

Giving During Tough Economic Times

In response to several requests, I have gathered recent papers that all relate to fundraising in difficult economic times. The last two papers refer specifically to ways of remaining positive, especially in difficult times.

I hope that this information will be helpful to Unitarian Universalist congregational lay leaders. I welcome any other recent papers that could be added to this list.

Wayne

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Past Sheds Light on Recession Giving

By Sharon Bond

September 29, 2008

If history is any indicator, the economic downturn afflicting the U.S. likely will have a negative impact on charitable giving to most sectors, an analysis of past data says.

The severity of the impact will depend on whether the nation is simply experiencing slower economic growth, or whether it is in a recession, which historically has caused giving to drop after factoring in inflation.

However, the human-services sector actually may see growth in giving pick up, as has happened in past recessions, says "Giving During Recessions and Economic Slowdowns," a report written by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University and published by the Giving USA Foundation.

Over the four decades analyzed in the report, the only drop in charitable giving, as measured in current dollars, occurred in 1987 and likely was due to a tax change that temporarily altered the timing of donations.

Otherwise, even during short and prolonged recessions, as well as other times of economic contraction, actual giving from year to year increased in current dollars.

However, when adjusting for inflation, total giving fell in three of four years that included at least eight months of recession, for an average drop of 2.7 percent, the study says.

The largest drop was 5.4 percent, occurring in 1974, followed by a drop of 3.7 percent in 1970.

Individuals have donated about 80 percent of all charitable contributions over the past four decades, the study says, and during years with at least eight months of recession, individual giving has dropped an average of 3.9 percent after inflation.

Foundation donations, which account for about 10 percent of overall giving, has dropped an average of 0.1 percent in the same years, the study says, while corporate giving, which makes up about 5 percent of all giving, fell an average of 1.6 percent.

But for some sectors, recessions have less of an impact, or even can spur giving, the study says.

For human-services groups, the average rate of growth in giving after adjusting for inflation averaged 2.3 percent over all 40 years, but more than doubled to an average of 5 percent during the four years with eight or more months of recession.

For sectors like religion, health, public-society benefit, the arts and international affairs, average rates of growth in giving were positive but did not increase during recessions.

Education was the only sector that saw a drop in the average rate of growth in giving during the four years with at least 8 months of recession.

To encourage giving in tough economic times, the report recommends charities:

- Ensure each board member is a donor and an advocate for the organization.
- Develop and follow a fundraising, communications and stewardship plan.
- Redouble efforts to renew gifts from existing donors.
- Use all available fundraising tactics.

To receive a full copy of the report, email [Sharon Bond](#).

ANTICIPATING THE EFFECTS OF THE U.S. ECONOMY ON CONGREGATIONAL GIVING IN 2008-2009

By Laurel Amabile, Director of the Annual Program Fund

Like many religious and nonprofit organizations, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations are feeling the adverse affects of the slowing U.S. economy. It looks like this trend will continue to have an impact for months to come. A recent [Advancing Philanthropy](#) article by Mary Ellen Collins, *Enjoy the Ride: How to effectively raise funds in a roller-coaster economy*, offers some advice that may help us and our member congregations manage the challenges successfully.

According to the article, professional fundraisers agree that the best strategies for successful fundraising during unpredictable economic times involve foundational elements of philanthropic fundraising.

- Appealing Mission Statement—a dynamic and unique mission appeals to people’s interest in the value of the organization and the causes it supports.

Unitarian Universalists need to know that their contributions to their congregations, districts and UUA make a difference because these entities are making a difference in the wider world. We must be prepared individually and collectively to articulate our UUA and APF mission, purposes and principles in appealing and compelling ways that elicit high levels of support at the congregational level.

- Acknowledge the impact of the economy on the organization’s ability to fulfill its mission.

It will be as important as ever to build relationships with congregation and district leaders through regular contact and sharing of information. We must carefully track congregational giving activity watching for any warning signs or trends that suggest unpredicted shortfalls or financial distress in congregations.

