

Tenth Edition

# The State of Church Giving through 1998

*Excerpt:  
Systems and Subsystems Analysis:  
A Case Study*

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## *Systems and Subsystems Analysis: A Case Study*

### **HIGHLIGHTS**

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- The church is conducting subsystem analysis under the rubric of systems analysis. As a result, the church is not able to function at its potential level.
  - Systems analysis methodology, developed by business, helps leaders identify how to improve the functioning of structures to more efficiently produce a desired end result.
  - Systems analysis assumes those applying the methodology have a clear end result in mind.
  - Church leaders have embraced systems analysis, even though they have not agreed on a defined end result.
  - Not identifying the large system in which the church functions, leaders become preoccupied with semiautonomous subsystems within the church, hampering the overall functioning of the church in meeting its potential for good.
- A case study of The United Methodist Church demonstrates the consequences of this situation.

### **NARRATIVE**

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The church in the United States is conducting subsystem analysis under the rubric of systems analysis.

*A Borrowed Idea.* Church leadership, particularly at the national level, borrowed the idea of systems analysis from the world of business. However, the translation from one arena to the other was garbled.

Business knows what it wants to produce. For example, a manufacturing company might ask, Is our present organizational system producing automobiles at an acceptable profit? If the answer is negative, then further analysis helps to identify where the problem lies. Adjustments are made, whether to production or marketing, until the system yields the desired result.

Systems analysis presumes that those who are applying it know what end result is desired.

Church leaders in the United States do not have a clear goal by which to evaluate the system in which the church operates. This situation is particularly true in the area of the stewardship, or preferably, the financial discipleship, patterns of church members. Any group of church leaders, asked to identify the main priority of a particular denomination, will likely offer a vast variety of opinions. One not unusual example of this situation occurred in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1992, leaders of this denomination gathered in Chicago to set mission priorities. “The result was a 256-page document summarizing the priorities in 143 reports, each from a separate subgroup.”<sup>1</sup> The inherent commonalities among the reports were not developed in the document.

Lacking a clear goal to define the desired results, church leaders substitute a preoccupation with subsystems to fill the void of monetary priorities. Leaders latch onto obvious, lowest common denominators. The result is an emphasis on institutional maintenance, a subsystem that ought to be serving a larger purpose. On a local level, institutional maintenance tends to focus on the physical plant and operating budget. At the national level, it combines operating budgets with agency territoriality. In the absence of an awareness of any larger system to be funded, the untapped potential for mobilizing all church members to impact need in Jesus’ name does not register with church leaders.

***Stuck in an Old Paradigm.*** This preoccupation with the subsystem of institutional maintenance developed in large part because most church officials are stuck in a pre-1950s mind-set. Until the 1950s, data suggests that the majority of the U.S. population was poor; only a minority had income in excess of their basic needs. For the vast majority of those actually struggling to make ends meet, church leaders did not place great financial demands on them. Rather, there were segments of church leadership who supported what they perceived as justice and equalizing efforts, such as labor unions, to benefit this struggling majority. To a larger extent, however, the church embraced the role of comforter and encourager for this large number of members who were working hard merely to establish security for themselves. Those few members of extraordinary means were the ones held accountable for the fiscal health of the church. This approach was in keeping with the historical tradition of noblesse oblige, the responsibility of the nobility toward those on whose shoulders the nobility built their personal comfort.

In the 1950s, a new circumstance developed. Affluence began to spread through American society in general. Now the majority had income in excess of their basic needs while the poor became a minority. However, church leaders did not develop an economic “middle-class oblige” to guide the newly affluent into responsibilities of their changed status. Even today, many church leaders will cite consumer debt and increased lifestyle costs to

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<sup>1</sup> John Ronsvale and Sylvia Ronsvale, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 75.

reinforce the perception that most members cannot increase giving. Pastors often feel it necessary to apologize while preaching the one obligatory stewardship sermon a year.

The Ministry of Money uses helpful phrases that describe the new circumstances in the U.S. The term “extraordinarily wealthy” describes those citizens who have unusual amounts of wealth by any standards. Taking a global perspective, almost all of the other people in the U.S. can rightfully be termed “ordinarily wealthy.”

These ordinarily wealthy members are, to a large extent, ignored by church leaders. The main focus continues to be on large gifts from the few extraordinarily wealthy. Local congregations tap their wealthiest members for building campaigns; nationally, many denominations have set up special offices to solicit gifts directly from these individuals.

The other ordinarily wealthy members do not receive an equal amount of attention regarding their financial potential for helping others in need. It is not a surprise, then, that a strong consumer mentality has developed in churches. These ordinarily wealthy members have had their values toward their money formed by the media. Secular advertising does not make the same mistake as does the church, ignoring the ordinarily wealthy and their financial potential for spending.

The old paradigm, or conceptual framework, of focusing on the few extraordinarily wealthy people locks church leaders into a survival mentality. The fear is that resources are limited to the willingness of these few to cooperate. The goals for the church are set accordingly low. The lowest common denominator in the church is basic maintenance of the institution at each level, whether congregational, regional or national. Keep the lights on, construct a building, and keep the staff paid—these are the extent of the vision that leaders offer with any organized enthusiasm. Competition between the local congregation and individual agencies within the denomination for the few large gifts creates tension, as well as an overall void where a unifying, compelling vision could be. Aggravating the situation is the fact that agencies can hire trained staff who work to state the agency’s needs in appealing and attractive ways, resulting in the agencies succeeding in attracting large gifts where congregation leaders fail.

***A New Paradigm.*** Church leaders need to acknowledge that the paradigm has shifted. The widespread affluence in the U.S. requires a new approach to financial responsibility within the church. Overall goals could be set in keeping with the potential of not just the few, but the many who can make a difference consistent with the tenets of the professed faith.

Were the post-1950s economic changes understood, the focus would certainly change. The goal would be to mobilize all church members to deeper financial discipleship evidenced in improved giving habits. Money would be recognized as a tool for good. The options before members would include an attractive vision large enough to need the participation of the many, and not just the few.

Giving patterns over the past three decades indicate that the present agenda of institutional maintenance is not an engaging vision. If it were, the portion of income given to the church would not have declined during thirty years when people’s incomes were expanding. Instead, the portion given would have increased, or at least not decreased.

Institutions, with their physical plants and operating budgets, are necessary. However, their purpose needs to be reinterpreted. These institutions are not a good in and of themselves.

