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Excerpts from the Alban Institute webinar for UCC pastors and lay leaders hosted November 21, 2008: *Ministry and Mission in Uncertain Times*

Making Sound Strategic Choices in Anxious Times – Susan Beaumont

Four steps to maintaining a sense of thoughtfulness about the choices you are making at this time:

1. Be honest about your reality. You need not distort reality or hide and cover things up to protect people.
2. Keep mission focus at the center of your decision making.
3. Set priorities on the basis of mission contribution and resource and requirements.
4. Develop strategy for doing more with less.

1. In that reactive stance, I have noticed that congregations often want to retreat on new programs they've started. They want to second guess and reinvent things. People who didn't like a program that you began in the first place, will use a time like this to make a case for why we need to make it go away. And it's really important that we stop and get together our facts so that we are doing our decision making on the basis of a reality we understand and not on some fear-based reaction. It's helpful in doing this, to slow your self down, to make sure that you're compiling and analyzing recent trends, not just what happened this last month. It's easy to take a look at that second worship service and say now's the time to pull the plug on that without stopping to say "Okay, what's been happening with that second worship service over the course of these last two years before we had this moment and how has it changed in this moment so what is our reality and what is it we're looking at?"

It's important to stop and consider a variety of "what if?" scenarios. In a reactive stance people, again, want to bring closure and make a decision quickly but it's important to say; "What happens if the economic downturn is really as awful as we all think it might be, but what happens if it's more short term, what kinds of options do we have open to us and then to asses the potential impact of both a short term and long term decision making around that.

2. Keeping focused on the mission. A really important question for you and your leaders to be engaging in right now is "What now has really changed on the landscape, what has changed in our environment?" There is something unique about our environment that we need to pay attention to.

Can we look at the impact and the quality of all the ministries we are doing to say, “What’s ours to do?” and recognize that there may be a rare opportunity in this moment to actually start a ministry that you haven’t done or to expand a really important ministry. If your congregation does something related to helping those who’ve lost jobs cope with that transition in their life that would certainly be a ministry that ought to be growing in a time like this and not suffering a cut back along with across the board cuts that everyone is experiencing. There’s actually some good news at a moment like this, which is, some of the programs we’ve been hanging onto for periods of time, some of the ministries that have been limping along and we’ve allowed to continue, this is actually a prime moment to take a look at those and use the economic downturn as the logic for why we need to make the hard choice and move that thing off the radar screen.

3. Set priorities.

This is a chart by Kate Barr, Executive Director of the Non Profits Assistance Fund.

	Low Contribution to Our Mission	High Contribution to Our Mission
Low Use of Our Resources	Ask ourselves: “Is this really a good fit for us?”	Keep or expand these ministries
High Use of Our Resources	Reconfigure or eliminate these ministries	This is our core. Can we do it differently with fewer or different resources?

This chart helps congregations understand; “What are we suppose to be paying attention to here?” It asks you to do two things.

1. Evaluate each of your ministries and programs according to how much they contribute to the overall mission of the congregation. Of course this does assume you have some sense of understanding what your mission is as a community.
2. Also ask the question: “How many of our resources is this taking?”

When we find that we have in the upper left hand quadrant, programs and ministries that really do not contribute much to the overall mission of the church and they don’t use up many of our resources, these are the kinds of things that build up over time and drain us. The good news is this is a time to evaluate that upper left hand quadrant and see if we can’t close down some of those ministries and programs.

Maybe they were at one point in time very viable, thriving things which no longer make sense in our current context and we have let them struggle along. Let's see how we can reallocate the resources from the left side of the chart over to the right side of the chart if we have something going on in our midst that has a high use of resources with a low contribution to our mission, that's a no-brainer and at a time like this we need to reconfigure or eliminate those ministries.

Then we want to ask ourselves: "Where do we have programming that's making a high contribution to the mission and not using much resource?" Those are the things we should be expanding at a time like this. And looking at the core (which is the bottom right quadrant) the stuff that takes a lot of our time and energy and has the highest contribution to this calling that we think we're here to fulfill, "Can we do it differently?" or "Can we do it with fewer or different resources?"

