

In a Sluggish Economy Revisited

Practical Suggestions for Funding Mission

By Ruben Swint

THE UPHEAVAL and uncertainty and panic associated with our economy in 2008 and 2009 create a question similar to that raised in 2002 and 2003. What are we to do now that the stock market has fallen, unemployment is rising, credit is still tight and the global economy as well as our own only lately is sprouting “green shoots of hope.” In this article I revisit the practical actions that I offered in an article in the Summer 2003 edition of the *NACBA Ledger* to those churches feeling the stress of less contributions and the uncertainty of America’s economic future.

1. TAKE CARE OF MISSION.

Fulfilling mission is your primary goal. Mission consists of identity, values and strengths for ministry. Do not let reactive decisions impair your congregation’s ability to carry out its mission. Be sure to ask, “Will what we are choosing to do jeopardize our ability to carry out our mission?”

Often your mission is not deep enough into congregational consciousness. Communicate your mission over and over. Constantly illustrate your mission effectiveness. Emphasize the real outcomes of your mission. Take care of your mission

by talking about your unique mission and illustrating the good it does.

2. PRACTICE REALISM.

Nothing substitutes for a realistic appraisal of your situation. Many churches have a divergence of 5% to 15% between the amounts for budget, contributions, and expenses. Church members can become accustomed to the fact that their annual giving never meets the budget number. Bring the budget, contributions, and expenses amounts into alignment and create a more credible reality for everyone.

Rather than focusing on whether or not you are increasing the budget or meeting the budget, communicate how well you are accomplishing your ministry goals for the year. Explain that your plan of ministry is vital to so many people and that sustained and increased giving will maintain and grow your ministries.

3. USE THE “FOURTH QUESTION.”

One strategy for planning ministry year after year is to ask three questions:

1. What are our strengths, those things we do well?
2. What do we do okay and we should improve?
3. What could we and should we begin to do?

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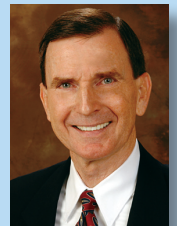
A fourth question is rarely asked. Now is the time to ask, “What is it we should stop doing?” Most churches will acknowledge that there are some activities, events, programs, or ministries that they do in order to be “full service,” not because they are good at them. In a down economy, churches should focus on their core strengths in ministry and channel their financial resources toward them.

4. ENLARGE YOUR MINISTRY.

Our 2008 economic anxiety began with the talk of bailing out Wall Street. Days later the talk turned fearful with the need for rescuing “Main Street.” How much talk have you heard about taking care of the back street of our society? Who is

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speaking, and acting, for the poor, the lonely, the jobless, the hungry, the sick, the homeless? What about those with *no* golden parachutes, 401Ks, health insurance, or medicine?

Is this not your calling? Increase your compassion capacity with a community safety net for those who have no voice in this economy. Or increase your time, talent and money engagement in the community ministry already supported. The more effective your church is in providing effective solutions for real needs, the more generous people will be in funding your mission.

5. PREACH AND PRACTICE THE GENEROSITY OF GOD.

Our Bible contains the record of God's great generosity to creation and to humanity. Many times we read not only of generosity but of God's extravagance. "More grace than we can comprehend. More love than we can know." (Seager)

Once we put aside our fear and begin to trust God, we can awaken the slumbering desire to be as generous as we have always wanted to be and known we could be. Now is the time for generosity.

Being created in the image of God, we inherit a generosity gene. Once we put aside our fear and begin to trust God, we can awaken the slumbering desire to be as generous as we have always wanted to be and known we could be. Now is the time for generosity. Churches demonstrate generosity in their commitment to the homeless, helpless and hopeless.

6. ASK BIG.

According to Lyle Schaller in his 2001 book, *What Have We Learned?*, the non-profits' big money game is asking for large contributions from donors' accumulated wealth. Churches should evaluate whether or not they will continue to rely only on members' income for their annual ministry plan (the budget) or also ask for the big money to carry out their mission.

You should present potential large donors with several options to consider. Any of these options, if funded, would enable your church to carry out its plan of ministry for the year. Examples include enlarged community ministry, new ministry position subsidy, Web site, new program funding, or church growth strategy.

In times of economic uncertainty, we can become too much like our society, obsessed with money! Instead, remain passionate about the mission God has given you, individually and corporately. Strive to be realistic, creative, compassionate and generous in funding your God-given mission. 