WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The doors of the historic Black Church, a fortress of healing from social pain, have opened even wider during the economic crisis. But, as church membership increases across the nation, offerings are decreasing, causing even houses of faith to make difficult decisions, pastors say.

“I think the story that has not been told is that the churches across the country have been hard hit,” said Dallas-based Bishop T. D. Jakes in an interview with the NNPA News Service. “The church has no more resources than from the parishioners from which it comes. And so, when the parishioners are in straits, churches are in straits, too. And so it puts us in a bit of a precarious situation.”

Jakes says he has had to take drastic, but practical measures to cut costs at his more than 30,000-member Potter’s House.

“Membership has gone up. Income has gone down. We’ve laid off about 40 people from our staff. We’ve had to make some hard choices. We’ve had to curtail some of the services that we’ve normally had to provide to the community because our resources are hard hit. I’m getting calls from pastors all over the country who are downsizing, cutting back on services, cutting back on office hours because they are being adversely affected by this also,” said Jakes.

Last months’ Black unemployment rate leaped 1.7 percent from the month before, now at 15 percent overall. That is nearly double that of the 8 percent white unemployment rate and the national average, which is 8.9 percent. For Black men, the unemployment rate is 17.2 percent, more than double that of white men, at 8.5 percent.

From the civil rights movement to the current economic downturn, African Americans have typically turned to the Black church when community is in crisis.

One would speculate that smaller churches may be fairing easier with less overhead. But in coast to coast interviews, most pastors are telling the same story - even congregations with less than 1,000 members.

“We have probably experienced about a 30 percent decline - a significant, noticeable decline in the giving,” says Pastor Levonzia Stevens Sr., senior pastor of the 700-member Hope Aglow Empowerment Center in Woodbridge, VA. “The people are trying to do what’s right in God’s eye sight. Unfortunately sometimes the pressures of normal bills cause individuals to make decisions that cut back on their giving. It’s been more noticeable over the last year.”

To prevent staff layoffs, Hope Aglow has been forced to dip into its reserve funds.

“Of course, as your reserves are depleted, that puts you in a very precarious situation,” Stevens says. “But, your hopes are that the giving will take place soon.”

Economic forecasters say unemployment could reach double digits for everyone before it gets better. The pain is indiscriminate.

“I don’t think anyone is not affected by the economy right now from Wall Street to Main Street,” said the Rev. Dr. Tecoy Porter, senior pastor of the 1000-member Genesis Church in Sacramento, CA. “California just got out of the budget crisis so our members are furloughed twice a month and things like that.”

Because of a 20 percent drop in offerings, Porter says he has had to lay off some staff members and restructure his church organization. That includes cutting two Sunday services down to only one. Fortunately, because of the Black community’s history of struggle, Black institutions have a special knack for endurance.

“We’ve been here before. We’re not strangers to any type of depression or oppression or things like that. And so there’s a resiliency of Black churches that cannot be overlooked,” said Porter. “I am a preacher’s kid, a third generation pastor, so I am a product of the Black church and so I believe it is the strongest institution that we have for African Americans in our community because it has survived so much.”

The messages through the years have been consistent.

“We preach hope. We say we can make it. We’ve been here. Don’t panic. This too shall pass,” Porter said.

Meanwhile, some pastors say their churches are supplementing messages of faith and hope with practical teachings on finances, job-searching, entrepreneurship and business ownership.

Porter has written a book, Releasing Your Inner Treasure, 8 Kingdom Keys to Unlocking the Wealth Within You, based on his personal experiences with financial management. Now in his tenth year of pastoring, he retired from managing his information technology firm when he was only 29-years-old.

“If you manage your money right, then everything else will be right,” he said. “I’m so surprised at how we just don’t want to talk about money and deal with those issues. So, that spurred me to write the book and really preach about how He has empowered us economically and financially and to use those practical scriptures to build us up.”

In addition to scriptures, tangible know-how to correct and add balance to some of what has been taught in churches over the years will be key, said Bishop Noel Jones, pastor of the 17,000-member City of Refuge in Los Angeles, which he said is down only 6-10 percent on income.

