

# giving in recession

The work of God is too important to get squeezed by an economic downturn. Here Steve Pierce provides some pointers to help and challenge us in our giving.



Many treasurers will be looking anxiously at their church finances, fearing a fall in giving from cash-strapped church members. It is a real issue. As income falls, charities are being forced to cut services. Many church leaders, hesitant to preach generous giving at the best of times, may be even more reluctant to do so as church members feel the squeeze and some lose jobs and homes. Cast-iron techniques to sustain giving in a recession would be useful right now! Instead, two brief thoughts to encourage and to challenge us: one biblical, one practical.

## Giving in grace



Paul says little about money compared to the Gospels so his forceful teaching in 2 Cor 8-9 is remarkable, especially as he uses 15 different Greek words (plus combinations of those words) to avoid using the word 'money'! Why? Paul is clearly not embarrassed to request a generous gift. If you will be patient with my Anglican DNA, money is 'sacramental', an outward symbol of inner gratitude, praise, receiving. For Paul the Jerusalem offering symbolises the gift of grace

which unites both Jew and Gentile. Commending the Macedonian church (2 Cor 8:1-2) Paul writes first not about the amount they gave but the grace given to them – and then notes their joyful and generous gift from their scarcity.

So, when preaching the grace of giving in recession, we don't persuade, appeal or plead. The core message is unchanged: giving must be a genuine expression in thanksgiving and worship of what God has entrusted to us we give from what we have, not what we don't have. This is no cop out. Giving is about our first fruits, a budget priority. Reducing giving to maintain a preferred lifestyle is a breach of trust. If income changes, giving will change.

A key challenge is this: are changes to giving a response to what has happened or fear of what might happen?

## Regular giving sustains itself



A second, practical point flows from this. In previous downturns charity income has

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generally held up ok. But there are early fears that this one is different as income declines from legacies, corporate donations and trusts for whom investment income has fallen. However, regular giving and income from face to face fund raising seems more robust. In the nineties recession giving through Stewardship actually increased and third quarter figures for 2008 show an increase of 8% on the same period 12 months earlier. Recent research by nfpSynergy<sup>1</sup> showed that giving sustained itself in the nineties recession but notes a post recession falling off before increasing pace again. Four parish stewardship





programmes in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham in the last quarter shared a 29% increase in giving, ranging from 16% to 48%. This is terrific. People will respond positively when challenged with biblical insight. People

also respond to need, and the recession brings many needs that require additional funds.

### So what can we conclude?



Personal relationships and communications as ever are vital. People give to people to make a difference so emphasise change not survival or maintenance. In the USA pledging is more common and churches are noting increased pledges from those so far unaffected by the downturn as they see greater need and pain in congregations and communities.

Generosity is a core spiritual value so leaders and preachers should not lack confidence



in preaching giving as a priority. If we give only after everything else is taken care of, giving will always be vulnerable to recession. But priority giving, related to income not discretionary expenditure is more resistant to recession.

There is a challenge for those who are less affected by the recession to increase their giving so that the work of God doesn't suffer in the downturn.

Yet like the manna, delicate as frost, church finances are vulnerable, dependent on the generosity and commitment of God's people. Difficult times are an occasion to renew trust in God's provision without reducing God's economy to the pursuit of personal prosperity:

One who is generous will prosper;  
Those who refresh others will  
themselves be refreshed

(Proverbs 11:25)