

CHURCH ECONOMICS

All Souls Church, November 23, 2008

Forrest Church

On Anniversary Sunday, our tradition is to open the All Souls history book and reflect on our past. We do this to honor those who have gone before us; to know a little better where we have come from; and to learn from our successes and failures. For reasons so obvious that I won't bother to explain them, this year I shall revisit All Souls at times of great national economic crisis.

This is our 189th anniversary. Coincidentally, it is also the 189th anniversary of the first major recession in United States history. When a small group of liberal-minded religious seekers banded together to establish a Unitarian church in New York City in 1819, their timing could not have been worse. The panic of 1819 witnessed dozens of bank failures, widespread and unprecedented foreclosures, massive unemployment, and a nationwide slump in manufacturing and agriculture.

The timing may have been dicey, but the call to action was unmistakable. Slipstreaming on the publication of the instantly popular address, "Unitarian Christianity," that William Ellery Channing preached in Baltimore in the Spring of 1819, our founders arranged for Channing to lead worship services at a large local hall on his return trip through the city. Three days later, fourteen men, most of them from the merchant class, met to establish a Unitarian church here, named, after its form of governance, the First Congregational Church in New York City. Given the state of the economy, they were acting very much on faith. In addition to a bank loan, the trustees had to take out a second note backed by their personal funds. They laid the cornerstone of our first building, an elegant neo-classical edifice on Chambers street, ten months later. In January, 1821, some sixty families commenced public worship there, flush with debt but rich in hope.

In good times and bad, two factors combine to help make a church prosper: competent ministers; and devoted, generous congregations. For the first twenty years of our existence, All Souls' survival depended almost entirely on the latter factor alone. The debt remained on our books for years to come. Nonetheless, the devoted, generous parishioners had done and continued to do their part. Now all they needed was a competent minister. William Ellery Channing was the first to decline their offer. Others followed in train. They finally settled on William Ware, the son and brother of two esteemed Unitarian leaders, but

himself more than a little unsure of his calling. “He merely reads his sermons & that in a muffled and scarcely distinct manner,” Board member Henry Sedgwick wrote to Channing in some alarm. “One would almost suppose that he read from a manuscript poorly written and with which he was imperfectly acquainted. Cannot something be done to combat this?”

The answer, which took more than a decade and a half to figure out, was, “Evidently not.” Ware hated the ministry. He also knew he was unsuited for it. Though the nation emerged from its own recession in 1823, lacking a dynamic pulpit, our fledgling church struggled to survive. Ware resigned his pulpit in 1836. His final sermon was his fieriest by far. “I have,” Ware said, in bidding the congregation he had served so imperfectly farewell, “labored here for years to save souls—but my hearers are so negligent and inattentive, that I find it is no use—the fashions and vanities of this world overpower the word.”

During Ware’s ministry, far from being negligent, the women of this congregation established a school in the church’s basement to serve the growing immigrant population. At its height, more than 90 children were enrolled. And in 1832, following the great cholera epidemic, the trustees dug deeper into their pockets and hired a minister at large, whose mission was to reach out to the poor in the neighborhood. This experiment ended, in 1837, however, submarined by the onset of the nation’s second great recession. Demonstrating a little commented on, because so embarrassing, rule of church economics, when a congregation is forced to cut its budget to the bone, the ax is almost always first sharpened on spiritually essential yet institutionally optional social service and outreach programs.

Not that our remaining members did not have good reason to take what measures they could to survive. With the economy in shreds, in 1837 the First Congregational Church of New York City teetered on the brink. Again their faith paid dividends. Within two years, everything had changed. Henry Whitney Bellows, a promising 24-year-old, answered our call to the pulpit. Over the course of his magnificent, 43-year ministry, not only did Bellows lead All Souls (which he so named) to a new, larger edifice, rapid growth and welcome solvency. He also became a leading voice both denominationally and nationally. Among other things, Bellows established the Unitarian ministers association, healing a split between western free thinkers and the New England clergy; with educator Horace Mann, he co-founded Antioch College; and, in 1861, he founded the American Sanitary Commission, forerunner of the Red Cross, which served the wounded on both sides throughout the Civil War. In two visits to Washington, Bellows convinced President Lincoln that an active, independent nursing corps was essential to the wartime effort. He then traveled the country raising six million dollars (back then a prodigious sum) to fund the effort.

