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The State
of
Church Giving
through 2004

Excerpt Chapter 8

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chapter 8

Will We Will?

“But you shall remember the LORD your God,
for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth...”

Deuteronomy 8:18, *New American Standard Bible*

“Live as free people;
do not, however, use your freedom to cover up any evil,
but live as God’s slaves.”

1 Peter 2:16, *Good News Bible*

The information in previous chapters suggests that addressing global word and deed need is not a matter of whether the resources are available—they are—but rather it is one of organization.

The key question, then, is whether church people in the United States will decide to act on the Great Commission—to go into all the world to share the Gospel and teach new believers to obey (Matthew 28:18-20)—in the context of the Great Commandment—to love God and love their neighbors (Mark 12:29-31)—at a scale that reflects their own potential for good, and the desperate needs that so many are facing.

Before discussing that idea further, a brief series of questions might lay the groundwork for that discussion.

Will meta-denominations replace current denominational structures? Within the United States, congregations have, in general, affiliated with a larger denominational structure. These national structures, many with European roots and varying degrees of cultural identity, have provided a theological framework for the teaching that goes on in the congregation, facilitated the training and placement of pastors, and assisted congregations in carrying on global missions, among other services.

A change has been taking place over the past decades in the relationship between

denominational offices and their related congregations. The trend is toward the congregation, and away from centralized authority of the national office. For example, this change is evident in the reporting of congregational statistics to national headquarters. A few denominational offices that have received congregational reports, and published the aggregate numbers, for three, four, or even more decades now report that congregations no longer want to provide the data to the national office. What had previously been a requirement for affiliation has become a matter of preference at the local level.

The movement from a strong denominational affiliation to a congregationally-centered focus has also resulted in other changes, such as congregations comparison shopping for services offered by the denomination. This trend was evident by the 1990s, when congregations were increasingly choosing to use Sunday school materials other than those prepared by the denominational publishing house.¹

Congregations have also embraced broader networks that offer leadership and worship materials. The Willow Creek Association, based in Barrington, IL, has drawn congregations from a variety of denominations into a network of 3,300 congregations who pay \$249 a year to receive training resources. The annual Leadership Summit sponsored by Willow Creek attracts as many as 80,000 people. Rick Warren, of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, writes a regular newsletter for church leaders that goes to 157,000 globally, including many in the United States.

These two networks that offer pastor training and worship style ideas have been relatively compatible with traditional denominational structures. However, both groups have recently moved into the realm of missions, a field historically at the heart of many denominational structures.

Bill Hybels, pastor of the church and leader of the Willow Creek Association, has encouraged the formation of Willow Creek Global Connections, with a Web site detailing how the congregation is structuring its direct mission outreach. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church, announced his PEACE Plan as a highly visible follow-up to his mega-selling *The Purpose Driven Life*, encouraging church members to tackle what he calls “global giants.”

Congregations already involved in one or both of these congregational training networks, may now have an option that goes to the core of the traditional denominational association. Congregations could begin to choose to model their mission outreach in new ways that weaken denominational ties even further. These relationships, bringing congregations from very different communions together into a larger informal meta-denominational interconnectedness, lays the groundwork for what would be a uniquely American development.

The rise of the congregationally-based meta-denomination leads to an additional question.

What will be the role of traditional denominations if congregations opt to participate in meta-denominational structures? A group of three researchers, in an article in the *Review of Religious Research*, observed, “Denominations are akin to professional associations in that they are the primary mechanisms through which clergy secure employment.”²

Congregations from very different communions have joined together into larger meta-denominations.

Traditional denominational offices are not likely to be replaced soon in the supervision of pastor health insurance and pension plans.

It is reasonable to ask, though, whether denominational officials will be content with a limited administrative relationship with pastors and congregations.

Yet, a more critical question is whether denominational offices being limited to the role of a pastor's guild is the most efficient use of these structures.

The economics term, disintermediation, can serve to describe the transition taking place in denomination-congregation relations. First used in 1967, the word was defined as: "the diversion of savings from accounts with low fixed interest rates to direct investment in high-yielding instruments."³ The word has grown in application since 1967, to describe the removal of the middleman in business transactions. The term may also be helpful to describe the process taking place when congregations opt to go outside of traditional channels to accomplish activities they want to pursue, including missions outreach.

A related term is so relatively new that it that can be found primarily in definitions on the Internet. The word "reintermediation" leads to the next question.

If denominational mission structures are dismantled at some point because congregations choose to work through other channels, will those structures soon have to be rebuilt to provide similar services? The term "reintermediation" is defined as "the reintroduction of an intermediary between end users (consumers) and a producer. This term applies especially to instances in which disintermediation has occurred first." Accompanying the definition on the Wikipedia page was an illustration from Internet commerce that bears enough relevance to the present discussion that it is reprinted below in full.

