

When The Economy Sours Facing Financial Adversity

by Mary Sulerud

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life;
what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body,
what you shall put on....” (Matthew 6:25)

In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addresses our very human anxieties about having enough of the basics — food and water, shelter and clothing. And as I explore this passage with vestries throughout the Diocese of Washington along with Jesus’ admonition — to “not worry about your life”— I have had many occasions to watch parish leaders struggle with what it means to listen to God, and to be faithful to the financial resources in their care.

As a former rector (Church of the Ascension, Silver Spring, Maryland) in the mid ‘90’s, I know what it is like to have a congregation that is the happy recipient of substantial increases in pledge and collection plate income, because the parish is in a growing neighborhood and basically affluent times.

But the consequences for congregations when such a cycle turns — and investment and interest income plummets for congregations and parishioners alike — can be equally adverse. And what then? For then the phone lines of folks like me began ringing with very fearful people on the other end wondering what to do.

My response is to try to help vestries put this in the perspective of our faith — to help people to put aside their “money anxieties”— by focusing on discussion of passages such as the above, instead of on “what do we cut” and “how much do we cut?”

Biblical reflection makes it clear that we are not alone in facing financial adversity that God is present. It also helps people to be accountable for what didn’t go well in an annual commitment program, including a possible over-reliance on endowment income instead of stewardship. And it can help in developing a budget that reflects the real mission and ministry of the congregation.

So what might a parish look like that is doing well in financially challenging times? In early June of 2003 a letter crossed my desk from the rector of the Church of Our Saviour in Silver Spring, Maryland, the Rev. Mark Pendleton. In it he congratulated the members of his congregation for their best stewardship campaign. Moreover, giving in the form of pledges and plate had exceeded expectations allowing the parish to undertake new ministries.

Church of Our Saviour is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, program-size congregation in a suburban middle class area of Montgomery County, Maryland. Its members are government employees, teachers, social workers, nurses and other health care professionals. Many of its members come from the West African countries of Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia and the small island countries that make up the Caribbean.

When asked what his congregation and its leadership did specifically to have such a good annual commitment campaign and such a stable budget in trying times, Mark pointed to three things.

First, the leadership of Our Saviour decided that stewardship was the “bread and butter” spiritual issue of the parish, with all households pledging as the goal, and they have not ever lost sight of that message.

Second, the people were clear about their mission and ministry and the relationship of the budget to accomplishing this God-given purpose.

And third, the rector and wardens were committed to teaching all members what stewardship means and what it means to pledge, using leaders of the various African and Caribbean communities to do this teaching through peer group gatherings. This was seen as a commitment to increase the personal and spiritual relationships among the variety of people who sit in the pews every week. The work also assumed that new people might not have a clue as to how the church functions financially, and so undertook to explain it clearly

It is quite a success story. Every year at Our Saviour 98% of the pledges made are paid and, in a parish of 380 household units, 262 pledge. As more new people have become members they have also become pledging members. Which, in turn, has dissipated a fear among the long-time members that the new people wouldn't care like the old people did. And the parish meets regularly, beyond the annual meeting, to engage in “truth telling” about where they are and what new ministries God is calling them to do.

What appears to makes the difference at the Church of Our Saviour, so that it can thrive in grace and holiness even in weak economic times, is that the emphasis is not on the dollars per se, but on the development of significant relationships with God and one another, that are both personal and corporate.

To make a long story short, the problem may be presented as not enough money, but it very rarely is only that. And the rush to cut, reduce, and cross this unpleasant task off the vestry agenda can rob the leadership of the deeper examination of a congregation's stewardship, mission and place in its own community. There is no substitute for this good work.



This article by Canon Sulerud will appear in the November 2003 issue of Vestry Papers, a publication of the Episcopal Church's Cornerstone Foundation.

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