Yet even during Bellows ministry, it was the women in the congregation who revitalized and oversaw All Souls’ own outreach efforts. Among these, the Society for the Relief and Employment for Poor Women was chartered in 1848. Today,

renamed for the woman whose bequest funded its establishment, the Annie Eaton Society continues to operate out of All Souls. It is believed to be the longest standing organization founded by women to serve women in the country.

The church's period of greatness did not survive Bellows's death in 1882. With no endowment and a particularly weak ministerial successor in Theodore Chickering Williams, All Souls went into free fall. Even the angel who embraces him in his disproportionately prominent monument to my right could do nothing to lift Mr. Williams or All Souls from their shared fate. Unofficial church historian and archivist, George Bishop (the Lorraine Allen of his day), put it starkly. "It was evident that All Souls faced disintegration and total collapse except the pastorate were changed." In 1896, fourteen years after his arrival, Williams resigned.

Another axiom of church economics bears mention here. As a rule a large church can shrink much more quickly than a small church can grow. In All Souls' case, the shrinkage held for years. From the 1880s to the 1950s, allowing for little ups and downs, we remained a small church. With attendance rarely over 100 per Sunday during this period, it took all the devotion and generosity the congregation could muster to make it fiscally from year to year.

Some years, understandably, were worse than others. Yet any story that begins as ours did with the Panic of 1819 could not help but open a major new chapter with the onset of the Great Depression. In yet another remarkable piece of economic bad timing, in 1929 we sold (without firmly closing on) our third building on 20th Street. This was Bellows' great yet ungainly so-called Beefsteak Church or Church of the Holy Zebra, renowned for its alternating stripes of red and white stone. Chasing our elusive fortune uptown, shortly before the market crashed we purchased land on the corner of 80th and Lexington and proceeded with plans to build a new building. On Black Thursday of that same year, almost everyone who had made pledges for the new building project found themselves severely out of pocket. The putative buyer of the Beefsteak Church went bankrupt. Shortly thereafter it burned down. Which left All Souls with no church and a piece of empty land.

Enter a generous benefactor, George F. Baker, who had provided for All Souls in his estate. George F. Baker Jr., honored his father's pledge by offering to pay the interest for five years on the loan we would need to finance our new building. This put the building project back on track.

In early February, 1932, two weeks after FDR's Inauguration, construction commenced. The following November, we began worship in this beautiful space, beautiful in part because we could afford no architectural gingerbread. The Wiggin House next door, our administrative offices, followed some fifteen years later, again facilitated by a major bequest. In the 1950s, we added three stories and founded All Souls School. As each mortgage was finally burned, another was

soon reopened. But our devoted and generous parishioners, some of you among them, kept faith with the future.

Let me close with a couple of observations on church economics that bear directly on the circumstances in which we find ourselves today at the outset of yet another economic meltdown. Although All Souls, along with every other institution, will be affected, we are well positioned not merely to eke by but to thrive and to serve during this new period of crisis.

During the tenure of my immediate predecessor, Walter Donald Kring, the congregation paid off all our remaining debt and several major bequests came in, giving the church its first real endowment and, with this, a degree of economic security. In the 1950s and early 60s, All Souls grew and prospered under Dr. Kring's careful stewardship. In the final years of his ministry, with the congregation diminishing once again, the endowment that had been established during his tenure was a godsend. It helped subvent several successive annual shortfalls in the budget, including shortfalls during the first years of my own ministry.

After I arrived in 1978, it took us three full years, as the church was growing and annual giving began to cover a larger part of our expenses, to balance our budget without taking a major drawdown from the endowment. During this period we established no new programs, including outreach programs. We simply couldn't afford them. (Not to mention that the last impression a young minister wishes to leave is that he is a heedless spendthrift). So I saw first hand how important an endowment can be in bridging a church through a period of transition. At the same time I was able to witness how any kind of deficit restricts the neighborly love a church can, or is willing, to offer.

