

Executive Analysis 3 of 4: Issues Raised by the Findings in *The State of Church Giving through 2011: An Overview of the Risks in Mobilizing the Church in the U.S. in This Age of Affluence*

This packet of documents is fraught with Risk.

For us, risk is going beyond a typical announcement about a new research publication, and instead telling you what we think the trends mean, even if you may not be interested or may not want to hear.

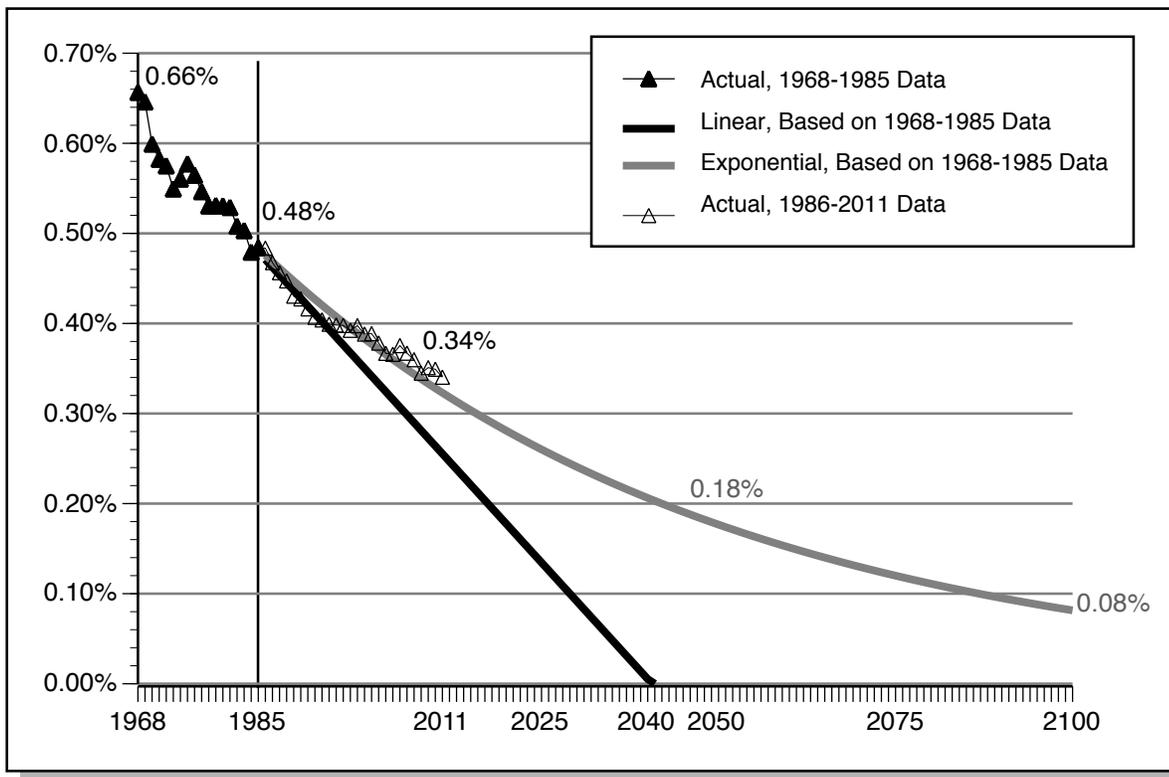
For you, risk includes reading information that may suggest changes are necessary, and change is generally seen as a risk.

For all of us, risk is that the church in the U.S., in 2013, will miss some important signs and thus we will continue to lose a critical opportunity, at this point in history, to be part of the movement of the kingdom of God designed for this time.

However, to do nothing about the trends found in *The State of Church Giving through 2011* is perhaps the greatest risk. Consider two figures that appear in chapter 5, and also on the back cover of the new publication.

The category of “Benevolences” includes spending beyond the congregation, including denominational and seminary support, as well as local and global missions.