Disintermediation describes the removal of the middleman in business. Reintermediation is the reintroduction of the intermediary.

Although at the beginnings of the Internet revolution, electronic commerce brought the idea of disintermediation to many producers, as a way of cutting costs or increasing profits, many (if not most) of those producers found out that it was not so easy. It was thought that the Internet would "disintermediate" middlemen and drive them out of business by having producers sell directly to users.

However, what these predictions missed was that cutting out the middleman brought problems such as the high cost of handling to ship small orders, dealing with massive amounts of customer service issues and confronting the wrath of retailers and other channel partners. Producers did not consider that they had to spend huge resources to accommodate presales & postsales issues of individual consumers. Before disintermediation, those middlemen acted as salespeople for the producers. After disintermediation, somebody had to handle those customers. Furthermore, producers did not consider that selling online also has high costs: Developing the web site, maintaining the information & marketing expenses to draw online customers.

Maybe most importantly, producers did not consider the fact that being the only source of their products for online consumers is similar to having only one store in a city selling a particular brand.

Many thousands or even millions of web middlemen are pushing their own products and spending money to draw customers to their web sites. So if a producer shuns those middlemen, it gets less “shelf space” on the web and therefore the decrease of the probability of getting online sales for their products.⁴

It is fairly obvious, in applying the illustration in the present discussion of traditional mission structures, that the “middlemen” would be the denominational offices that have served to connect congregations with international mission sites.

The congregation is, perhaps in the role of the consumer, faced with a world full of need and in the market for mission outreach. Missionaries and overseas agencies, in a role something like a producer, have the discipleship opportunities that must be communicated somehow to the thousands of congregations in the U.S. The denominations have facilitated these relationships.

It is true that denominations have often served as the middleman without actively promoting bridges of effective communication between the congregations and the missionaries. That fact may contribute to some discontent at the congregational level. However, the denominations have also handled a lot of the myriad details, from currency exchange and international law to crises that develop from war or individual illness on the front lines of missionary service.

The mission structures of denominations allow an average of a couple of cents from every dollar given to a congregation to have a global impact. Yet, 87% percent of the pastors, and 89% of the denominational regional officials, surveyed, agreed with the statement that, “Most congregations take the services which the denomination provides to them for granted.”⁵

That situation may exist, in part, as a result of the lack of effective promotional and communication efforts on the part of the denominations. Para-congregational organizations have to continually convince their supporters of the value received for the donations. In contrast, denominations have been able to count on regular income from what are variously labeled “assessments” or “per capita” or “apportionments” by denominations, and often referred to as “taxes” at the congregational level. That source of income may no longer be a certainty for the denomination.

Information in earlier chapters indicates that church member contributions to Benevolences have been declining as a portion of income over three decades. The impact on traditional national structures due to the general downward trend in giving as a portion of income is reflected in reports of cutbacks at denominational headquarters.

In light of this giving trend, it would not be surprising to see the meta-denominational approach, placing missions initiative at the congregational level, becoming widespread in the next decade at the expense of more traditional denominational mission channels. If that becomes the case, the end result might be the dismantling of denominational mission frameworks now in place.

In the enthusiasm for increased personal involvement, will congregation members count the cost of withdrawing from the current mission structures supported through the denominational affiliation they now have? The mission channels that train, place,

Para-congregational organizations have had to convince donors of the value received for contributions while denominations could rely on income from assessments.

and support missionaries globally represent well-established efforts being carried out by dedicated people. These mission organizations within denominations are the result of years of service and have grown out of long-established relationships in various international settings.

It may well be appropriate for congregations to review present structures, and engage in dynamic dialogue with their related denominational offices about how to improve communication and mutual accountability in order to improve their own experience with mission outreach.

However, the changes in the congregation-denomination relationship that have occurred already have not generally happened in a way that would be described as “thought-out” or “well-planned.” It is possible that congregations will not seriously think through how best to pursue expanded missions outreach and, as a consequence, they will simply allow present denominational structures to atrophy through neglect. In that case, congregations should be aware that, in a decade or so, they may well be faced with recreating structures similar to the ones they presently have. For example, after the first rush of excitement in direct mission contact, it is likely that congregations will eventually want some assistance with setting priorities for the overwhelming number of compelling opportunities for service that demand their attention. And missionaries may soon find it difficult to relate to hundreds of separate congregations, rather than a central denominational office. Like the Internet commerce producers found, an effective middleman benefits both sides of the interaction. An open question at this time is who will emerge as the effective “middleman” in congregational mission efforts.

