A congregational money autobiography

A Wisdom Central Response

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"Wisdom Central" is a continuing service of Design Group International™, where consultative expertise is matched to a question organizations might face. The questions are from real people in real situations.

Question: *What exactly is a congregational money autobiography and how is it done?*

Response: A money autobiography is a person telling their life story with the development of their understandings and behaviors regarding money at the center of that story. A congregational money autobiography is doing the same thing with a congregation's history.

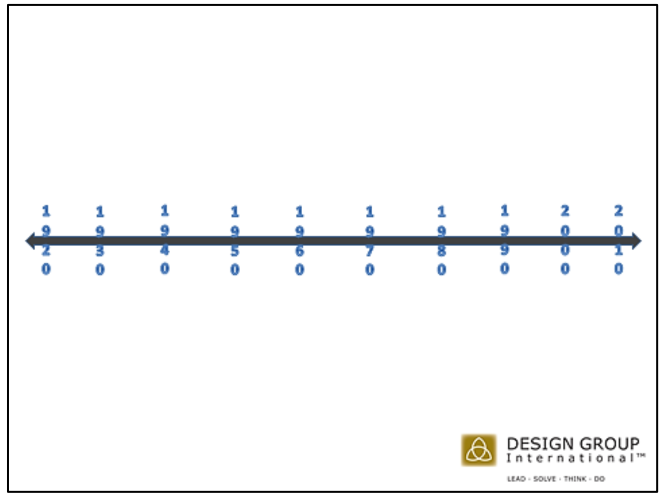
Money autobiographies were largely developed in the 1970's by an organization connected to the Church the Savior in Washington, D.C. called *The Ministry of Money,* now known as the *Faith and Money Network.* Money autobiographies were used in spiritual retreat settings to help people understand their relationship with money and to make sure it assisted their journey toward the heart of God rather than away from it. At the time, people participated as individuals or married couples rather than as a congregational effort.

In the 1990's, an educational project fostered by Mennonite denominations called *The Giving Project* began offering money autobiography retreats where an entire Sunday school class or even an entire congregation might learn more about their individual journeys with money and spirituality. The Giving Project also offered a model for congregations to look at their entire organizational system and to alter the touch points where generosity is taught so that they might work in synch with one another.

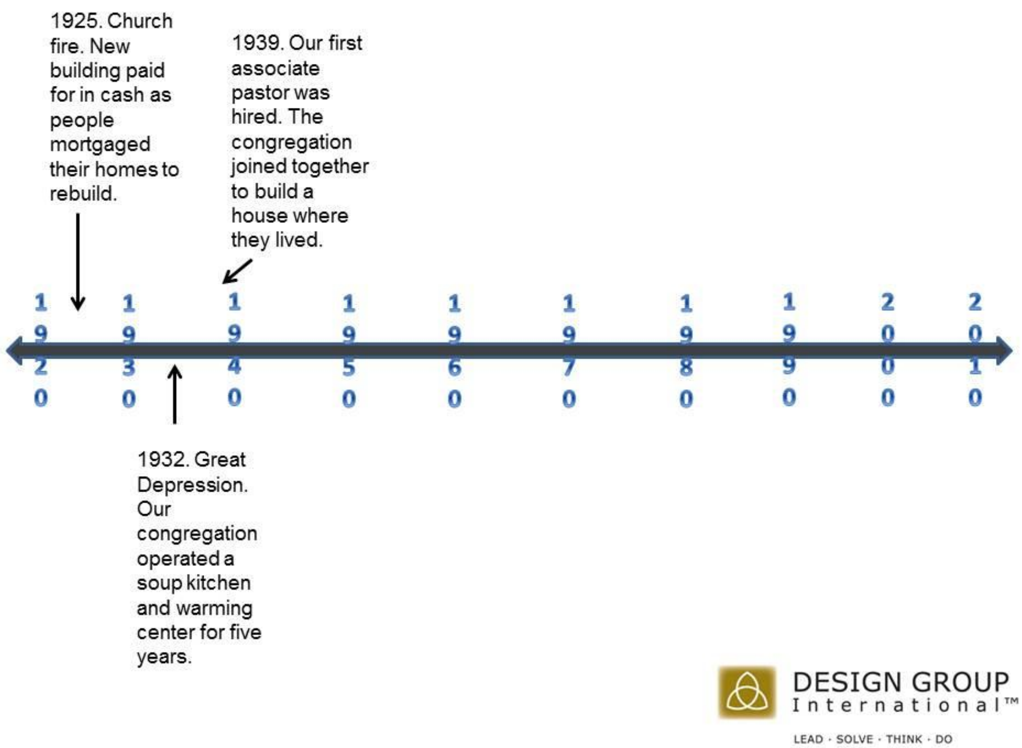
It is the combination of developing a money autobiography and an organizational systems approach for congregations that gives birth to the congregational money autobiography.

Some church consultants make use of a congregational timeline[1] as a means to help congregations. It is an especially useful tool for congregations that are trying to recover their sense of mission or who are trying to find a new level of unity after a period of conflict. A congregation's money autobiography is easily developed by using the same timeline exercise.

Session 1 – Making use of a long scroll of newsprint on a wall, a skeletal timeline is placed on the paper, the only markings being decades (see illustration at right). Someone usually needs to do some research ahead of time to provide stories that precede the living memory of persons participating in the money autobiography experience.