Figure 9: Projected Trends for Composite Denominations, Giving to Benevolences as a Percent of Income, Using Linear and Exponential Regression Based on Date for 1968-1985, with Actual Data for 1986-2011

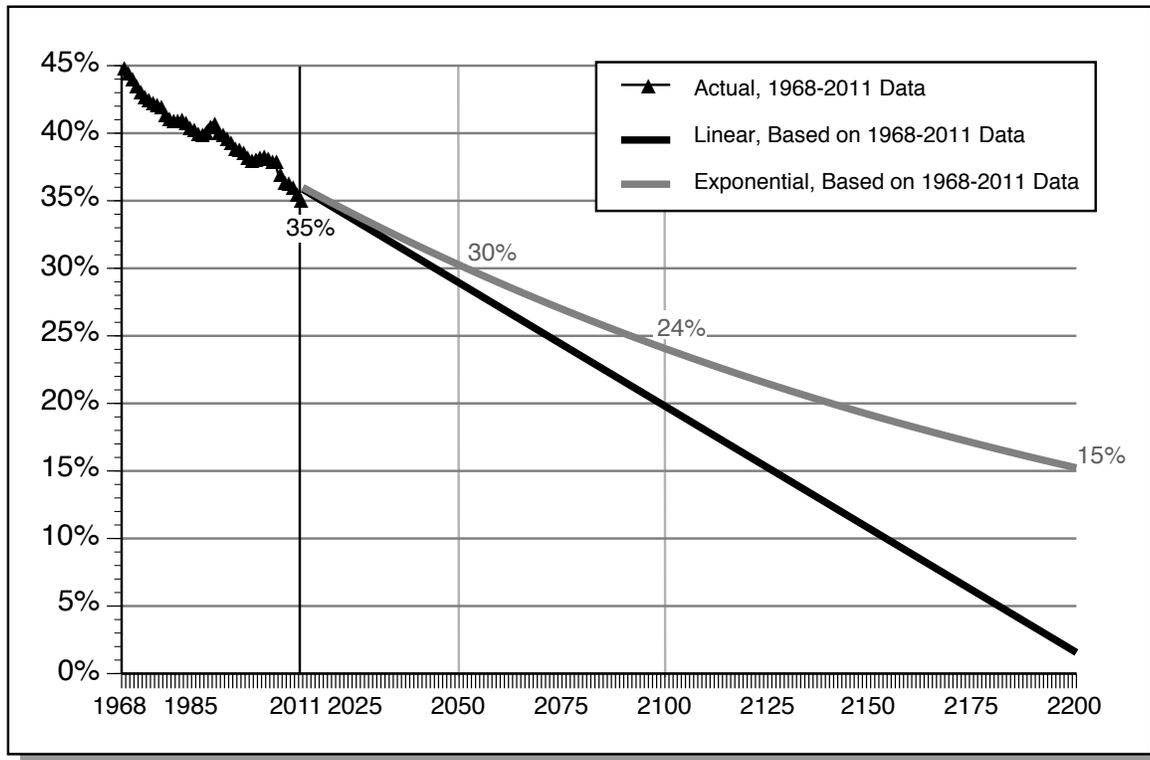


Source: empty tomb analysis; YACC, adjusted series; U.S. BEA empty tomb, inc. 2013

Between 1968 and 2011, per member contributions as a portion of income allocated to Benevolences declined from 0.66% to 0.34%, a decline of 48% from the 1968 base. The exponential regression accounts for 99% of the variance, suggesting a strong trend.

The following graphic describes the trends in membership as a percent of U.S. population in 36 communions, including some of the fastest growing.

Figure 14: Trend in Membership as a Percent of U.S. Population, 36 Denominations, Linear and Exponential Regression Based on Data for 1968-2011



Source: empty tomb analysis; YACC adjusted series; U.S. BEA

empty tomb, inc., 2013

A key observation, based on the two figures, is that, to date, church leaders have not provided a compelling positive agenda for affluence—as previously optional, or even nonexistent expenses, such as fewer people per household but more floor space, microwaves, and cable television in multiple rooms, have become “necessities” over these decades—while giving shrank. Yet, with God, it is never too late.

