

## **Banquet Speech to MIT Trustees and Faculty**

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### **“Tim’s Top Ten Tips for Christian Workers in Crisis”**

Well, I have been looking forward to talking to you tonight as we celebrate an academic year that might never have happened, if not for the faith and faithfulness of staff, faculty, trustees, and churches of Myanmar. Jill and I have had a wonderful nine weeks of teaching and ministry among you, and one of things I have most enjoyed has been the opportunity to spend time one on one with so many of you. You have opened yourself up to Jill and to me, allowing us to have so many different meaningful conversations and experiences together.

Thank you for that. Thank you for helping to make my 9 weeks in Myanmar an utterly sensational experience. You welcomed us with open arms, open minds, and open hearts. You gave us so many opportunities to contribute to your life and preparation for ministry, both academically and spiritually. We felt God’s Spirit working powerfully over the past couple of months, and it would not have happened had you not been so eager to receive from us and give us the blessing of giving to you. And believe me, we have received much from you in return.

As I thought about what I wanted to share with you tonight, I felt I simply could not ignore the great financial crises that the world is going through right now. Many people are probably still in shock, while others are already having to face the harsh realities of not having jobs, losing homes, having to move in with relatives, fearful about the future. And as you know, the financial crisis that began in New York has spread throughout the world, with ripple affects on giving to churches, charities, and overseas partners.

The scope and magnitude of the crisis are nearly unprecedented. It is very important for all of us right now to think and pray about how we are going to cope with the coming hardships and respond constructively to them.

So, let me offer you Tim’s Top Ten Tips for Christian Workers in Crisis.

1. See the opportunity at hand.

Now, crises are nothing new for any of us. They come and go throughout our lifetime. Often we do not know immediately what to do in the crisis, but men and women of faith have learned to reach out to God more earnestly and to maintain an attitude of faith. Not faith that God is going to do everything we hope for, but faith that God is going to work in us, in our families, in our congregations and in our institutions through the crisis.

Our part, as is often said, is to “not waste the crisis”. Our job is to let the crisis move us where we need to go, and to bring creativity and resourcefulness out of us that we didn’t even know existed within us.

In other words, those who overcome adversity, those who emerge as real leaders in difficult times, and those who are the wisest among us, see crises as opportunities.

For example:

- Times like this are opportunities to re-examine our priorities. What are the best uses of our resources, when we have to make choices?
- They give us an opportunity to depend more on God. Will we take our anxiety to God and leave it there?
- They give us an opportunity to pull together more. Will we swallow our pride and work out our conflicts better so that we can help one another through these hard times?

- They can help us to grow as individuals and in our life and work together as families, as churches, as institutions. Will we take the time to examine our hearts, minds, and behavior and let God change us?

2. Let the crisis bring out your creativity and resourcefulness.

In my travels around the world, and work with pastors, leaders and other motivated individuals I am seeing many creative and resourceful responses to hard times.

What I see suggests some strategies for all of us.

- a. Since no one expects the situation to improve quickly, good leaders must be willing to act with wisdom to a) hold down costs, to b) find new sources of income, and c) find creative ways to accomplish the highest goals with less cost.
- b. In this environment, pastors may be wise to invest more time in volunteer lay leaders, rather than try to do all the work themselves. For example, Judith Doré is a school teacher, who became president of her Reformed congregation in Chartres France. They have no pastor this year, and much of the leadership responsibility for the church has fallen on her. She does not get paid, but she is growing considerably through this experience, and the church is benefiting from her using her gifts. I did some coaching work with her, and I saw how valuable it was for me to invest several hours with such a capable lay leader. One of the solutions to pastor burnout and inadequate resources is to utilize lay leaders more—but this requires better training, empowering, and re-educating of the congregations. That is, we must do a better job teaching our congregations about the body of Christ and how to draw on one another to get their needs met.
- c. This crisis may also provide the needed motivation to do more training of the poor and needy to care for themselves better and to meet their own needs, rather than look to the pastor and the church for handouts. We call it giving others a “hand up” rather than a “hand out”. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Rev. Jacob Lipandasi started a program for widows

and orphans in his community. He was able to help these women to grow food for themselves to survive. He is also developing additional programs that cost very little or no money to help the widows and orphans to support and help each other better. Now he is trying to raise money to get trained in community development so that he can train the widows how to be entrepreneurs.