Let's talk about some of those alternatives of how you might do it differently. When you are looking at a mission or a ministry that's a vital part of who you are but it's taking up too many of your resources. We can ask ourselves first: "What really is the essential function of what we are doing there?" "Is there a way that we can eliminate pieces that are really not the essential part of it or just postpone it to a different time?" Looking to share the mission with partner churches can be helpful.

Where can an increase in volunteerism help? There is good reason to believe that when times get tough, people get refocused on things that are important to them in life and volunteerism may actually increase in a time like this and we might be able to use more volunteer hours to supplement something we have going on.

What new partnerships can we form? How might we look at some of our sister congregations either within our own denomination or outside of them who are struggling with some of the same ministries and think about ways we can share buildings, share programs, share resources to do the same ministry for much less cost. And who else might help drive our resource engine? Is there a way that we can think about taking some of the ministries we do and make them more self funding, charge admission for a class that use to be a free service that we provided. There are a lot of ways to think about the moment that we are in.

It is really important that we don't unilaterally ask our staff teams to do more with less. Our staff members are already facing the crisis of being people who are in an economic climate that is not friendly. They have to worry about "Is my salary going to be cut? Am I supposed to work even more hours than I already have?" Staff teams can get quickly resentful when good people are asked to do more with less while there are other people perhaps on the staff team or in the congregation who are not carrying their part of the load.

So having those hard conversations now about where are we effective, where are we ineffective, where are staff members performing against our expectations, where are they falling short? Having those hard conversations is a much better approach than unilaterally saying to everyone “Just make do.” In a time like this, making good strategic choices will position you well for the next chapter of ministry.

Question

Do you have a sense of how fundraising went this past fall?

Answer - Susan Beaumont

We are getting mixed reports, within my own client systems, everyone is reporting being impacted. I haven't heard of anyone say “Gosh, we haven't been hit by this.” But a number of clients are saying “It's not going as poorly as we thought it would.” and others are saying “It's pretty severe.” I read an article not too long ago in *Christianity Today* that was written after the 9/11 economic downturn and some research that was done on that time showed that the decrease in fundraising, during economic downturn, is really only about 5 to 7% even in the most severest recession, for non profits and for churches in particular. And often times that decrease in available funding of 5 to 7% is offset by the decrease in what it costs to do some of the things we wanted to do so that the impact is not as great as we worry about. I often also hear from people who study stewardship issues and know those things that churches are the last groups to be hit when people make choices about cutting their contributions to non profits. So those are some small reassurances that perhaps this is not going to be as drastic as some people are worrying it might be.

Question

Okay, in my local church, in the past two weeks, we have done everything you say we should not do mostly in the vein of the church living within its means.

Answer - Susan Beaumont

Well I'm not sure I know what “Everything you say we shouldn't do.” means actually (laugh) but I'm guessing that you are saying “There has been some reactivity and we are making quick choices to try and get ourselves positioned and to feel better.” If that is already happening, so be it. There's lots of opportunity in the course of a budget year to shift course and shift direction if people feel the need to do some drastic cuts to make themselves feel better going into the early part of the year then as a leader you may have to live with that for a period of time but you may also be open to suggesting at points in time “Can we stop and reevaluate? We set a course of action this past November, is there a way that we can revisit this in March and see if those choices still make sense?” We don't have to live with a stewardship choice that we made until next year.

Answer - Alice Mann

I'd could make a brief addition to that, in churches that are working hard on church growth and may have staffed ahead to try to allow for that growth sometimes there were unrealistic expectations about how quickly that staff person was going to generate their own salary and so I'm only imagining into what some of the decisions of the past few weeks might be in that church but I know in some other congregations that I work with, it's not really the downturn that's a fundamental problem but the downturn has shed a light on the fact that there were unrealistic expectations. Either that staff person's energy was not really fully directed toward meeting new and prospective members and doing what's necessary to help them find their way in. Sometimes the role hasn't been defined clearly but sometimes they really did overshoot and I don't think it's the end of the world to have to admit that. It doesn't mean you can never do this again. Again this is a framing piece to say "We're learning something here and if we learn what we need to learn from it our growth program can pick up at a new point."

Question

I'm a Conference Minister and I'm speaking with a congregation on Sunday that just this week decided to cut all salaries by 25% and eliminate mission altogether. I like Susan's outline and I'm wondering if you have any suggestions as to how to open this up further with members.