Jones said unbalanced teachings in the church are partially to blame for the crisis.

“We have endured 25 years of health, wealth and prosperity preaching and the prophet should have told us that we were going to be in this kind of situation and circumstance since they have such prophetic words,” Jones said. “What happens is the church has capitalized the gospel and we have preached Americanism for gospel and ultimately we ended up crashing because there is no credulity and authenticity in the whole presentation.”

He continued, “The only people who were making any real money were those who were expostulating the theology that left the psychology that debilitated the minds of those who were involved. The debilitation is that everybody expected to bring an offering in church and just get rich though nobody participated and partnered with God. Because at the end of the day nobody receives a check in an envelope postmarked from heaven. It’s your participation that makes it happen…The ministry and the preachers have taken so much money from the church and lived lavish lifestyles. We need to put something back. We need to equip our people. As James puts it, very explicitly, ‘Faith without works is dead’. We co-create, we perpetuate God’s creation by functioning responsibly.”

Jones said many Christians have basically lived on credit and owned nothing.

“So, what everybody was talking about as God’s blessing was people living on credit. And the Bible says that the borrower is subject to the lender. So, Christian America simply joined the capitalistic bandwagon - and in the name of God - articulated a theology that has no credulity.”

Not all churches are feeling the economic pinch.

Bishop, I.V. Hilliard, pastor of the 28,000-member New Light Christian Center Church in Houston said he has been impacted more by hurricanes than by the economy.

“Our giving has held pretty much steady,” he said. “Here in Houston last year, we had two hurricanes. One hurricane shut the city down for about a month to six weeks. That hurt us more than anything. But, throughout it all, our members have remained pretty steady in our giving.”

When high fuel prices hit last year, some tough decisions had to be made, Hilliard said. “We did not lay anybody off. We just chose to go into our reserves and tighten our belts so to speak.”

When people do ask for help, “They’re asking for the same thing they’ve been asking for in the past – just at a greater rate,” Hilliard said. He said he has made a commitment to his members: “Nobody will go hungry and nobody will go without clothing.”

The following are some of the church programs to help those who are hurting financially:

• Jones is doing business incubation - a marketplace at which his congregation gathers every Sunday. There are 80-100 booths in which people present goods and services to the church and to the community. He says he finances some of the stronger business ideas and teaches management and budget skills to the owners, thereby recycling the money within the parameter of the church. He also holds “Urban Seminars” around the country, teaching fundraising/grant writing, financial reporting and compliance for organizations; prudent investing, corporate structuring and growth management.

• In addition to encouraging people to go back to school or start their own businesses, and to save wherever they can, Stevens says his church provides a soup pantry and some assistance with bill payments.

• Hilliard said he is encouraging people within his congregation to help each other. “The strong must bare the infirmity of the weak.” As for the churches under his covering, “We have seminars to help them understand what their roles are and what they can do in this kind of economy.” He says he also teaches the pastors how to keep their members positive by thwarting the influx of negativism. “We create an atmosphere of hope and faith as we learn from God’s Word.”

• Jakes suggested that churches partner with larger outreach services like Church World Services, World Vision or the Red Cross, which specialize in dealing with people in crisis. Through such partnerships, the Potter’s house has established a program through which families can buy $100 worth of groceries for $30 if they order it every week.

Church leaders should also remember to be advocates for the poor as the local, state and national government make tough decisions and to be a galvanizing force to encourage families to stick together through tough times, Jakes said.

The pastors agree that the financial troubles won’t last always.

“In the Bible, in every story where you find a famine in the land, by the end of the chapter, you find a blessing, overflowing abundant blessing,” said Stevens. “We don’t serve a ‘get you’ God. God is not coming after you because you want a better house or a better car. Everybody got greedy. God doesn’t hate us for that. So, we have to get over the guilt factor and look at what we can do to be better stewards of our resources. The rebound is coming. We ought to see that and know that. …Work while we wait, prepare. We are our best stimulus plan. We are our best recovery package.”