

# Secrets to Strong Giving in a Struggling Economy

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Whether debated privately in our hearts or very publicly in our church halls, the question on almost every church leader's mind is the economy. While our faith is certain, current economic conditions are not. With the presidential election looming, the situation might become even more volatile. With this in mind, it only seems prudent to ask, "As the economy declines, will our giving go down with it?"

This very question was the target of a February 2008 study conducted by empty tomb inc. Researchers studied church-member giving patterns in recession years from 1968 to 2005. The results of their comprehensive analysis are surprising. Six recessions occurred during this time. In three of the recessions, church-member giving declined; while in the other three, it increased. Giving also declined in four non-recessionary years during this period. The conclusion is: Church-member giving does not necessarily decline in a recession. Clearly, there must be factors other than the economy that affect the way our members give. So what is the secret?

The good news is the solution to strong giving lies within your influence. A look at generous churches across the nation reveals that internal factors have much more impact on giving than external factors such as the economy. While these churches come from all denominations and regions of the U.S. with very different worship styles, facilities and congregations, they share some key characteristics. Here are five secrets to strong giving that have emerged in generous churches:

## Clear Vision

Your church's vision of ministry is the one factor that will determine everything else. What does your church passionately bring to your little corner of the Kingdom? If you know without a doubt, then you have a God-given reason to exist. What people are looking for is an opportunity to live beyond themselves. As your church helps them grasp their reason to live, resources are sure to follow.

"It's all about vision and mission. People must buy into the DNA of the church," explains Pastor Leo Schuster of Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Houston. "A capital campaign is symptomatic of the general health of the church." Christ the King's vision is to be the Body of Christ in mission, and their focus is ministry to their city. "For us, it's not about being fed; we're here as servants. We create a climate of service where we partner with other ministries to change our community," he says.

## Connected Body

It's not really vision unless your people are part of it. The body must be connected to the overall mission of the church and empowered to carry it out. Jim Jackson, Ph.D., senior pastor of Houston's Chapelwood United Methodist, has an unusual way of encouraging vision at his church. Periodically, he drops in on Chapelwood's weekly neighborhood groups to listen to his members' vision for their church and their community. "I believe if this is a genuine church, then God has given the people a vision," Jackson shares. "I'm not the only one with the vision. I hear corrections and I hear lots of appreciation. As I listen, it's easy to discern the residual vision among our church body."

Jackson devotes most of his time to walking with his members – and with good reason. "I am not involved in administration or managing people. I am listening, networking and forming relationships. By the time I get ready to do any fund raising, there is a natural purchase. We all buy into the vision. And resources follow vision."

## Kingdom Focus

For giving to be strong, your church must be more externally focused on Kingdom priorities than preoccupied with internal issues. Liquid Church in Morristown, N.J., is a great example of a body of believers with a focus outside four walls, primarily because they don't have any to begin with.

Liquid meets in the ballrooms of several luxury hotels and has no plans to acquire a building. Lead Pastor Tim Lucas explains, "We invest in people, not buildings. My people are much more likely to invite their non-Christian friends and co-workers to a location like this rather than a traditional church. Our focus is reaching people who aren't here yet."

On a recent Sunday morning, two women at the hotel bar overheard Liquid's worship music flowing out of the upstairs ballroom. When they asked the front desk about the "meeting with the music," the clerk encouraged them to go check it out. They came to Liquid and were captivated, as they sat listening to the service with their cocktails in hand. "Attracting people right where they are is what we call a sign of health," Lucas declares.

## Purposeful Appeals

Giving must be connected to life-change. ...

A building project must be a logical extension of the vision and Kingdom-minded mission of the church. Any project that does not meet these criteria will not connect in the hearts of your people, so it will not connect with their treasure (resources), either.

There must be a clear explanation of how the facility will help accomplish the ultimate goal of helping lost and hurting people. Here are some key questions to ask before any campaign:

- Why are we building (or buying) this?
- Why are we building (or buying) it now?
- What will happen if we do not build (or buy) this now?

"External factors come into play with giving, but as long as you keep a dynamic vision before the people, they're going to respond," affirms Scott Landon, director of finance and administration at Wheaton Bible Church in West Chicago, Ill. "Our giving capacity continues to increase, despite the economy."

## Generous Culture

The cardinal rule of a generous church is that it is led by a generous pastor. You cannot lead your people to a place that you are not willing to go yourself. This requires sacrificial giving from the entire leadership team. Churches that foster a culture of generosity are also focused on the principle theme of the Gospel – God's love demonstrated by His people in action. "A culture of generosity emerges out of a culture of the Gospel," Schuster suggests. "People are going to give when their hearts are melted by the overwhelming gift of God's love and grace."

A spontaneous culture of generosity can spring forth when a meaningful, attainable giving need is presented in a powerful way – even in the most unfavorable economic conditions. A powerful example of this happened this past summer at Liquid Church. The leadership decided to launch a giving campaign in the dead of summer – the season typically considered the most financially and spiritually dry time in the life of the church. With gas prices at an all-time high and attendance at the mid-year's low, the church decided it was the perfect time to cast the vision of bringing clean water to sub-Saharan Africa.

Liquid partnered with Charity Water to come up with the goal of providing three water wells at a cost of \$5,000 each. "We harnessed the power of great story-telling to give us all a vision of what we could do and suddenly, the fire of sacrificial giving swept through our church," Lucas explains. "One man who had been

saving for three years to buy a Harley decided to donate his \$5,000 to build a well. He thought about investing in the motorcycle, which would end up as rust in a few years, or his option of investing in a well that would provide clean, safe water for 800 men, women and children for the next 20 years." Hundreds of similar stories developed during the next three weeks, and more than \$100,000 was raised in less than a month – enough to finance 20 wells.

In trying times, the world needs the Church as never before. More than any other cause in your community, your church can be a steady beacon of hope as the environment around you grows more and more restless. Your neighbors may be driven to their most open spiritual moments in years due to personal financial stress. What a terrible price to miss this rare opportunity to minister to them because your church lacked the financial means to do it. No matter what size or shape your church might be, what's happening in your pulpit will always be more important than what's happening at the pumps. This is not a time to be ruled by fear. So plant and water ... and trust God for the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6).

*Jim Sheppard serves as CEO of Generis ([www.generis.com](http://www.generis.com)), a consulting firm that provides counsel to churches and religious organizations in the areas of generosity and stewardship. He's led 98 capital stewardship campaigns, including 24 that raised more than \$10 million. Since 1992, he's helped his clients raise more than \$760 million. Contact Sheppard at 800.233.0561 or [jim@generis.com](mailto:jim@generis.com).*

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