

Untapped potential in Christians' wallets

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By Ken Camp

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If American Christians tithed, churches could gain \$156 billion a year, a recent study found.

And if denominations allocated a greater percentage of their receipts to international human needs, they could make strides in eliminating poverty-related child deaths, researchers concluded.

A recently released study by John and Sylvia Ronsvalle-the latest in an annual series published by empty tomb, a Christian service and research organization based in Champaign, Ill.-examines giving trends and church priorities.

In 2003, members of Christian churches in the United States gave an average of less than 2.6 percent of income to their churches, the researchers discovered.

"If church members were to reach a congregationwide average of 10 percent giving, an additional \$156 billion would be available to assist both local and global neighbors in need," the Ronsvalles wrote.

“The potential impact of this money is seen in need statistics that could be addressed in Jesus' name: \$5 billion could help stop the majority of 29,000 deaths a day around the globe among children under 5, most of whom are dying from preventable poverty conditions; \$7 billion could provide basic education for the world's children; \$124 million could launch a massive world evangelism effort in the '10-40 Window'—an area of global need spiritually and physically.

But the long-term trend points to a downturn in individual giving. Overall, church members gave a smaller portion of their income in 2003—2.59 percent—than in 1968, when members gave an average 3.11 percent.

During that same period, churches chose to keep more of the money they received rather than forwarding it to their denominations to support national and international causes, and the 2003 level marked the lowest point in 35 years.

“If the portion of income donated to the church had not declined between 1968 and 2003, congregations and denominations would have had, in aggregate dollars, 72 percent or \$2.2 billion more for benevolences, funding the larger mission of the church, than the amount actually donated in 2003,” the Ronsvalles observed.

As a part of their study, the Ronsvalles surveyed 28 Protestant denominations. They found—on average—less than 2 cents of every dollar donated to affiliated congregations in 2003 funded the denomination's international missions programs.

They noted in 14 denominations that grew in membership between 1969 and 2003, about 3 cents of every dollar went to denominational global missions. In 14 denominations that declined during that period, less than 1 cent of every dollar went to international missions.

For the full report, visit www.emptytomb.org.

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