Their value lies in their service as a foundation on which to build efforts that capture the hearts and minds of church members. People willingly support institutions they perceive to provide them with needed services. Medical facilities, software companies, and banks all demonstrate that people will maintain institutions they perceive as enabling them to live better lives. Declining giving patterns suggest that church leaders make a mistake to believe that their members will support their organizational structures merely because it is the right thing to do.

***Theological Analysis.*** What is the larger purpose of the church which will enhance church members' lives?

As businesses embrace the term "mission statement" to help them define their goals, the church, too, needs to recover a clear idea of its purpose. Why should members support it? The following discussion refers to selected verses that represent a larger body of supporting concepts and Scriptural passages.

The question may be asked, what system defines the purpose of the church?

A widely recognized verse is Jesus' declaration in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (NRSV).

However, this verse does not describe the church's operating system. Rather, this verse presents the means for how an individual enters into that system. It is by grace that one enters into God's system. The question in the present discussion is, once in the system, how is one to act?

Two other verses define the operating system once an individual enters into a relationship with God and the church.

The first verse actually describes two systems competing for the church member's loyalty. Jesus presents a clear choice between two systems in Matthew 6:24. He announces:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (NIV).

Of all the competing forces for the human soul, Jesus indicates that there are really only two main choices. A person can be in God's system or Money's system. If in God's system, money becomes a tool for good. In the alternative system, money displaces God as a priority.

Within God's system, what are the goals? Again, Jesus offers a clear summary. There are two key, related aspects of God's system as described by Jesus in Mark 12:29-31:

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (NRSV).

God's system revolves around humans loving God. And how do humans love God? By following God's direction to "love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says that no commandment is greater than these. Even the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20,

where Jesus commands his followers to go and make disciples and teach them to obey, can be seen as a fulfillment of the more basic command to love the neighbor.

The way people use money indicates what they worship. In money's system, the individual is encouraged to pursue the age-old fault of elevating self to a primary position in place of God. A dynamic tension develops between accumulating money and spending it in adulation of self.

In God's system, money is used to worship God.

That statement is not as easy to understand as it may seem. A popular myth about money and God circulates among church leadership. Money, this school of thought proposes, should be given to worship God in the "purest" possible way. Therefore, gifts given to church structures should have no strings attached, and feedback is not a "right" associated with the donation. Laypeople should give to the church out of love for God, with no questions asked. A corollary is that church people should therefore trust the church leadership and give because it is the right thing to do.

The use of Mark 12:29-31 (which is repeated in Matthew 22:37-39 and Luke 10:27) suggests this myth does not reflect God's opinion. In these verses, Jesus seems to teach a conceptual and practical framework for God's system. The conceptual is summarized by "Love God." What does that really mean? Jesus offers a very practical measure for actions related to the conceptual framework: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Thus, laypeople have a legitimate gauge for holding church leaders accountable. "I want to love God by loving others," the layperson can say, "and how are you spending my gifts to help me accomplish that goal?"

In one of the more detailed money passages in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul seems to endorse the expectation of high levels of accountability. Both 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 are devoted to money and the church. Verses 16-24 in chapter 8 focus particularly on the issue of accountability.

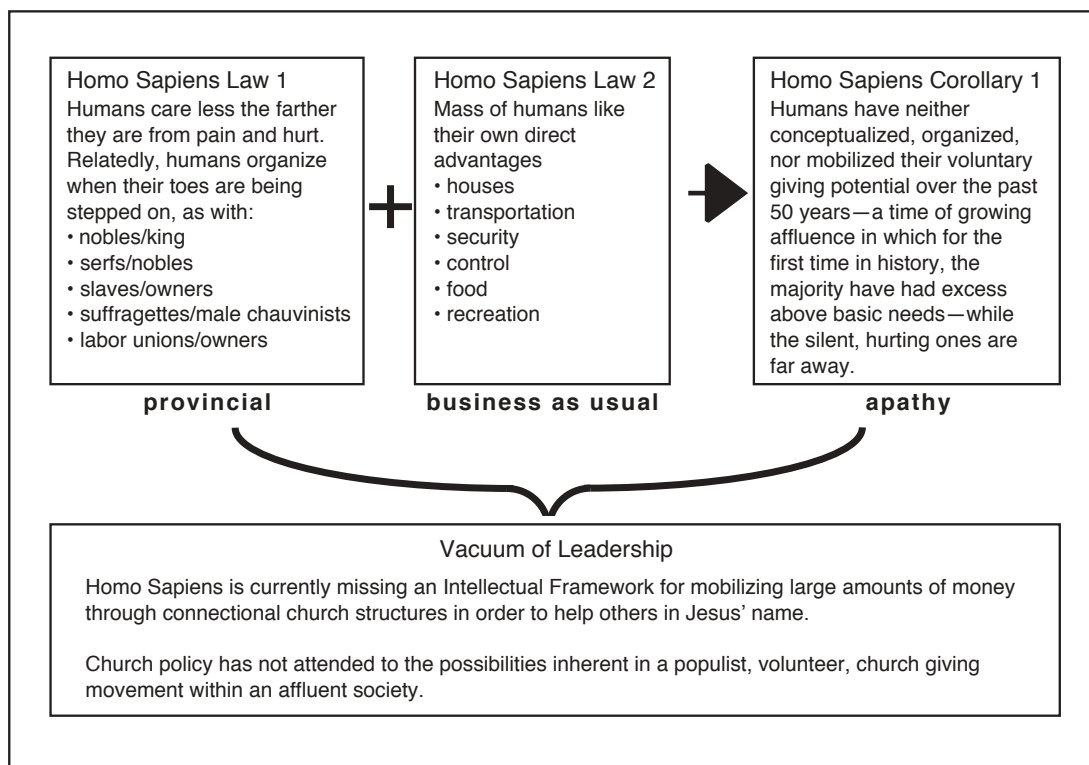
For church structures, then, the first question is what system has it chosen to be in? Is it in God's system, using money for good? Or is it in Money's system, trying to place a religious gloss on what are essentially self-serving spending patterns? However the question is answered, the role of God and money is a fundamental issue in the operation of the church.

***Principles for Conducting a Systems Analysis Case Study.*** Christianity considers the human condition, and the need for change resulting from a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

**Figure 25: Basic principles for analyzing the operating system of the church.** Four key principles will lay the foundation for a systems analysis of the church, and more specifically, The United Methodist Church.

***Principle 1: Human beings are naturally provincial.*** This principle is illustrated in Figure 25. The "Homo Sapiens Law 1" reads "Humans care less the farther they are from pain and hurt." When the hurt is immediate, humans will organize, as was evident in historical conflicts between nobles and kings, serfs and nobles, slaves and owners, suffragettes and male chauvinists, labor unions and management/owners.