To change these patterns, however, will involve risk. Here are some of the issues that need to be faced.

Risk of oneness. Jesus prayed for oneness among those who would believe as a result of the apostles’ witness (John 17:20-23). Yet the church in the U.S. shows little consciousness of its identity as the whole body of Christ. Instead, church leaders seem content to ignore the reality that “Christian” is one of the largest identity group in the U.S. The lesson Jesus gives in the parable of the “wheat and tares” (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) may be relevant. There is power in the oneness of Christ’s followers. Sociologist Rodney Stark said that a “revolutionary” idea in the Christian message was to extend Christians’ concern “beyond the bonds of family and tribe” (*The Rise of Christianity*, p. 86).

Risk of allocation of resources. Risk not only results from coordination with other communions or Christian organizations. There is also a perceived risk that there will not be enough resources to allocate within one’s own organization. The responsibilities of maintaining an institution are very real. Yet if the needs of the institution limit the ability to pursue the kingdom of God’s primary purposes, to that extent, the institution is no longer contributing to meeting goals, but has become the goal itself. Can we actually believe God will “supply every need” (Matt. 6:33), and that if we lose our lives, putting our institutions at risk for the greater good by making them available to pursue a common goal, we will find our lives—and perhaps restore our institutions to health (Matt. 16:25)?

Risk of failure. There are so many things that could go wrong with a bold effort in Jesus’ name. The goal might not be achieved. Disagreements will have to be worked out. Plans will be started and then have to be changed. Wait: Don’t all these points describe the Book of Acts narrative? Stepping out in

faith means, by definition, that the next step is not clear. Yet we have the confidence of Eph. 2:10: God has designed beforehand the good works for us to do.

Risk of personal agendas. Any coordinated action would be *in addition* to current denominational activities. As we note in *The State of Church Giving through 2011*, “That is not to say that what is going on through church institutions is not commendable. It is. The issue is that it is not sufficient” (p. 139). All the current activities would *need to continue* if a common goal were embraced: “It should be emphasized that this common goal, designed to increase mission participation on the part of more Christians and church members who are presently involved to only a limited degree, is in addition to current activities” (p. 147). Yet how should the body of Christ determine whose agenda has priority? We suggest there are two triage needs that deserve primary attention. The first is engaging unengaged unreached people groups, as a core function of the Great Commission in Matt. 28:18-20. The second has been defined by the world itself. Jesus asked the blind men, “What do you want me to do for you?” and they said, “We want our sight” (Matt. 20:32-33). If we, as the body of Christ, ask the world, “What do you want us to do for you?” the answer has already been given. In 1990, world leaders said children of the world had “first call” on available resources to reduce global child deaths. This goal was affirmed again in the year 2000. To date, church structures are working on this goal independently of each other, and as one of many goals. What we’re suggesting is that the goal be raised in priority in all communions, and donations of \$50 a year sought from each of 100 million Christians to provide the funds to *expand current church channels’ efforts* to improve the rate of reduction in global child deaths. Many of these deaths, it may be noted, occur in predominantly Christian countries.

Risk of setting specific goals. This risk is related to the risk of failure. However, there’s another aspect to this risk. There is a level of accountability that comes with clear goals. The church says before God and the world, “We are going to step out in faith.” If we get bored or want to change the goal because leadership changes in a communion, the world will be able to point to the stated intention and ask about it. That’s uncomfortable. Church leadership, as much as the society at large and Christians in general, want the maneuvering room to change priorities at will. But if there are priorities set not by our personal preferences, but because of the demands of the Gospel as we face the urgent needs of the world, achieving these priorities leaves less room to put one’s hand to the plow and look back (Luke 9:62).

