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The State of Church Giving through 2000

Excerpt Chaper 8
Two Solutions for theVacuum of Leadership
in the Church in the U.S.

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chapter 8

Two Solutions for the Vacuum of Leadership in the Church in the U.S.

HIGHLIGHTS

Giving trends between 1968 and 2000 are evidence that church members have not had a good enough reason to increase, rather than decrease, the portion of income they spend on the church.

This situation exists because there is a vacuum of leadership in the church.

A proposed solution to negative giving trends includes two parts. The goal of both parts is to leverage general church member giving to scale in keeping with members' potential giving levels, and in keeping with needs around the globe, particularly those of children.

The first facet of the proposed solution involves a decision to mobilize. A blue-ribbon commission would be formed. This commission would be asked: (1) to gain coordinated support across the whole spectrum of the historically Christian church in the U.S. for a "positive agenda for affluence" that will encourage church members to increase giving; (2) secure $1.25 billion annually for 10 years from wealthy donors to match new money raised by congregations to support additional mission activities; and (3) promote nationally the positive agenda and the matching idea.

The second facet of the proposed solution to negative church member giving patterns is the development of a dynamic Web-based feedback system. The system could be used independently by any denomination for its own mission projects. The software for the Web-based feedback system would: (1) provide a way to list mission projects that qualify for the matching funds; (2) allow individual congregations to know how much money is needed for a particular project; and (3) provide regular and project-specific feedback to congregations that donated to a particular mission activity.

NARRATIVE

The 1968-2000 giving trends analyzed in other chapters of this volume make clear that church member giving did not increase at a rate that kept up with incomes that were expanding between the years 1968 and 2000. As a result, the percentage of income donated to the church was smaller in the year 2000 than in 1968.

A variety of issues contributed to the lack of growth in church giving as a percentage of income. One key contributing factor is the vacuum of church leadership. At any level of the church, leaders were not calling for increased giving from church members for any purpose other than institutional maintenance. The 1968-2000 giving tables indicate that this maintenance agenda did not appeal to church members enough to cause them to invest more of their resources in the church. Therefore, giving levels moved away from the goal of a congregation-wide average of ten percent, rather than toward the standard of the tithe.

In keeping with the maintenance agenda, Congregational Finances, focusing on the needs of current members, absorbed the vast majority of the increased dollars that were given between 1968 and 2000.

During the long U.S. economic expansion, which was continuing in the year 2000, giving as a portion of income could have returned to the level of the late 1960s or even to Depression-era levels, both of which were higher than the percent of income given in 2000. It would also have been possible to surpass those earlier donation levels, moving decisively toward the tithe on a congregation-wide scale.

One major factor helped to create these declining trends. Giving levels did not increase because there has been a vacuum of trusted leadership calling on church members to reverse present trends for a purpose that members feel is worthy of their investment.[1]

As noted in the earlier Trends chapter of this volume, the current condition of church giving need not define future patterns. Specific steps could be taken, if church leadership were to emerge and focus on giving to others as a priority.

Figures 21 and 22 describe two aspects of a proposed solution to address this vacuum of leadership. One element of the proposed solution calls for a decision to mobilize. The second part of the solution is the development of a dynamic feedback system to encourage real partnership between church members in the U.S. and their denominational mission activities.

Proposed Solution Part A: Decision to Mobilize. Figure 21 presents one aspect of the proposed solution to the present vacuum of leadership regarding church giving patterns.

The summary of this solution is “Decision to Mobilize.”

National church leaders need to make a decision to mobilize church members such that increased giving to the church will be a positive side effect of members’ desire to take action.