Figure 25: Principles for Systems Analysis of the Church



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**Principle 2: Human beings like personal advantage.** “Homo Sapiens Law 2” states that human beings like their own direct advantages. This tendency can be seen in the areas of housing, transportation, security, control over their circumstances, food, and recreation.

**Principle 3: Human beings have not organized to use the benefits of the economic expansion of the past few decades to make significant strides in assisting hurting neighbors.** Although wealthier than ever before, giving data does not point to a dramatically increased level of charitable activity to solve, rather than cope with, domestic and global need. The provincial attitude in Law 1 combined with the preoccupation with business as usual in Law 2 leads to the apathy described in Corollary 1.

**Principle 4: There is a leadership vacuum.** To alter the consequences described by these three principles, dynamic leadership would have to redirect the energies of human beings. Given the mandate from Jesus Christ, church leadership might well be expected to provide such an agenda. The lack of action on the part of church members demonstrates that there is a vacuum of effective leadership. If effective leadership existed, by definition giving patterns would be increasing.

**Figure 26: The general membership of the church is not mobilized.** Human beings demonstrate actions along a spectrum. At one end is a lack of love, evidenced by insensitivity to neighbors’ needs, personal greed, and apathy. At the other end of this spectrum is love, evidenced by compassion, generosity, and empathy. Most humans totter back and forth on this spectrum. Americans are legendary in their willingness to assist in natural disasters, such as a hurricane, a specific international famine, the plight of an individual featured in the national media. However, these spontaneous outpourings on the love end of



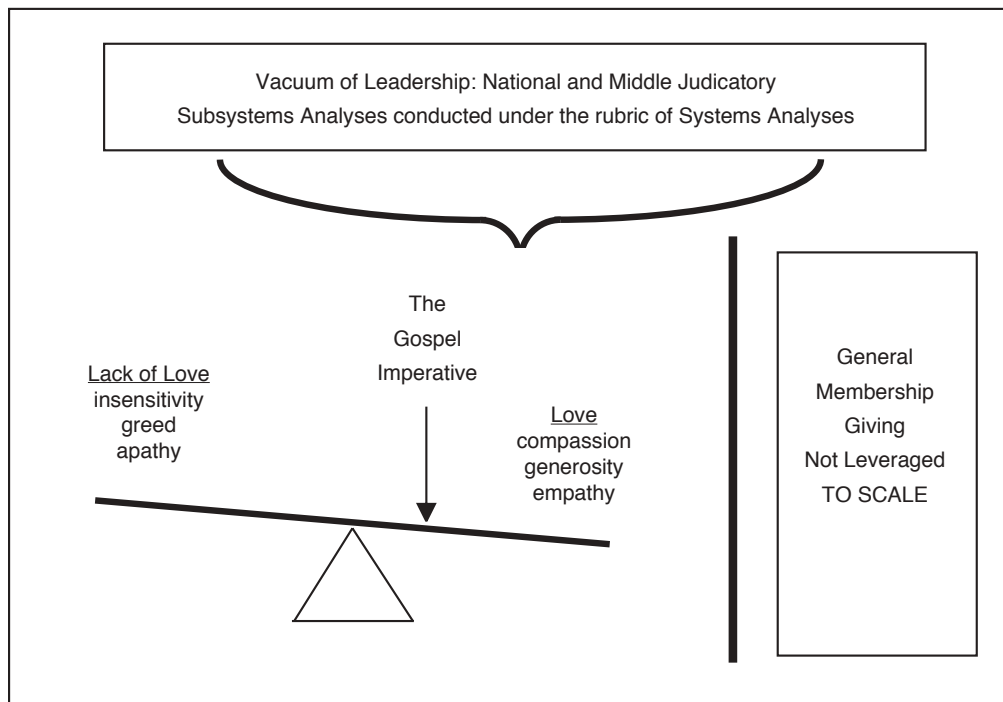
the spectrum are not sustained. Rather, they are interruptions in the standard pattern of business as usual resulting from provincial apathy.

The Gospel Imperative shifts the balance toward love, toward the accompanying traits of compassion, generosity and empathy. However, a lack of leadership in the church means that—even in an institution organized around these values, such as the church—these positive impulses are weakening as evidenced in a declining portion of income being donated. It is significant, in this context, that the category of Benevolences, the portion of income focused on others, has shrunk three times as much as the portion of church donations that directly benefit current members.

Why hasn't the portion of income donated to the church increased even as incomes increased? Why hasn't it at least maintained the levels evident in the late 1960s? And why has the portion of income that goes beyond the local operations of the congregation declined faster than that kept for the benefit of members themselves? The Gospel Imperative needs to be emphasized through creative leadership to organize and mobilize the vast majority of church members in a sustained fashion. Lacking this leadership, church members are left largely on their own as they struggle to balance the competing interests of self and neighbor.

The lack of leadership can also produce a level of boredom among church members offered goals far below their potential. One leader pointed to a regional project, highly publicized over several years among the churches, asking for special donations for food to be sent to another country. The attention given to the project was out of proportion to the goal, which required a donation of less than a dollar per member. Other leaders have pointed to the belittling of the cause of hunger that results from churchwide projects that ask people for a penny a meal to be donated to the cause. Low goals communicate both a lack of excitement and the low value placed by leadership on such causes.

