

Negotiating new realities

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We were at the tail end of the G.W. Bush administration, and the mild discomfort that we had been feeling since 2001 became agonizing. The stock market tumbled. The housing bubble met a sharp needle. College graduates accumulated debt to get their degree, but it didn't actually ensure them a job. People began to go into bankruptcy because they couldn't pay their medical expenses. Gas prices had crept from a dollar a gallon to four a gallon. Each day revealed a new, disturbing banking scandal.

In our corner of the economy, excellent pastors got fired and many took wage and benefit cuts. In some cases, congregations didn't realize that their decrease in membership was a national trend that had a lot to do with shifting demographics. They needed to change in order to reach a new generation. Sometimes membership resisted the transformation that pastors wanted, then turned and blamed the pastor when the church decreased in size. Endowments shrank, older generations passed away, and congregations began to feel the effects of not reaching out to younger generations. The new reality became very stressful for pastors.

In all of it, most of us woke up to the fact that we would need to start living much differently. In our home, even though our income had not changed, we began to prepare. We dug up our lawn and planted a garden, banned using credit cards, junked our second car, eliminated as much debt as we could, and learned to live without much air conditioning. We thought more about the planet-at-large, changed our light bulbs to CFLs, and stopped celebrating Christmas as the great American hoard-a-thon. I cut back on clothes and haircuts. We realized that the days of pastors having secure jobs were over. We were just like everybody else in our economy.

It was a deliberate and substantial shift for our entire family. In the next few years, as my writing and speaking grew, our personal and professional needs shifted, but we kept three commandments:

•**Thou shalt not let go of medical care.** I had health insurance, but my husband didn't. So, when my writing and speaking began to mushroom to a point where I needed to give something up, we knew that my husband had to find a job with insurance before I could make any major shifts.

It's hard to find employment with medical insurance, but costs have increased so much that it's a necessity. If you are in a difficult position, but you have health insurance, do what you can to keep your job. If you find yourself negotiating a larger salary or health insurance, go with insurance.

•**Thou shalt stay in the housing market.** I've heard different opinions on this, so let my voice be one in many. If you're in a volatile market, by all means, be wary. A lot of the decision to buy will depend on your location. But I have recently heard a chorus of clergy saying, "I will *never* again buy a house." They cite massive drops in housing values, the inability to change jobs easily, and the excruciating pain of moving. Pastors have faced foreclosures, and I don't want to minimize that reality, but we have made the decision to stay in the market.

Clergy get tax benefits with that mortgage. It's a way to build equity (even if you lose some money on your house, you will lose all of your money on rent). We are not going to make boatloads of money on skyrocketing equity, but we will need a place to live when we retire. Right now, housing prices are low *and* interest rates are low. In many areas, rents are as high as a mortgage payment. So, if you're wondering whether or not to get into the market, I would advise you to make the plunge. And if

you don't mind me getting end-of-the-world desperate on you... knowing that our family would not go hungry because we could have a garden was worth a great deal of security in my mind.

•**Thou shalt sock away additional retirement as much as possible.** We have a member-based retirement plan in the PC(USA), which is amazing. But we have always tried to keep an additional 403B fund open. There were times when we stretched to pay our bills, but we were still putting additional money into retirement. Our funds have taken a hit, along with everyone else's. We've lost money. But, at least we had money to lose.

I am no financial guru. We scrap and fumble. We face our finances with a great deal of stress, shame, humility, and frustration. At times, we've pawned our possessions in order to make our mortgage (which reminds me... this is a really good time to sell all of those gold earrings. You know when you lose one, and you have the other one, but you don't know what to do with it? Find a reputable dealer and sell it now. Gold prices are high). We have always placed God's calling over our material needs. But, following those three simple commands has helped us greatly.