

US churches urged to revive mission outreach

Jerry Filteau | Dec. 31, 2009



The "Martincitos," a group of low-income older adults, meet three times a week in the parish center of Villa El Salvador near Lima, Peru. The Ronsvalles want to increase financial support of international missions like this. (CNS file photo)

Every year John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, longtime experts on church finances and consultants on stewardship, offer fascinating views of how U.S. Christians could change the world ? and their own lives ? if they actually tithed to their churches.

In their latest report, "The State of Church Giving Through 2007," they give a snapshot of what might happen in the nine U.S. archdioceses currently or traditionally headed by a cardinal.

Assuming the Catholics of those archdioceses actually contributed 1.2 percent of their disposable income ? the average of Catholic giving across the nation ? the Ronsvalles estimated that in 2007 Catholic contributions in the nine archdioceses totaled about \$9.3 billion.

If Catholics there tithed, however, that figure would have been \$68 billion higher, for a total of \$77.3 billion, they said.

"Increased giving at the 10 percent level could be allocated so that 60 percent is directed to international ministries and 20 percent to domestic needs," they said. "That distribution could direct as much as \$3.2 billion to inner-city Catholic schools in just these nine archdioceses, even while providing critical resources for missions that address international need."

Even if Christians increased their church giving by half, or if Catholics raised their contributions to the same level as other Christians, the amount released to energize church charitable and mission activity would be enormous, they said.

The Ronsvalles are founders of Empty Tomb, a national church stewardship consulting firm in Champaign, Ill. They have published annual reports on church giving in America since 1990, and their cumulative data on church giving go back to 1968.

The latest report ? based on data from denominations that publish yearly national financial reports ? again confirms two key findings on trends in church giving over the past 40 years:

- While actual church contributions have risen, even after adjusting for inflation, they have not kept pace with the increase in income over those years. The percentage of disposable personal income that people give their church has dropped, from 3.11 percent in 1968 to 2.56 percent in 2007.
- The proportion of members' contributions that goes to maintaining the facilities, staffing and programs of the local congregation has remained fairly steady over those years. What has suffered most from the reduced giving is the proportion given to benevolences ? to charitable works, evangelization, spreading the Gospel to others by word and deed. That has dropped from 0.66 percent of personal disposable income in 1968 to 0.37 percent in 2007.

While Catholic parish and diocesan finances are not compiled on a national basis, other studies have regularly found that Catholics on average give only 1.2 percent of their disposable income to their church, less than half the average rate of other Christians.

Much of the Ronsvalles' analysis in the 196-page study is devoted to assessing how much U.S. Christian churches could do around the world not only to spread the Gospel, but to dramatically reduce hunger, increase literacy, and virtually end malaria and other deadly but treatable diseases if they mobilized their members to devote substantially more of their wealth, time and talent to those causes.

The Ronsvalles offered several other reasons why Christians should increase their giving and why the churches should encourage them to do so:

- God's preference. "To be faithful to Jesus Christ requires not only belief but also obedience by showing God's love to others in both word and deed."
- Integrity. "Helping those in need is a basic matter of integrity for those who claim to know Jesus Christ."
- Youth. Recent studies indicate that decreased interest in the church and increased suspicion of Christianity among the nation's youth may be due in part to the fact that over the past 40 years "churches have increasingly turned inward, as shown in the increasing percent of donations spent on their internal programs and shrinking percent spent on the larger mission of the church."
- Self-interest. "The findings about youth suggest that there is a present and future social cost to a declining church. Therefore, one element of self-interest in mobilizing the church is that a more active church could strengthen society as a whole."

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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