**Figure 26: General Church Membership Is Not Mobilized in Financial Discipleship**

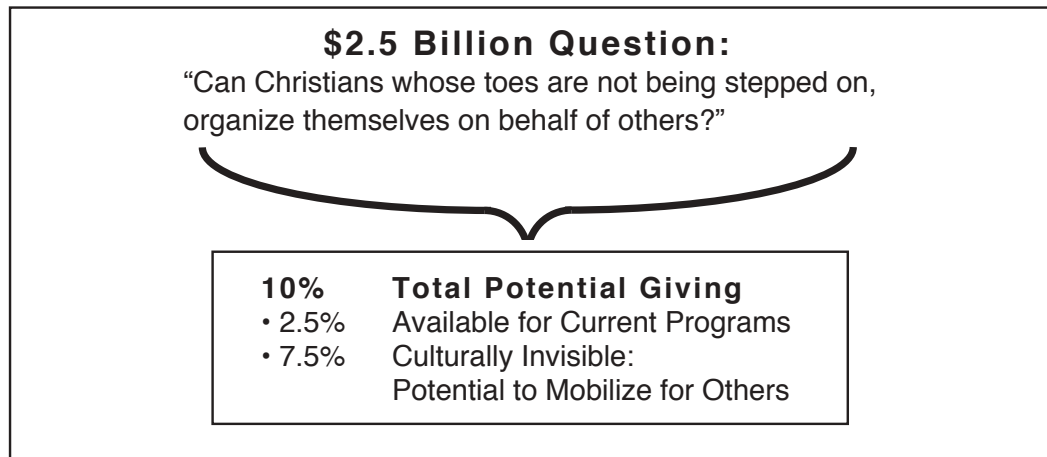


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The general membership is separated (as indicated by the solid vertical bar) from an effective challenge to fulfill their financial discipleship potential. Church leaders do not apply systems analysis to understand how the Gospel Imperative can increase its impact on church members. One evidence of a successful application of systems analysis on giving patterns would be that church members in general would be giving “at scale” in order to impact need in Jesus’ name. A definition of at scale would be achieving a congregationwide average of 10% giving, with some giving more and some giving less. Instead, the portion of income continues to decline.

**Figure 27: The \$2.5 Billion Question.** Based on the tenets of the historically Christian faith, it is clear that concern for the neighbor is the way in which God wants church members to demonstrate their professed love for God. The key question then is, “Can Christians whose toes are not being stepped on, organize themselves on behalf of others?” That is, can Christians who are essentially comfortable rouse themselves to action in response to their professed belief on behalf of people in need, both locally and internationally?

**Figure 27: The \$2.5 Billion Question**

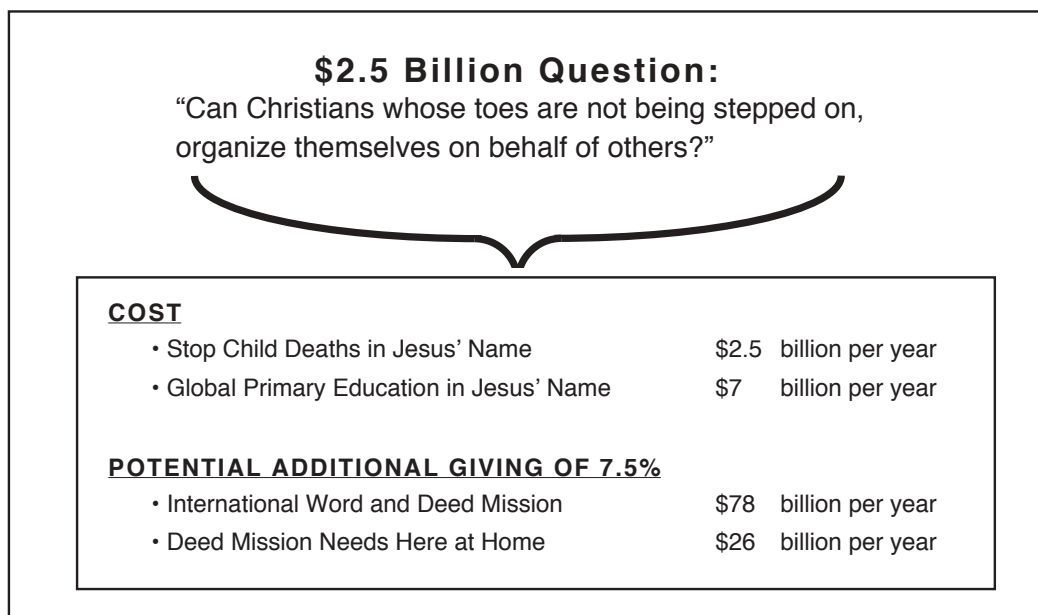


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What would such activity look like? Given Jesus’ systems description in Matthew 6:24, this activity would involve money. One clear measure of the fruits of this change would be in giving patterns. The classic potential giving level is 10% of income. It currently takes about 2.5% of members’ incomes to run church structures at their present levels. That means that church members, were they to increase their giving to a congregationwide average of 10%, could back up their professed love for God by directing the additional 7.5% of the tithe to help their neighbors in need, both domestically and globally. Yet this potential remains culturally invisible. It is not seriously discussed in church policy circles at any level.

**Figure 28: Implications of the \$2.5 Billion Question.** The amount of \$2.5 billion is a starting point for discussing the present inaction of church members in the U.S. The \$2.5 billion figure is the amount that UNICEF has estimated would be necessary to stop most of the annual 11 million deaths of children under age five around the globe. Another \$7 billion a year, again according to UNICEF data, would provide global primary education for all children.

**Figure 28: Implications of the \$2.5 Billion Question**



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These UNICEF estimates are not statements of its own program needs. Rather, the estimates are for costs that would be incurred through the combined efforts of international agencies, including denominational structures. Were the church to pursue these activities through available denominational structures, these actions could be combined with a statement of Jesus’ love, to provide both word and deed witness.

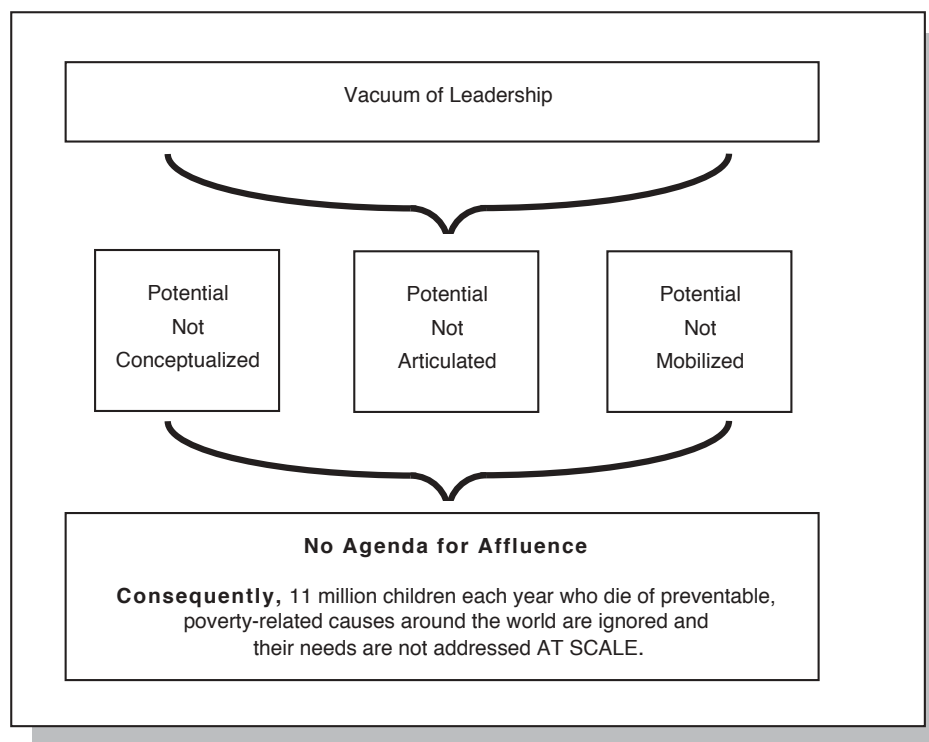
These cost estimates often strike fear into the hearts of the most compassionate. That response is due to the leadership vacuum, not due to the related facts. Leadership apparently refuses to see the potential for mobilizing the vast majority of church members. Were they to do so, they would understand that the 7.5% of the presently un-given tithe would allow as much as \$78 billion to be shared in Jesus’ name through church structures to address needs for basic survival and education. Leaders would understand that there would also be as much as \$26 billion for domestic deed mission, offering practical acts of love and concern to the neighbors across the street.

