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The State
of
Church Giving
through 2001

Excerpt

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*Reversing the Decline in
Benevolences Giving:
A Country-by-Country Needs Analysis*

HIGHLIGHTS _____

A country-by-country analysis of global needs, with a reference point of stopping, in Jesus' name, global child deaths, is a key element of an effort to reverse negative Benevolences giving trends. This strategy addresses several factors that contribute to the decline in Benevolences giving as a portion of income that is detailed in earlier chapters of this volume.

NARRATIVE _____

A country-by-country analysis of global needs, with a reference point of stopping, in Jesus' name, global child deaths, is a key element of an effort to reverse negative Benevolences giving trends.

Such a strategy would address several factors that are contributing to the negative trend in giving to Benevolences as a percent of income that is detailed in earlier chapters of this volume. These factors include the need among congregation members to know "what their money is buying" when it leaves the congregation. Further, by providing a tool that leaders could use, this strategy would help to fill the current vacuum of church leadership that exists in the area of integrating faith and money. The strategy also complements several aspects of the "positive agenda for affluence" affirmed by national church leaders, and works in tandem with previously suggested strategies to improve giving to Benevolences.

Before reviewing the positive aspects of this strategy, it would be well to consider a few working assumptions that lay the foundation for this approach.

Underlying Assumptions. Funding for missions should increase. The most basic assumption supporting the suggestion for a country-by-country global needs analysis is that funding for missions should increase. While it may seem a foregone conclusion, the apparent lack of effective action among church leadership in the U.S. at the congregational, regional and national levels leaves the matter open to question. Therefore, a few observations about the role of mission in the church may be useful.

Missions has been seen as an integral reason for the existence of the church from the beginning. “The Great Commission,” given by Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19-20, was reaffirmed with Jesus’ words at the ascension scene recorded in Acts 1. In the first instance, Jesus told the disciples to “make disciples of all nations” both baptizing them and “teaching them to obey everything” Jesus commanded (NIV). In Acts 1:8, Jesus promises power to the disciples so that they can be witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (NIV).

This global reality continued through the centuries to the degree that Arthur Judson Brown wondered in 1902, “Does any sane man imagine that the Church could cease to be missionary and remain the Church?”¹

Leaders throughout the two thousand years that the church has existed have affirmed missions—including good works in Jesus’ name—as consistent with the theological conviction of salvation being a work of grace. A review of the writings of two of the best-known proponents of salvation by faith alone—*sola fide*—finds a strong affirmation for good works growing from faith. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote about the natural fruit of a life saved by grace being good works that both glorify God and also demonstrate the effect of grace in one’s life.²

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches took the position in 1997 that economic justice as well as ecological destruction are issues “at the very center of Christian faith.” The Alliance decided that these issues were more than “moral and ethical questions” and “elevated” the issues to “‘the level of the faith’ and the ‘confession’ of the church...a situation described as a processus confessionis (a Latin term referring to a ‘committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession’).”³ From the Reformed point of view, not pursuing the good of the neighbor, which can be another definition of mission, becomes a denial of the demands of faith.

Increased Benevolences giving could make a positive impact. A second working assumption is that increased giving could make a difference. Chapter 6 in this volume explores the potential of church member giving at a congregation-wide average of ten percent (some members giving lower and some members giving higher than that level). Available

¹ R. Park Johnson, “Arthur Judson Brown, 1856-1963, Believing in the Power of the Sovereign Lord,” in Gerald H. Anderson, et al., eds., *Mission Legacies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 556.

² John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, “The Theological Implications of Church Member Giving Patterns,” *The State of Church Giving through 1995* (empty tomb, inc., 1997), <<http://www.emptytomb.org/implications.html>>.

³ Stephen Brown, “Reformed Group says ‘Struggle for Economic Justice at Center of Faith,’ ” *The National Christian reporter*, August 29, 1997, 1, quoted in Ronsvalle, “The Theological Implications of Church Member Giving Patterns.”

numbers indicate that church members could increase giving and make a major impact on global word and deed need.

Articles that appeared in the “Child Survival” series in the European medical journal, *The Lancet*, are a recent source of additional information about the difference that can be made. The authors in the series were affiliated with the Division of Policy and Planning, United Nation’s Children’s Fund (UNICEF); Division of International Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; and the Public Health Nutrition Unit of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, among others. The second paper in the series explored the topic, “How Many Child Deaths Can We Prevent This Year?” The study considered both specific strategies and the delivery systems available in low-income countries. The authors concluded, “Our findings show that about two-thirds of child deaths could be prevented by interventions that are available today and are feasible for implementation in low-income countries at high levels of population coverage.” The authors found that “some of the most promising interventions may be delivered at the household level, with limited need for external material inputs.”⁴ The conclusion, therefore, is that the lives of as many as six million of the 10.8 million children who are dying this year could be preserved, if the public chose to do so.

