

Don't panic, keep giving say financial experts

Josiah Neufeld
ChristianWeek Staff

Rather than raising alarmist fears, the current financial crisis should remind us of the difference between "needs" and "wants" Christian financial experts advise.

Bill and Dolores Block watched with growing "consternation" as their investments dropped by 25 per cent in October. "A bit of panic," is how Bill describes his feelings as their fund dwindled. The retired couple draws from their investment annually to supplement their pension income.

"How much lower could it go?" Bill asked himself. He and his wife began to imagine what they would do in a worst-case scenario: sell their Winnipeg home and car and move into a small apartment?

It would mean "no garden, no outdoor backyard kind of joys," admits Bill, "but in terms of necessities that would not be panic city at all. We could do that."

How deeply the current market roller

coaster will affect Canadians depends on how much money they have invested and how soon they need it, says Gary Hawton, CEO of Meritas Mutual Fund. "If they're retiring and relying on income from that portfolio starting in the next year, then the amount they're able to draw out will be considerably less."

Most world stockmarkets are down somewhere between 35 and 50 per cent on the year.

But don't start making coffee out of burnt toast as though it's another Great Depression, just yet.

"If you think back to the 1987 crash, it's very difficult to even pick that out now if you're looking at the markets over a hundred year span," says Hawton. "At the time it was by far the largest drop in the markets. But now it looks like just a little blip in an upward trend."

It took markets about two years to recover from both the 1987 crash and the 1997 Asian debt crisis, says Hawton.

Instead of cutting back on their giving to sustain their lifestyles, Hawton believes Christians

need to put their "needs" in perspective.

"We are borrowing to buy a second house that we couldn't afford, borrowing to buy all kinds of things we don't need," says Hawton.

"You see churches doing expansion projects and all kinds of things when there are people who are living just down the road that, frankly, are starving physically."

God provides

"We need to recognize that at the end of the day God will provide for us. He will provide what we need—not necessarily what we want.... I think Christians can get caught up in the cycle of greed and wanting more when in fact I think we need less."



How recent financial woes affect investors depends on how they've invested and how soon they will need the money, says Meritas CEO Gary Hawton.

Dieter Kays, president of FaithLife Financial agrees. He encourages Christians to keep investing in a responsible way, to share the fruits of their labours with others and not to let "greed be the dominant motivator driving us."

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FaithLife Financial expanding to international market

WATERLOO, ON—As tremors shake the financial world, Christian investment organization FaithLife Financial is broadening its horizons.

A not-for-profit organization, FaithLife offers insurance and investment options to people and organizations associated with member churches. In October, FaithLife agreed to welcome clients in other countries.

Expanding borders

"There are opportunities for FaithLife Financial to also move outside of Canadian borders within the Christian

community," says president Dieter Kays.

He says FaithLife has had inquiries from clients wondering if FaithLife services could be made available to Christians in Africa, Latin America or Eastern Europe.

FaithLife also moved to allow organizations not specifically connected to a church to use FaithLife Financial services.

"Our primary motivation is to make our organization more profitable through that particular venture without really worrying about who the end user of that product is," says Kays.

FaithLife Financial welcomes churches affiliated with the Canadian Council of Churches and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

Voted in favour

Members voted in favour of these changes at an October meeting and requested formal approval from the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions and Canada's minister of finance.

FaithLife Financial operates independently from any church body. It has 31,000 members and \$444 million in assets under administration.



Janis Ryder (second from right) is excited about FreeForm's goal of helping Christian organizations reach their full potential.

New program helps ministries develop leadership

Bruce Soderholm
Special to ChristianWeek

NIAGARA FALLS, ON—Denise Gillard was at a crossroads and she knew it. Hopeworks Connection, an innovative not-for-profit organization in Toronto that empowers youth through music, had begun with a flourish, grown quickly and was facing the same challenge that all ministries and similar ventures face once initial growth plateaus: sustainability.

"We [had] this really great program and things that we've built for youth, but we were missing a lot in terms of infrastructure," says Gillard. Enter FreeForm, a capacity-building program targeting ministries and organizations like hers to help develop leadership and enhance viability.

FreeForm is the collective brainchild of Janis Ryder of Ryder Consulting and Clayton Rowe of World Vision Canada. Paul Magnus, former director of Tyndale Seminary's leadership program joined it in an academic partnership.

On October 15 FreeForm launched in Niagara Falls, Ontario at the Mount Carmel Spiritual Retreat Centre. The centre is also the site of FreeForm's first residential retreat, a three-day event for the program's first cohort of six leadership teams.

At the opening Ryder spoke of her "passion to build capacity within Christian organizations, and to see them realize their potential." Capacity-building, in layman's terms, is about helping organizations become what they were meant to be through strong governance, strategic planning and program development, fund-raising and marketing strategies, team-building and efficient financial and human resource management. Research suggests mastery in these domains is key to the long-term effectiveness of any organization or enterprise.

Bridgeway Foundation and World Vision are the primary financial backers of FreeForm, subsidizing two-thirds of the sign-up fee for approved participants. The Catalyst Foundation is opening a bursary program to reduce the remaining costs up to 50 per cent.

Bridgeway spokesman Brent Fearon says he is sold on FreeForm's merits because of its partnership expertise and its "expanse."

"This isn't a fly-by-night program," says Fearon. "This isn't a one-day seminar that brings [charities] in and does a mind dump and then leaves [them] on their own.... This is a serious long-term growth project which just increases the potential for success exponentially."

Green

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The group was started after St. Brice's pastor, Richard White, was inspired by an interdenominational initiative called Eco-Congregation Ireland that developed a series of teaching modules on how to increase congregations' practical and spiritual environmental awareness.

"The prophet Isaiah said that a little child shall lead them," says White, who is preaching a series on the Bible's call to care for creation. "I am thrilled about Creation Keepers. As Christians we are called to be wise stewards of God's creation, and instead we have for too long taken God's world for granted."

As churches we need to go back and look at what the Old and New Testament has to say to us." David Humphries, of Eco-Congregation Ireland, says they never expected their initiative to reach all the way to Canada.

"I think what they are doing is brilliant, absolutely brilliant," says Humphries, rector of Stormont in Belfast, the first parish in Ireland to win the Eco-Congregation award.

"One thing we have found in Eco-Congregation Ireland is that [environmental awareness] is a big attraction for young people. They are the natural people to lead it in our congregations and it is a great way of getting young people involved in church."