

Church contributions, budgets recede in poor economy



Less in the collection plate this year? In a survey of Protestant pastors, 57% said the poor economy was hurting their church.

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By [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#), USA TODAY

Recession pain has hit widely and deeply among U.S. churches — driving down contributions and limiting budgets, according to surveys from two groups specializing in Christian research. Meanwhile, pleas for assistance rose sharply in 2009.

Although pastor [Rick Warren](#), a best-selling author, raised \$2.5 million with a New Year's Eve appeal when the budget for his Saddleback Church came up \$900,000 short, few pastors have his fame or his affluent Southern California base.

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A national survey of 1,002 Protestant pastors in November by Nashville-based LifeWay Research found:

- 28% reported raising less money than in 2008.
- 57% said the poor economy was hurting their church.
- 70% reported increased requests from people outside their congregation for assistance.
- 43% budgeted more money to help more needy people.
- 3% were considering closing down their churches.

"Churches have not yet entered the recovery," says LifeWay director Ed Stetzer. "Historically, they tend to recover financially when unemployment decreases, usually after the economy as a whole" recovers.

"Still, we have a mandate to help, even when giving is down," says Brady Boyd, senior pastor at New Life Church in [Colorado Springs](#), where 10,000 people attend weekend worship.

New Life dealt with a 13% drop in offerings in 2009 by cutting 25 staff positions through layoffs and attrition, ramping up use of volunteers, and relying on special appeals such as a Christmas collection to help struggling military families nearby to buy food.

"I'm proud that our people rallied and we do as much or more in ministry than we did before," Boyd says.

The Barna Group, based in Ventura, Calif., also examined the recession's effect on churches in tracking polls of 1,114 pastors and church leaders from October to December.

Across all Protestant churches, it found, budgets were down 7%. But for the most typical size church (100 to 250 adults attending weekend worship), budgets declined 13%.

Charismatic denominations, black churches, Southern Baptists and congregations in the Northeast struggled the most, Barna Group found. Churches that held their ground were most likely to be mainline Protestant congregations and churches in the Midwest. Only 9% of churches had higher giving in 2009 than in 2008.

At Temple Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, Miss., "we had a great December, raising \$800,000 that month for our \$6.3 million budget," says

senior teaching pastor Tony Merida. "This enables us to increase our partnerships and mission trips."

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