Answer – Susan Beaumont

Well, I think a really powerful thing is to just simply share that chart that I laid out. Ask people if they have given some consideration to the evaluation of what they're presently doing and to suggest audaciously that there is something they ought to be doing more of. That seems to capture people's imagination, to kind of shock them out of their scarcity mentality. The challenge in implementing this is quite frankly many congregations really aren't equipped or prepared to say; "Are we clear about what our mission is and are we even clear about what programs we have and how many of our resource they're using?" So it's not surprising that churches will have to do across the board cuts because they don't have the capacity to have any other conversation in the moment. But it is a moment to say "Can we use the next year to have those conversations? Can we begin talking about clarity about our mission and an evaluation of what we have going on so that a year from now we can have better conversations about this or six months from now we can have better conversations?"

Question

What's the best way to combat the voices of crisis on cable news and the headlines? The headlines have our congregation's attention 24/7 and we in church only have access a small part of the time.

Answer - Alice Mann

One of the ways I found myself trying to redirect that after the 9/11 event was to notice that I was beginning to feel that most of the television reporting on all stations was all fear all the time and I found that even just saying that to myself I was able to look at the screen and as I was getting more and more weighed down by the heavy message I would almost say to myself; “Oops, this is all fear all the time” and then get up to my feet perhaps turn it off and redirect my energy. It’s not a matter of ignoring it; people will not take you seriously if you just try to say, as my mother would want to say; “Everything will turn out alright dear.” When you are really in the muck that’s not really an assuring message but to maybe find a way to call attention to it, without being blaming, or sarcastic, dishing the culture doesn’t help particularly at this moment but just to notice it and ask people to notice their responses to it and ask them to consider some alternative responses.

Answer – Susan Beaumont

In some ways this could be the churches finest hour right here. We’ve talked so much in recent years about the mainline church losing its sense of relevance. If there was ever a moment for the church to be relevant and offer hope in peoples lives this could be one of those moments. Alice and I work all the time with congregations who are doing planning and as part of our planning exercises one of the things that we do in the Alban approach is often to create this “Wall of wonder” or this history chart that goes through chapters and eras of church life and what happened in each of those eras. I can site so many instances where congregations point back in their history to a moment they are so proud of. When everything told them that something wouldn’t work and they took a risk and stepped out in faith and it was a remarkable turning point in the life of the church. I don’t say that to encourage stupidity in a moment like this but to just call us back to the place of action. We are the church and we are here for moments like this to point people to the direction of; “there is something more here that we need to be tapping into that the rest of the culture doesn’t have access to.”

Question

How do we work with congregations that have an instinct to pull back from either the strategic plan that they’ve been implementing or the mission priorities that they’ve said they’ve had? How do we keep the momentum going for those plans that we’ve been working with and those opportunities in these trying times.

Answer Alice Mann

Peter Block has a fairly recent book the title of which is *The Answer to How is Yes*. What he is trying to lift up there is the notion that we sometimes get all tangled up in “Oh, how, how, how, how can we possibly do this and don’t re-clarify the fundamental question: “Is this what I intend to do, is this what we’re here for?” And so I would just underscore again the grounding in the fundamental things that don’t count on exact numbers of dollars or

exact curricula that we employ that get underneath that to” What’s it all for?” and when you get underneath it to that level then the faith statement that the leader does need to re-affirm in all times and all places that if that’s the fundamental call then there is some way to do it now. It may be extremely different than what we picture and there may be some letting go involved but if we let go in service of that fundamental call then that is actually quite empowering.

Answer – Susan Beaumont

What I have been finding that has been helping with my clients is to focus them back on the need. What is the original need that brought us to this moment of saying that this is the direction we were going to go and what is the felt passion around this and has that gone away? When they can articulate, “No, all of that stuff is still real.” Then you can ask the question “Is there some reason that our priorities should move to something that has become more emergent, more as a need, more important?” Usually people can work their way through that logic to say “No, this is still a priority. We still need to be doing this.” Which then allows us to ask the questions that Alice is asking; “How can we keep this moving forward, even though we don’t have the same resources?”

Invite space where we can ask questions that force us to slow down and be more thoughtful because the decision probably doesn’t have to be made today.

