

In Tight Economy, Church Models Generosity

✖ Despite a lagging economy and research showing declines in church giving, a charismatic congregation in Tennessee wants to be known for its generosity.

On Sunday, 700-member Grace Center church in Franklin, Tenn., surprised the faith-based Siloam Family Health Center in Nashville with a check for more than \$112,000—the total collected from tithes and offerings that weekend. Siloam provides medical care to people with no health insurance at an average cost of \$10 per visit.

“I noticed when things get tight economically we have a tendency to hold on to stuff as believers,” said Grace Center pastor Jeff Dollar. “I felt that in order to break that thing off of us, we have to move in the opposite spirit. One way that you do that is you take up a ‘hilarious,’ so to speak, offering and just give the whole thing away. And that’s what we did.”

Siloam President Nancy West said the health center’s staff and volunteers had been praying since Ash Wednesday for God to bless the health center. Because of job losses since the economic downturn, the number of uninsured people seeking Siloam’s services has increased significantly, she said.

"I was totally shocked and just lost for words," said West, who thought she was visiting Grace Center to talk about Siloam's work. "It was just absolutely a great ... 'God moment' of seeing people where faith had really rose up in that they gave generously and obviously sacrificially."

The contribution was the culmination of a two-day Resource Revolution conference hosted by charismatic Bible teacher James Ryle, who has been leading similar conferences across the U.S. Ryle teaches from 2 Corinthians 9:8, which says "God is able to make all grace abound to you so that, in all things at all times having all that you need, you will abound to every good work."

"It is God's desire to find people who are willing to cooperate with Him by being faithful stewards of the resources He has entrusted to them," Ryle wrote in a blog posting Monday about the Grace Center giveaway. "At His leading we respond in obedient generosity-and the results are always staggering."

"I rejoice for what has happened to Siloam Family Health Center," he continued. "But I am especially delighted to watch now with great expectancy at how the Lord will bless this honest and humble congregation with His response from heaven for their generosity shown here on earth."

After a Resource Revolution event in 2008, Grace Center

presented a surprise \$205,000 check to Fernvale Community Church, whose 123-year-old chapel recently had been destroyed by a tornado.

"[God] knew exactly what that church needed," Dollar said. "We found out their insurance would cover only \$400,000 of the rebuild, and the rebuild cost \$600,000. Then we walk in with \$200,000."

Though this year's offering was less than in 2008, Dollar said it was more than five times the \$20,000 offering collected on a typical weekend. He expects more contributions to come in but believes the \$112,000 donation must be what Siloam needs.

West said in recent months Siloam has hired additional staff to expand its hours and take on new patients to meet the increased demand for their health services. "We frankly did not know how we were going to be able to sustain that," she said. "It was a real step of faith for us to do that. ... [The financial gift] was just a sweet blessing of the Lord just confirming that we're doing the right thing."

It also built up the faith of the Siloam staff. "It was just this radical exhibit of giving, just radical giving, sacrificial giving," West said. "We've really been praying for miracles here at Siloam for us to see our patients miraculously healed. And this has just really encouraged our faith."

Grace Center members were told in advance that their giving would be donated but did not know which organization would benefit. Dollar said he prayed about which ministry to give the offering to, and someone later suggested Siloam.

Dollar admits the church could use the money. The congregation has outgrown its facility and wants to build a new one. "This is a sacrificial gift, absolutely," Dollar said. "When we give away this offering, we give away what our normal tithes and offerings are for that week as well."

But he said giving brings a unique reward. Last year, despite the economy, Grace Center saw a 5 percent increase in giving. Dollar said some church members experienced significant financial breakthroughs after the offering giveaway in 2008, but he says God's way of responding to giving is not always financial.

"The interesting thing is, the way that the Lord pays back is kind of value for value," he said. "He doesn't necessarily pay you back with money, although He can. When you give back to Him what's valuable to you, He gives back to you what's valuable to Him."