

HOLY HELPS

SENSE ABOUT CENTS
Strategic Ministry Planning in Current Economic Times

Wishful thinking should not replace sound financial principles. Launching a project without doing what Jesus advised in Luke chapter 14 is to ensure failure, bring reproach upon the name of Christ and destroy a ministry. Casting caution to the wind and naming it and claiming it, has led to the mentality that could be interpreted as "Bigger is better even if God is not in it." It gives new meaning to the old cliché, "Spend and be spent."

These are difficult economic times and can be a learning period for leaders of Christian institutions going forward. I've heard of Christian Day Schools closing, several Christian institutions of higher learning merging, churches reducing their Missionary Budgets and staff in order to stay afloat financially. Certainly a studied evaluation of the financial status of the church and its ministries is warranted.

In Luke chapter 14 Jesus said, *"Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'? Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?"* (Luke 14:28-31 nkjv)

The context of the analogy that Jesus gave regarding tower building and warfare was one of discipleship. Jesus was saying, "Count the cost before you commit to the course." This principle, so necessary in discipleship, is also essential regarding the finances of a ministry as well.

I am frequently asked to advise churches, schools, etc. about expansion plans, budgets and so on. Recently a church related school financial problem was brought to my attention for input. Here was the situation: the church had an average attendance of 250 meeting in a nice facility only five years old. The pastor "felt led" to start a Christian day school, K – 12. They enrolled 60 students. Prior to starting the school the church budget was marginally being met, mainly because of the large mortgage payment. Consequently the meager staff was underpaid and giving to missionary endeavors was minimal.

Along came the economic downturn of 2009 - 2010, offerings declined as members became unemployed and some parents withdrew children from the school which was operating on a "shoestring" prior to the downturn. I also learned that church offerings were down and the church was struggling financially. Giving to missionaries had been further reduced, the pastor was taking a salary cut and was considering resigning. Now, the question posed to me was: "How can we save the school? We started it by faith and now we can't maintain it. I told my people, 'Let's just believed God and keep going!'"

You may disagree with the counsel I gave, but here it is. I advised:

(1) Close the school! There were other options for a Christian Education: Home Schooling or one of the 23 other Christian Day Schools within a 10 mile radius.

- (2) Concentrate on growing the church. It is better to do one thing well than to attempt to do two things badly. "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." The church is the main thing!
- (3) Re-evaluate your entire ministry. Decide what it is that you are equipped to do, what people-gifts you have to utilize, what resources you have upon which to draw.
- (4) Recommit to building people. If some ministries put as much emphasis upon building people as they do upon building facilities we would have churches filled with spiritual giants!

When is it necessary to initiate a new ministry, facility, etc? When growth demands it! I have heard it said, "Build it and they will come!" That may be true of an Ice Cream shop but it is seldom true concerning Christian ministries. Nowhere are people falling over themselves to get on the straight and narrow way.

Hopefully, the following will be of some help to anyone faced with such a challenge. I have been blessed to have had the opportunity to lead Christian organizations in initiating new ministries and/or erecting new facilities. How did we proceed?

1. We prioritized scripturally.

Jesus said, "I will build my church." The health of the church must not be jeopardized in order to have a para-church ministry. The word "para" means: "Beside, beyond; helping in a secondary way; an accessory." (Webster Dictionary) There are instances where para-church ministries overshadow the church and the church is secondary in the scheme of things. The church must always be the number one priority.

2. We analyzed the need thoroughly.

It is not good stewardship to initiate a new ministry if that ministry duplicates an existing legitimate and orthodox ministry in the area. Just to initiate a ministry because "everyone's doing it" is nonsensical.

3. We planned diligently.

This involves strategizing that is compatible with the Mission and Vision Statement of the organization. It is surprising how few churches have a Mission and Vision Statement, consequently they are left to "flying by the seat of their pants" and to "knee jerk" decisions. Long range planning does not violate the faith principle. Unfortunately, it is not the hallmark of many so-called "faith ministries."

4. We met with financial consultants regularly.

A banker, who was a member of the church of which I was pastor at the time, told me that it was his experience that ministers of the Gospel had the least knowledge of money management principles of any professional leaders with whom he had dealings. "*Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established.*" (Prov.15:22)

5. We monitored the progress faithfully.

Regular conferences with architects, contractors and vendors, etc. are necessary to safeguard the organization's finances.

6. We kept the membership apprized consistently.

Information, information, information consistently given makes for an informed, united and excited constituency. How to invite trouble: Keep people guessing about what is happening!

7. We prayed fervently.

Although this is last in the above list it was always the number one priority throughout the entire process. The praying preceded everything else and permeated everything we did.

When expansion is demanded by sustained numerical and financial growth, then there should be much sanctified thinking preceding the launching of any major expenditure.

There is a divine audit ahead for all of us who have had the responsibility of overseeing any area of God's work. As in the parable that Jesus spoke in Luke 16 we will hear Him say to us: "Give an account of your stewardship." Therefore, may we exercise good sense with God's cents!

JdonJ