When faced with difficult financial choices, congregations may need additional information about their Association or District and how their funding programs work. We will need to be ready with helpful information, to be responsive to their questions, and proactive in our communication.

- Avoid dramatic shifts in fundraising methods and changes in staffing.

Our staff and volunteers are essential to our Association’s ability to sustain strong relationships with our congregations. Our Stewardship and Development staff group seeks to nurture the Annual Program Committee, to provide these volunteers with ongoing support , encouragement, and resources they need to effectively serve our Association. All must work together to be consistent in our approaches and the stewardship messages we convey to our congregations.

- Keep public relations and marketing strong.

As you know, the UUA has been conducting a major national advertising campaign this year. Our President Bill Sinkford has worked throughout his tenure to increase our visibility through public witness, media coverage, and partnering with organizations with common values. The UUA website has been completely redesigned to be more visitor friendly. Our Association has increased its marketing staff and is working with the Swardlick Group to develop appealing and compelling print materials for our UUA funding programs.

The Stewardship and Development staff group communicates regularly through our mailings, individual donor contacts, Generosity and Giving E-Newsletter, and APF Quarterly Newsletter. We must make use of these and widen their circulation in our contacts with congregation and district leaders. Please share the links to the UUA Giving and Generosity section of the website: www.uua.org/giving

- Keep the organization “recession-proof” by spreading the enthusiasm about what the organization is doing.

As Unitarian Universalist leaders, it is essential to talk in positive ways our UU faith and the organization we serve: what we are excited about, how we support the organization financially, and what we are personally doing to make good things happen. Those of us in staff and leadership roles interact with many people—in local communities, congregations, districts, and nationally—as representatives of our Unitarian Universalist Association. Your enthusiasm will catch peoples’ interest and willingness to support the UUA as an organization doing good works well.

- Practice openness and accountability.

Share information about how contributions are used to fulfill the Association’s mission and purpose. Educate congregation and district leaders about the importance of our Association of Congregations, our covenantal relationship, and need for appropriate infrastructure and systems that support the needs and interests of congregations to the greatest extent. As UU leaders and staff members, it benefits you to know where to find the UUA and District financial and giving information online and within the staff groups. You are encouraged to explore the relevant sections of the UUA website.

- Meet regularly with donors, if possible, informing them of the organization’s needs. Invite questions.

Our Association benefits from using a highly relational approach in working with its congregations and individuals. Not all UUA staff and volunteer representatives can make regular onsite visits to congregations, but regular personal contacts via phone, email, and postal mail are critical to promoting strong relational ties to the wider organization. Our congregations need to hearing they are valued and important to their Association. It is helpful to pass along any relevant feedback to district or UUA staff. Make saying “Thank You” a priority.

10 Steps to Successful Stewardship in Difficult Economic Times

Wayne B. Clark, PhD.
UUA Director of Congregational Stewardship Services
wclark@uua.org
207.829.4550

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1. Share research showing that giving continues, although the rate of growth slows.
2. Develop a new, or revitalize an existing strategic plan that is “owned” by the congregation. (see chapter three in *Beyond Fundraising*)
3. Identify goals that will help to fulfill the vision and mission of the strategic plan. (see chapter three of *Beyond Fundraising*)
4. Use program budgeting. (see *Mission-Based Budgeting* by Jerry King)
5. Make a compelling, passionate case that helps to implement the strategic plan. (see chapter six in *Beyond Fundraising*)
6. Take an appreciative inquiry approach. Focus on recent successes and build upon them. (see *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* by Mark Branson)
7. Ask all congregants to make a financial commitment.
8. Ask for financial commitments in person-to-person stewardship conversations. (see chapter five in *Beyond Fundraising*)
9. Acknowledge each financial contribution.
10. Use electronic giving programs to stabilize cash flow. (see www.vancoservices.com)

Thoughts on Giving in Tough Economic Times

Reverend Ian Evison, District Executive
UUA Central Midwest District

Lyn Corder and all: Good to meet you! The point you make is a very important one—all historical experience points to the conclusion that in tough economic times giving, perhaps especially giving to congregations, remains level. I attach an article making this point from the Center for Philanthropy at Indiana University (also see <http://philanthropyjournal.org/news/past-sheds-light-recession-giving>). The practical point is that we need to keep our nerve--it is unwise and unnecessary to react to this as if giving were going to decrease. It most probably is not.

