

DEALING WITH FEARS

Counting the Cost, Looking for Treasure

As a church considers a call to holistic ministry, people will want to assess the price tag. Some in the congregation will focus on the risks associated with any new endeavor: to your membership, budget, personnel, property, facilities, or reputation. Leaders should not ignore these concerns. Rather, leaders should heed Jesus' warning and count the costs:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Luke 14:29–30

Any church considering a significant investment must weigh the cost of the desired project against the potential benefits of its completion—and the risks incurred by not investing. Where a congregation often needs help is in counting the cost associated with *not* responding to a call to holistic ministry: lost opportunities to share the gospel; lost identity as a beacon of hope and transformation; lost resources and contacts from new community collaborations; lost credibility to speak prophetically to critical social issues; and the loss of the experience of hands-on ministry as fertile soil for spiritual renewal.

One of the greatest risks and rewards of holistic ministry lies in our response to the invasion of "those people." This includes new people who are moving into our community, new people coming to our church, or new relationships with people who respond to our social ministries. Rev. Jim Kraft, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, recalls hearing another pastor complain about "all those new people moving into our area," as if they were a threat to their church. By choosing to see change as a crisis, and reacting negatively to it, this pastor lost a great ministry opportunity that was laid at his church's doorsteps.

Learning to distinguish crisis from opportunity and to assess risk realistically is important. As an example, let's look at the risks associated with launching a soup kitchen. Consider the risks to volunteers, church members, church facilities, and the church's ministry overall.

Risks to volunteers: Volunteers may find it uncomfortable and embarrassing to have to relate to people of a different racial or socio-economic background. Volunteering takes time away from family life. The soup kitchen might bring volunteers in contact with ex-cons, drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, pedophiles, molesters, or HIV/AIDS- or other disease-infected guests. Members may become discouraged by seeing some of the same people needing a meal week after week, month after month, year after year.

Risks to church members: Soup kitchen guests might take up increasing time and attention from staff. The church might become known as "the soup kitchen church," affecting the reputation and status of church attenders. Guests might wind up in worship services, creating disturbances and altering the "look" of the church.

Risks to church facilities: The kitchen will need upgrading. The church will face new health and fire code requirements, bringing the church under the watchful eye of public inspectors. The program will take up space. Equipment might be stolen or broken. Fire and other building damage is a possibility.

Risks to ministry: The soup kitchen might siphon volunteers and funds from other pet programs. The guests might expect other types of services besides a meal, but the soup kitchen already will stretch the church's capacity. Some members question whether continuing to feed people who express no intention of becoming a Christian compromises the church's integrity.

The above risks are real, and should not be trivialized or minimized. Church of the Advocate knows this well. In twenty years of running a soup kitchen that feeds up to three thousand meals each month, as well as other ministries that serve their devastated Philadelphia neighborhood, Rev. Isaac Miller says his church has paid a price. "There have been times when it feels like you just get ripped off, like clockwork—pots and pans stolen, all of the copper in the heating system stolen." Despite the congregation's financial struggles, its service to the community has remained a priority. Sticking with the ministry through times of sacrifice and loss is part of what has kept the congregation together. The church's commitment to outreach has produced, in Rev. Miller's words, "a group of people that are remarkably resilient and courageous, and with a great ability to 'hang in there'—folks who have got a real genuine commitment to love all this place as it is, and who love the church, with the love of Jesus and his tenacity."

Church of the Advocate could make decisions about ministry based on the costs. Instead, it chooses to focus on the rewards. Many of the risks of starting a soup kitchen identified above could be re-written as portals to new avenues of relationship and ministry:

Opportunities for volunteers: Volunteers may form genuine friendships with the guests, overcoming shyness and prejudices. Stepping out in faith may bring volunteers closer to God. They may become more empathetic, compassionate, and informed about the social issues affecting the guests. They may become more bold in sharing their faith and more committed to prayer for the lost. The children of volunteers may learn the priority of Christian service by seeing it modeled by their parents.

Opportunities for church members: New lay leaders may emerge to free up or replace staff in the soup kitchen ministry. The church may gain new members from among the guests. Members may become more faithful in giving to support the church's ministry. The new ministry focus could energize and unify the congregation. The church's emerging reputation as a caring church may attract new members with the desire and energy to be involved in transformational ministries.

Opportunities for church facilities: The improvements to the kitchen may open new possibilities for church fellowship, such as sharing a meal together after a service. The church could donate or lease use of the kitchen to other agencies when it is not used for the ministry.