The church is given the responsibility to do “mission” whether or not it is convenient or seemingly possible. However, these child survival studies suggest that word and deed mission through the established international network of denomination mission structures would not be a hopeless task, but rather could have a tremendous effect.

A consensus exists. The third assumption that lays the groundwork for increasing Benevolences giving is that there is a consensus among a broad spectrum of church leaders in the U.S. that it should happen. A survey of 202 leaders in historically Christian denominations based in the U.S. resulted in responses from 41% of those successfully contacted. Of those responding, 81% responded “Yes” to the assertion that church members in the United States should increase giving through their churches in an effort to stop, in Jesus’ name, the millions of annual preventable global child deaths. The positive respondents represented African American, Anabaptist, Baptist, Evangelical, Fundamental, Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and other Catholic communions.⁵

An earlier grouping of national church leaders concluded that “The church needs a positive agenda for the great affluence in our society.”⁶ Based on the broad support expressed in the more recent survey, it appears that the issue of preventing, in Jesus’ name, global child deaths could serve as that agenda.

This broad consensus supports the active exploration of strategies to assist church leaders in moving from conviction to action regarding the need to increase giving for missions.

⁴ Gareth Jones, et al.; “How Many Child Deaths Can We Prevent This Year?”; *The Lancet*; <http://www.thelancet.com/journal/vol362/iss9377/full/lancet.362.9377.child_survival.26292.1>; p. 6 of 7/7/03 2:06 PM printout.

⁵ John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, “National Church Leaders Response Form,” *The State of Church Giving through 1999* (empty tomb, inc., 2001), <<http://www.emptytomb.org/ResponseForm.html>>.

⁶ John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), p. 293.

Country-by-Country Needs Analysis. From a practical point of view, the church in the U.S. is well suited to a country-by-country needs analysis. International denominational relationships link church structures in the U.S. with structures in every country of the globe. In many cases, denominations in the U.S. have frontline representatives, in the form of missionaries sent to serve in other countries. These missionaries are often dispersed throughout a nation's boundaries, serving in rural as well as urban areas. Church leaders of other countries also have working relationships with church leaders in the U.S. Thus, church leaders in the U.S. have a ready-made communications system on a country-by-country basis.

The value of looking at need by country was affirmed in the first of *The Lancet* "Child Survival" articles. In the summary findings, the authors state, "The causes of death differ substantially from one country to another, highlighting the need to expand understanding of child health epidemiology at a country level rather than in geopolitical regions."⁷ Thus, an expansive network of frontline representatives from the U.S., and relationships with church leaders of those other countries, may suit the church in the U.S. well for servanthood leadership on this approach.

The church also has a largely untapped network of academic and practicing specialists who could assist with the development of the needs assessment under discussion. One church-related college president that the authors met at a presentation also had experience working in an international government organization and as a public university president. In a discussion of the country-by-country need analysis idea, he pointed out that church-related institutions that address international issues have not linked with people of like mind who are specialists in public institutions. For example, land-grant universities have many talented Christians on their faculties who are also very active in their churches. Many of these people would respond positively to an invitation to get involved in an effort to do a country-by-country needs analysis.

In a separate conversation, an economics professor at another church-related college noted that practical investigation of a strategy like a country-by-country global needs analysis could be conducted by interested members of a professional organization such as the Association of Christian Economists. He pointed out that the association membership encompasses both church-related colleges and land-grant, other public and private universities, as well as government agencies such as the International Trade Commission, the World Bank, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The association has regular national conferences and a publication called *Faith and Economics*. Topflight specialists could confer and apply their skills and knowledge to the challenge.

The information produced by a country-by-country global needs analysis would, of necessity, be designed to be accessible to church members in general. A great deal of knowledge about needs in various countries is already available. The problem with this information is that it is often geared to specialists. It is also not organized in a recoverable fashion, for example layered in priority of relevance for a church member who "wants to

⁷ Robert E. Black, Saul S. Morris, Jennifer Bryce; "Where and Why Are 10 Million Children Dying Every Year?"; *The Lancet*; <http://www.thelancet.com/journal/vol361/iss9376/full/lan.361.9376.child_survival.26233.1>; p. 1 of 7/7/03 2:17 PM printout.

make a difference.” It is very possible that the overlap between, for example, what the World Bank or multilateral government structures need and what is needed by laypeople in the pews would be as much as 75-90 percent. However, terminology and format for the layperson would have to be designed to make the information accessible. Further, in addition to the description of material needs, Christian economists would want to also provide church members with a description of the spiritual reality within the countries. An organizing principle of a country-by-country needs analysis could be that the information would be used as a tool to mobilize church members to act on the Great Commandment: to love God, and to love the neighbor as one’s self. The itemization of global need, if targeted to be used by concerned congregation members, could work as part of an overall strategy to mobilize church member Benevolences giving as a logical consequence of the integration of faith and money, as discussed in the “mobilization and feedback” section below.