Yet, we should not be sanguine. Just because the overall level of giving is likely not to go down does not mean that the dollars will be given for the same thing. Part of the reason that giving to congregations tends to stay level overall in tight times is that in such times people want to give to places where they are convinced it will do the most good. Judged by this standard some organizations will do better—and some will do worse. So, the first word of wisdom is *not to panic* and the second is to *focus on mission* both of service within the congregation and in the wider world. I attach an article by a colleague, Laurel Amabile: *Anticipating Economic Effects*.

In addition to this, I would add two more pieces of advice:

Don't drive the anxiety: some of the greatest damage I have seen to institutions in downturns comes from quick and clumsy self-protective action. It is not necessarily responsible or wise to respond to every up and down of a quickly shifting economic landscape. This can be a temptation for those among us who are most attuned to finances (pretty hard not to notice another 600 point drop in the Dow today). The obvious example of the harm caused by clumsy self-protective example would be the congregation that makes harsh decisions about compensation without consultation and without advance warning. Those in congregations who are excellent at communication and group process need to be made part of any discussions.

Give as much attention to looking for the opportunities as to protecting against the dangers: Any crisis opens opportunities, financially and strategically as well as for serving mission. One of the things that has interested me most in hearing from congregational leaders over the last month or two is precisely about these opportunities they have found. It is natural enough to become reflexively self-protective in such a time. Yet to do so misses opportunities. I have talked with congregations planning major projects and have found that those who already have a chunk of cash in hand are finding great opportunities. When lending is frozen the person with cash in hand—even a little of it—is king.

Best. Ian

10 Stewardship Issues Every Church Leader Should Consider in 2009

by Brad Leeper

This article was originally published in [COOP](http://www.coop.org) magazine and is used by permission. www.coop.org

Whether whispered silently in our heads or energetically wrestled through in leadership meetings, economic fears challenge churches. We offer hope and meaning to our communities and a world growing more restless in finding truth. What a terrible price to miss authentic ministry because we lacked financial resources, especially when our neighbors may be driven to their most open spiritual moments in years because of their personal financial stress.

As we move toward 2009, the financial uncertainties force us to ask the most penetrating questions about stewardship that we have asked in decades.

Churches can be abundantly resourced during the most challenging times. How can your church position itself to maximize financial resources even in troubled fiscal climates?

Growing and courageous churches should consider these 10 issues in preparation for the coming year.

1. A bold vision with meaningful results will rarely be under funded

Now is not the time to shrink back from pursuing your neighbors in need. Even in the midst of personally challenging time, donors still want to make a meaningful mark on others. Internally, there is always that personal drive to live beyond ourselves and influence others. The church that vividly tells its story and challenges Christ-followers to live beyond themselves attracts financial resources.

Evidence shows that in down economic times, many church members do not treat giving as an expendable luxury item. They are inclined, however, to become far more selective in their giving outlets.

The church that consistently and creatively articulates a compelling vision and celebrates the successes will attract giving in hard times.

2. Conversations about giving must move beyond stewardship toward spiritual formation

Generosity is a spiritual issue of the heart. A person cannot move toward spiritual maturity until he or she understands that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Our culture works overtime to convince us that there is no correlation between our faith and our finances. A first-time reader of the New Testament could not

miss the plentiful teaching about our faith directly impacting how we live not only now, but also how we build our treasure in heaven.