Who will emerge as the effective “middleman” in congregational mission efforts?

The enthusiasm at the congregational level for a missions approach that emphasizes the immediate satisfaction represented in short-term mission trips needs to be balanced with the situations facing Christians in other parts of the world, situations that require long-term solutions for the desperate word and deed needs that confront them. Congregations should count the costs before they decide whether or not present denominational structures can be improved in order to produce the desired results. Any change in structure should be an intentional development that grows out of a concern about how best to love a hurting world in Jesus’ name, rather than an unintentional byproduct resulting from each individual congregation pursuing its own agenda without regard for the broader consequences of its actions.

Is the goal of denominations to mobilize their congregations in mission outreach, or provide cathartic drama at a maintenance level? As discussed immediately above, congregations need to be careful about how they choose whether to support their denominational structures. Denominations, in turn, need to be sure they have the best interests of their congregations at heart. Congregations will be able to sense whether the denomination sees the congregation merely as a funding source for the range of basic activities that national officials want to carry on. The congregation will also be able to sense whether the denomination sees itself as assisting every congregation member to be faithful to the prime directive of the Great Commission in the context of the Great Commission, because that agenda will be evident in the denomination’s interaction with congregations. When congregations are primarily valued as a funding source for the denominational leaders’ agenda, then inspirational pronouncements are deemed sufficient. In contrast, empowering congregation

members requires intense efforts to develop practical steps that actually produce discipleship mobilization.

In literary criticism, Aristotle is cited for his observation that good drama should provide a cathartic experience for the audience. A performance of opera, rock music, or a comedy is a success if the audience has gained some personal insight through the event.

A good worship experience can have constructive elements of cathartic drama. If parishioners leave a service feeling uplifted by the singing, still thinking about a point in the sermon, or convicted by the reading of Scripture, then the service has been a success.

However, worship is only one element of Christianity. The Great Commission combines coming to belief with learning to obey. Therefore, watching a performance, no matter how inspirational, is not the end point of the worship experience. The congregation member also needs the opportunity to put faith into practice.

The growth of short-term mission activity at the congregational level suggests that church members are not content with the performance-aspects of religion only. Four different conferences on missions in the first half of 2006, both para-church and denominational, attracted many congregation leaders as well as students. Not willing to limit support for missions to sending money to headquarters and receiving a quarterly magazine in return, church members are arranging mission trips, often making arrangements through para-church organizations.

As a result, denominational offices are faced with an important question. In the past, sufficient support has come in through denominational assessments, so that congregational activity carried out independently was in addition to, not in place of, the financial support for denominational mission outreach. However, with the increasing shift to congregationally-based efforts, what role will the denomination choose to play in the mobilization of expanded mission efforts?

Many denominations have not intentionally created structures to support congregation-based mission initiative. Consider that, in this day of instant communication, denominations have not designed feedback systems to inform their congregations how the money sent through denominational mission channels has been spent. Apart from general contributions, it is often difficult for a congregation to find out when and if designated money, sent for a specific missions project, actually reached the intended destination.⁶ The idea that congregations would be informed about what their money actually helped accomplish in a specific project is not even in the equation.

Failing to organize themselves in order to empower congregation members to serve as active disciples, denominational leaders may specialize in providing a cathartic drama experience instead. Congregations can offer worship services, and yet not produce disciples because the church members are not engaged and held responsible for obedient action. In the same way, national denominations can present wonderfully inspiring ideas, but not actually deepen the level of discipleship if the denomination does not organize itself to mobilize church members for obedient action. As an illustration, consider a decade-long activity of The United Methodist Church Council of Bishops.

Cathartic drama needs to be combined with putting faith into action.

The United Methodist bishops rightly identified the issue of preventable child deaths around the world as an issue that demanded action on the part of church members. In 1995, the bishops authorized the development of an Initiative on Children and Poverty. As shown in quotes presented in Table 40, the 1997 “Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative, Biblical and Theological Foundations,” is a brilliant, impassioned document.⁷ The child deaths are likened to “child sacrifice... to the gods of consumerism, violence and neglect” (p. 1). The statement “challenges ‘the people called Methodists’ to reclaim their identity and mission as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the coming of God’s reign of justice, generosity, and joy” (p. 5). The document announced that, “The crisis among children and the impoverished and our theological and historical mandates demand more than additional programs or emphases. Nothing less than the reshaping of The United Methodist Church...” (p. 6).