Factors Addressed by a Country-by-Country Needs Analysis. Giving to Benevolences as a percent of income has been declining among church members in the U.S. at least since the late 1960s. Unlike giving to Congregational Finances—the operations of the local congregation—which experienced a recovery in the mid-1990s, the decline in giving to Benevolences has been relatively uninterrupted. Analyses earlier in this volume have demonstrated that the trend is evident among evangelical as well as mainline Protestant church members. In chapter 3, Table 14 demonstrates that mainline Protestant denominations had fewer aggregate inflation-adjusted dollars in 2001 than in 1968. These are the dollars that not only pay for operations of regional and denominational structures, but also for domestic and international mission outreach.

In the same chapter, Table 12 indicates that Benevolences represented a smaller portion of per member donated dollars in 2001 than in 1968 among both evangelicals and mainline Protestants.

Table 1 in chapter 1 indicates that, in 1968, Benevolences represented 21¢ of each donated dollar in the composite denomination data set, and only 15¢ in 2001.

The consequences of the long-term decline in Benevolences giving are evident at the national denominational level. For example, in 2002, both the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and The United Methodist Church reduced the number of missionaries they were supporting.⁸ Declines in investment income were cited as causes. However, the long-term decline in the amount of money being sent beyond the local congregation was a factor in the denominations’ increased dependence on investment income.

It is proposed that a country-by-country global needs analysis, in combination with a broad mobilization strategy, could address the following factors that contribute to the decline in Benevolences giving.

People like to know what their money is buying. In a conversation with an economic historian, the question was posed as to why church members had not spontaneously responded to global need—specifically by stopping, in Jesus’ name, preventable global child deaths—out of the increasing affluence they had experienced since 1950. Tremendous amounts of

⁸ A Religion News Service article appeared as “Economic Doldrums Affecting Churches,” *The Christian Century*, February 22, 2003, p. 17.

resources became available, as well as improved communications systems that documented the number of children dying. Yet, why have church members not responded generously to alleviate the tremendous suffering reported both in the news as well as through church publications? The economic historian's response was that what would be helpful to encourage such a response would be a specification of how much money it would take to accomplish needed projects in each country.

This suggestion independently reflected a strong finding about a dynamic that affects congregational operations. In a survey of pastors in 14 denominations across the theological spectrum of the Protestant church in the U.S., 89% affirmed the statement that "Most church members want to know 'what their money is buying' when sent out of the congregation."⁹

This survey finding correlates with an earlier observation in a Roman Catholic doctoral thesis about an adaptation of the tithing system in the early decades of the twentieth century. The author concluded, "The success of these tentative trials would seem to indicate that the people are as generous as they ever were, provided they understand the needs of the Church and feel that they are not being imposed upon."¹⁰

One strong point of a country-by-country analysis of global needs would be the specific lists that could be provided to church members. Requests to support denominational mission outreach could be accompanied by general line-item budgets that provide church members with the details of how their money will be used in a particular country. For example, the second *Lancet* article mentioned specific strategies to eliminate child deaths. A list of measles vaccine, vitamin A, tetanus toxoid, water sanitation projects, antibiotics and insecticide-treated nets,¹¹ depending on need in a particular country—accompanied by the denomination's own inventory of the need for Bibles and other print documents as well as personnel required to distribute the items—could provide congregation members with a "shopping list" to fund.

The strength of this point is evident in church member financial response to nationally-televised tragedies. Whether it was Hurricane Andrew's devastation in Florida or the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes in New York, church members responded generously to denominational requests for financial support of relief efforts. A country-by-country analysis could move the level of congregation member financial support from irregular spontaneous outpouring to a sustained enthusiasm for impacting global need through available church structures.

Denominations need to focus on the larger issues. Denominational structures expanded during the well-funded decade of the 1950s. Many structures took on a "corporate" model.¹²

What began to erode was the level of service that these highly organized and centralized national structures offered to the local congregation. Congregations, treated like franchises,

⁹ Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Michael N. Kremer, *Church Support in the United States* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1930), p. 37.

