

Ministry in Hard Times



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by **Dan Hotchkiss**

During the Great Depression, my grandfather lost his job and started a new company. His friends had enjoyed his Christmas gifts of homemade candied fruit--the kind used in fruitcakes--and encouraged him to turn what had been a hobby into a business. Luckily for him, the fruitcake market turned out to be countercyclical: when people can't afford expensive luxuries, they look for cheap ones. Fruitcake--like liquor, lotteries, and day-old bread--sold best when times were worst.

Many people like to think religion, too, is countercyclical--that people cling to it when other sources of support fail. Religion may be countercyclical, but organized religion may not be: worship attendance rates in mainline churches reached record lows during the Great Depression and record highs during the prosperous 1950s. Why would people go to church more when they have more money? The possible explanations are many; the most likely one, in my opinion, is that people are ashamed to worship where they no longer fit the economic profile of the congregation.

A minister told me this sad story: A leading member of a leading church dressed every morning in a suit and rode the train to town. Hardly anybody knew it, but he had no job to go to. To him, keeping the appearance of prosperity was worth deceiving everyone, even (or perhaps especially) everyone at church.

Like cars and houses, congregation membership can be a costly marker of class membership. Cars and houses have played leading roles in the early stages of our current economic downturn; churches and synagogues likely will face hard times as well. To be sure, giving to congregations is steadier than other charitable giving in the face of economic fluctuations. Tithes and offerings may be the last charitable giving people cut, but at some point, cut they will.

In seminary, most of us learned little enough about managing a congregation in good times. What we did learn, often, was steeped in rhetoric about abundance, growth, and optimism that, in retrospect, reflects a time of heady growth, fervent spending, and heedless borrowing. The future, at least in the short term, may require us to relearn concepts of stewardship and planning that stress thrift, the clever use of resources, and the courage to say no to low priorities.

In times like these, endowed congregations, which like to think they have a cushion against economic harm, find that in fact they are affected more abruptly

and severely than member-supported congregations are. Members, as a group, can almost always choose to give a little more; a portfolio of stocks cannot. You can soften the impact by smoothing out the "draw," but in the long run, the return is what it is.

Unfortunately, in many congregations the process of decision-making about money is ill-suited to the task of allocating scarce resources wisely. The implicit mental model is that the congregation's first duty is to sustain its institutional core--to maintain the building, service the debt, meet the payroll, and keep the lights on. If there is money left, we can then speak of mission, outreach, service, innovation--as if those were optional extras.

This mental map--institutional maintenance as the foundation, mission as the ground floor, innovation as a decorative filigree--does little harm so long as the supply of money grows from year to year. But in lean years, when spending needs to be trimmed back, this way of thinking can accelerate a downward spiral. Who would support a congregation that does nothing but support itself?

Which brings us to an awkward point: over time, congregations, like all nonprofits, tend to fall away from serving their mission into serving their constituents. One powerful set of constituents comprises long-time members who want to preserve the congregation's familiar look and feel--appearances and practices that comfort them. Another powerful group is the paid staff.

I once consulted with a church in a magnificent Romanesque building studded with distinguished opalescent stained glass. It had a full-time minister and music director, a sixteen-member paid choir--and thirty-five people in the congregation on an average Sunday. This mode of operation had been financed by liberal spending from a once-large endowment and even larger withdrawals from the invisible bank account of deferred building maintenance.

Like most congregations in such circumstances, this one took pride in the heroic way they had sustained a proud tradition against long odds. But one day their treasurer reframed their situation for them. "Every day we open up our doors, we piss away fifteen hundred of God's good dollars," he said. After a stunned silence, the discussion shifted. Instead of "How can we continue to provide ourselves with a church for the longest possible time?" the group began to ask, "How can we make the most faithful use of the resources in our trust, to fulfill the true purpose of the church?"

Luckily (or providentially), the church stood next door to a museum, which purchased the building for its collection of religious art. The congregation scattered, leaving a substantial legacy to other congregations, charities, and religious institutions. Not a perfect outcome, perhaps--what is?--but better, ethically, than simply waiting until the money was all gone.

This story is dramatic but instructive even for a congregation that is faced with

trimming back by 10 or 20 percent. The easy path is always to give tacit priority to existing staff positions and activities, to ignore the hidden cost of deferred building maintenance, and to cut whatever lacks a strong internal advocate. In many cases this means cutting outreach giving, denominational support, and innovative projects. Or it means copping out of all priority decisions and enacting an across-the-board percentage cut.

In times of strained finances, even more than in fat years, it is important that the budget process begin not with the budget from last year but with the congregation's mission. The congregation needs leaders--call them the board--capable of standing apart from the daily management of ministry. The board needs to reflect and pray about the congregation's mission and articulate a vision for its ministry that reflects its special calling in a time of trouble. And it needs to make hard choices--sometimes choosing what is right instead of what will keep the peace.

Nothing can make budget cutting easy, but there can be some joy in it if, in the process of accepting what we can't afford to do, we reach a deeper understanding of what we must afford to do, one way or another.

Dan Hotchkiss is a senior consultant at the Alban Institute. "Ministry in Hard Times" originally appeared in the January/February 2009 issue of *Clergy Journal* (<http://www.logosproductions.com/>) and is reprinted with permission.

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[Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership](#)
by Dan Hotchkiss

In *Governance and Ministry*, Alban Institute senior consultant

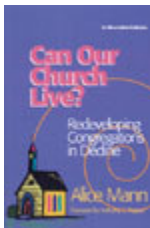
Dan Hotchkiss offers congregational leaders a roadmap and tools for changing the way boards and clergy work together to lead congregations. Hotchkiss demonstrates that the right governance model is the one that best enables a congregation to fulfill its mission--to achieve both the outward results and the inward quality of life to which it is called.

FEATURED RESOURCES



[Starting Simple: Conversations about the Way We Live](#) by Bob Sitze

In today's complex and busy world, people yearn for simpler lives. Bob Sitze believes conversations change us as individuals and that most important social changes take place through conversation, so in *Starting Simple* he invites us into heart-to-heart conversations about simple living.



[Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline](#) by Alice Mann

Nothing on earth lives forever--not even congregations. Alban Institute senior consultant Alice Mann explains how the natural life cycle of a congregation, as well as other internal and external factors, can produce a congregation that is in real trouble. She then offers hope for congregations that want to change. Practical options for congregations, leadership challenges for laity and clergy, and ways to work with denominations are detailed, and engaging discussion questions provide a basis for congregational planning.

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Herndon, VA 20171

(703) 964-2700 | (800) 486-1318 | (703) 964-0370 fax webmaster@alban.org