Table 40: The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church “Children and Poverty Initiative, Biblical and Theological Foundations”

<p>Excerpts from The Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty Of The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church 1997</p>
<p>“The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church believes that God is calling this Church to a new level of dedication and commitment on behalf of children and the impoverished. The Council is taking steps, through the Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty, to assist the Church in responding to God’s call...” (p. 1).</p>
<p>“Child sacrifice has been taboo among the world’s great religions for at least three thousand years, yet today children are being sacrificed to the gods of consumerism, violence, and neglect. Economic injustice, racial and ethnic and religious hatred, and the abuse of political power are resulting in genocide of the world’s most vulnerable citizens, children who live in poverty...” (p. 1).</p>
<p>“...The state of the world’s children and poor people challenges ‘the people called Methodists’ to reclaim their identity and mission as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the coming of God’s reign of justice, generosity, and joy” (p. 5).</p>
<p>“The crisis among children and the impoverished and our theological and historical mandates demand more than additional programs or emphases. Nothing less than the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among ‘the least of these’ is required.” (p. 6)</p>
<p>“The primary goal is evangelization, the proclamation in word and deed of the gospel of God’s redeeming, reconciling, and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to and with the children and those oppressed by poverty. The United Methodist Church is called to be a means of grace to the vulnerable. The Church must also be open and hospitable to God’s transforming grace through the vulnerable. Receiving the gifts of the children and the impoverished will be a means through which God evangelizes the contemporary Church...” (p. 7, emphasis in original)</p>
<p>Announcement on The United Methodist Church “Children & Poverty, The Bishops Initiative” Web site</p>
<p>“The Council of Bishops’ Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty is discontinued as of December 31, 2004. The Bishops are continuing children and poverty as an emphasis in their Council life and residential area leadership.” (p. 1)</p>

Then, in 2004, an announcement on the United Methodist Web site was posted:

The Council of Bishops' Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty is discontinued as of December 31, 2004. The Bishops are continuing children and poverty as an emphasis in their Council life and residential area leadership.⁸

With a decade of opportunity to mobilize church members around this critical need, during which decade an estimated 100 million more children died around the globe from preventable poverty conditions, one might have expected from the text that the bishops would pull out all stops to reshape The United Methodist Church. That did not happen. Congregation members were not engaged in meaningful new ways. The statement, inspiring though it was, was not accompanied by any specific practical actions that changed the way congregations conducted their ongoing activities. The fruits of this unfocused approach appear in a statistic from 2004: "...43 percent of United Methodist churches in America did not receive a member by profession of faith..."⁹ In that same year, less than two cents of every dollar donated to the congregation was spent on denominational overseas missions.

Globally,
cathartic drama
is losing its
audience.

In the world theater of unreached people groups and children dying from preventable causes, cathartic drama, no matter how inspiring, is losing its audience. Rev. Evatt Magura, director of Balm in Gilead in Africa, attended a gathering of religious leaders that was held at the same time as the TIME Summit on Global Need that took place in New York City last November 2005. One reporter wrote about a panel discussion: "Magura, however, said what's being done by churches is just 'not enough,' and he's tired of churches advocating for change while not making use of their resources."¹⁰

It is an academic question whether congregations should support their denominational structures out of loyalty. The fact is, as evidenced in membership and giving trends, congregation members do not seem willing to support structures that provide pronouncements rather than practical opportunities for individual congregation members to make a meaningful difference. Denominations need to decide whether they will make it a priority to mobilize congregation members to undertake the obedient actions that grow out of true faith, and if so, how to organize around that agenda.

Do denominations have a role in helping congregations set their priorities? It should not be assumed that all congregations are committed to mission outreach. For example, when asked, "What would you do with an unexpected financial windfall?" 31% of the Protestant pastors surveyed chose "build, expand, or update church building and facilities." For laypeople, paying off debt (18%) and increasing social programs such as helping with homelessness or education (18%) were tied. Giving more to foreign missions and evangelism was the top priority of 7% of the pastors, and 8% of the laypeople.¹¹

Given these expressed values, it seems that there could be a role for denominations to hold congregations accountable to higher standards, if denominations decide that their own priority is to mobilize those congregation members in loving action in word and deed.

Denominations could be uniquely suited to instill pastors with a heart for missions.

However, that is not always the case. Denominational leaders are not fulfilling their responsibilities if their primary objective is to influence the pastor to pay full assessments to the denomination. As noted in chapter 6, some denominations do not inquire about the total amount that their congregations are spending on global missions, both through the denomination and through other channels. The denominational offices only express interest in what comes into their own structures from the congregation. The contents of the congregational survey form speak volumes to the pastor about what behaviors are valued by, and therefore likely rewarded by, the denomination.

The Navigators, the para-congregational discipleship group that has emphasized one-on-one evangelistic relationships, recognized a need among pastors for encouragement and support in setting priorities. Navigators has begun a ministry focused on congregations called Church Discipleship Ministry. One of the leadership team members for this emphasis, Samuel Hershey, observed, "...the church leadership gets bombarded with members' need, rather than being missional."¹² Denominations could also help pastors and congregation members strengthen their commitment to outreach, and thereby strengthen the entire church structure.

