

The Age of the Unthinkable

On Saturday, January 30, the San Diego Union-Tribune ran an article entitled “Crystal Cathedral loses some of its shine”. The article reports that the church’s revenue has dropped 27 percent from roughly \$30 million in 2008 to \$22 million in 2009. The church plans to save \$4.9 million by selling 170 acres in Orange County including a retreat and wedding center, laying off 50 employees, and cutting the “Hour of Power” from 8 of their 45 domestic broadcast TV stations. The 10,000 member church will also cancel its “Glory of Easter” pageant this year, which normally attracts thousands of visitors. The “Hour of Power” has been on TV for 40 years. Sheila Schuller Coleman, founder Robert Schuller’s daughter, is the church’s recently appointed leader. She has said, “If we can just hang in there and be smart about surviving the downturn in the economy, this storm will pass and we will be OK and we can begin to grow again as a ministry.”

While I certainly wish them all the best, I do not agree with her statement. I do not believe their ministry will grow again if all they do is hang in there until the storm passes. If they do not go through a paradigm shift, their church will continue to decline. Richard Flory, a senior research associate for the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC says the era of blockbuster televangelists is fading and viewership is declining as the age of the average viewer creeps upward. He said, “I can’t imagine anybody younger than 40 watching some sort of televangelist.” The church, founded more than 50 years ago, has been bleeding dollars and members for years, a trend that accelerated when the founder Robert Schuller Sr. stepped down.

20 years ago, this scenario would have been unthinkable for most people. Today, it doesn’t surprise me at all. Today, we live in the Age of the Unthinkable. Haiti has experienced an unthinkable earthquake. While earthquakes are certainly nothing new, reports coming out of Haiti are that this is the worst earthquake in history. The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center was unimaginable for most Americans the day before it happened. The stock market collapse in the fall of 2008 stunned notable economists as well as average citizens with the depth and breadth and speed of the fall.

The “new normal” of our economy is unthinkable. Today, we have an improving economy that is not accompanied by hiring people back to work. States and cities are making massive budget cuts they thought they never would have to make.

What happens in our society impacts us in the church. Some of the church growth principles of 20 years ago now not only don’t work, but they actually deter people from going to church. The Presbytery of Western New York (Buffalo) no longer has a single associate pastor position in any of its 70 churches. In our presbytery, we have about 10 fewer associate positions than we did just 5 years ago. I know of a small church that is thinking about closing its doors. One of its elders told me, “We have to let the members know it’s not business as usual anymore.” How many of our churches express the same attitudes as the Crystal Cathedral? How many are thinking if we can only weather this storm, we will begin to grow again? We won’t. Growth will not come by simply

hanging on to the status quo that hasn't been working for a long time. Something needs to change.

And yet, in the middle of this, Jesus Christ continues to speak good news into our situation. We are not in a hopeless situation. God is up to something here. The church will never go out of existence. We in the church will have to learn how to adapt and develop new skills. But, it is not hopeless. There is a re-formation of the church that is going on. We are trying to catch up to what God is doing and how the Holy Spirit is re-shaping us for ministry in a new era. We want to carry forward the best of the past into an unknown future. We know that if we keep learning, we can keep ministering. People will always need Jesus Christ. The shape and style and size may change, but the need will remain. The presbytery is a learning community – a place for people to come together to learn from one another, how to walk in the Savior's footsteps, and how to follow in His ministry.

I hope you will join us on Saturday, February 13, at 8:30 am, for a day of learning together, as we discuss ministry and leadership in the Age of the Unthinkable.