

## **A GPS for \$ Directions**

A congregation e-mailed me the other day and asked if I could help them overcome the “strangle hold” their budget had on their attempts to expand their ministry. I wrote back and asked them what seemed to be the problem. “Our congregation’s council has been working to increase our member’s giving for several years and although there have been several increases in giving over the years, the cost of doing the work of the church and the ongoing expenses seem to consistently take all the income”. I wrote back and said, “Welcome to the club! Nearly 100% of all congregations have the same issues”. Then I asked, “what kind of debt load do you have?” And she told me that “they didn’t have any debt, just a mortgage on their sanctuary that “ate up” over \$ 10,000 a month, almost a third of our annual income!”

I didn’t bother to explain that the mortgage was indeed a debt and that a mortgage that consumed over 30% of their income was definitely a big debt load. “How old is the mortgage”, I asked. We are in the sixth year of a twenty year mortgage, the original loan was for \$1,650,000 and we have a balance of over \$1,100,000. “What was the original interest rate”, I asked. It was 6.5%, so we really can’t save anything by refinancing.” “I imagine you had a Capital Campaign to raise funds for that loan, when was that finished”, I asked. “Five years ago we received the last of the three year pledges”, she answered. We have really wanted to start a school or a pre-school, since we have the property and extra building space and many members and local residents that have asked us , but things are always so “tight” just trying to pay our expenses that we haven’t been able to move forward on it!”

“I’m talking to you on e-mail and there’s no way that I can get a feel for your challenges without knowing more, but it sounds to me that probably need to plan a new Capital Campaign with two goals; To reduce your mortgage and to fund the beginning of your new school. My advice would be to call the ELCA’s Mission Investment Fund and get some advice from their building consultants and also contact the ELCA’s Stewardship Key Leader program about what it would take to do that campaign. Those two groups are “in house” Lutheran financial planners that can give a good assessment of the best way for you to proceed and they both have outstanding “track” records. It will start your congregation back on the road to growth!”

One of the key reasons that so many of our congregations don’t grow is because they are afraid to ask for help. Most of them will suffer through years of “hand wringing” and long debates in their council meetings agonizing over things that can be corrected in short order by groups within the ELCA that are always anxious to help. They remind me of most men when they aren’t sure of how to get to the place they are going, they will get lost rather than stop and ask for directions! The fault maybe is on both sides though, as many times, the ELCA makes it difficult to find out exactly where to ask the questions. But, the bottom line is that thousands of our congregations struggle with challenges that are easily solvable with slight changes in the congregation’s approach.

It isn’t “brain surgery or rocket science” to overcome these kind of financial challenges and every congregation has them from time to time. Don’t wait for someone to invent a GPS for your congregation to give you directions on how to overcome these financial challenges. Ask your synod for help or go to [elca.org](http://elca.org) and find the people that deal with these problems every day. God wants your congregation to grow --- and it’s just good stewardship!