In addition to congregational surveys that do not inquire about total overseas missions spending, there is one other "tell" about the priorities that denominations set for congregations. (As an aside, this use of "tell" comes into the general language from the world of card playing, to describe a certain inadvertent mannerism that broadcasts whether a player is happy or sad with the cards in his hand. The word aptly describes the relationship of the denominations' values and their promotion of unadjusted unified budgets. However, the reader will kindly not be distracted from the content of the point being made by any concern that the playing of cards is being promoted or endorsed, which matter is not being addressed here.)

Denominations could be uniquely suited to instill pastors with a heart for missions.

Denominations routinely promote the value of their structures as the most efficient way to accomplish the task of global evangelization and impacting the physical needs of others. However, the unified budgets attach so many additional cars to the engine that the train finds it difficult to gain momentum. Developing that analogy a little further, the engine on a train serves two purposes. One is to keep the train moving once it's rolling. However, the initial purpose is to start the train from a dead stop. It is this first task, to pull all the additional cars that trail behind rolling in the first place, that places great stress on the engine.

Denominations use overseas missions in the role of the engine on a train. The good work that is going on because congregations form together to help others is often highlighted when denominations communicate with their congregations. In the 1920s, denominations developed the "unified budget" because there were too many engines going in too many directions. So denominational offices lined up the denomination's needs in a row, as cars are attached to a train engine. Regional offices were attached. Domestic evangelism was attached. Denominational administration, seminaries, and all the other aspects of running the denomination were attached to the engine of overseas missions.

Congregation members were urged to give to the allocation for the denomination and fuel the train toward success.

The system has been sustained and allows denominations to maintain present activities. However, because there are so many cars attached to one engine, the one engine finds it difficult to mobilize and travel at a very fast speed. And although it is an unintended consequence, the rate of travel for the train cannot improve because of the structure of the unified budget. In most denominations, apart for designated funds, overseas missions receives a fixed percent of income to the denomination. So if congregations doubled their allocation to the denomination, it might add another engine to the train, but it would also add an equal number of cars for that engine to pull. Because every department in the denomination also receives a percent of income, rather than a fixed amount. So every time the amount to overseas missions increases, the other departments increase proportionately. This is true even though the other departments do not have the expansive need represented by people groups with no presentation of the Gospel, and children dying from easily preventable causes. Yet, there is no announced plan to change those allocation percentages if the budget is oversubscribed. For every engine that is added, an equal number of cars are added for the engine to pull, and the train does not pick up speed. Under these circumstances, there is no incentive for congregation members to add more engines.

Unadjusted unified budgets foster the institutional enslavement of overseas missions.

It is this fixed relationship between the increase of overseas missions and the related required increase in every other department in the denominational structure that is referred to as the institutional enslavement of overseas missions. The engine is used to pull the whole, but it is never freed to reach the necessary speed. As long as the ratio of engines to train cars remains the same, the train's speed will be limited.

However, if denominations would develop realistic budgets for each department, while keeping the overseas missions budget expanding, then the unified budget would serve a useful purpose. Instead of enslaving overseas missions by chaining it to ever-expanding denominational administration and entity activities, the unified budget could be the means to insure the denomination was in strong basic shape for the larger task of international ministry. If a denomination, for example, announced that each department other than overseas missions needed two train cars, then congregation members could provide those. After that, congregational money would be adding more engines. The train could go faster as more engines are added, while the number of cars being pulled stays the same. The entire enterprise moves more efficiently toward the destination.

Any analogy, including this one, is imperfect. The purpose of the illustration is to encourage fresh thinking about issues that are carrying congregation-denomination relationships toward change. Denominations could help set congregational priorities by aligning their stated goals of coordinating congregational efforts to love a hurting world in Jesus' name, with a system that permits and structurally encourages congregations to expand international ministry in a practical way.

Is an emphasis on missions versus congregational maintenance a zero-sum challenge? Using missions as a church growth strategy, in the same way new church starts and seeker-friendly services were used some years ago, will probably never work.

As an aside, the membership trend numbers in chapter 5 of this volume, that document historically Christian churches shrinking as a percent of U.S. population, suggest that the new-church-starts and seeker-friendly-services strategies may have

only had limited success.

A commitment to missions demands a level of authenticity that cannot be a means to pursue the end goal of church growth. Dying to self for the sake of loving others in Jesus' name, while recommended in the Bible (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24), cannot be accomplished at a superficial level. If membership growth accompanies a commitment to missions, that growth will likely be developing as an organic side effect of sincere action.

