

# Confronting the Consumer Carnival

By Nathan Dungan

*At a recent family workshop hosted by Christ Church Episcopal (Richmond, VA) and the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia, I asked the participants to ponder this question: “What are your earliest memories of money as a child, and how are they influencing your current money habits?”*

The issue is more urgent than ever. Are youth learning the right habits from adults? Are congregations helping to shape wise financial values in young people? It is crucial for faith communities to reflect on what role, if any, they are playing in helping youth and adults think and talk about money and the power it has in their lives.

One of my earliest money memories – I was barely six – was when my parents decided it was time for my siblings and me to open a savings

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account at the local bank. As a grade-schooler, I couldn’t exactly grasp the concept that depositing money at a bank with a total stranger was a good thing. But my mom and dad persevered: they knew it was critical to teach us how to balance sharing, saving, and spending at an early age.

Sadly, in the face of the mind-numbing ramp-up of micro-targeted advertising messages directed at youth and adults, most families are still flying solo when it comes to teaching the next generation good habits of spending, saving, and sharing. No surprise that, today, society is now mired in debt and anxiety like no time since the 1930s.

If church leaders are honest about how well they are doing at teaching the emotionally charged subject of money, they will conclude: churches are, for the most part, abdicating their role to the consumer culture.

For more than twenty years, I’ve worked with faith communities at the local, regional, and national level on how to lead workshops that teach healthy money habits. Specifically, I work with them to devise systematic ways to help youth and adults develop and maintain good money habits that are consistent with their values.

I wish I could say I’ve witnessed a tremendous transformation in those two decades. It would be nice to report that churches now have well-articulated strategies for teaching wise financial values in an aggressively materialistic climate. I would like to say churches have found a cohesive, countercultural voice to challenge the repetitive chorus of the consumer culture’s siren song, which tells us fulfillment comes through consumption. But for a few exceptions, little is happening. All too often the church’s response is muted; other matters like declining attendance or shrinking budgets take center stage. And so a national spiritual crisis is now upon us.

## **Living at Extremes**

To be fair to congregations, money is not exactly dinner table conversation in most American homes. Regarding the subject of money, especially in today’s economy, families live at emotional extremes. At one end of the continuum is silence, born of discomfort or fear or time-honored taboo. I suspect this is the American norm. But at the other end is rancor – the loud voices, sometimes very loud, embodying worry about jobs, anxiety about savings, or family conflict over financial priorities and planning. By default, these extremes are what young people see and learn from. Whatever happened to the sane middle?

Making matters worse, the rest of the village (schools, nonprofits, and businesses) isn't exactly rising to the occasion. Today, youth rarely have the opportunity to learn even the basics of money management in school. Not in public schools, not in private schools. There isn't a business school in America that requires students to take a course in personal finance. Financial illiteracy is playing a starring role in this Great Recession.

Let me offer a few sobering statistics:

- By the time a college student reaches senior year, he or she will have on average four credit cards, \$3,000 of credit card debt and \$30,000 of student loan debt (source: [www.salliemae.com](http://www.salliemae.com)).
- The after-tax savings rate for young people thirty-five and under is minus 16 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics).
- Children today spend five times more money than their parents did at the same age (KGA consulting firm).
- This year America's twenty-eight million teens will spend \$74 billion on food, gas, electronics, movies, and music (Piper Jaffray Companies).

These dramatic increases in debt, now considered normal for so many young adults, don't just magically appear when they turn eighteen, twenty, or twenty-five. The path to debt starts much earlier in life – age five, eight, or ten in the form of unchecked spending habits, which metastasize into suffocating consumer debt in their twenties and thirties. Keep in mind there are more than eighty million young people under the age of twenty-five in the U.S., a demographic larger than today's baby boomers. Like all adults, they are subjected to more than 5,000

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advertising impressions per day. The goal of the impressions? Shape their financial habits and values for a lifetime.

Let's be clear: our society is working overtime to addict the next generation to spending. The big price we pay for this stealth addiction can be seen every day wreaking havoc on families, blinding us to the needs in our communities and the greater world, pulling us away from sharing time and money with those who are least fortunate.

My intent is not to demonize spending. Quite the contrary, spending should be joyful. But when

the overwhelming consumer message directed at children teaches them to spend first, save little, and share what's left, the imbalance is palpable and poisonous. Our ability to be generous is in direct proportion to our money habits and overall financial picture. Distracted by incessant consumerism and weighed down by debt, how can we respond to the needs of the world?