Opportunities for ministry: The soup kitchen might attract new funders and donors willing to support the church's ministry. Collaborations with other agencies caring for guests' needs may develop. The church might realize that just feeding people is not enough, and decide to branch out into supplemental programs of substance abuse recovery or affordable housing. The congregation may gain deeper insights into the Scriptures on caring for poor persons. Concern for guests' spiritual needs may lead to a new emphasis on evangelism training. Guests' lives might be changed!

Discussions of cost and risk reveal what people hold most precious, for "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). The man who knows there is an immense treasure buried in a field is no fool if he sells all he has to buy the field (Matt. 13:44). Likewise, church leaders may look foolish for taking great risks for holistic ministry, but they consider the stakes to be light beside the hope and joy of seeing people enter the kingdom of God. Leaders can use people's fears about holistic ministry to kindle an appraisal of the congregation's priorities and values, in light of a holistic theology.

A significant event in the history of Central Baptist Church illustrates the impact of risk-taking ministry. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the urban tumult that followed, some of the members felt strongly that the church should take a stand in response. Soon a radical proposal was put before the congregation: Mortgage the church property for \$100,000, and use the money to address the social crisis. Early on a Sunday morning, the congregation debated the proposal. The discussion lasted so long that the congregation canceled the worship service for the day in order to devote their attention to the question. At stake was not just the money, and the risk of losing the church property, but an understanding of the character and calling of the church. The mortgage represented, in part, a willingness to put the church's identity on the line.

After four hours, the proposal passed with a two-thirds majority vote. The resulting Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Fund poured resources into a host of ministries in the African American community, promoting educational scholarships, job training and placement, community organizing, the arts, and housing. At a time when many white churches were withdrawing from cities—physically and spiritually—and denying any social implications of the gospel, suburban Central Baptist's investment in African American community development sent a message that some Christians believed in resisting the evils of racism and honoring the image of God in all humankind.

The risky investment has paid off within the church as well. Over the years Central Baptist strengthened its commitment to social justice. Now nine mission groups address various areas of social concern, each with the goal "to reach out beyond ourselves with God's love." One of these is an Undoing Racism group, "committed to heightening our understanding of the tragic costs of racism within and beyond our congregation and to forming partnerships to overcome the effects of racism." Through hands-on activism, the congregation continues to build on the risky resolution passed in 1968. And the church's mortgage? Repaid within seven years, thanks to the generosity of the congregation, particularly matching gifts from two church families.

Fears arise not only from the known risks but also, or especially, from the prospect of the unknown. Holistic ministry means launching out into the depths, moving out from the safety and familiarity of the harbor into the uncharted waters of the ocean. In some cases, as in the story of Central Baptist, the situation calls for a radical leap. But not all congregations need start out by taking big risks. Writes Gene Wilkes, “A leader is a pioneer because she goes to the edge of a current reality and takes the next step. Upon seeing the new reality, she invites others to join her on the edge.” Risk-taking leadership discerns God’s leading a pace ahead of the congregation, and helps the church journey “off the map” in holistic ministry one step of faith at a time.

In the end, doing holistic ministry is not a matter of making the right risk assessment but of obeying a summons. We engage in outreach in fits and starts; we incur bumps and bruises; we succeed and fail; we want more but settle for less; we get burned and we burn out; we rejoice and we grieve; we receive recognition and we get overlooked. Grants, members, and staff may come and go; equipment may be donated, broken, stolen, or given away; relationships may be forged or fractured.

But what else should we expect when we follow the One who said, “If anyone would be my disciple, they must pick up their cross, deny themselves, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24)? Fulfilling God’s mission cost Jesus his life. And following Jesus into holistic ministry brings Christians to the point of dying to ourselves, dying to our own comforts and interests, even to the point of a willingness to lay down our literal lives. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Jesus bids us come and die.”

Yet what is most important and eternal can never be taken from us. Jesus is our example, “who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). God gave us so much, gave up so much for us. As followers of Jesus, “the love of Christ urges us on” to do no less in sharing God’s good gifts with our neighbors (2 Cor. 5:14). So — “Take a risk,” advises Rev. Patrick Hansel of New Creation Lutheran Church. “Community ministry brings you energy. Serving people brings *you* life, too. Sure, there are going to be mistakes, and you’re going to fall. But you’ll also be uplifted. And,” he grins, “it’s a lot of fun.”

Adapted from Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson and Heidi Rolland Unruh, Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works, chapter 14. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Book House Company, copyright (c) 2002.