In conversations with pastors, I am constantly amazed at how fearful these leaders are in shepherding people in the area of finances. Spiritual leaders yield far too easily to the myth that is it inappropriate as a pastor to interact with people about their possessions. Certainly, we would not give preference to the rich man as admonished in James 2. But we must not be passive about teaching how the incorrect image of money can prompt wanderings from the faith. (I Timothy 6:10)

The last frontier in American Christianity is the conversation about money. Spiritual transformation's last obstacle is our wallet.

Asking for money without the backdrop of spiritual formation will hit minimal financial results. The church that aligns spiritual formation and money will never lack. One cannot help but to give generously if there is a vibrant connection with their faith and finances.

3. Conversations must move beyond stewardship to generosity

With all due respect to the biblical concept of stewardship, the term itself is passive, hard to understand, and boring. In the secret places of the heart, people do not long to be good stewards. They do long to make an impact. To be a difference maker. To be generous to the point of giving up something that is good in exchange for something that is better.

Churches that celebrate generosity become more generous. Churches that are silent about generosity become zealous about cutting expenses. I have lived in that cutting expenses season. Experiencing generosity is much more fun.

Try a vocabulary shift in 2009. Replace stewardship with generosity and unpack the stories about how the generosity of your church changed lives. Watch your giving flourish.

4. Churches must speak more intentionally about finances

Economically tough times create intense static in the minds and hearts of your people. Consider that we have been accustomed to a consumer driven lifestyle accompanied by \$3 cups of specialized coffee and the internal confusion hits decibel levels too loud for even 18 year old rockers.

Where do your people stand in juggling financial realities? According to a USA Today article May 2008:

- 9 out of 10 consumers in their 30s are in debt.
- 45% of respondents in one survey said they had too much debt to think about saving. Do we think the answer is any different about their generosity?
- 20% of adult in their 30s are still paying college loans.

Another source reports that Americans now save, on average, less than 1% of their income. How can we expect people to give generously when their margin is already so razor thin?

Be daring in your coaching. Teach people how to get out of debt. Teach them how to save. Inspire them to live above the roar of our consumer-driven machine.

When I perform a giving analysis for a client, it is very typical to receive a list of regular attending households (OK, relax. I do not ask for names) with over 50% of those households having given nothing in the last year. I have had pastors tear up when they realize that they are the number 2 top donor in the church. Your people are not as up to speed about finances as you think they are.

The church that preaches and teaches about sound, biblical financial practices will create a long-term culture that gives abundantly to match its compelling vision.

5. Churches can still raise financial resources for major projects if ...

Churches that successfully raise additional funds for major projects make an audible from classic campaign approaches. Donors are eager to give to the right projects if we adapt our methods from past practices.

People eager to give generously look for certain qualities in a project before giving. Their decision making grid is radically different than even just a few years ago.

- Generous people look for more specific benchmarks and ask much harder questions in search for validation of the project.
- Does the project make sense? Is the reason to give sacrificially clear and compelling?
- Has the leadership thought this project through? Has the leadership done due diligence? Just because the pastor loves this project has little bearing on my love for the project.
- Would my investment directly help people? Buildings do not inspire me.
- There are far more attractive projects outside the church that appear more meaningful to me. Just because I attend church here does not mean that I automatically buy into your project.
- Does this project help the poor?

Give a change of pace from predictable practices to foster generosity.

Even though much of my work centers on capital campaigns, I fight hard to keep those two words from my interaction with clients. Most of my clients call their effort a "mission expansion project" or "vision expansion project". Stewardship is replaced by generosity. Vision casting and telling gripping narratives begin months in advance not compressed into a five week package. Print media is replaced with moving video work that is viewed repeatedly on YouTube.

The traditional three-year giving period for a mission expansion project can be

shortened. People are increasingly skeptical about long-term commitments. A fast growing church can actually be hindered with a long giving season.

Churches that have made adjustments to converse with a new kind of donor still cultivate significant resources for their vision.

6. The church must intentionally build greater trust with its people

Most church giving, especially project-driven giving, is in direct correlation with the trust account balance with its people. How often and how creatively can you build the trust connection that gives people instant freedom to say yes to a spiritual investment?