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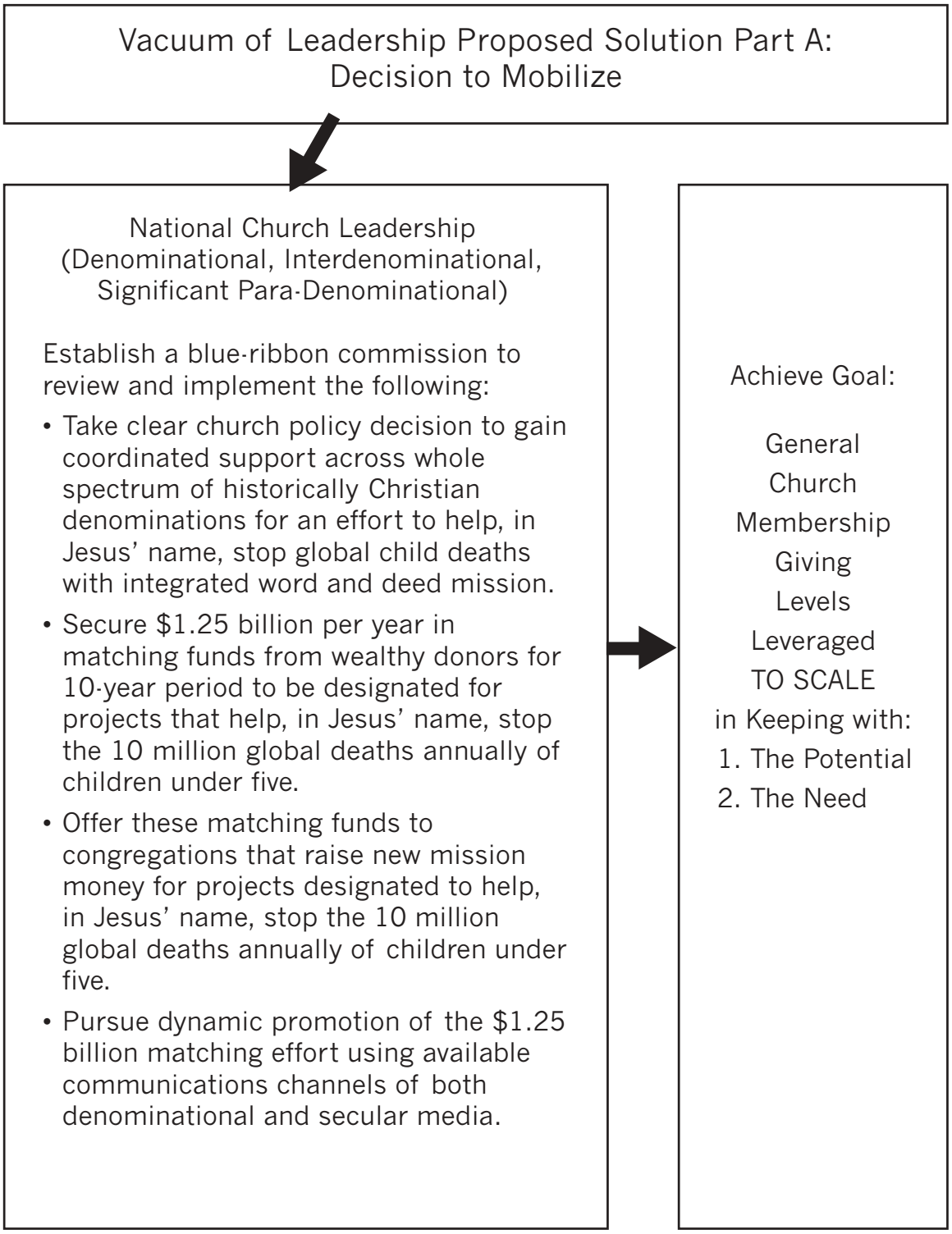
[1] For a discussion of dynamics related to this vacuum of leadership in the church, see John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, “Systems and Subsystems Analysis: A Case Study,” *The State of Church Giving through 1998* (Champaign, Ill.: empty tomb, inc., 2000), pp.º77-95, or at <http://www.emptytomb.org/SystemsSubsystems.pdf>.

Figure 21: Vacuum of Leadership Proposed Solution Part A: Decision to Mobilize



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In the present discussion, the idea of "national church leaders" has a broad definition. It certainly will include denominational leaders. It is likely that this definition will also include leaders of interdenominational groups. In addition, given the present functioning of the church in the U.S., there may be significant para-denominational groups that should be involved in mobilizing church members. These para-denominational groups probably have no formal affiliation with the denominational church structures in the U.S. Yet, they maintain a national presence that could help to mobilize all church members.

Of course, the idea of mobilizing church members to increase giving is much easier to say than to do. Present relatively low giving levels exist in spite of various efforts to increase donations to the church. Nonprofit and for-profit groups, both denominationally-affiliated and independent, produce libraries full of technique manuals and campaign outlines intended to address the giving issue. The giving data for 1968-2000 suggest that a different approach is needed to change the long-established low levels of giving.

The proposed solution includes the forming of a blue-ribbon commission made up of respected representatives of denominational, interdenominational and para-denominational groups. While this panel would be only advisory to national denominational structures, the opinions of its members should carry enough practical authority that the recommendations will carry weight in national church leadership circles.

The present solution proposes that the commission represent the "historically Christian church," as a matter of both conviction and efficiency.[2] In that setting, a basic core set of beliefs may be assumed. That set of beliefs may have to be narrowly defined. However, it should be possible for this group to focus on what they have in common, instead of the common emphasis of differences that separate them. Given the challenge of securing agreement among the broad spectrum of Christian traditions in the U.S., even when they share the same religious texts, the commission would be limited to historically Christian churches.

Traditionally, there has been no forum that fosters a broad national dialogue among these varied Christian communions.