¹¹ Jones, p. 3.

¹² Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation," in Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Organizational Revolution*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 317.

were expected to provide certain levels of support to the larger central organization. Pastors often refer to denominational askings—whether titled “per capita” or “assessments” or “apportionments”—as taxes.

Further, national denominational officials appear to be preoccupied with the subsystems that support institutional maintenance. A vacuum of leadership exists in the overall system of discipleship and transformation of congregation members, accompanied by the atrophying of giving to Benevolences.¹³

A country-by-country analysis of global needs would provide a service-oriented communication tool that denominational leaders could provide to local congregation members. In essence, congregations would once again have a reason to support the large denominational structures that were helping them make sense of an otherwise overwhelming amount of input about the global neighbors for whom congregation members are supposed to be caring

A country-by-country global needs analysis complements mobilization and feedback efforts. In *The State of Church Giving through 2000*, two additional strategies were proposed to reverse the decline in giving to Benevolences.¹⁴

The first was a blue-ribbon commission of national church leaders in the U.S. This broadly representative commission could be formed to implement a national policy calling on church members to mobilize on behalf of dying children around the globe.

The second blue-ribbon commission could develop software for a generic and dynamic Web-based feedback system for use by denominations within their independent and unique structures. The feedback system would provide church members with the information about what their money was accomplishing when it left the congregation.

The proposed country-by-country global needs analysis would be a vital component of the mobilization effort. It could also give focus to the feedback system, providing denominations a reason to ask congregation members for specific support, combined then with timely, project-specific feedback through a dynamic Web-based system.

The Need for a Strategy to Win the Hearts and Minds of Congregation Members. The proposed country-by-country analysis of global needs could help congregation members understand the needs of their neighbors around the world. Through this understanding, church leadership could help members integrate their faith and money, a stated if generally unimplemented goal in the current practice of historic Christianity.

When church leaders do not provide church members with a positive agenda for their affluence, the church member is left to cope alone. There are strong alternative monetary agendas assaulting the member. Without spiritual guidance, how is the member to choose?

¹³ John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, “System and Subsystems: A Case Study,” *The State of Church Giving through 1998* (empty tomb, inc., 2000), <<http://www.emptytomb.org/SystemsSubsystems.pdf>>.

¹⁴ John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 2000* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 2002), pp. 91-107.

To illustrate this point, the authors developed Figure 20.

The top box is labeled “Stored Time and Talent.” This box represents what money actually is. Money, in a very real sense, is what the Person has invested his or her time and talent in. The money represents how the Person’s time has been invested in a job or other income-producing activity. That time and talent is now in a form that can be stored up and exchanged—money.

The bottom box is labeled “Current Time and Talent.” The box represents the present time and talent that the Person has available to spend, not only on a job but also at leisure.

It is important to realize that the Person, whose head (mind) and heart are in the middle of the figure, is only one person, encompassing both stored time and talent and current time and talent.

The vertical line in the figure represents church giving. Note that there are two parts to the line. The lighter gray line on the left represents the 2.7% of income that it presently takes to run the church at a maintenance level. The darker gray line is the additional 7.3% of the tithe, which is a standard measure of faithful stewardship. When the full 10% or more of income is not given, the un-given portion can serve as a resistance barrier to breaking through to living for others. Until a compelling vision for stored time and talent is promoted by church leaders in ways that engage, and deeply involve, church members, the full ten percent of giving won’t be activated.

What is the church’s vision? The words on the left of the chart represent that message: the gray, smaller letters say, “Live for Others.” When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, the response was: “Love God . . . and love your neighbor . . . There is no greater commandment than these” (Mark 12:29-31, NIV).