Further, leaders would realize that mobilizing such giving would provide an informed constituency to address related public policy issues. Instead, those leaders who deeply care about others often tend to move from general statements to public policy concerns, skipping money and the role of individual giving in involving church members.

In Matthew 13, Jesus refers to a theme stated in Deuteronomy 29:4, Isaiah 6:9-10 and 42:20, Jeremiah 5:21 and 6:10, and Ezekiel 12:2. The condition of “having eyes but not seeing, and ears but not hearing” describes the state of church leadership today in regard to the potential for deepened financial discipleship among church members.

**Figure 29: Lacking an agenda for affluence.** The vacuum of leadership in the church in the U.S. means that the potential for impacting domestic and global need, through increased giving, on the part of all church members, is not conceptualized, not articulated,

**Figure 29: Lacking an Agenda for Affluence**



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and not mobilized. As the Stewardship Project National Advisory Committee concluded, church members need a positive agenda for their increasing affluence.<sup>2</sup> Yet church leaders have not offered such a compelling vision. It is no surprise, then, that these members have followed the leadership of the secular media into increased accumulation and consumer debt. On the congregational level, leaders organize for months and celebrate the contribution of thousands and even millions of new dollars donated for a building. However, as one leader pointed out, a suggestion to exert that sort of energy and celebration over raising even greater amounts of money for mission would be dismissed as an absurdity. As a consequence, the 11 million children under age five who will die this year of preventable poverty conditions around the globe will do so silently, ignored by church members in the U.S. who are busy with their provincial agendas.

**A Case Study: The United Methodist Church.** The authors have worked with national offices and congregations in a variety of communions. One surprising finding in the Stewardship Project<sup>3</sup> was that attitudes and problems associated with money were similar across the entire theological spectrum. A humorous observation in the National Advisory Committee, that brought together stewardship representatives from seven conservative Protestant communions, seven mainline Protestant communions, and a Roman Catholic archbishop, was that if oneness in the body of Christ existed nowhere else, it existed among the problems all the groups faced regarding money.

<sup>2</sup> Ronsvalle and Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows*, 293.

<sup>3</sup> A three-year project titled "Congregation-Level Field Observations and Denominational Giving Reports Stewardship Analysis Project" conducted by empty tomb, inc. with a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The authors have had reason to work in some depth with The United Methodist Church in particular. Apart from attending a local congregation in this tradition, a number of congregations affiliated with this denomination have participated in an ongoing mission-incentive project which the authors have designed.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this relatively in-depth experience, the following systems analysis will focus on The United Methodist Church. The reader can evaluate to what degree these observations can be generalized to other traditions in the church. Based on encounters with many of those traditions, the authors would assert that the findings for one denomination are generally applicable beyond a single tradition.

**Case Study of The United Methodist Church, Finding 1: Lack of Communication Fosters Inaction.** What is the purpose of the church? If one were to contact leaders at any level of The United Methodist Church, these leaders would probably answer that question in a manner similar to the leaders of any other Christian communion in the U.S. The answer would be a variation on the theme of turning members into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. However, lacking an overarching system, that general goal remains an abstraction. On a practical level, it is sacrificed to the more accessible objective of institutional maintenance, as the following illustration demonstrates.

The first encounter with the maze of United Methodist subsystems that turned into a case study began rather simply. The leadership council of a United Methodist congregation opted to participate in a missions-incentive project. The stated goal was to first secure the funding of the local congregation's operations. The leadership made the commitment that, when the congregation's operations funding was received, any additional donations would be directed to pre-determined missions activities. The funds would be sent globally through denominational programs, and locally through channels of the congregation's choice. Since the congregation had had difficulty fully funding its own budget in the past few years, all the leadership did not apparently grasp the implications of the commitment being made through this missions-incentive program structure.

An unexpected financial gift resulted in the full funding of the operating budget. By the end of that year, there was money left over. According to the pastor, several key members of the leadership board, reminded of the commitment to direct a significant amount of this "extra" money to global and domestic missions, "had apoplexy." The group followed through on the commitment, but not everyone was very happy about it. The pastor, dealing with a grumpy board, asked the authors to assist with a solution. She indicated that a piece of specific news from those benefiting from the international mission gifts would assist her greatly. For example, she could take a postcard with her to the meetings, perhaps every other month, from the project overseas. This information would help her tremendously in changing the focus of the congregation leaders from the loss of the money sent to missions to the good that the money was accomplishing.

The authors agreed with the pastor, concluding that her suggestion was brilliant. Let it be noted that since that time, this idea has been shared with national leaders in a number of different denominations. The routine response has been a combination of "What a great idea!" and "Why haven't we thought of that before?"

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<sup>4</sup> The National Money for Missions Program of empty tomb, inc.

These same two responses were voiced by a staff member at the Annual Conference level to whom the authors appealed for assistance. In the United Methodist structure, congregations belong to an Annual Conference, which then relates to the national structure. This Annual Conference staff person promised to contact the relevant national agency with the suggestion. Months of increasingly awkward phone calls from the authors to the annual conference staff person followed. By the seventh month, the Annual Conference staff person concluded that a response to the idea from the national agency would not be forthcoming.

