

Financial crisis stirs hope, builds trust

In spite of the financial impact the current recession is having on Catholic parishes, hope and faith remain strong among those on the front lines—pastors, staff and volunteers. Most see this time as an opportunity to return to the basics, think creatively, tap hidden leadership and find new ways to increase efficiency.

The Basics: Charity and Trust

The reality of the current recession is shrinking funds and a growing need for food, clothing, shelter and help with utility bills—with little or no relief in sight. But less money and more need is not something new for Catholics or other non-profit organizations. What is new is the size of this economic downturn's bite as it reaches deep into the ranks of traditionally reliable "generous donors"—the middle and upper class. As a result the "haves" are fast becoming the "have-nots."

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No one is surprised that the "have-nots" are themselves digging deep and giving like the widow with her "mite". They know that giving—as



Deacon Tom Pluta of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Westfield, N.J., explains—is an essential part of our ongoing conversion to Christ.

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"We need to tap into the deepest parts of our own being," Deacon Tom says, "and give because generosity—especially when it comes from our own emptiness—is a real measure of trust in God. As my former pastor used to say, 'Cast your bread upon the waters and God will send you a ham and cheese sandwich.' You can't out-give God."

In this light, the economic crisis holds much promise as an opportunity for parishes to reconnect with the basics of Christian community. Nothing builds a sense of belonging more than working shoulder-to-shoulder with brothers and sisters in Christ to help others.

Mem Petriello, secretary at St. Joseph the Worker in Orefield, Pa., can't say enough about her own parish's response. "Everybody's giving," she says, "from the Boy Scouts to classes at school, the Knights of Columbus, and St. Vincent de Paul. I have boxes of food sitting under the desk, and in six months I haven't given out as much food as I have in the last month."

Cutting Costs

Updating technology can result in significant savings over the long term.

Besides giving during these tough times, Mem says St. Joseph is cutting costs for the long run. This past February the parish made the transition from a 20-year-old DOS-based system to ParishSOFT. With lots of support from ParishSOFT's Fran Naturale and other ParishSOFT users in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, Mem is enthusiastic about the change. "I love ParishSOFT! I

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Innovative Parish Loan Program saves close to \$1 million at St. Joseph the Worker parish.

Tapping into the leadership of the collective Catholic community shares best practices, teaches management skills.

just did a report for the first time and printed out a list for Monsignor to call parishioners. It’s fun!”

Sharing Mem’s enthusiasm is Diane Potvin of St. Francis Xavier in Winooski, Vt. Being the only one on staff in a parish of 900 families, Diane says ParishSOFT allows her to manage her time better.

“With Offering and Pledges I can enter all that data in half an hour,” she says. “But best of all, I sent ParishSOFT my very junky, bad database for conversion and they worked a miracle! What they sent back was totally wonderful with little or no mistakes. Now I reactivate people without having to enter a whole bunch of information.”

Diane’s been using Family Directory, Time & Talent, Religious Education with Tuition, and Offering & Pledges for about three years, and she’s looking forward to the rest of the diocese coming on board. “Being online together will save a lot of time calling back and forth to ask questions,” she says.

One Creative Solution

Another cost-cutting measure at St. Joseph the Worker is the brain-child of pastor Monsignor Robert Wargo—the Parish Loan Program, launched in November 2008. Designed to reduce both principal and interest on a \$3.4 million mortgage, Msgr. Wargo’s plan was to float a loan by asking 1,000 of his 3,100 parishioners to loan the parish \$1,000 each, interest free. The goal was to reach \$1 million which would then be repaid over 10 years.

The Parish Loan Program attracted 925 participants for a total of \$925,000. Monsignor Wargo was able to reduce the parish mortgage by one third—to approximately \$2.5 million—in addition to saving close to \$1 million in interest over that 10-year period. Annual mortgage payments were reduced from \$340,000 to \$240,000, an annual savings of \$100,000 that will be used to pay back 100 parishioners each year for the next 9 years and 25 in the tenth year.

And now that St. Joseph has ParishSOFT, Monsignor Wargo’s mailings and Mem’s tracking and reports will be a lot faster and easier.

Leadership and Management

Monsignor Wargo’s resourcefulness in managing his parish’s finances is a good example of the leadership parishes will need to navigate changes in the wake of the current crisis. However leadership and management skills have not been part of seminary training up until now. Pastors looking for help have traditionally turned to fellow priests like Monsignor Wargo or parishioners with expertise in the world of business and finance.

Now Catholic veterans of that corporate world have developed a number of programs specifically to help priests manage their parishes quickly and well, freeing them to focus on the priestly duties for which they were ordained. Good Shepherds, Good Leaders, for example, teaches skills like how to

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create a compelling vision, how to set goals and priorities, time management, recruiting and developing people, and building strategic partnerships.

An organization designed more broadly for clergy and laity alike is the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management (NLRCM). Founded in 2005 by Catholic leaders from business, philanthropy, academia and elsewhere, the Roundtable offers conferences and focuses on “best practices” that are featured in a searchable database called “ChurchEpedia” at www.nlrcm.org (click “Best Practices”).

Graduate degrees in church management are available at several Catholic universities like Duquesne, Notre Dame and Boston College. Villanova’s M.B.A. is offered online with only a one-week residency requirement for clergy and church workers who can’t take off for two years.

Hope

As already overburdened Catholic parish staff and volunteers continue to juggle limited time and money in their outreach to those who come for help, two characteristics remain strong: compassion and hope. Motivated by their commitment to Christ and his Church, they are thinking of ways to do more with less, learning new skills, changing their habits and being joyfully surprised each time a small offering reaps overflowing rewards. A Presbyterian minister, James Hudnut-Beumler, has described this pastoral response to crisis as “discovering their soul as a congregation.” Perhaps it could also be described as “keeping our eyes open for that ham and cheese sandwich.”

For more information or a product demonstration, please visit www.parishsoft.com.

ParishSOFT

825 Victors Way
Suite 200
Ann Arbor, MI 48108-2830

Web: www.parishsoft.com
Email: support@parishsoft.com
Phone: 734.205.1000 main
866.930.4774 support
Fax: 734.205.1011

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