

Mission, Money, and the Church (Part One) by Chris A. Meinzer

I have spent more than two decades at the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. During this time, I have analyzed the economic and organizational models that undergird the missions of theological schools. Mission and money have been helpful frames for this work. In theological schools, mission signifies the students served, and money represents the human, financial, and physical resources required to support the mission. I see many parallels in congregational life.

Mission and money are often in tension and normally out of balance. Most focus on the mission of the church as sacred and conversations about resources as secondary or even profane. Given the significance of the life-changing purpose of the church, I think that mission and money must be seen not as mutually exclusive but as necessarily complementary. The church needs leaders who emphasize the ongoing importance and interdependence of both.

Scarcity and complacency

The tension between mission and money is part of institutional life at many churches. The ever-present pressures to balance the economics of the enterprise often influence what can be accomplished. Nonetheless, in order to ensure the long-term vitality of its purpose, church leaders must ensure that mission guides within the realities of money and resources.

At one end of the spectrum, churches see their biggest obstacle to fulfilling their mission as a lack of human and financial resources. Living daily with this shortage can create a climate of scarcity. Perhaps a church like this might run out of money before it runs out of mission, or it might be trying to stay alive with a mission that was appropriate in the past but has not been reimagined or reorganized in light of its present realities and resources.

At the other end of the spectrum are churches that live in resource abundance. They may be blessed with a hefty endowment or a few generous donors. At such churches, living in the midst of abundance may lead to a climate of complacency. Perhaps a church like this will run out of mission before it runs out of money, or it may be too satisfied with today to cast a bold vision for the future.

It's not unusual for churches to get focused on the short-term rather than thinking strategically. Either a climate of scarcity keeps the challenge of the annual budget at the forefront of decision making or a climate of complacency keeps churches from asking the deeper questions about appropriateness of their mission or their use of money and other resources.

As you reflect on the relationship between money and mission in your context, consider these questions:

1. How does your church think about mission and money? Are your conversations mutually exclusive or complementary? How do you as a leader help or hinder these conversations?
2. Does your church operate out of a climate of scarcity, complacency, or something else? How does this climate impact your mission? How does your own thinking benefit or complicate the climate?