Having clarified that point, there is evidence that deep mission commitment can lead to growth. Yet some pastors approach the issue of congregation member involvement in ministry activities outside the congregation as a zero-sum equation. It's as if the pastor fears there is a limited amount of commitment to be spread between the congregation and mission activity, whether local or international, outside the congregation. In some extreme cases (or perhaps not so extreme), even the denomination may be seen as a competitor for the congregation member's loyalty, and therefore for their financial support. Two studies may help to alleviate that fear.

One analysis found that a group of 14 denominations that grew in membership between 1968 and 2003 also had a higher than average per member level of the number of cents per dollar that was spent for denominational overseas missions. Meanwhile, a group of fourteen denominations that lost members between 1968 and 2003 also posted a lower-than-average per member level of the number of cents per dollar that were spent on denominational overseas missions.¹³

A second study considered how participation in community ministry affected participation in other aspects of congregational participation. In that study, "community ministry" was defined as "involvement in activities encouraged by your congregation that support the physical, material, emotional, and social well-being of people from your congregation, neighborhood, and community." Examples of community ministry covered by the definition included housing programs, whether construction or shelter, emergency assistance, such as food, clothing, and short-term financial assistance, and immigrant ministries. The study found an enhanced relationship among those who were active in community service and their involvement in their congregations. That is, those who participated in community ministry were more likely to attend worship services, to pray, and to financially support the church than those who were not active in such outreach. Further, those who had been involved in community service for at least six years were more likely to share the Christian story with others than those who had been involved in community service for five years or less. The study also found that less than half of the members in the congregations surveyed were involved in community service outreach. Only about half of those involved in such outreach indicated that their congregations supported these members with prayer, while only 20% indicated that they were involved in a congregational Bible study that supported their outreach.¹⁴

Church leaders apparently need not fear that encouraging members to become more active in helping other people, as a function of acting on their faith, will detract from the life of the congregation. On the contrary, improved levels of discipleship could strengthen the basic operations of the church as a natural side effect of increased

Congregations in 14 denominations that grew in membership between 1968 and 2003 spent a higher than average cents per dollar on denominational overseas missions.

faithfulness.

Will congregations in the U.S. serve as global mission outreach centers and financial discipleship centers, or succumb to Mammonism and become irrelevant to the work of God's kingdom? Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard labeled the practice of religion in the mid-1800s as “the ‘Christendom’ of nincompoops.”¹⁵ He also observed, “This is the shocking thing. Perhaps too it is without an analogy in history that a religion has been abolished by...flourishing. But note that in saying ‘flourish’ Christianity is understood as the opposite of what the New Testament understands by Christianity.”¹⁶

Also comfortably distant from 21st century America, Juvenal described the atmosphere during the fall of the Roman Empire, where “...luxury, more deadly than war, broods over the city and avenges a conquered world.”¹⁷

Yet today the church in the United States exists in the midst of general affluence that far exceeds that of Juvenal’s Rome. Jesus warned that a choice had to be made in Matthew 6:24: “You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both” (*The Message*). As philosopher Jacques Ellul pointed out, “Jesus did not usually use deifications and personifications” and yet labeled Mammon as a “force” that was competing with God for the human soul.¹⁸ In proposing a choice between God and money, Jesus was not offering his followers a cathartic drama experience, but rather was presenting a reality that demands an active choice.

The irony that Ellul appreciated was that slavery to God makes one free while the seeming freedom offered by money actually enslaves one. A French proverb summarizes the situation in this way: “Money is a good servant but a bad master.”

If the pastor’s top priority is a new building to attract more members that will lead to bigger salaries and an appointment to a larger church; if the denomination considers success has been achieved if present operations are able to be maintained; if church members primarily want to purchase “fire insurance” for eternity and some values for their children so that they will grow up to be pleasant people—then Money has extended its mastery over the church.

However, if the priority at all levels of the church is to pursue the Great Commission because of the Great Commandment, wherever it leads, then God’s agenda will force money into the proper role of servant.

Kierkegaard, again, described the problem: “In the New Testament, Christianity is the profoundest wound that can be inflicted upon a man, calculated on the most dreadful scale to collide with everything... All the shrewdness of ‘man’ seeks one thing: to be able to live without responsibility. The priest’s significance for society ought to be to do everything to make every man eternally responsible for every hour he lives, even for the least thing he undertakes, for this is Christianity.”¹⁹

What would it look like, if church leaders were to hold each other accountable at the level of responsibility that Kierkegaard described?

Denominations can hold congregations accountable through congregational surveys that measure how much congregations are spending on their internal operations compared to international missions, whether those missions are conducted through the denomination or other outreach channels.

