

# Keeping Outreach in the **Midst of Crisis**



*Q: Because of decreased giving, I'm feeling the tension of having to make budget cuts, but I still want our church to focus on outreach. Do you have any suggestions for taking care of our church, yet still pressing on to reach the unchurched in the midst of these economic changes?*

**A:** At NorthRidge, I'm dealing daily with the same challenges you're facing. The difference: I'm in Michigan—the state with the country's worst economy. So, yes, I have some suggestions. And they aren't theoretical; they are the things I've been investing my leadership in this past year.

## **Remember God is in control.**

First, you need to personally work through the natural disappointment and discouragement that comes with facing “less than ideal” times. If you don't, it will rob you of energy and passion. At NorthRidge, we have experienced very positive years in the last decade. So when we began facing the downturn, it took me off my stride. I've had to work through my own personal

disappointment by remembering that God did some of His greatest work in the midst of crisis (parting the Red Sea, feeding the 5,000 and rising from the dead). Focusing on that truth has enabled me to remain an optimistic and innovative force in our church even during these tough times.

Second, remember the power of crisis to open up people to their need for God. In good times, people live with the delusion they're in control and secure. When crisis comes, people wake up to reality. I decided the timing was perfect to do a message series called “CRI\$I\$.” On the first weekend, our attendance jumped by 2,000. During the series, 121 people accepted Christ, and many believers began looking to God with renewed faith and passion.

## **Continue to emphasize reaching out.**

Third, make sure your church understands and embraces the priority of outreach. Your church needs to know that if it's going to please the Father, outreach efforts can't be cut. Jesus made this crystal clear

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when speaking to the inward-focused religious leaders of His day. In His words, “there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7). Simply put, outreach is the Father's priority. If you don't continually remind your church of this, especially during times of crisis, they too will begin to turn inward. Of course, this is antithetical to Christ's example and mission. He left heaven to seek and save the lost. He has called us to follow Him by turning outward and going into the world. And He has commanded that we do nothing out of selfish ambition but that we have His heart for those far from Him (Phil. 2:3-5). If our churches are going to genuinely follow and represent Christ, we can and should say “no” to many things. Outreach should never be one of them.

## **Focus on being effective, creative and generous.**

Fourth, evaluate your budget for effectiveness versus convenience, production versus maintenance, and necessity versus waste. As church leaders, our goal should always be to ensure that every dollar spent is the right expenditure for achieving the mission. If we're not careful, a budget that was once the right one can evolve into the wrong one over time. We recently eliminated 10% from our annual budget to prepare for the very real potential

of budget shortfalls in the coming year without touching our outreach budget. We had allowed our staff and ministry budget to become unnecessarily bloated. As our staff had grown, we had developed some redundant positions, others that created unnecessary and ineffective layers of management, and still others that robbed volunteers of the opportunity to use their gifts. So, we restructured for greater alignment to our values, missional effectiveness and budget efficiency.

Fifth, invest yourself and your team in creative thinking and analysis. Spend time thinking of new ways to accomplish ministry impact at a lower cost. For example, many churches are paying staff to do what volunteers can do as well or better. Though I'd put our bands and musicians up to any church, ours are totally volunteer-driven, including most of our worship leaders.

Finally, continue to teach your church generosity. Sadly, many believers become less generous during times of crisis. It should be the opposite. Generosity is the invitation for God to be involved in our lives and finances. Though we live in the worst economy in America, our church is presently over our yearly budget income projection. We've seen that where God guides, He provides. As revealed by the example of the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8, God is always guiding His people to be generous when they have much—and when they have little. We should never hesitate to share this truth. When we do, it always amazes me how God surprises His church with His provision and His people's generosity.



*The senior pastor of NorthRidge Church in Plymouth, Mich., Brad Powell consults with church leaders to help them lead their churches through transition. Brad has authored Change Your Church for Good (Nelson). NorthRidge Church is No. 15 on The Outreach 100 list of Largest Churches in America. Got an opinion on this column? E-mail: TellUs@OutreachMagazine.com.*



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