Your people might love the primary teaching pastor. They most certainly love the people of their church. Significant trust comes from neither of these sources. Shaping confidence is a neglected art.

- No bank account replenishes itself automatically after a withdraw. So too must church leadership constantly make trust deposits.
- How can we increase our trust account?
- Tell people frequently how their financial gifts are being used.
- Teach how they are building treasure in heaven.
- Celebrate generosity at each offering.
- Help people understand how financial accountability is a big deal in your church.
- Maintain an open atmosphere about your finances.
- Unapologetically spend money on an annual, independent audit and proclaim the results of the clear audit. Make audit copies available in your lobby.
- Leaders appropriately share how they give.
- Send a thank you note to a household after their first gift to the church.

As we swim in these economically turbulent waters, consider more radical moves to build trust.

- Stop ineffective ministry even though you will take hits. People are having to adjust their budgets by stopping spending that they would rather not stop. Model for them how to adjust spending patterns.
- Redeploy budget line items to more practical human needs. Food banks, justice ministries, fighting child slavery, mercy ministries and other such works are perceived as far more important than operating expenditures. If the economy worsens, you will need to support some in your church to ride out the storm.
- Consistently building trust accelerates generosity.

7. Potential larger gift donors need pinpoint coaching and encouragements

As leaders, we hear an outstanding vocalist and we encourage them to move into the music ministry. We find a young leader gifted as a communicator and we

prompt them into ministry options. Yet, we find a person with financial capacity to give large sums and we go into silent mode.

Churches that coach and elevate the gift of giving contribute vast resources for Kingdom work. Rather than showing the rich man favor, we actually raise the bar of discipleship for them and release enormous sums toward those things that stir the heart of God.

Most potentially larger gift donors are often paralyzed about their giving. They often are ill-equipped to know how to give, where to give, and the mechanics of making wise gifts. Appropriate financial guidance can multiply a gift to your church while legally minimizing tax liabilities. Our government tax code subsidizes our giving. Although people can earn huge dollars, they are not automatically inclined to know how to give wisely. A wealthy person who understands how much is enough can substitute giving for lifestyle and release untold resources to valuable ministry needs.

Churches that disciple high capacity donors multiply vast amounts of resources.

8. Leaders must model sacrificial giving

We cannot lead people where we ourselves are not going. Our people are hungry to view authentic leaders living and giving in the context of faith. Leading by example inspires. How we model and appropriately demonstrate generosity can be tricky. It is done with integrity and humility in generous churches.

9. Human need trumps brick and mortar

Pastors tend to like ministry and facilities large. People like church to feel small and relational. Pastors understand how facilities are tools to reach more people. Most people, however, are less concerned about the facility and more concerned about human need.

It is the new normal now to include the human element in vision expansion projects. Church planting, multi-site, a clinic in Africa, homeless ministry in the community, and similar high human touch elements are increasingly expected in major projects. Human investment validates the construction.

A colleague worked with a client's vision expansion project that had nothing to do with any construction undertaking. Every investment dollar flowed boldly to planting churches around the city. The multiple of annual income raised was incredible!

A clear connection on how personal giving reduces human need throws gasoline on generosity.

10. Free yourself from the past. Your church members have

The recent Barna report on giving in 2007 repeated the same theme from prior years. Just 5% of American adults tithed. The most generous segment, evangelicals only topped the charts at 24%. The numbers have remained steady

over the decade. We are anemic as a church in prompting generosity.

Trends in giving, however, are shifting more radically than ever before.

For those of us passionate about the local church, Barna sends up a bright warning flare. People are changing how they relate with the church. No longer content with standard church interaction, they are "expanding their circle of Christian relationships beyond local church boundaries." People increasingly give their money to organizations other than the church.

I served a client this past year that had small groups unofficially connected with their church in multiple states. This strategy was not intentional nor were these groups even supported by the church. The groups emerged from a meaningful interaction with the church pod-cast ministry. These groups gave generously to this church without a hint of request by the church.

