



# Secrets to Strong Giving in a Struggling Economy

By Jim Sheppard, CEO & Principal  
www.generis.com

**W**hether debated privately in our hearts or very publicly in our church halls, the question on almost every church leader's mind across the country today is the economy. While our faith is certain, current economic conditions are not. And with the coming election, the situation might become even more volatile. With this in mind, it only seems prudent to ask, "As the economy declines, will our giving go down with it?"

This very question was the target of a recent study<sup>1</sup> conducted by *empty tomb, inc.* in February 2008. Researchers studied church member giving patterns in recession years from 1968 to 2005. The results of their comprehensive analysis are surprising. Six recessions occurred during this time. In three of the recessions, church member giving declined; while in the other three it increased. Giving also declined in four non-recessionary years during this period. The conclusion is church member giving does not necessarily decline in a recession. Clearly, there must be factors other than the economy that affect the way our members give. So what is the secret?

The good news is the solution to strong giving lies within your influence. A look at generous churches across the nation reveals that internal factors have much more impact on giving than external factors like the economy. While these churches come from all denominations and regions of the U.S. with very different worship styles, facilities, and congregants, they share some key characteristics. Here are five secrets to strong giving that have emerged in generous churches:

## 1. Clear Vision

Your church's vision of ministry is *the* one factor that will determine everything else. What does your church bring to your little corner of the Kingdom with a passion like no other? If you know without a doubt, then you have a God-given reason to exist. What people are looking for is an opportunity to live beyond themselves. As your church helps them grasp their reason to live, resources are sure to follow.

Pastor Leo Schuster of Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Houston, TX, says, "It's all about vision and mission. People must buy into the DNA of the church. A capital campaign is symptomatic of the general health of the church."

Christ the King's vision is to be the body of Christ in mission and their focus is ministry to their city. Leo says, "For us, it's not about being fed, we're here as servants. We create a climate of service where we partner with other ministries to change our community."

## 2. Connected Body

It's not really vision unless your people are part of it. The body must be connected to the overall mission of the church and empowered to carry it out. Dr. Jim Jackson, Senior Pastor of Chapelwood United Methodist in Houston, TX has an unusual way of encouraging vision at his church. Periodically, he goes out to Chapelwood's

neighborhood groups, meeting with two groups a week for three months, to listen to his members' vision for their church and their community. Jim says, "I believe if this is a genuine church, then God has given the people a vision. I'm not the only one with the vision. I hear corrections and I hear lots of appreciation. As I listen, it's easy to discern the residual vision among our church body."

Jim explains that he devotes most of his time to walking with his members. "I am not involved in administration or managing people. I am listening, networking, and forming relationships. By the time I get ready to do any fund-raising, there is a natural purchase. We all buy into the vision. And resources follow vision."

### **3. Kingdom Focus**

For giving to be strong, your church must be more externally focused on Kingdom priorities than preoccupied with internal issues. Liquid Church in Morristown, NJ is a great example of a body of believers with a focus outside four walls, primarily because they don't have any to begin with.

Liquid meets in the ballrooms of several luxury hotels and has no plans to acquire a building. Lead Pastor Tim Lucas explains, "We invest in people, not buildings. My people are much more likely to invite their non-Christian friends and co-workers to a location like this rather than a traditional church. Our focus is reaching people who aren't here yet."

On a recent Sunday morning, two women at the hotel bar overheard Liquid's worship music flowing out of the upstairs ballroom. When they asked the front desk about the "meeting with the music," the clerk encouraged them to go check it out. They came to Liquid and were captivated as they sat listening to the service with their cocktails in hand. "Attracting people right where they are is what we call a sign of health," says Tim.

### **4. Purposeful Appeals**

Giving must be connected to life-change. A building project must be a logical extension of the vision and Kingdom-minded mission of the church. Any project that does not meet these criteria will not connect in the hearts of your people, so it will not connect with their treasure (resources) either.

There must be a clear explanation of how the facility will help accomplish the ultimate goal of helping lost and hurting people. Here are the key questions to ask before any campaign: 1) Why are we building, or buying, this? 2) Why are we building, or buying, it now? and 3) What will happen if we do not build or buy this now?

Scott Landon, Director of Finance and Administration at Wheaton Bible Church says, "External factors come into play with giving but as long as you keep a dynamic vision before the people, they're going to respond. Our giving capacity continues to increase despite the economy."

### **5. Generous Culture**

The cardinal rule of a generous church is that it is led by a generous pastor. You cannot lead your people to a place that you are not willing to go yourself. This requires sacrificial giving from the entire leadership team.

Churches that foster a culture of generosity are also focused on the principle theme of the gospel - God's love demonstrated by His people in action. "A culture of generosity emerges out of a culture of the gospel. People are going to give when their hearts are melted by the overwhelming gift of God's love and grace," says Pastor Leo Schuster (Christ the King Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX).

A spontaneous culture of generosity can spring forth when a meaningful, attainable giving need is presented in a

powerful way – even in the most unfavorable economic conditions. A powerful example of this happened this past summer at Liquid Church. The church decided to launch a giving campaign in the dead of summer – the season that is typically considered the most financially and spiritually dry time in the life of the church. With gas prices at an all-time high and attendance at the mid-year’s low, they decided it was the perfect time to cast the vision of bringing clean water to sub-Saharan Africa.

They partnered with Charity Water to come up with the goal of providing three water wells at a cost of \$5,000 each. Pastor Tim explains, “We harnessed the power of great story-telling to give us all a vision of what we could do and suddenly, the fire of sacrificial giving swept through our church. One man who had been saving for three years to buy a Harley, decided to donate his \$5,000 to build a well. Tim says, “He thought about investing in the motorcycle which would end up as rust in a few years, or his option of investing in a well that would provide clean, safe water for 800 men, women, and children for the next 20 years.”

Hundreds of similar stories developed over the next three weeks, and over \$100,000 was raised in under a month – enough to finance 20 wells.

In trying times, the world needs the church like never before. More than any other cause in your community, your church can be a steady beacon of hope as the environment around you grows more and more restless. Your neighbors may be driven to their most open spiritual moments in years due to personal financial stress. What a terrible price to miss this rare opportunity to minister to them because your church lacked the financial means to do it.

No matter what size or shape your church might be, what’s happening in your pulpit will always be more important than what’s happening at the pumps. This is not a time to be ruled by fear. So plant and water...and trust God for the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). ─

1 Church Member Giving and Recession Years, 1968-2005 by John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, empty tomb, inc., Champaign, IL, February 2008