It is an irony that slavery to God makes one free while the seeming freedom offered by money actually enslaves one.

Pastors can hold congregations members accountable for their level of financial giving, rather than avoiding the issue as the last taboo subject in the church.²⁰

Congregation members can hold their congregational leadership accountable for what portion of the budget is being spent on international missions, to see if the church is quickly growing toward a goal of 60% of income going to international mission. The goal would not be the “zero-sum” of reallocating the present 2.56% given to the church, but rather increasing giving toward a congregation-wide average of ten percent, even while making sure the increased giving actually went out of the congregation for missions.

Congregation members and pastors both can hold their denominational structures accountable for the feedback necessary to build bridges of communication between congregations and those serving on the front lines of mission outreach.

Church members in the U.S. can hold themselves and their structures accountable for the role they will play in God’s movement toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the context of the Great Commandment.

Or the church in the U.S. can become increasingly irrelevant. Its irrelevancy within U.S. society will not be the most significant issue. The culture is becoming more and more coarsened and hedonistic to the degree that network TV competes with cable TV to broadcast language and visuals that would formerly have been limited to “adult” movie houses. Church members are defeated by Mammonism to the degree that many feel they cannot afford to tithe because of the amount of debt they are carrying—debt they carry in order to maintain lifestyles decreed by Money playing the role of a god. Personal morality has become so compromised that the percentage of babies born out of wedlock increases even as research shows that marriage decreases poverty. From these and other signs, such as the declining portion of income donated to the church, and the declining percentage of church membership as a portion of U.S. population, the institution of the church is obviously moving toward irrelevancy in American society.

Church members in the U.S. can hold themselves and their structures accountable...or they can become irrelevant.

However, the greater risk for the church in the U.S. is that it is being sidelined in the movement of God’s Spirit in the world. Conventional wisdom is developing to the effect that the future of the church is in the Two-Thirds World, and not in North America and Europe. Will the church in the U.S. be content to be “formerly-was” and “has-beens” as the movement of God’s kingdom continues? For the lack of faithfulness on the part of Christians in the U.S. will not stop God’s goals from being accomplished in the world. Rather, it will only bring judgment on those who had the opportunity to do good but chose not to do so. It’s uncomfortable to think that the harsh words in James could possibly apply to Christians in America:

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire.... You have lived on earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. (James 5:1-3a, 5 NSRV)

Surely Christians in the U.S. are not rich? Well-off, maybe. Okay, comfortable. But such harsh words could not be directed toward nice people like *us*.

Will we will? James Grant, as the director of UNICEF, was tireless in his efforts to draw the world's attention to what he termed the "silent emergency" of millions of children dying around the globe from preventable conditions. He pointed out that great social movements had generally been initiated by the people who were being oppressed. However, the dying children are not in a position to create such a movement. His urgency was evident as he wrote:

For changes in prevailing opinion and attitude are the moral context for changes in the world of events, the climate in which ideas and movements flourish or perish. At different times in the past, for example, prevailing opinion has accepted the evils of slavery and colonialism, racism and apartheid; but changes in that climate of opinion have eventually deprived such ideas of the oxygen of tolerance, the sustenance of acceptance.

Surely, on this fortieth anniversary of UNICEF, the time has come for the international community to say that it is *also* intolerable for 40,000 of its young children to die every day, and for millions more to be malnourished, blinded, brain-damaged and disabled in the silent emergency of infection and malnutrition which the world has already demonstrated its capacity to prevent on a significant scale and at a manageable cost.

Surely the time has come to say that it is obscene to let this continue day after day, year after year, as our civilization moves into the twenty-first century. Surely the time has come to put the mass deaths of children alongside slavery, racism, and apartheid on the shelf reserved for those things which are simply no longer acceptable to mankind. Surely the time has come to mobilize national and international capacity to put known low-cost measures into effect on the necessary scale, to exert the moral muscle to transform what can now be done into what *will* now be done.

Of course there are a thousand practical problems to be overcome, and of course it will not be easy to put even known solutions into practice on such a scale. But let us rather compare those practical problems with the difficulties mankind has overcome in so many other fields in recent times. Can we really say that we must wait for the return of economic growth when over 3 million children a year are dying of diarrhoeal dehydration which can be prevented by basic family health education and by oral therapies costing less than one dollar?...

We now have the knowledge. We now have the means. And if political and public opinion in the world were to burn with intolerance of readily preventable disease and malnutrition, then who would really deny that these evils could be brought to an end in our times?²¹

According to The United Methodist Bishops, "Vision and moral will are the responsibilities of the Church."²²

How will the church exercise that responsibility? The information presented

The harsh words of James 5 can't actually be directed at nice people like *us...*

in chapter 6 of this volume establishes that the financial resources to act on that responsibility are available. Many resources are, perhaps temporarily, tied up in credit card debt, multiple vehicles, and more square footage than a decade ago. But the analysis in chapter 6 demonstrates that the solutions would only cost each church member a few more cents a day.

