

# Does God or money shape a church's ministry?

January 10, 2013

Ask a Christian whether God or finances determine how a church operates.

Most likely, the response would be: "Of course, God does."

But John L. and Sylvia Ronsvalle believe the answer may not be as clear-cut as most Christians assume. They cite an overall decline in giving to churches and the fact most denominations and their affiliated congregations have failed to develop a specific "positive agenda for affluence" or a means to help U.S. citizens deal with their money.

In spite of economic setbacks, the United States remains an affluent country, they maintain, but its citizens and institutions sometimes aren't certain how to use wealth responsibly.

The Ronsvalles are authors of *The State of Church Giving through 2010: Who's in Charge Here? A Case for a Positive Agenda for Affluence* for empty tomb inc., a Champaign, Ill.-based research and service organization. Published in 2012, the study uses membership and giving data from 40 mainline and evangelical denominations from 1968 through 2010. American Baptist Churches-USA and the Southern Baptist Convention were included.

The study analyzed church member giving by total contributions, gifts to support church finances—building upkeep, staff salaries and benefits, curriculum and so forth—and benevolence, which includes money given for mission support.

When giving is compared as percentage of income, both church finances

and benevolence show a pattern of decline, with the greatest percentage drop in benevolence. Member giving declined from 0.66 percent of income in 1968 to 0.35 percent by 2010. Overall giving to churches—the total of gifts to church budgets and benevolence—was calculated at about 2.40 percent for 2010.

The study calculated the potential of the church not only to meet its own needs, but also to further kingdom work. The Ronsvalles noted if congregational members in 2010 had given at the same percentage of income as members did in 1968, \$2.8 billion more would have been available for the church's mission purpose.

If individual members had given a tithe or 10 percent of their incomes, the churches the study included would have seen an additional \$165 billion to pay for the congregations' expenses and meet global physical and spiritual needs.

Individuals aren't the only ones who should be challenged to give at least at former percentage levels. The Ronsvalles point out institutions must develop specific plans when trying to encourage participants to contribute to a particular program.

The study looked at Southern Baptist missions giving through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions. The convention established the Board of Foreign Missions on May 10, 1845, two days after the denomination was founded, and it has emphasized foreign mission giving since that time.

In addition, the SBC has introduced several programs to encourage evangelism, including the 75 Million Campaign in the 1920s and Bold Mission Thrust in the early 1980s. The problem, the Ronsvalles said, is financial campaigns dedicated specifically to reach program goals never were planned, as well.

They point out the SBC continues to emphasize evangelism, particularly among unreached people groups, announcing the “Embrace” program for churches to adopt a group. Then last year, the convention adopted the secondary name “Great Commission Baptists” for churches to use voluntarily.

The study noted that in the 1970s, churches sent, on average, 8.94 percent of total gifts to the Cooperative Program. From 2005 to 2010, the average had dropped to 4.91 percent.

While the SBC has stressed global evangelism and promoted several emphases since 1919, by 2012 “it had not yet effectively mobilized its members to accomplish that goal, as it strove to balance the needs of its general structure with the challenge of completing the task of taking the gospel to the whole world,” the Ronsvalles said.

The United Methodist Church also has experienced difficulty meeting some mission goals. When the bishops set up an initiative on children and poverty, they did not set a timetable or plan to develop strategies for meeting goals. Although they updated the initiative in 2001—again with no specific plan—they discontinued it at the end of 2004.

But with its initiative to end malaria, set up in 2010, the church set both financial and timeframe goals. That initiative still continues.

The study suggests churches have moved toward a consumer mentality—that they must provide comfort or entertainment to attract new members and keep those they have.

The Ronsvalles conclude the decline in giving and membership that began in the 1960s is an indication “church leaders did not provide a positive agenda” as members’ disposable income increased.

“Whatever church leaders taught about money, church members were not

convinced to maintain, let alone to increase, the portion of income directed to the church," the study concludes.