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## Finding redemption in recession

*Many pastors face the challenge of their careers. Pastors across the country talk about what they see when they look out at the pews and what they say from the pulpit.*

by [David Gibson](#)

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*Editor's note: A version of this story appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of [Divinity](#) magazine.*

From one angle, the national recession can bear an unsettling resemblance to original sin: a steep and sweeping fall from economic grace that touches every soul, regardless of status or profession, age or creed, and with little respect to human standards of innocence or guilt.

Of course some are suffering more than others, and in different ways. And the greater sins of a few outrage the rest. But in interviews with pastors and preachers working around the country, often in widely divergent situations, there is also the sense that everyone is touched in some profound way, even if this common bond requires a response pitched to the specific context.

The question, they say, then turns to whether the crisis may offer an opportunity for not only economic, but also spiritual and ecclesial, transformation. This opening has both individual and communal dimensions, the pastors say, that traverse and connect the worlds of work and worship.

### Questions to consider:

- What can Jesus teach us about ministering to the poor and the wealthy in a spirit of honesty and grace?
- What did the preaching and teaching in your church concerning possessions sound like

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### Challenging the leaders

For many pastors, the greatest and most immediate challenge is gauging how to address anxious congregants where they are. Two examples can illustrate the differences and commonalities.

At Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, N.C., the Rev. Steve Eason's congregation successfully completed a \$30 million capital campaign. But

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before the economic downturn?  
What does it sound like now?

- The economic downturn has opened many Christians' eyes to presence of poverty and financial difficulties. What else are we not seeing or hearing in the American church because of our relative comfort and prosperity?
- What can you learn from those whose socioeconomic and educational status differs from your own?

Charlotte is also the "Wall Street of the South," the second-largest banking center after New York (no other city is even close) and a ground zero of sorts for the financial collapse.

Myers Park Presbyterian has taken a hit as well, in economic terms -- its \$5.2 million budget for 2009 would be the envy of most churches, but that figure is down from a projected \$6.2 million a few months ago. Congregants are losing jobs or moving away, and many have seen their incomes drop dramatically even as some of them -- like Bank of America executives -- become targets of populist anger.

Eason rejects any temptation to scapegoat: "Everyone loves to take a poke at the rich. But you've also got to step back and realize that a lot of rich people are doing a

lot of good in the world."

But such comments won't hit home with his congregants, nor will simply saying that genuine contentment is not based on material things, he said. It's true enough, but if you push that too hard, said Eason, "It gets Pollyanna-ish."

Instead, Myers Park Presbyterian has taken a twofold approach. First the church created practical ministries like job networks and counseling programs. Next they recognized there are a lot of successful people in the church -- "These are not people who need their hand held," as Eason put it -- that need to be challenged.

"I came at it from a leadership angle," he said. "These are leaders who are getting hit, and their No. 1 job is to lead people out of this."

The church launched a four-part preaching series in January and February on the leadership models of Moses and Jesus, for example, calling on those who can lead "to have a servant's heart" to help others.

"Now is not the time to get cocky and brassy. We need to serve people who are hurting," Eason said. "We're still a very blessed people for all the hits we've taken."

### *God will take care of you; we want to help*

West of Charlotte, the Rev. Brad Thie, of Friendship United Methodist Church in Newton, N.C., sees his job as more like triage for a region where hardship is deep and wide.

Unemployment is above 15 percent and rising, and symptoms of the affliction can be seen in the huge spike in demand for medical and social services.

Thie does not avoid the recession in his sermons, but preaches on passages such as the Sermon on the Mount ("Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?") or the laments to God of the prophet Habakkuk: "Though the flocks disappear from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, Yet will I rejoice in the Lord and exult in my saving God."

But he adds that even the best homily must be complemented by practical ministry -- counseling and spending time in prayer with people. His church has a fund to disburse money anonymously to those in need.

As the number of out-of-work parishioners has increased, so has attendance at daytime Bible study group, Thie said. "It's been a pleasant surprise to see these unemployed people throwing themselves into Bible study."

"We are living through the greatest opportunity in our lifetime to minister and witness," Thie said. His message: "Not only will God take care of you, but we want to help."

### *Emergencies, natural and unnatural*

The Rev. Jim Huskins also tries to present that message to the people he ministers to around Goldsboro, N.C. A retired United Methodist pastor, he works as program director at Marion Edwards Recovery Center Initiatives (MERC I), a United Methodist disaster relief program.

Disasters now are both “natural and unnatural,” as unemployment skyrockets and donations drop -- to the point that the MERCI program may be closed, even as its services are needed more than ever, he said.

