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Since Lynn Munson's job led her to Yorba Linda, California in 2010, she has reined in her organization's finances, returned it to profit, made key staffing changes and presided over a merger.

But she doesn't work for any company.

Munson is pastor of Yorba Linda United Methodist Church, which had been losing money and members before she arrived.

With managerial training and a penchant for business, Munson preaches the virtues of running religious organizations like businesses. In the process, she has developed a reputation as a financial fixer for troubled churches.

"I go into churches that are struggling and turn them around," said the 49-year-old Munson. "I've always had a flair for doing something new and innovative and difficult."

The number of religious organizations in financial turmoil spiked during the recent downturn as unemployment rose and giving fell. By hewing to tried-and-true business principles such as careful expense control and strict personnel management, some churches are finding a path to salvation.

A robust industry of specialists now focuses on assisting struggling churches, said Sam Rainer, president of church consulting firm Rainer Research.

While he cautioned against running religious organizations in a way that prioritizes

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with local churches, including some facing considerable problems — to get Yorba Linda United Methodist Church's house in order.

In less than three years, she has boosted income by 64 percent, opening up funds to renovate the administrative offices and overhaul its affiliated preschool. In the process, she has helped grow the congregation threefold.

On a recent Sunday, more than 200 worshippers packed the pews to hear Munson's sermon on power and control. Some late arrivers lingered near the doorway while they scanned the room for open seats — a virtually unheard-of situation just a few years ago.

"It's growing pretty dramatically," said Ann Test, a retired principal in Yorba Linda who has been coming to the church since 1975. "It began going downhill (about 10 years ago) and then Lynn came."

A business mind

Munson's affinity for business was evident at an early age. As a grade-schooler, the Chicago native would spend holidays and summers at her grandmother's employment agency, answering phones and helping out around the office.

"I would listen to her, how she made decisions; I would listen to how she talked to people," Munson said. "She's my hero."

Later, Munson learned the nitty-gritty of running an office when she held management positions at a number of companies, including two engineering firms. In college, she took management and accounting courses, and considered majoring in business before turning to religion.

She obtained a master of divinity degree from the Claremont School of Theology and

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its budgeted expenses.

Munson took swift action. She resolved a number of contentious issues within the congregation, such as the volume of the pre-service music; she also took control of the church's affiliated preschool and pledged to renovate its aging facilities. The moves, she said, helped stem the loss of members and led to an increase in donations.

She also reorganized the budget with an eye toward cutting expenses. One key move, she noted, was to switch the staff health care plan from a Methodist church option to a Kaiser Permanente small business plan, a move that saved roughly \$15,000 a year.

"She does a fantastic job," said Brent Person, who serves on the church's finance committee. "She has a grasp of the business side of things."

Munson said her top priority was to provide a structure for the church's operations, including an administrative hierarchy, clearly defined job duties and disciplinary guidelines.

Munson wasn't alone in turning the church around, though. She is quick to give credit to her staff members. "I just helped them do what they already wanted to do," she said. "Part of turning a church around is creating structure. When you've got a clear vision and structure, all the energy goes the same way."

Unofficial merger

Despite tackling most of the issues plaguing her church, Munson's job wasn't over.

Church leaders asked her last year to help Light of the Canyon United Methodist Church in Anaheim, which ran into trouble after it lost a tenant that had leased space in its building. As of January 2012, the church stopped paying its mortgage, according to a letter to congregants.

She rejected the possibility of an official merger, which would have transferred Light

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The move further expanded the already growing membership in Yorba Linda. Munson said the official congregation now has more than 300 people.

Munson said the massive undertaking reinvigorated her. While she typically moves churches about every three years, she has no plans to leave.

“I’ll stay forever,” she said with a laugh. “We’re going to keep growing and changing. I envision that we’re going to become a new church every three to five years.”

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