

Five Tips for Managing Your Church Budget During the COVID-19 Crisis

Rev. Ken Sloane, Director, Stewardship & Generosity
Discipleship Ministries
The United Methodist Church

None of us could have anticipated what this spring was going to be like when 2020 church budgets were being prepared last summer or fall. Yes, we are in unfamiliar territory. A friend reminded me of these verses in the lectionary Gospel text assigned to March 29:

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them" (John 11:7-10, NRSV).

People around us are in unfamiliar territory, stumbling in the darkness, but the light of Christ is in us. Let that light shine, and don't let our economic worries overshadow our call to be in ministry where Christ would be in ministry. Here are some tips that I hope will help.

1. INCREASE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR DONORS

- The building is closed, not the church; it's not a time for the church to go silent.
- Even during social distancing, relationships are still important.
- Make sure every member gets some contact every few days.
- Stream a worship service, even it's just scripture, message, and prayer.
- Use social media to help people stay connected.
- Get a free Zoom account to allow some groups to continue meeting.
- Remind people of the church's financial needs, but be sensitive to households that have lost income.

2. ASSESS YOUR INCOME SOURCES

- List any automatic recurring giving (including those who give by bill pay) and encourage your leaders to become part of that group.
- Interest income (from investments) will probably be less than before the pandemic.
- Examine emergency or "rainy day" funds (yes, this qualifies) held by finance or trustees, being careful not to violate restrictions or designations.
- Do an assessment of income and expenses for the first quarter of this year and schedule an assessment at the end of the second quarter.
- Consider donors who may have the capacity to give extra through these days.

3. CONSIDER EXPENSES YOU CAN REDUCE OR ELIMINATE

- What are you not doing now that doesn't need to be an expense?

- What supplies or services can be put on hold or canceled?
- Review building expenses; for example, church thermostats to minimize HVAC costs.

4. IDENTIFY EXPENSES THAT MAY BE DEFERRED

- Check your annual conference website or email communications from your district to be sure you are taking advantage of any programs or offers of forbearance they are providing.
Some conferences may be deferring payment of benefits or apportionments; others are extending offers of salary assistance through the conference's Commission on Equitable Compensation.
- Check websites of vendors and lenders; many are offering reductions or elimination of late fees, which may change the priority of payments.
- Could church vehicles not being used right now have premiums reduced?

5. PRIORITIZE EXPENSES AND ESTABLISH NEW PROCEDURES

- Placing staff salaries at the top of the list says people are most important.
- List next those things that will become bigger problems if they are not paid (penalties/interest/loss of coverage).
- Expenses should still be authorized before they are paid. Set up ways to do that remotely.

Remember that the people of your church and community are experiencing fear, anxiety, illness, uncertainty, lack of purpose, and perhaps doubting their own worth. They need connection; they need hope; and they need to know that God loves them and has not abandoned them. Our Easter services will be different this year, but they will still be a celebration of God's power over disease and death and light over darkness.

Our prayers are with you!

With special thanks to my "editorial board" of Jim Allen, Phil Jamieson, and Melissa Spas!