But Huskins also believes that rather than just reacting to grinding economic woes, churches and pastors need to be much better prepared for the pathologies that emerge from a recession.

When the anger and depression show up at the door in the person of an abused spouse or a backsliding alcoholic, Huskins said, “You’re way behind the...curve.”

The problem, he said, is that churches have not deployed their resources on economic issues and preparedness. “It’s a matter of this being seen as a ministry that can be done through the church.” It is, he said, akin to offering marriage preparation programs rather than just divorce counseling.

### *Fighting fear as a community*

The fearsomeness of the recession, however, also is being viewed as an opportunity to create new connections among believers and churches.

The Rev. Scott Chrostek, an associate pastor in Brighton, a Michigan suburb between Detroit and Ann Arbor, has members in his United Methodist congregation who would be considered upper-middle class, among them a number of auto industry executives. Yet recent months have shown that no one is safe, especially in a state like Michigan.

In the metropolitan Detroit area, one in eight is unemployed, and as Chrostek notes, “that becomes very real in a church of 800 people.” It also becomes very real as the automotive industry, already struggling and the target of populist ire in other parts of the country, faces the prospect of bankruptcy.

Before Christmas last year, the preachers at all three worship services asked everyone connected in any way with the auto industry to stand. Somewhat haltingly, people got up until nearly 80 percent of the worshippers were standing.

“We just said, ‘We want to be in prayer for all of you,’” Chrostek said. “That has done so much for our congregation. We feel connected.”

### *Collaboration and networking*

The Rev. Lisa Moss Degrenia, of Allendale United Methodist Church in St. Petersburg, Fla., sees opportunities for forging bonds that can help not only individual members but also the church’s witness as a whole.

Before the recession really took hold, some United Methodist churches in her district launched a “collaborative multi-site laboratory” in which congregations of all sizes and varying degrees of sustainability came together to share resources and ministries.

The laboratory was an effort to address inevitable transformations before they became crises, and to do it without the language of “mergers” and “takeovers” that smacks of the corporate world. Degrenia said the recession has only hastened their experiment in collaboration -- and that’s a good thing.

In a similar vein, Eason of Myers Park Presbyterian notes that since the economy cratered, he and other pastors have been networking and sharing ideas and best practices in a new internet community with some two dozen other Presbyterian churches across the country. “We weren’t talking before, but now we are,” Eason said.

Interestingly, Chrostek said that as times have grown tougher, the congregation has continued to push its stewardship campaign and emphasize the need to help others. It has paid off: The church has raised more money in the past two years than ever before. At nearby Waterford Central United Methodist Church, where Chrostek’s wife, Wendy, is an associate, they’ve also had increased giving of late -- even though Waterford’s congregation generally is less affluent than Brighton’s.

## *How do you know if you are greedy?*

Another question many pastors are asking themselves is how -- or whether -- the recession will transform American attitudes about money and possessions.

Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School, said preaching about the economy is a challenge because congregations are different and each congregation has people in different situations and with differing attitudes about money.

“I often say that one reason the church seems to concentrate so much on sex and lust as a sin is because we think we know what it looks like when we get it wrong. We seldom talk about greed, because how would you know if you are [greedy]?”

Since greed is so hard to recognize (even though it is a much greater concern in the New Testament than lust), Hauerwas said many people didn't even know that they were suffering its effects until the recession hit.

Even now, he said, most people seem to be praying for things to return to the affluence of the recent past, rather than trying to address issues such as the growing gap between the very poor and the very rich.

For example, he said the extravagant bonuses paid to financial executives aren't new; they're just in the news, and suddenly people are focusing on that aspect of the income gap.

“It always beats the hell out of me why people don't get upset about it,” Hauerwas said. “It's just obscene. The only reason I can think of is because people think, ‘Oh, I've got a chance to get rich, too!’”

And that desire, Hauerwas said, is another form of lust. “Churches need to help people frame their lives in the context of what Jesus taught. We haven't been very good about that, in terms of our ability to see our greed through the light of the gospel.

“What needs to be said is, ‘Look, you are possessed by your possessions. And Christianity is ongoing training in dispossession, to where you'll be free,’” he said.

As to whether this crisis truly will transform Christians -- much less the nation -- Hauerwas is skeptical. Others, including Degrenia, are hopeful that churches will seize the crisis as a time for transformation.

“There is an opportunity, brought on by the economy, to break down walls, to be more kingdom-minded,” she said.

“Sometimes it starts from self-interest. But God can take a little crack like that and open it into something wider.”