No, the issue is not one of having enough resources to make a difference.

The issue is one of organizing to act on the church's potential to make a difference. Or rather, caring enough to organize.

Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos, Associate General Secretary for International Affairs and Peace, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, in the Preface to *Eradicating Global Poverty: A Christian Study Guide on the Millennium Development Goals* wrote, "Yes, poverty will always be with us. But is it inevitable that extreme poverty—the kind of poverty that *kills*—must persist?...if we were to learn that today, for the first time in human history, we have the tools, knowledge, and wealth to end extreme poverty, would we take the steps necessary to do so?"²³

We have the means. We have the responsibility. We have the know-how. We know the good we know we ought to do. The only resource lacking to stop child deaths, and to reach every people group with a presentation of the Gospel, and to declare God's love with power in word and deed, is the will to do these things.

According to Ephesians 3:10, God's "intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (New International Version).

Those in the heavenly realms are watching in anticipation, to see what we will do. Will we will?

Those in the heavenly realms are watching to see what we will do. Will we will?

Notes to Chapter 8

¹ John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), pp. 86-87, 338.

² Paul A. Djupe, Laura R. Olson, and Christopher P. Gilbert, "Sources of Clergy Support for Denominational Lobbying in Washington," *Review of Religious Research*, September 2005, 47:1, p. 90.

³ *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1994), p. 334.

⁴ Wikipedia; "Reintermediation" <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reintermediation>>; p. 1 of 8/29/2006 4:34 PM printout.

⁵ Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows*, p. 342.

⁶ For a case study, see John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 1998* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 2000), pp. 86-95. Available at: <<http://www.emptytomb.org/SystemsSubsystems.pdf>>.

⁷ The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church; Children and Poverty: An Episcopal

Initiative, Biblical and Theological Foundations; <<http://www.umc.org/bishops/statement.html>>; pp. 1-7 of 10/28/1997 12:14 PM printout.

⁸ The United Methodist Church; “Children and Poverty™, The Bishops Initiative”; <http://archives.umc.org/frames.asp?url=http%3A//archives.umc.org/in...>; p. 1 of 7/24/2006 7:03 PM printout.

⁹ United Methodist News Service article appearing as “U.S. churches face crisis, discipleship leaders say,” in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference (Springfield, IL) *The Current*, April 7, 2006, p. 8.

¹⁰ Rhoda Tse; “Churches Should Stop Looking to Others to Solve World Health Problems, Faith Leaders Say”; *The Christian Post*, published Nov. 4, 2005 6:59:59 PM EST; <<http://christianpost.com/article/church/2369/section/churches.should.stop.looking.to.others.to.solve.world.health.problems.faith.leaders.say/1.htm>>; p.1 of 12/20/2005 8:12 AM printout.

¹¹ LifeWay News Service; “Survey Asks Pastors, Laity Where The Money Should Be Spent”; published 5/4/2006; <http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0%2C1703%2CA%253D162455%2526M%253D200681%2C00.html>; p. 1 of 5/12/2006 9:46 AM printout.

¹² Rhoda Tse; “Interview: Samuel Hershey on Discipleship”; *The Christian Post*, published December 24, 2005 9:02:45 PM EST; <<http://www.christianpost.com/article/ministries/1676/section/interview.Samuel.Hershey.on.discipleship/1.htm>>; p. 1 of 12/27/2005 8:37 AM printout.

¹³ John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 2003* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 2005), pp. 64-65. Available at <<http://www.emptytomb.org/scg03missions.pdf>>.

¹⁴ Beryl Hugen, Terry A. Wolfer, and Jennifer Ubels Renkema, “Service and Faith: The Impact on Christian Faith of Community Ministry Participation,” *Review of Religious Research*, June 2006, 47:4, pp. 409-4:26.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack on Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (1944), Introduction by Howard A. Johnson, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 191.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, p. 142.

¹⁷ Juvenal, in *Satires I*, quoted in Emily Morison, et al., eds., *Familiar Quotations by John Bartlett* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 122.

¹⁸ Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), p. 75.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, pp. 258, 290.

²⁰ Ellul, p. 77.

²¹ James P. Grant, *The State of the World's Children 1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 9.

²² The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Bishops, p. 5.

²³ Lallie B. Lloyd, ed., *Eradicating Global Poverty: A Christian Study Guide on the Millennium Development Goals* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 2006), p. 7.