Question

What about the message that clergy are giving? What if they don’t want to talk about generosity or abundance?

Answer - Susan Beaumont

When things are more economically more sound we tend to put the money message away because we don’t want to have to talk about that and then when we find ourselves in a time like this I’m finding clergy are struggling with their theology of abundance and sometimes it turns into a kind of sappy reassurances of “Just have faith.”, which, as Alice pointed out earlier, has to come from a real place where people feel like they are being heard. I think there’s a lot to be said about abundance and as religious leaders right now our ability to talk about abundance and the need to keep focusing on abundance, it is critical.

Alice Mann

One very personal experience I had during a time when I was doing graduate studies and had to make a reaffirmed decision to go to church that Sunday, I turned up on a stewardship Sunday and heard a woman talk very tenderly and powerfully about her own economic circumstances and she had lost her job, there was a lot there and she testified to how she maintained her own generosity and making choices at that time had reassured her of God’s abundance. I think this is a beatitudes moment, the poor in spirit may have the most powerful message. I think about, for example, people in the congregation who are in Al-anon or AA or some other kind of recovery, they are not going to tell all those

stories in the public realm but they are often people who have stories of trusting God when it looked like everything was over. People who have been dealing with a life threatening illness and many of the people who have the least and who have been able to bring their faith to bear on that may be able to give some pretty powerful testimony, so this is a time to look for some unexpected voices to proclaim the Gospel.

Question

I have a gut feeling that liturgy and worship may be a key element in telling the story and reminding people of who they are. Do you care to comment on this role and where we might find resources on this?

Answer - Alice Mann

One of those places where abundance gets lost in worship and especially when we get anxious, is in the calm and unhurried character of what we do. So one thing I would watch liturgically is ...some congregations worship tends to be a little frenetic even on a good day, but to watch that and maybe consciously slow it down a bit. Maybe watch not to overload it with too many elements on the same day, too many announcements, too many special dedications or show and tells and so forth, the kinds of things that can work their way in because everybody needs a piece of the airtime but to really focus on whether that is a moment of peacefulness and whether that is sort of the still point of the turning world just for a moment. And to help people be conscious of also entering and getting ready for that. Maybe you would do some slightly different preparatory things for your worship. Maybe in addition to a prelude there would just be a moment to say "We're just going to hold together an awareness that this is a difficult time for our society and a difficult time for many of the people, not only in our pews, but right around us in our community and to hold that together in an attitude of trust, that's how we're going to begin our worship," and maybe ring a bell and keep a brief time of quiet. That would go a long way to breaking the cycle of anxious behavior and feelings.

Question

What role might a pastoral relations committee play during these anxious times?

Answer - Susan Beaumont

Well I certainly think that a pastoral relations committee can be key advocates for this notion of "We are not going to dump all of our anxiety and all of the dilemma we have in our budget situation on our staff team. We are not going to unilaterally go to our staff team and say; "You all have to take this kind of a pay cut this year and we still have these expectations." I think they can be a key voice in helping people to see there might be alternatives and to advocate for now allowing the congregation to purge their anxiety by dumping on staff.

Answer - Alice Mann

I can also see pastoral relations partner with personnel or a planning group in some of that strategic assessments that Susan was talking about in terms of what are the key functions and which programs are different staff attached to, some of those kinds of issues. Maybe also support for the senior minister if that person is head of staff, in more individual support for that person in sorting through areas of performance that may need to be raised with various staff members, obviously in a confidential way, offering some perspective and advice but also some support that it is a good thing to do that.

Question

Stewardship is viewed as a necessary evil. We do it so we can fund our ministries. How do we reframe stewardship in and of itself?

Answer – Alice Mann

Wow, that's a wonderful big reframing question, isn't it? It sort of blows the whole thing wide opened.

Well, here's the way I talk to myself about this, when I get myself in a clutch. When you think about relationship with God, the whole ballgame is trusting God, in every day, every moment in every situation in our life, that's the fundamental work of being a human being, is trusting God and then manifesting that in what we do. And so, I think, coming back to that fundamental is certainly one of my touchstones in situations like this. Stewardship, going back to the Exodus story is about trusting about giving us the bread we need, but not getting it until tomorrow. Trusting in the goodness of God in every circumstance, I think, is the fundamental faith enterprise.

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