There is an increasingly sophisticated donor in an ever increasing competition for the faith dollar. A challenging economy will accelerate the competition. Many donors fail to connect how their attendance at your church translates into giving practices to your church.

If inspired, motivated, and simply prompted, however, people would still rather give to their church. Our silence leaves them uninspired, unmotivated, and believing that we have no need of financial resources.

The church that shifts generosity dialog and practices to better match the shifting patterns will receive substantial resources.

Conclusion

As we consider ministry plans for 2009 in the midst of economic uncertainty, understand the urgency of making adaptations to your giving practices. You will find the process engaging, energizing, and incredibly meaningful to your people. They will be transformed with an amazing collaboration with their investments and God's call on your church.

Thoughts on Annual Stewardship Drive The Community Church of Chapel Hill

By Frankie Price-Stern
November 20, 2008

Everyone -- We are just completing wrap-up of the annual stewardship drive in my own congregation.

The congregation is very energized and focused because we have a new minister. However, I believe our results prove that a strong case for giving does "override" the negatives of the economy

We too were concerned with the economy so we were very purposeful with our goals, process and organization

As of today with 220 out of 250 Donor units completed the increase is +8% -- and we expect after the follow-up is finished we will be over 10% and could reach +15%.

Summary:

I hope Community Church's experience can be used to illustrate that you can receive very strong results this year with:

- a focused congregation,
- a strong purpose message (case statement) for giving,
- clear giving expectations (Fair Share Guide),
- and a committed team with a clear process

Details:

-- Our largest (over \$4,000) givers combined were much more generous than usual (+11%) perhaps feeling a need to be more supportive at a time of possible financial challenge.

-- After strongly communicating the Fair Share message (based on the table) we received a significant (+14%) overall increase from those giving below \$100 per month

-- We did have some (10) older long term members who have been consistently giving between \$100 and \$200 a month decrease their giving. We suspect this is probably as a result of the economy decreasing retirement income.

-- A larger portion of our members than usual did keep their commitments the same, but we had fewer than usual households that decreased their commitments.

Concerned about the economy we purposefully made some changes to our goals and process

-- We started meeting early -- in May

-- We set a goal to ask everyone (all members and friends no matter how new to our congregation) for a financial commitment. (We received 40 new FCs for an average of over \$1000 each.)

-- Our conversations included two simple Appreciative Inquiry questions -- What delights you most about Community Church right now? What are your strongest hopes for our new future?

-- We widely publicized online pledging (using Survey Monkey) as an easy option. This and the simplicity of the two questions allowed some of our conversations to be effectively had on the phone.

-- We experimented with having a longer (4 weeks) Stewardship campaign period this time and regularly followed up with stewards to ensure everyone did get personally asked.

-- Every week we had a testimonial that was positioned right after the minister's message.

-- Every week we sent a steward status report to all stewards and captains showing assigned donors/received pledges. I think this kept our stewards motivated.

-- And, we followed up with reminder postcards at the end of the third week.

This is the Time For Fair Share Giving

Frankie Price-Stern
November 21, 2008

[We] believe the economy impact is a *personal* rather than a *community* issue.

[These] are the times Fair share Giving was made for. Giving as a community allows those with impact to feel good about their lower gift and those without impact to see the value of community fair share giving and perhaps raise theirs to match the table.

The only way we mentioned the situation was "in challenging times our church community can become even more important to us".

When asked specifically -- often by leaders (we did not publicly bring the economy up since we believe it is a personal issue) -- we discussed the research that says that at times of personal financial stress those that give look at their gifts and shrink the number of places their gifts go to the one or few that they are passionate about. That in fact, sometimes they end up giving the same or more where they give.

I am sure we have had some impact. Due in part to the larger number (42%) of same amount FCs, our repeat Financial Commitment from those with current year FCs is +4.5% and including those that we lost is only +2%. So, we are paying rigorous attention to asking everyone, all friends and even those members who do not normally make financial commitments. We are committed to continue to follow-up even with those households that are always "high maintenance" to reach. For follow-up right now the rule is a "no pledge" is definitely OK, but it has to come from the donor, not from our decision to no longer try.