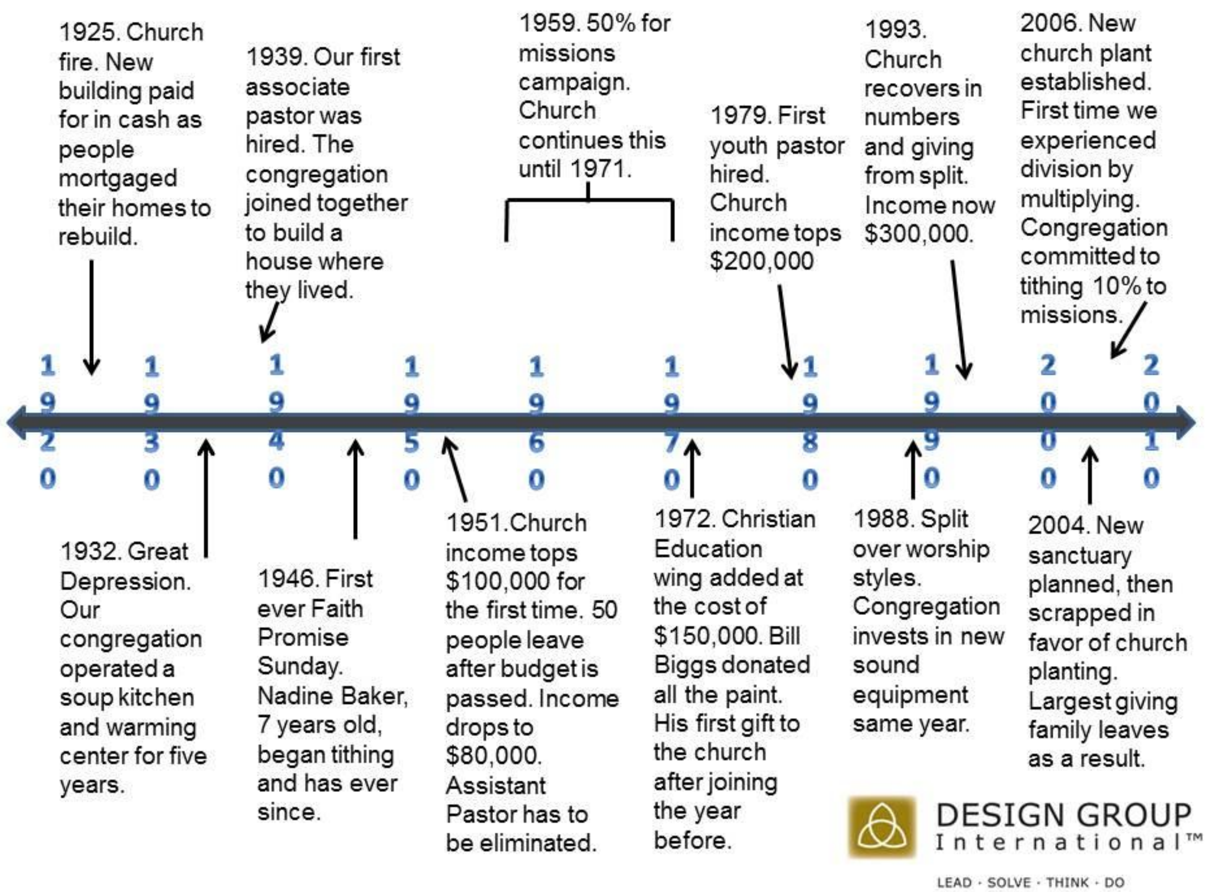


The first session is used to worship together and then tell these stories up to the point of living memory represented in the room. Participants may have details to add from stories they heard from their parents. The person leading the session should be prepared to mark this detail on the timeline.



[1] An excellent outline of how to do so can be found at churchresources.org

Session 2 – After some initial reflections, those who participate are invited to begin adding detail to the timeline. The facilitator works through the decades, inviting people to walk through their memories of the congregation's experiences with faith and money. Copies of annual reports, church histories, and church directories can be used as tools to help participants remember. Participants might also find it useful to remember the larger story by connecting their own spiritual development to it. See the completed timeline below for some examples:



Session 3 - Structured as a worship service, and with the timeline in the background, participants are invited to share their reflections according to the following questions:

- Are there any themes that emerge from considering our congregation's experiences with faith and money?
- Are there any insights we might offer for our congregation as it seeks to be faithful in the future?
- Are there any personal insights you take with you out of this experience?

Congregational money autobiographies serve several purposes. Not only do they provide deeper knowledge of a congregation’s history and system, they provide a link between the spiritual development of the person and the congregation of which they are a part. Congregational money autobiographies also serve as an excellent team building or leadership development exercise. And even more, they provide important information and perspective for strategic and difficult decisions congregational leaders might face.

Design Group International™ has several persons experienced in leading congregational money autobiography experiences as well as personal money autobiography retreats. We would be pleased to serve your congregation or organization in this way.

About your respondent:

Mark L. Vincent, Ph.D., CSP is the CEO of Design Group International™, an organizational development firm. In addition to youth ministry, pastoral and strategic interim experience, Mark pioneered work in neighborhood ministry to children, congregational leadership development and decision-making, *The Giving Project*, MMA's Stewardship University, firstfruits funding systems for denominations, strategic interim ministry, and capital campaigns. He is the author of books, curricula, leadership training materials, and various articles and monographs. He is also the principal writer for *Depth Perception*, an oft-quoted, bi-monthly column. His doctoral dissertation explored the definition and management of denominational funding systems.

A frequent presenter on organizational leadership and stewardship themes, Mark is a current board member of the Christian Leadership Alliance, a past board member of the Ecumenical Stewardship Center, the founding editor of its annual periodical *GIVING*, and the recipient of a service award from the board of the Christian Stewardship Association. His interests include reading broadly, particularly fiction, biographies, ancient history and various business disciplines.