

## IS YOUR CHURCH STRUGGLING FINANCIALLY?

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As I talk to people around the U.S., I hear stories of flat and reduced salaries and staff and program cuts. More than a year of recession and slow recovery has taken its toll. And many churches depend on the generous giving of older members who are gradually dying off, while the generations behind have fewer resources and a different approach to giving. This trend is likely to continue.

What's a leader to do? For one thing, it's vital to distinguish the matters we can control and those we can't. There are wide forces at work in our society that impact all of us: challenging economic times, regional differences (churches in Michigan, for example, face special challenges), the rural/urban divide. These are simply facts.

And yet, each of us does have control over certain matters in our own setting. Even if you can't conjure money out of the air, you can keep yourself on track with your own ministry, and help others do the same. Leadership does make a difference, even - or perhaps especially - when times are difficult. Here are three items to consider as you lead in this important area of church life:

**1.** Keep your focus on vision. When money is tight, it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Keep working on your own clarity. Do a little bit of thinking about this every day. Even two minutes, daily, can be enough. Ask yourself, why am I here? What am I called to do? What might we be called to do together? This does not mean ignoring fiscal realities. The question at times may be, given our resources, what might we do? Ministry needs resources, but even unlimited resources are useless without vision.

If you are a staff person or lay leader, focus on doing your job well and thoughtfully leading in your area of responsibility. Get feedback from the leader about what he or she is after. And ask yourself the same questions: why am I here? What am I called to do? What might we be called to do together?

**2.** Clarify who is responsible for what. Leadership comes with responsibility, and the financial support of the ministry is a big part of this. At the same time, in a church, decision-making needs to be shared appropriately. Don't carry the group on your back. Insist that the leadership share information with the people as a whole.

If your salary is reduced, as has happened in a number of churches, be sure you reduce your hours. "Easier said than done," you may say. But when churches make difficult decisions like reducing staff, the effect needs to be borne by the church, not by the staff. Don't break your back to carry the church. This is classic overfunctioning.

**3.** Pay attention to your own anxiety. Anxious leaders can't see options. If you can manage your anxiety, you leave room for creativity (your own and others') to emerge. Jeffrey Miller, author of *The Anxious Organization: Why Smart Companies Do Dumb Things*, puts it this way: "If fear is contagious, then so is courage. In an anxious organization, a single individual can have a powerful and wide-ranging effect just by mastering his or her own anxiety" (p. 85).

How do you do that? Focusing on the vision, item #1 above, will help. Maintain your spiritual life. Remember that it is ultimately not all up to you. Finally, keep your sense of humor.

You can't fix the recession. You probably can't fix your church's budget. But you can occupy the position that you hold (top leader, staff, volunteer) with as much hope, honesty and grace as possible. That is enough.