A couple of months elapsed until a contact person in another United Methodist national agency was phoned by the authors. This person's portfolio included helping to provide mission feedback to congregations. The idea was again broached for some type of regular project-specific feedback to congregations supporting a particular denomination-funded international mission project. Nothing elaborate was suggested. A simple database could match the addresses of supporting congregations with one statistic or fact, a brief anecdote or story, and a prayer request from the funded mission project, perhaps on a bimonthly basis, for a year after the most recent gift from the congregation to that project. A computer could produce a postcard with the address and these information items on it, while staff could mail it. Again, the national agency contact thought the idea both doable and valuable.

Again, months of increasingly awkward phone calls followed to the national agency office. After six months of such calls, the national contact said that she had not been able to obtain any response from the relevant agency because they were busy planning a 50th anniversary celebration of the mission structure, and did not have time to respond to inquiries from individual congregations.

Meanwhile, the involved congregation withdrew from the missions-incentive program.

The second encounter that led to Finding 1 developed when a different United Methodist congregation fully funded its operations budget in the context of the missions-incentive project. At that point, this congregation of less than 100 people sent over \$5,000 to denominational missions projects. This time, a layperson asked the authors for assistance in obtaining project-specific information about how the money was used to help people on the receiving end.

The authors enlisted different contacts within the denomination to obtain feedback for this congregation. The idea was broadened to provide the relevant national agency with alternatives. If a database-produced postcard would be too difficult, the agency could list project-specific information on its Web site. Congregations that funded a particular project could obtain current, specific information about that project on the Web site.

Two years after the money was donated, during which time a number of denominational representatives made repeated attempts to obtain the feedback, the congregation received the information that, after some extended delays, the money had actually arrived where it was supposed to go; no more specific information was available.

This congregation, too, withdrew from the missions-incentive effort, using a bequest they received not for mission outreach but rather to replace the siding on the congregation's building.



One of the denominational representatives who attempted to secure feedback information for this second congregation came to a summary conclusion. The involved agency that handled missions funding for the denomination had a number of people designated to raise money from congregations. However, no one was designated or freed up to provide specific feedback to the funding congregations. This feedback information could be seen as an education effort and partnership building activity for the congregation members who contribute the money. The agency instead was preoccupied with the subsystem of raising a maintenance amount of money, in a business-as-usual fashion, rather than involved in the larger system of loving the neighbor by empowering both the donor and the recipient through an exchange of information.

Contrast this denominational approach with that of airlines, for example. Many airlines have far more individual customers than denominations have affiliated congregations. However, when an airline's customer takes a journey, within a few weeks that individual customer receives a personalized frequent flier statement with the recent journey's miles added to past totals. The airline also includes "personalized" offers for both trips and trip-related commodities that provide opportunities to obtain additional frequent flier miles.

Denominations do not seem to value their congregations' missions support in the same way that airlines value their frequent fliers.

**Case Study of The United Methodist Church, Finding 2: Unintegrated Statements.** One of the more articulate statements about the purpose of the church was produced by the United Methodist Bishops in 1996. "The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative"<sup>5</sup> is an inspiring, comprehensive document. It could well serve as outlining a positive agenda for the affluence of church members, not only in The United Methodist Church, but in other traditions that chose to build on it.

Figure 30 provides a scale that could be used to evaluate any proposed overarching agenda. Other factors could also be included or substituted on this scale. The ones presented seem the most relevant to the authors. Evaluated in this light, the Bishops' Initiative highlights a focus on the needs of children, particularly those dying from preventable causes, that meets critical criteria. For purposes of discussion, the proposed agenda can be summarized as "Stopping, in Jesus' name, global child deaths." The following observations result from using the scale in Figure 30.

On the spectrum of **Major Hurt** or **Lesser Hurt**, this focus would rate at Major Hurt.

For **Most Vulnerable** to **Self-Sufficient**, such an effort would rate at the Most Vulnerable end of the scale.

For **At Scale**, from a global viewpoint, to **Limited Focus**, the task is At Scale. The project is large enough that it cannot be accomplished by a few wealthy individuals. It is comprehensive and compelling enough that every church member would feel needed.

Is it something **Christians Can Do**, or is it something that requires church members to also **Force Non-Christians** to cooperate? Since, through faithful giving and established

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.umc.org/bishops/statement.html>

**Figure 30: A Scale to Evaluate a Proposed Overarching Agenda**

|   |  |                                   |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| <p><b>Systems Analysis: Defining a Goal that Involves Stored Time and Talent, i.e., Money</b><br/>                 Jesus Christ: Serve God or Mammon<br/>                 The Two Greatest Commandments: Love God and Love Neighbor as Self</p> |  |                                   |
| Major Hurt  |  | Lesser Hurt                       |
| Most Vulnerable   |  | Self-Sufficient                   |
| At Scale  |  | Limited Focus                     |
| Christians Can Do   |  | Force Non-Christians              |
| Word <i>and</i> Deed  |  | Word <i>or</i> Deed               |
| Rhetoric/Theology with Action Plan  |  | Rhetoric/Theology w/o Action Plan |
| Preventable   |  | Unavoidable                       |
| No Negative Consequences  |  | Major Negative Consequences       |
| Immediate Resolution  |  | Delayed Resolution                |

international church channels, church members have the power to impact this need directly, it would be something on the Christians-Can-Do end of the spectrum. No doubt, concerned representatives of church structures will also need to involve political contacts in order to secure the necessary cooperation of government officials, particularly abroad. However, the grassroots momentum can begin and build in congregations without permission from secular structures.

Does it involve **Word *and* Deed**, or does it emphasize **Word *or* Deed**? In this case, the direct care can be combined with a spoken witness, so *Word and Deed* is incorporated. Different church structures will no doubt bring the unique perspectives of their varied traditions to the task, but all will combine these two important aspects of faith-based action in some form.

On the spectrum of **Rhetoric/Theology with an Action Plan**, over to **Rhetoric/Theology without an Action Plan**, the proposed agenda of preventing child deaths combines rhetoric and theology with action. This fact is in contrast to the too-frequent practice of church leaders to focus on rhetoric/theology about the common good in a way that does not touch the everyday lives of most church members.



Is it a **Preventable** situation through action, or is it an **Unavoidable** circumstance, regardless of how hard we try? It is Preventable, according to demographic experts.

Would addressing the need have **No Negative Consequences**, or **Major Negative Consequences**? This agenda would be on the No Negative Consequences end of the spectrum. Demographic experts find evidence that lowering the rate of child deaths has a long-term impact on decreasing the birth rate. Thus, helping children who are already born to survive will not increase world population, and could very well help lower it.

Finally, is there an **Immediate Resolution** to the situation, as opposed to a **Delayed Resolution**? The assistance has immediate impact. The denominational structures are already in place, although budget cuts in many denominations threaten some of these structures with dismantling. The partnerships necessary in other countries have been established through church relations over the years.