At a recent seminar in Minneapolis for parents of teens, I shared the following: "If you don't have an intentional, values-based system for talking and teaching about money in your home, you will likely default to that which is happily provided by the consumer culture. The culture's message is straightforward: see money, spend money." This 24/7 default system is extremely well-funded and operates with laser-like efficiency.

### **No Place to Go?**

How are families ever going to break unhealthy patterns of communication and behavior if they don't have places to go and learn how to do money differently? Surely congregational life should step forward as a resource. Churches nurture humane values – and they also stand to feel the impact, along with other charitable institutions, when spending becomes reckless because it is severed from moral values.

After working with thousands of families over the past twenty years, I am convinced that money literacy is not simply a matter of learning about compound interest, credit scores, or the benefits of tax-deductible contributions. It is much more than the mastery of transactions. In fact, the *interaction* with money is just as important as the transaction. By interaction I mean our ability to talk openly and thoughtfully about money by sharing our family stories, our money mistakes, and, yes, our values.

"The people who tell the stories define the culture," declares David Walsh, child psychologist expert on the media impact on children and author of *No: Why Kids – of All Ages – Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It* (Free Press, 2007). When it comes to shaping financial habits and values in the twenty-first century, who do you think is defining the culture?

Yet the Bible is filled with stories about money and values and how important it is to wrestle with definitions that distinguish a need from a want. Jesus embraced every opportunity to boldly and directly challenge our money habits and behavior. Time and again he used parables to interrupt our daily rhythm and then alert us to what God is calling us to do.

I wonder what Jesus' reaction would be to the annual drama of those post-Thanksgiving shopping days, Black Friday and Cyber Monday. How might he react to the dazzling myriad of media we have in place for purchasing more and more stuff?

But just when you think there is little reason for hope, let's turn again to the churches. Despite a less-than-stellar record so far, I believe the church is well-positioned to lead the way out of the wilder-

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ness of consumerism. Think about it: what other organization convenes people from such diverse backgrounds – be it age, gender, socio-economic, race, or culture – on such a regular basis? What other organization gathers people around a cosmic moral story about human dignity and destiny? What other institution regularly affirms values about God and the world that people rally around – and can use to push back against secular ideologies and excess?

### **Slowing the Juggernaut**

But the church needs to pivot quickly and develop a strategy, a voice of clarity – or the opportunity to reframe the conversation and reform our behavior will pass, and a culture of unquestioning greed and materialism will continue to fill the void. And it won't ask for our permission.

Let me offer an example of a model that faith communities could replicate. Collaborations between the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado and the Colorado Episcopal Foundation are working to engage, educate, and equip churches to take hold of the issue of money and hyper-consumerism for the benefit of youth and adults in their communities.

In 2006 leaders there asked me to keynote at the annual conference of the Colorado Diocese. At the end of the conference they invited any church in the diocese to participate in a future training session based on my *Share Save Spend* curriculum. The goal: educate churches and equip them to lead multigenerational workshops on the topic of money, values, and the culture.

Early in 2007 I led a training program around our *Financial Sanity* curriculum that drew fifteen churches of various sizes from across the diocese. By now, nearly forty congregations have been trained in this interactive, multigenerational method. The result:

hundreds of youth and adults are discovering new and more sustainable ways to link the choices they make with their money (share, save, spend) with their values and their faith journey. Success stories are emerging – families that are learning new values-based ways to talk and practice financial behavior, and congregations that are being more strategic about addressing financial literacy with their members. (See [www.sharesavespend.com](http://www.sharesavespend.com) or details at the Colorado Episcopal Foundation website, [http://www.coef.org/for\\_churches/families\\_and\\_money/](http://www.coef.org/for_churches/families_and_money/))

The success of any financial literacy initiative depends on key elements of follow-through: identify the need, create a thoughtful strategy and achievable action plan, start small but think big, have articulate and passionate leaders, and stay the course despite adversity. Too often new programs lose steam because churches can't maintain the momentum required for long-term success. But this much we do know: hyper-consumerism is not a passing fad. It is here to stay.

Some years ago I heard the Rev. Herb Miller, a prominent scholar on stewardship, share a very profound phrase in a sermon: "Hope, without a plan, is denial." We're naïve if we merely hope consumerism will somehow magically improve without intervention.

The current economic environment brings us to a unique moment for reframing the conversation about money and its role in our lives. Now more than ever the church needs to step up and reclaim its voice as a countercultural leader. Millions of youth and adults are eager to live differently and think more deeply about what God is calling them to be.

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