

# Preparing to flourish in faithfulness during a recession

By Paul Baxley



As 2022 came to an end, more economists were predicting that the national and global economies would experience a recession. There is no agreement on exactly when such a recession will begin in the United States, how long it might last or how intense it will be. But the consensus is strong enough that now more and more articles are being published on how businesses in different sectors can prepare for a recession. Just as we are beginning to return to some semblance of normalcy after the most intense disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic, the last possibility any of us want to consider is that another significant challenge is around the corner.

Hoping a recession will not come or ignoring the mounting evidence that one is on the way are not good leadership strategies. I find myself wondering how those of us who lead congregations, denominations and other faith-based nonprofits should be preparing for the growing likelihood of a recession. How should we set our minds? What questions should we be asking? How should we be engaging our leadership teams? What challenges might we face and how could we be prepared for them? What ministry opportunities might emerge and how could we be faithful in embracing them? Are there questions we can ask now and steps we can take now that will strengthen our congregations and communities whether a recession comes or not?

I am convinced that leading congregations and other ministries in this moment will require adopting a mindset clearly informed by Scripture and living faith. Paul encouraged the Philippians to have the “same mind” in them that “was also in Christ Jesus.” New Testament scholar Steven Fowl translates “mind” as “way of thinking, feeling and acting.” What way of thinking and feeling should guide our acting as we prepare for the growing likelihood of a recession?

The Scripture passage that has been on my mind as I have read the growing consensus among economists is the extended narrative the Book of Genesis gives describing Joseph’s preparation for the famine in Egypt, found in Genesis 41. Joseph discerns that seven years of famine will follow seven years of plenty, and so he counsels the leaders of Egypt to use the years of plenty to prepare for the years of famine. When Pharaoh takes Joseph’s advice, Egypt is better positioned than any other nation not only to survive the famine, but to thrive during it. Even a cursory reading of Genesis 41 holds up several important themes:

## Ministry in Economic Volatility



First, proactive preparation is essential in the face of a coming crisis or challenge. Because Joseph knows a famine is coming, he encourages those in power to prepare in concrete ways. Christian leaders should be proactive in preparing for any emerging challenge, including the growing likelihood of a recession in the next year. The alternative is to hope it doesn't happen, be caught unprepared, and then to experience a panic that exacerbates all the challenges.

Secondly, leadership in the face of a coming crisis requires a willingness to accept counsel from others and the courage to practice truly collaborative decision making. Pharaoh recognizes Joseph's wisdom, accepts his counsel even though it comes from an unlikely place, and then empowers Joseph to share leadership through the years of plenty and the years of famine. Significant challenges, be they a global pandemic or a global recession, are not to be faced by leaders in isolated exercise of power. Rather, we are to provide space to hear good counsel and be willing to share responsibility, even with unlikely or unexpected emerging leaders within our congregations and our communities.

Finally, because God works for good in all things, even during things that are not good on their own, proactive faithfulness creates opportunities for congregations and other ministries. Joseph grows and thrives because of his proactive posture, and Egypt does the same. A recession, in and of itself, could be a terrible thing. But it does not mean a congregation or ministry must be ravaged or destroyed by it. Resurrection faith recognizes that there is always opportunity in crisis.

So, with that mindset in place, formed by Scripture and living faith, how might we lead in the awareness that a recession is likely coming? How can we be more proactive so that we, and the congregations or ministries we lead, might flourish in faithfulness during a significant challenge?

I encourage you to begin prayerfully considering these questions if you have not already done so. In the days and weeks ahead, our Fellowship will produce tools and resources to help you in this process. This week we are sharing a more detailed set of suggested initial steps and an inventory of all the resources our Fellowship already has to help congregations navigate financial challenge and change.

In two weeks, we will release a new resource from our CBF Foundation on recession planning and several other tools you can use with your congregational leadership teams. As we begin this work, we are very aware that any recession will not impact all communities or congregations in the same ways, so we will be encouraging you to explore the unique ways your congregation and community might be impacted and prepare to respond. And, we will be emphasizing steps you can take that will strengthen your ministry even if a recession does not come.

As we begin to prepare for a potential recession in the months ahead, it is wise to begin by establishing a biblical and theological foundation that can guide us in these days. I offer Joseph's example as just one; your prayerful reflection may lead you to others. As people who know that all things are not good but who still believe that God works for good in all things, we can prepare not only to meet challenges but also join Christ in mission in new ways. And we can be undergirded by the conviction that nothing can separate us, our congregations or our communities, from Christ's love and presence and that the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us.

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