*Dominant subsystems operating in The United Methodist Church.* Thus, the United Methodist bishops laid the groundwork for a positive direction for the church. However, there is no overarching system in that communion which allows the action of the bishops to have any measurable, practical, at-scale applications. Figure 31 describes the subsystems which preoccupy this denomination.

As a body, the United Methodist Bishops function in a relatively unintegrated fashion in relationship to the denominations' agencies, even though the bishops, individually, sit on agency boards. This situation is not unique within denominations, as was confirmed in interviews with representatives of other communions. Agency administrators and congregation members alike many times view the pronouncements by the national spiritual leaders as somewhat removed from the practical workings of the organization. Nor do the bishops indicate an expectation that it should be otherwise. Most recently, the emphasis has been on a renewed commitment to "localism," encouraging grassroots initiatives. Yet the bishops have not provided an overarching vision by which to evaluate and unify the local initiatives into an organic whole, focused on a common general purpose. As a consequence, local leaders, lacking guidance as to what larger standards should be used to judge the value of proposed initiatives, content themselves with limited activities that do not disrupt the business-as-usual agenda of institutional maintenance.

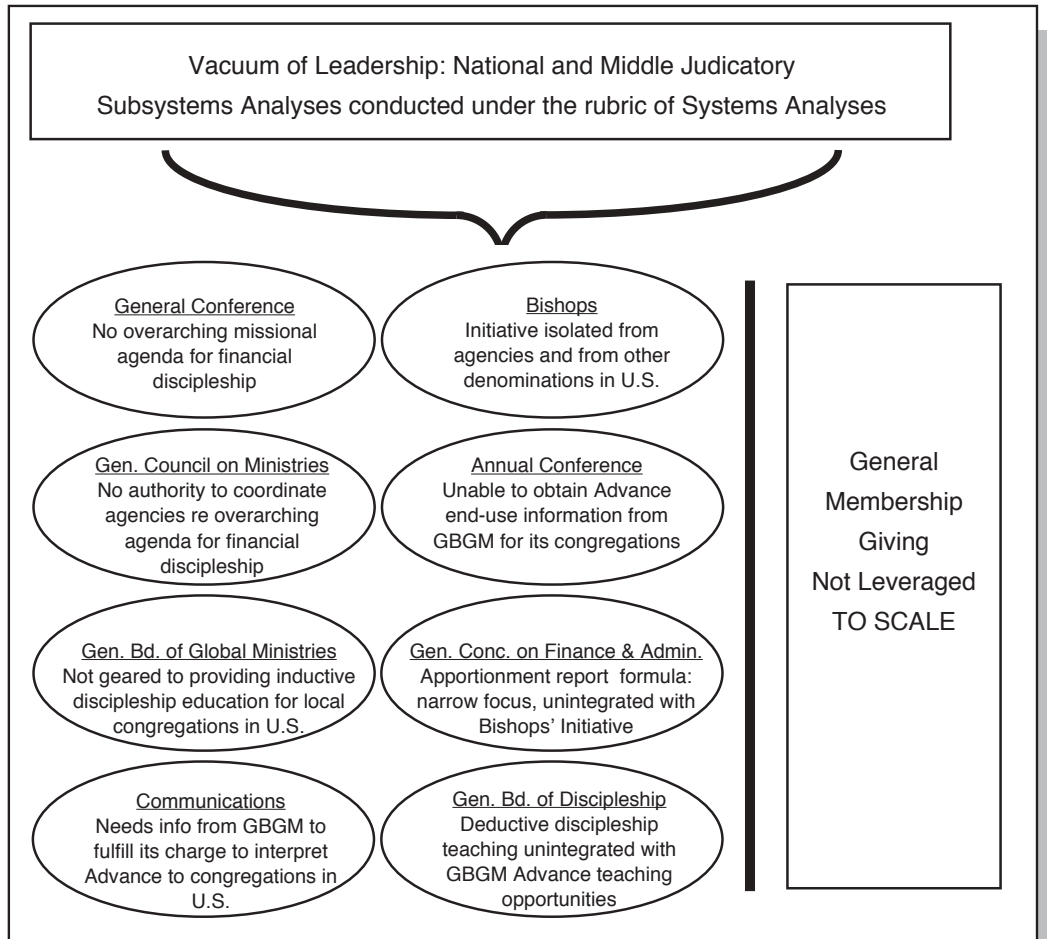
Another factor is that, unlike most other communions, the major agencies of The United Methodist Church do not reside in the same city. This geographical separation coincides with the independent subsystems in which each of the agencies operates. However, denominations with agency offices located across the street, or even across the hall, also evidence the lack of an integrated system guiding all the parts toward a common whole.

The United Methodist General Conference, which assembles congregational representatives every four years, legislates church policy by which the congregations are to operate. Its focus is on this legislative process, rather than defining a practical national agenda for action.

The General Council on Ministries (GCOM), in the opinion of some denominational leaders, does not have the strength to coordinate the various agencies in an overarching agenda.

The General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) dispenses the mission money received from congregations. The Advance is the set of United Methodist designated giving

**Figure 31: Subsystems in The United Methodist Church**



empty tomb, inc., 2000

mission projects. The GBGM is not geared to providing inductive discipleship education by sharing specific project information with the funding congregations in the U.S. Inductive education is the opportunity for the information recipient to draw conclusions based on specific facts and life experiences, in contrast to deductive education in which an expert imparts systematized teaching.

United Methodist Communications provides educational materials and media programs. It is limited in its ability to interpret missions to congregations by a lack of regularly updated project-specific information from the General Board of Global Ministries.

Local congregations are organized into Annual Conferences. As demonstrated in the encounter described in the Finding 1 section, the Annual Conference staff is not able to obtain specific mission information from the general agencies of the church in order to keep the congregations informed about designated giving through the Advance.

The General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) keeps the statistics and handles the business aspects of the denomination. The GCFA assists with policy for funding the General Boards and Episcopal activities. Their focus has not, to date, been

integrated on an operational level with the Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty, although the Initiative is dutifully quoted in reports.

The General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) provides deductive teaching materials on a variety of topics. These materials do not coordinate with information and inductive learning opportunities potentially available from the General Board of Global Ministries about specific mission activities.

As a result of the independent functioning of these agencies, members are structurally encouraged to continue in their provincial attitudes within their local congregations. Financial stewardship is largely interpreted as institutional maintenance. The exceptions are the occasional disasters at which time the secular media provide specific feedback about the conditions to be addressed. Denominations often then exploit this coverage to attract the spontaneous generosity of church members to their agencies' related efforts.

