

What's a leader to do about money at church?

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November 19, 2010

Leadership at its best is about being present with those we lead and being less reactive to the inevitable ups and downs of church life – including the inevitable financial ups and downs. One important leadership task is to pay appropriate attention to the content – the bills do in fact have to be paid – without being too distracted from the process: how people relate to each other and make decisions. In dealing with church finance, it can be easy to miss the deeper processes at work because we are so focused on solving the financial challenges.

Here are two examples: Two churches of similar sizes may face similar significant budget deficits. In one church, the president of the congregation gets up and lays the facts out for the congregation. A small group develops some creative ideas for increasing giving, which the leadership then implements. The pastor makes a clear case for the ministry of the church. People are anxious about the financial situation, but it doesn't keep them from making appropriate decisions which are in everyone's best interest.

In another congregation, whispers about the deficit begin immediately after the board meeting. The pastor can't bring himself to address it from the pulpit. At the congregational meeting, accusations of mismanagement are made. The treasurer walks out. E-mails are exchanged frantically after the meeting. The congregation is unable to bridge the gap, and the youth pastor is laid off.

These congregations could deal with other challenges in the same way and come up with similar results. One is resilient, calm and creative.

The other is anxious, reactive, and rigid in its response. Whether the matter is money, building use, worship patterns or carpet color, the response will be similar. The functioning of the institution and its leader is not “about” the money at all.

You may ask, “I’m in congregation B: what should I do?” The first job is always to manage your own anxiety. This is your highest priority – you can’t do the rest of your job if you are too anxious. Recognize two things: first, the reactivity of this congregation has a long history which you cannot change. Second, you play your own part in it, and that part you can change. You may need to make a clear statement from the pulpit or at a board or congregational meeting. The purpose is not to accuse others, or to tell them what they should do or how they should be. But you can say something like, “Here’s what’s important to me in our ministry, and why I think we all need to support it.” Resist the idea of solving the problem for them or trying to calm them down (although if you stay calm, it will help others stay calm).

The best leaders relate to others in a way that is clear about their own position and invites others to participate, but doesn’t willfully pressure them to change or to follow. This kind of leadership has to do with personal maturity: our ability to be clear within ourselves and to relate to others out of that clarity. Edwin Friedman called this “leadership through self-differentiation.”

Here are some questions to ask to keep yourself thinking about leadership and money.

1. Who is the most anxious about money in the church? Who is the most calm?
2. Do I need to define myself or take a stand on an issue (“here’s how I see it”)?
3. Who is overfunctioning around money? Am I? Who is underfunctioning?
4. What is the church’s history around money? Can I see similarities between how the church makes decisions about money and other decisions we make?
5. Where might I take a little less responsibility? Where do I need to step up and take more leadership?

Originally posted at [Marcuson's Church Leadership Blog](#).