Only after we were able to balance our budget through pledges while capping the draw on our endowment did the social outreach and service programs that All Souls is today rightly known for become practicable. During the 1980s, we established, among other initiatives, our Friday Soup Kitchen and Monday Night Hospitality programs, the Aids Task Force (the first major congregational response to the then new Aids epidemic), our partnership with the Booker T. Washington Center in East Harlem, and the first Homeless Scout Troop.

With respect to these programs and their successors, with the economy today in free fall, reflect for a moment more on the most spiritually embarrassing aspect of church economics. Remember what happened in 1837 when the economy collapsed and the church had to cut back its budget? That's right. We cut our outreach ministry. Not capriciously, but because we had to eliminate all non-necessary expenditures to survive.

Ideally, the last thing a church should cut in times of economic exigency is its outreach to the poor. Yet fixed expenses cannot be cut, and an institution has to survive to be able to serve. Short of survival, however, a congregation will almost

always take care of its own first, including its staff to the extent that it can, before reaching out to care for others. You may not like this. I don't care for it myself. But history reminds me how often this happens and how persuasive, in times of necessary belt tightening, the arguments to jettison all optional programs can be. Among such optional programs, viewed, in a strange sort of way, as luxuries, social outreach and service programs almost always top the list.

This is why we (Christina Bellamy, Michelle Jawin, Christine Goodwin, Bill Bechman, Anne Bradley and I, among others) set up the Heart and Soul Foundation. By establishing an independent, though primarily church run, body to raise most of the money for our major outreach programs as well as aiding other humanitarian initiatives throughout the city, it removed what today would likely be almost \$200,000 dollars a year out of our operating budget.

Imagine what might happen next year, for instance, if we were to face a budget shortfall without either an endowment available to bridge us, if necessary, through this new time of difficulty or the Heart and Soul Foundation working tirelessly to maintain support for our long-established outreach efforts. After trimming operating expenses wherever we could, I can easily hear arguments raised at our annual meeting to cut back on all optional spending, namely our outreach efforts. These voices might not prevail during the first year of difficulty or even the second, but ultimately I can promise you they would prevail. Not only that but, as our own past demonstrates, these same arguments would be raised by people who care deeply about All Souls welfare and survival.

This is where church economics becomes a tricky spiritual science. To survive, we inadvertently diminish our reason for surviving. To save ourselves, we sacrifice our souls.

Fortunately, today All Souls is in the strongest position we have been during our entire history. Given the economic downturn, we can be particularly thankful for this fact. I believe we can raise the money necessary to balance our budget. If not, once we have made prudent cuts, due to the generosity of those who have gone before us, we will nonetheless have the means to continue our basic programming and services. That, in part, is what a church endowment is for.

And I am confident that we will once again join together to support the Heart and Soul Auction, knowing that in a time of shared suffering the poorest among us receive more than their fair share of suffering. The rest of us must make every effort possible to help redress the balance.

As we do, we can look back for inspiration to the devoted and generous people who came before us. Remember the Panic of 1819, the year our church was born. Remember the important role we played, as important as any other church in the nation, during the Civil War. And remember how we built this very sanctuary, made possible by the generosity of many and the saving gift of one bequest, during the heart of the Great Depression.

Due to their generosity and the more recent generosity of many who have shared these pews with us—who have remembered us in their wills and therefore truly walk beside us as we enter these uncertain days—we are poised to enter 2009, a time of greater economic foreboding than any since the Great Depression, with real confidence. The best way to honor our predecessors, by the way, and to honor our best selves as well, is to make their dreams come true.

To honor and serve those who will follow us we must do one additional thing. We must dream yet larger dreams. Because of the devotion and generosity of those who have preceded us, we can afford, even today in a time of economic duress, to dream such dreams. Which is a particularly good thing. For especially in times like these, we have to dream big. In fact, for our hearts' and souls' sake, we can't afford not to.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.