Perhaps MIT might consider training seminarians in community development, if it does not already do so.

### 3. Learn how to become more self-sufficient.

More and more ministries are learning how to be self-sufficient. In a limited sense, this is what the trustees did in creating the “Future Investment Fund of MIT” that puts endowment money to work in a private business, which provides regular income.

As another example, in Rwanda, I know a woman named Béatrice who has been doing just that. After the horrific genocide in 1994, when 1 million people were slaughtered in 100 days, she returned to her country to establish a program for orphans. She has been working hard for the past 15 years, providing education and trauma counseling to these girls. They never have enough money, but they have learned to be creative. One way that they support themselves is by baking bread and selling it to the embassies every morning.

The situation in the inner cities of America is not much better in some ways. Money is always an issue. A growing interest among foundations is to finance charitable organizations that are also learning to be self-sufficient. More and more, Christian agencies and institutions need to find ways to generate their own income. I know one group that sells tee-shirts. Another sells jewelry that the kids make. Béatrice’s girls, in addition to making bread, make handcrafts that they sell to tourists.

Likewise, many pastors in the U.S. are becoming bi-vocational, meaning they work outside of the ministry to earn money. Many of you are already bi-vocational, I know.

Paul did it by tentmaking. Pastors in the U.S. and elsewhere do it in a variety of ways. I do it by doing spiritual life coaching and consulting—I charge those who can afford to pay me, so that I have a greater ability to help those who cannot afford to pay me.

Of course there are plusses and minuses to this new approach—which is really an old approach coming back in vogue for various reasons. The plusses to earning your own income include having more money, being less dependent on others, and perhaps taking more pride and confidence in your own income earning ability. There is a downside, too. Working two jobs divides your attention and you have less time to focus on your ministry—or if you are a teacher, less time to do research and scholarly work.

4. If you do rely on contributions from others, use this crisis as an opportunity to make yourself more “support worthy.”

Now more than ever, given the financial crisis, givers will be discriminating about who gets their money. For example, I serve on the Board of a Foundation, and we are always looking for worthy recipients of our grants—even though we have far fewer resources than we once did. But with the resources we have, we want to be good stewards. So we ask hard questions:

- a. Does their work fit our mission and priorities?
- b. Do they do what they do well? Are they committed to excellence?
- c. Are they people of integrity and genuine Christian faith?

Remember: your reputation develops slowly over time, but is lost in an instant. Our true character comes out in times of crisis. Think carefully about the choices you make.

- d. Are they truly committed to serving Christ and the kingdom of God, and not just themselves or their own family?
- e. Are they the kind of people who will “pay it forward”, and even multiply the gift they have received for many others?
- f. Will they use the money as they say they will? Is their good accounting? Are they being good stewards of the resources?

Now, I realize that many of you may not see yourself as a fundraiser, and may not need to be bi-vocational. But in an environment in which resources are few, all of us need to learn how to be more creative and more resourceful.

5. Be a lifelong learner.

This tip is especially for the junior faculty. This current crisis is not the last one you are going to have to face. The time to start preparing for the future is now. Your seminary education has been a huge gift to you and invaluable for all that is ahead. But you are going to continue to need to learn from others as you face challenges and experiences. Come back to school for further education, if possible. Read books. Keep informed about the rest of the world through the internet when you have access to it. Seek out other more learned, wise teachers and guides. Keep learning and growing, because your time of leadership and influence is coming. Be as prepared as you can for your opportunity.

6. Listen to your spouse! If you’re not married, then listen to someone who knows you well and is willing to tell you the truth.