The Problem Trap
by Larry Peers, Senior Consultant
The Alban Institute

October, 2008

To effect deep change, leaders must be able to stand outside the dominant story of whatever it is we are trying to change—rather than being so immersed in it that we cannot truly observe how to lead a particular group in a particular situation. Ron Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, often talks about this as being able to take a balcony perspective. I have found the tools and perspectives of narrative therapy especially useful in helping clergy begin to get up on the balcony and become different observers of their situations, allowing for different actions and different results to become possible.

Recognizing the Problem-Saturated Story

One of the primary kinds of stories that takes hold in congregations and makes change difficult is what is known in narrative therapy as the “problem-saturated story,” or one in which the focus is on who or what is or has been wrong.

You can recognize the problem-saturated story when you’re in a group where someone offers an example of how difficult or awful something is in the congregation and before you know it the rest of us can’t help but chime in with more evidence for how truly bad and impossible the situation is. We can almost hear ourselves saying, even if the words aren’t verbalized, “You think that’s bad, let me tell you how it is even worse than that!”

Problem-saturated stories have the impact of being taken as fact rather than as a narrative created by a particular sifting of facts.

As leaders, we can easily succumb to the power of the problem-saturated story and, in fact, can become the main storyteller—if not the main character—in many of these stories. I have often noticed in clergy groups that a pastor or rabbi will tell a story about his or her congregation and seek support from others. In response to some well-intentioned advice from colleagues, the clergyperson often goes deeper into why these suggestions wouldn’t work—or delves into more of the problem story. At this point even the helpers may chime in with sympathetic remarks about how desperate and despairing situations like this can be.

In moments like these, I help to spoil the pity party. I ask questions like, “What would someone else in the congregation say? What would the newest or longest member of the congregation say about this situation?” “What would a child say?” or, better yet, “What would someone who disagrees with your version of events say about this situation?”

In asking these obnoxious questions, I am merely trying to point out the possibility of multiple perspectives and to introduce various versions of the story in order to interrupt the trance of the problem-saturated story, at least momentarily. I also want to give the clergyperson an opportunity to take on the perspective of a different observer.

Sometimes just recognizing the dynamic of the problem-saturated story can release people from its mesmerizing effect and allow them to stand outside of it. Other times, taking on a different perspective allows the leader to recognize that the observer they have been offers only one of many perspectives. Shifting the observer can often reveal different actions that are available and different results that are possible.

Externalizing versus Personalizing

A feature of the problem-saturated story within a congregation is that often there is a villain, a problem child, an *unmensch*.

There is usually a tendency to personalize what is going on in such a way that conveys the message that if only “so and so” would change, all would be well. In congregations, the tendency is to give this distinguished place of dishonor to the clergy or to a group of leaders, a group within the congregation, or even an individual. In my consulting work, I often hear the phrase “those people” used to refer to those considered the “problem children” in the congregation. From narrative training, we begin to see that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem—and, indeed, it is our relationship to the problem that is the problem.

Seeing the Exceptions

Once leaders can externalize the problem they are facing, what often happens is that the leadership is freed up to recognize more of the situation than is usually allowed in our typical discourses about “what’s wrong with this congregation.” In the externalizing conversations, often a new kind of conversation—what Michael White, one of the originators of narrative therapy, calls a “reauthoring conversation”—begins to emerge. “Reauthoring conversations,” he explains, “invite people to continue to develop and tell stories about their lives, but they also help people to include some of the more neglected but potentially significant events and experiences that are ‘out of phase’ with their dominant storylines. These events and experiences can be considered ‘unique outcomes’ or ‘exceptions.’”¹

Singing the Songs of the Lord

In the time of the Babylonian Exile of the Jewish people, the prophet Jeremiah could have commiserated with the problem-saturated story of a people who were in despair, far from home, and in captivity once again. Instead, he spoke the prophetic word:

Build houses to dwell in; plant gardens, and eat their fruits.