Each agency may regard itself in competition with the others in the denomination. At least one United Methodist agency is expected to develop income-producing materials to support its own activities. A layperson trying to obtain information can be shuttled from one office to another. There is no system in place to encourage the various agencies to organize a common strategy based, for example, on the Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty. Such a strategy could be presented to the congregations as a unifying activity. Instead, each congregation operates in a manner designed to secure its own survival. Each pastor introduces his or her own priorities, which will be displaced by the next pastor's priorities when a new clergy appointment to the congregation is made.

The circumstances that led to Finding 3 illustrate how the lack of an overarching vision among the agencies can produce subsystem actions which have serious consequences for the healthy functioning of the church as a whole.

**Case Study of The United Methodist Church, Finding 3: Subsystem Analysis of General Board Funding Recommendation.** The United Methodist Church relies on a method of "Apportionments." Each congregation is asked to contribute a specific amount of money to various causes within the church, including for the support of the General Board agencies. While the standard description for Apportionments would be a connectional, fair-share assessment, another term often used in informal settings is that they are a tax.

The amount asked of each congregation is determined by a formula. The Apportionment formula may vary from Annual Conference to Annual Conference. However, many Annual Conferences adopt the formula developed by the quadrennial General Conference. Up until the General Conference held in 2000, the Apportionments formula included the number of members in a congregation as a factor. Since membership in the denomination had been declining over a period of years, some leaders thought it would be wise to change the Apportionments formula. Apart from the resulting decreased levels of support due to fewer members, there was also concern that the Apportionments formula actually provided a disincentive to the congregation to increase membership by "taxing" the congregations based on the number of members.

A report was prepared for distribution at the year 2000 General Conference. The result of months of study, the paper proposed an alternative formula for Apportionments. The task force with the responsibility to draft the recommendation for an alternative formula engaged both a theologian and a consultant to guide their efforts.

The first section of the written report contained the theological analysis of the role of financial discipleship in general, and in support of church structures in particular. These first nine pages were insightful and offered sound operating principles.

On page ten, there was an abrupt change in tone and focus. The reader might guess that the first section presented the theologian's work, and the second introduced that of the consultant.

The practical analysis of the consultant concluded, among other points, that those congregations that pay a higher portion of Apportionments also fund a larger amount of Benevolences over and above Apportionments. In contrast, those congregations that do not fully fund their requested Apportionments amounts also do not fund as many extra Benevolences. Therefore, the task force's report recommended that the amount of extra Benevolences paid be included as a factor in the formula for calculating the level of Apportionments assessed to each congregation. Thus, those congregations already funding Apportionments and paying for extra Benevolences would now also pay higher Apportionments. In effect, these concerned and active congregations would carry those congregations that were not fully funding Apportionments.

The report acknowledged a possible relationship between declining membership and the inclusion of membership as an Apportionments formula factor in the past. Yet, the task force was now recommending that Benevolences beyond fully-paid Apportionments be included in the formula. An observer could surmise that such an action would be likely to produce a negative trend in extra Benevolences support through the congregation, even as membership levels developed a negative trend when included in the formula.

An item on the General Council on Finance and Administration's Web site seemed to indicate that the recommendation to include extra Benevolences paid was not, in fact, accepted by the 2000 General Conference. What could have been the thinking of the consultant and the committee, that they developed an approach that could, in all likelihood, have broad negative consequences on the behavior of the related congregations?

Not having access to the actual workings of the task force, one can only conjecture. However, an explanation that would explain the recommendation is suggested by the current contrast between systems and subsystems. It is likely that the task force and the consultant were given the specific, narrow charge to maximize the level of Apportionments paid to the General Agencies' operations. Within the system/subsystem approach presented in this chapter, the task force was not charged to conduct a systems analysis of the Apportionments structure. In fact, given the present leadership vacuum and accompanying absence of overarching vision in the church, it would have been difficult for them to do so. Instead, the task force and consultant were confined within a subsystem limited to institutional maintenance. In that context, the recommendation makes sense. From a larger systems perspective, however, the short-term gains resulting from the revised formula would be expected to produce serious negative consequences for Benevolences funding.

Denominational agencies preoccupied with functioning within their subsystems may well produce competing and conflicting agendas. With no effective leadership to unite and meld these various agendas to serve the purposes of a recognized overarching system, denominations have difficulty communicating the value of their activities to the congregations. Congregations are then left to formulate their own agendas, which are generally dominated by the needs of their local members.

**Conclusions from the Case Study Findings.** The United Methodist Church is not unique in the decreased level of support from its related congregations. Rather, a recent study found that two-thirds of the denominations responding to a survey reported a decline in support from their constituent congregations, even while these congregations raised more money. Denominations reported that they had cut their budgets through program reductions, used their financial reserves, presented congregations with emergency appeals, and in some cases cut their staff.<sup>6</sup>

The preoccupation of denominational agencies with internally independent subsystems helps to explain how a church in the most affluent society in history, with a high level of population affiliated with its various branches, with wonderful service structures in place, could allow their constituent members to be so underchallenged while international and domestic neighbors remain in desperate spiritual and physical need.

Denominations need to identify what entity within their structures has the authority not only to identify the overarching vision around which members can rally, but also the ability to hold its own component agencies accountable to furthering that identified agenda.

**Summary.** Church structures, particularly at the national level, use Systems Analysis methodology to identify how to improve the functioning of their structures. However, because denominations do not have clear goals, particularly in relationship to the financial discipleship of their members, the Systems Analysis approach is misapplied.

Many denominations have devolved into a combination of independent subsystems that often compete for support and territory among themselves. Few if any denominations have a clear goal of mobilizing all members, not just the extraordinarily wealthy, to improve their financial discipleship.

In Matthew 6:24, Jesus indicated that Christians have a choice between God's system and Money's system. God's system involves loving God; and to accomplish that goal, one loves the neighbor as oneself.

A case study of the United Methodist Church described how a focus on subsystems can produce unintended negative consequences. While the national-office subsystems pursue their independent agendas, congregation members are not provided with leadership or a compelling vision.

Church leaders in the United States need to identify such a compelling vision around which to organize their structures. Communication and interaction with members at the congregational level will help the church move toward greater obedience to Jesus and the tenets of the faith.

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon L. Miller, "Financing Parachurch Organizations" in Mark Chaves and Sharon L. Miller, eds., *Financing American Religion* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), 124.