How many of you are married? How many of you quarrel with your spouse some times? Of course you do. Opposites attract, but opposites also clash. The gift of marrying an opposite is that he or she will often see things we are blind to, and need to see, and will see, if we will only open our eyes and ears to what our spouse (or good friend) has to say.

Jill and I are quite different by personality. But I can’t tell you how many times I wish I had listened to her sooner. In times of crisis, do not be pig-headed or stubborn, listen to others as well as to yourself and God.

7. Consider the impact of your decisions and actions on others. Sometimes we can be too concerned about how others will respond to our decisions—so much so that we don’t speak the truth, or don’t stand up for what’s right. Other times, we push our way so hard and so fast, that we don’t adequately consider who may be affected by our decisions and actions. I’m suggesting that you learn to be more thoughtful—think about what’s right, think about what’s good, and think about the best way to pursue your goals with the whole community in mind.

In crisis, some of us get so scared that we just do what’s best for us. As pastors, youth leaders, teachers, administrators, we have a responsibility to think about what is best for everyone concerned.

8. Believe in your unique calling, and make your unique contribution. Sometimes in crisis, everyone is needed to do rescue work, or rebuild the villages, or clean up the yard. Yet, apart from the survival needs we all share in common, the needs of the whole community are best served when you and I use make our unique contributions based on our unique personality, set of gifts, unique experience, and specific opportunities. No one else is just like you. No one can do exactly what you can do. If you hold back, the whole body of Christ suffers and misses out on the blessing God intends for it. And you miss out. So, step up and offer whatever you have to offer—especially now, in a crisis.

Practically, as you consider appointments for key positions, now more than ever it is imperative to make “smart” appointments. Resist the temptation to just “fill” a post. Look for the right and best person, even if you have to wait.

9. Be strong and courageous. I don’t know how painful or difficult the current or future crises are going to be for you. But whatever you must face and do, you can do it. You can make it. If God has called you, God will go with you.

When we were on pilgrimage, a number of times we felt intimidated by the path ahead. Sometimes, we wanted to quit. But we had a motto that we took from a popular American movie: “never give up, never surrender.” When Joshua was given the daunting task of leading Israel over the Jordan into the Promised land, God said, “Be strong and courageous.” Why? Because if God has given us a commission, God will make us succeed. If we do not succeed, then God has something else in mind or plans to use our failure or frustration for some other purpose. But we seldom know for sure what God intends to do through us until we step up, and courageously take on the challenge before us.

10. Proceed forward, one step at a time.

How many of you have ever played the game “Ja” (Khyer)? I have never played it myself, but I understand that you must take only one step at a time until you become a Tiger, then you can jump all around. Well, some of you think you are a Tiger already, but you’re not. And some of you think you are not a Tiger, but you are.

The truth is no matter how skilled and experienced we may be, the wisest among us normally lead best by taking one step at a time, in sync with the leading of the Holy Spirit. When climbing a steep mountain, each step is important, if you don’t want slip and fall down to the valley below. Who jumps from the valley to the top of the mountain in one leap? No one. Rather, the successful climber, takes one step at a time, giving care to each step to be sure you are on the trail marked out for you, and that your footing is sure.



In a crisis, we often do not have any idea how things are going to turn out. All we can do is take the next step that is before us, using our best judgment and doing our best to listen to the Holy Spirit and to one another.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, they were in crisis, too. His “tip” to them was to rejoice always and not be anxious about anything, but instead to present their requests to God. Then they may hope to experience the “peace” that surpasses understanding. (Philippians 4:4-9). This is not a call to passivity or hiding under the bed while we wait for God to rescue us. Rather, it is a call to release our anxiety to God, so that we can be calm, focused, and better able to apply our energy and strength to the most important tasks at hand.

Well, these are Tim’s Top Ten Tips for Christian workers in crisis. I am looking forward to seeing what God is going to do through this present crisis. I hope you are, too.

May God give you strength and courage for all that is ahead, and make your work for Christ fruitful in ways that exceed your imagination. Amen.