Take wives and beget sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters. There you must increase in number, not decrease.

Promote the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you; pray for it to the Lord, for upon its welfare depends your own (Jeremiah 29: 5-7, NAB).

In essence, he was saying, "Don't cave in to your sense of despair and hopelessness." He reminded them of who they were outside of the problem and encouraged them to do what they knew how to do when they were not in exile: plant gardens, start families, and promote the well-being of the place where they dwelled. These actions were the start of a new story. Jeremiah was prophetically helping the people of Israel to "reauthor" their story in the midst of exile.

The Psalmist ponders, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Psalms 137:4) As religious leaders, we, too, ponder how we can sing in the midst of turmoil. A narrative leader must dare to be as prophetic as Jeremiah. Even in the midst of trouble or uncertainty, the narrative leader must be able to help others stand outside the mesmerizing effects of the problem-saturated story. The narrative leader must be resilient and resourceful enough to resist internalizing the situation. Instead, by recognizing that the "problem is the problem," the conversation the leader can facilitate is one that studies with curiosity the dynamic effects of this problem on the health, capacities, and faithfulness of the congregation.

Shifting the relationship to the problem comes only when the congregation can examine these effects and deeply and resoundingly say, "No, we don't want to continue with these effects of the problem." Then a threshold to a new possibility for the congregation emerges. This new threshold arises when the leader is able to ask, "What would you like instead? Where would you like to be headed?" "What would be the first sign that we are moving in that new direction?"

A narrative leader uses questions to help point a congregation toward the possibilities and directions that are inherent in a situation but often obscured by our usual problem-saturated and internalizing approaches to the situation.

The cumulative effect of the steps outlined here allow for a conversation of possibilities to emerge in what would otherwise seem like a dead-end. Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Turning to One Another*, underlines the power of conversation and the role of leaders in creating the kinds of conversations that can promote deep change: "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about. Ask, 'What's possible?' not 'What's wrong?' Keep asking. . . . Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters."²

¹ Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 61.

² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002), 145.

Adapted from "[The Problem Trap: A Narrative Therapy Approach to Escaping Our Limiting Stories](#)" from the Winter 2008 issue of [Congregations](#) magazine.

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Appreciative Tip: The Power of Great Questions

by Robert J. Voyle
September 11, 2008

David Cooperrider, the founder of appreciative inquiry, said that organizations grow in the direction of the questions they ask. Every time we ask a question of someone we influence or move the person or group in some direction. If these two statements are true and from my experience they are, then it pays to ask questions that move people in the direction we want them to go. For example if we want the group to move toward success, we need to ask questions about how they succeeded in the past, and what they want to accomplish in the future.

On the other hand if we ask a group what problems they are having, the people will be moved in the direction of problems and causality. This evokes blame and judgment which in turns creates defensiveness on the part of those who feel blamed. The end result is that members of the group will have been moved into a realm of greater alienation and powerlessness. Even if the problem solving question is asked with a minimal sense of blame, over time this problem centered approach will result in an erosion of confidence and well-being and leave people feeling powerless and immersed in their problems.

The appreciative approach of asking what is working and what would "more" look like continually moves people into a realistic and empowered hope for a better future. As Cooperrider has also said: "**we need to inquire into and discover the root cause of success rather than the root cause of failure.**" When confronting a problem we need to get clear on what a successful outcome would be and then explore what resources we need to achieve it, rather than focus on why we can't achieve the goal.

Here are some of my favorite questions:

What is it that you really, love to do?

What would happen to your life if you got to do more of what you really love to do?

What do you need in order to do more of what you love?

Notice we don't inquire why you can't do more of what you love, but what do you need to do what you love.

What would happen to your church if it stopped doing what it "should do" and simply became a place to support people to do what they really love to do?

To live in love and to share love is our heritage as the children of God. To grow communities of love we need to inquire deeply into our experience of love and sharing that love with others.

December 11, 2008