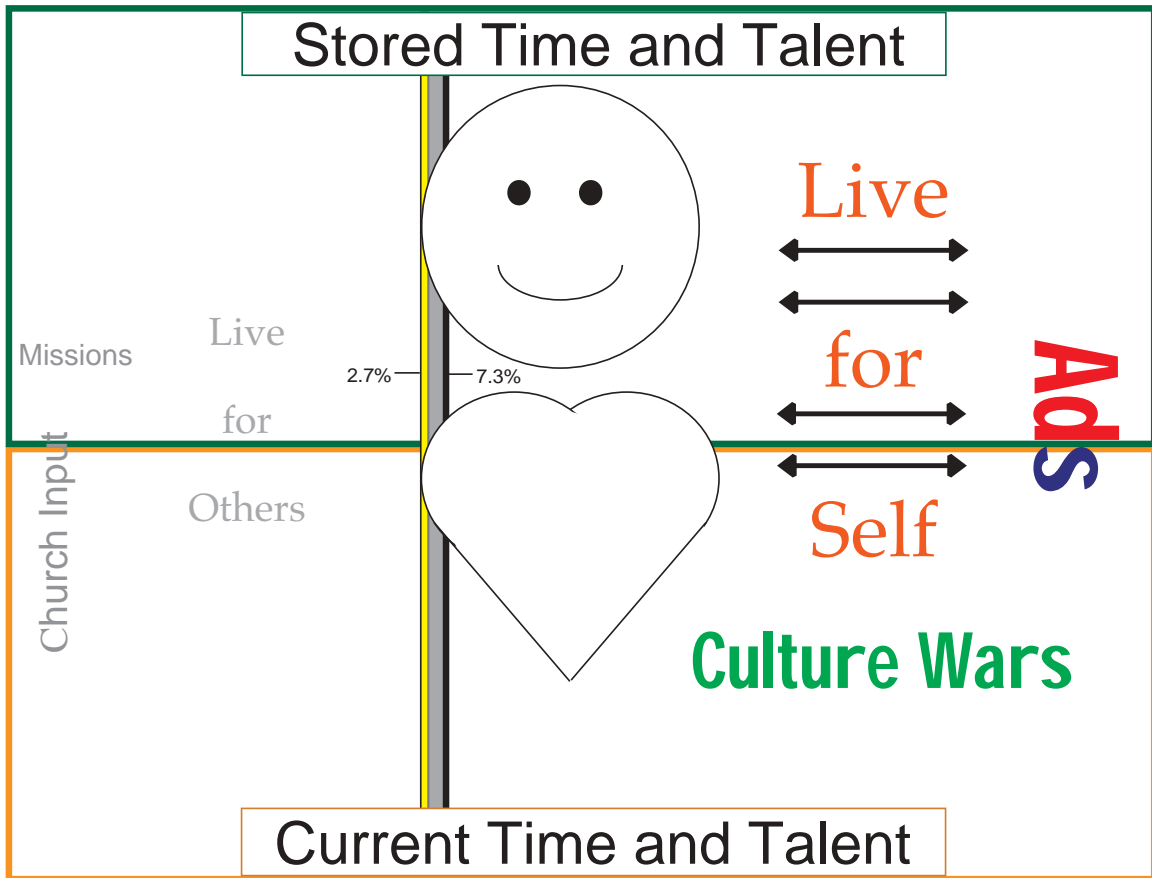
However, “Church Input” largely focuses on the current time and talent quadrant. Pastors have not been taught about the spiritual dynamics of church members’ relationship to their stored time and talent (money). So most of the time church leadership avoids the topic and focuses on current time and talent activities: church attendance, volunteering, personal relationships, etc.

That leaves most people overwhelmed by the input of Money’s agenda. When it is understood that money is stored time and talent, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 6:24 takes on a new dynamic: “You can serve God or money [Mammon].” If money is the stored time and talent of the Person, then the statement can be taken to read, “You can serve God or self.”

That’s the very message that consumer advertising generally promotes. Ads focus on the Person’s stored time and talent, and they have a clear field, since the church has so little to say about that area of the Person’s life. However, ads also appeal to and encourage Live for Self with current time and talent, as well. Issues in the Culture Wars that some say are going on in today’s society often are rooted in the issue of choice between self and Other.

In terms of figure-ground, the Live for Self message is being dynamically promoted. Live for Self is the figure in the foreground, even for church members. Live for Christ and others is in the dull background. What is necessary is for the church to develop an exciting

Figure 20: Mind-Heart, Figure-Ground



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agenda for affluence that becomes the figure, with the Live for Self ads functioning as the ground.

To switch the figure and ground, the church needs to help each person integrate the different forces that are operating on each whole person. What help is there to offer?

In discussing the graphic and these related ideas at a presentation, the authors asked participants to develop strategies to counter these trends. One person talked about a “God-sized Vision” to challenge church members to live for the Other (God) and therefore others—neighbors in need.

A God-sized Vision. In the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, Jesus presented the newly-formed church with a God-sized global vision. In a world where 10.8 million children under five are expected to die this year, many in countries that do not have easy access to the Gospel, the Great Commission and the Great Commandment continue to be relevant.

Practical strategies, such as a commitment to mobilize church members to action, a feedback system, and a country-by-country analysis of global needs, can provide church leadership at all levels of the church with the tools to help church members act on their professed faith. Then giving patterns will take care of themselves.