Risk of identifying leadership. Who has the right to lead a national movement in this age of affluence, with all its attendant possibilities? That’s always been difficult for the church. The apostles named Matthias, who is mentioned only in Acts 1:23-26, while God named Saul-Paul (Acts 9:1-6, and following). We personally are not the leaders. We have data and perspectives. But God has not blessed any of our efforts to mobilize a broad movement among Christians. That’s the sad fact. Therefore, we need others. We name a “dream team” of some individuals who have already demonstrated national leadership (pp. 160-162). Yet, as we acknowledge there and in light of the Acts narrative, God might have entirely different people step forward. We ask you to pray about whether you might have a role in a multidenominational, broad effort to mobilize the vast church in the U.S. toward a dramatic step of faithfulness through the many existing church channels.

Action Options in Light of the Risks.

Denominations can mobilize their 300,000 congregations. The pastor is the key leader in any local congregation. As one pastor observed, a pastor cannot do anything single-handedly in a congregation, but a pastor can single-handedly stop anything in a congregation. Can denominations provide sufficient leadership for the pastors in the estimated 300,000 congregations in the U.S. to mobilize resources for a life-saving campaign: life-saving for the children globally whose deaths are being prevented, and life-saving for the church structures that are revitalized through action?

The estimated cost to reduce global child deaths is an additional \$5 billion a year. If a broad coordinated effort were launched, 100 million Christians could give \$50 each a year through their own delivery

channels as part of a vast effort coordinated among many denominations. If one part of the body preferred to work independently, say evangelical or mainline Protestants, the cost per member would increase to \$200 a year per member, or for Catholics, \$100 a year per member. A broad effort among many different communions would not only decrease the cost per Christian, but also testify to the oneness that Jesus prayed for on behalf of those who would believe (John 17:20-23).

Independent para-congregational groups can mobilize 100 million Christians as individuals through advertising and direct mailing. These para-congregational groups already work with Christians both within and apart from congregations. There are an estimated 210 million Americans who identify with Christianity, many more than claim membership in a church. If the para-congregational groups take leadership, the distribution of a sizable portion of the increased giving of \$50 per Christian per year would be as likely to go through the para-congregational groups as through the denominations.

Big congregation networks can mobilize congregations. These proven leaders of what are sometimes labeled “mega-churches” could mobilize the 300,000 congregations through their existing or expanded communication networks. In this case, the increased giving may go through both denominational as well as non-denominational channels of the congregations’ choice.

To risk or not to risk? Leaders in the U.S. may spend some time debating whether and how to proceed with an effort to mobilize an additional \$50 donation annually from each of 100 million Christians to help, in Jesus’ name, reduce the rate of child deaths. This type of relaxed theoretical discussion can take place because we are generally protected from the urgency of the situation. Instead, imagine asking the parents holding a child who is dying. Isn’t it likely their urgent answer would be, “Whatever works.” As noted in *The State of Church Giving through 2011*: “The response of church leaders in the U.S. should be as urgent as if they themselves were being confronted with that challenge, as if it were their children or sibling confronting these threatening conditions” (p. 157).

Chapter 8 of *The State of Church Giving through 2011* explores why the giving and membership trends shown in the data analyses might have developed. A few reflection questions also come to mind:

1. Did secular business service groups develop because the involved laypeople with expertise were, as one businessman put it, only asked to be ushers?
2. Could churches work on a big common vision, in a coordinated but parallel way, needing the expertise of many different qualified laypeople who worship in many different congregations?
3. As the funding of para-congregational organizations and denominations has become more professional, to what extent have those professional fundraisers begun to limit or censor initiatives that may be perceived as too risky for future fundraising, and therefore limit the freedom of the church structures to pursue neglected aspects of God’s agenda?
4. As church structures have developed more sophisticated administrations, has an attitude (observed in some secular public and/or business settings) of IBG-YBG (I’ll be gone/You’ll be gone) made church administrators content to maintain their institutions, rather than intensely pursue the promise of Jesus that the church can do greater things than Jesus did (John 14:12-24)?
5. Would those not now in the church who want to “make a difference” welcome a chance to integrate their private faith with a bold, broad effort by the church, involving many parts of the body of Christ in a common general task centered on the shared convictions presented in the Bible?

Change is risk. Not to change when God wants change also is a risk. What does God want the church—not only your congregation or denomination but the whole body of Christ—to do at this point in history?