The empty tomb, inc. Stewardship Project National Advisory Committee bridged some, but not all, of these boundaries from 1992-1995. Those participating in the Stewardship Project National Advisory Committee represented the Roman Catholic church, seven communions that would be termed mainline Protestant communions, and seven that might be termed evangelical communions. Several of the committee members expressed surprise at the degree of similarity in experience among the otherwise disparate groups when the discussion focused on the effective practice of financial stewardship. The experience of the National Advisory Committee demonstrated that a broad spectrum of Christians could interact about clearly defined common interests, and pursue the common good of the body of Christ as a whole. These fifteen national stewardship officials gathered twice during the

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[2] The definition of "historically Christian" includes that combination of believers with a historically acknowledged confession of the faith, including Roman Catholic, other Catholic, mainline Protestant, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal/Charismatic, Baptist, Anabaptist, and Fundamental communions..

three years of the project and were able to agree on seven conclusions about stewardship as it is practiced in the U.S.[3]

More recently, another group, named "Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.," has begun an intentional dialogue among Christians. In April 2002, representatives of 20 denominations in the U.S., as well as two interdenominational and two para-denominational groups, signed a draft statement for this emerging body. The statement reads:

> Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. gathers together those churches and Christian communities which acknowledging God's revelation in Christ, confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scripture, and in obedience to God's will and in the power of the Holy Spirit commit themselves to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another; to fulfill their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world for the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[4]

The communions signing the statement included representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as Orthodox, mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant communions. A group such as Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. could be a broad enough entity to establish the type of blue-ribbon commission called for in the presently proposed solution.

In whatever manner that leaders are gathered to form the blue-ribbon commission, the commission will need sufficient practical authority that its recommendations will be seriously considered by the broad array of denominational leaders in the United States.

It is proposed that the commission not study the issue of giving, but rather be given the charge to review and implement several action steps that set the stage for increased church member giving.

Policy Decision. The first step for the commission would be to take a clear church policy decision to gain support across the whole spectrum of the historically Christian church for a common objective. To use one of the recommendations from the empty tomb, inc. Stewardship Project National Advisory Committee, the commission would secure support from a broad spectrum of church leaders for an agreed-upon "positive agenda for affluence." This positive agenda would not replace the many agenda items being pursued by church

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[3] The conclusions were presented in *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church* (Baker Books, 1996), p. 293. As noted at the meeting, the conclusions were not "word-smithed" but rather were designed to promote further dialogue. The conclusions were:

1. Owning the gap between beliefs and practice.
2. Recognizing creative tension between reality and vision.
3. Need for conversion/formation, which is part of the process.
4. Leadership needs conversion and formation in personal stewardship and to be given a level of confidence and courage in terms of corporate leadership.
5. A whole-life response to the Great Commandment of Jesus (Mark 12:29-31), to be disciples who are stewards.
6. The church needs a positive agenda for the great affluence in our society.
7. Healthy churches produce generous people

[4] "Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.: An Invitation to a Journey," Chicago, IL, April 6, 2002.

leaders independently and in cooperation with others. The positive agenda identified by the commission, and supported by church leaders, would be a rallying point around which actions to reverse giving trends could focus. An agenda for affluence that includes an action component would provide both a measurable goal, and a clear general concept with which leaders could agree.

The action focus recommended in this proposed solution to address the present vacuum of leadership is to stem the child death rate globally. More specifically, the suggested focus is an effort to help, in Jesus' name, stop global child deaths through integrated word and deed mission.[5]

Why global child deaths? Several points recommend this particular theme of global child deaths.

First, the need is compelling enough to attract the immediate attention of all church members. One problem in any effort to increase giving among church members is the difficulty of capturing church member's imaginations. The church's message of service to others competes with the most sophisticated advertising and communication industry in the world promoting a message of "self." In an era of "sound bites," any agenda on which church leaders hope to build increased financial discipleship must immediately touch the hearts and grab the attention of church members. The deaths of children is an issue that is instantly clear to busy church members with varying levels of commitment to the church.

Second, research by the authors concluded that most church members in the U.S. have been educated to "crisis fundraising." Any pastor will tell you that it is easier to raise money for a leaky roof than for the general operating budget. In fact, this aspect of stewardship practice in the U.S. is very negative. Church members are not discipled, or taught to observe the teachings of their faith, about integrating faith and money. Rather, members are educated to pay the bills of the congregation or to address an emergency. Given the reality of the present state of stewardship, the plight of dying children is a "silent emergency" as the late James Grant termed it. Therefore, as a starting point, this positive agenda for affluence presents a compelling need that will be easily understood by church members who presently equate the need to give with an emergency.

Third, this particular goal is a good choice because there is already a consensus about it among a broad spectrum of church leaders in the U.S. The work of the commission can build on that consensus. In 2001, a national survey of 202 historically Christian communions in the U.S. resulted in a 41% response rate. Of those responding, 81% agreed with the statement, "Church members in the United States should increase giving through their churches in an effort to stop the millions of annual preventable global child deaths in Jesus' name." Leaders agreed from denominations that are African-American, Anabaptist, Baptist, Evangelical, Fundamental, Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, other Catholic, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic.

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[5] The importance of the integration of word and deed is discussed in John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, "The Theological Implications of Church Member Giving Patterns," *The State of Church Giving through 1995* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 1997), pp. 83-96, also available at <http://www.emptytomb.org/research.implications.html>.

It should be noted that of those who agreed, two expressed concern that the phrase "in Jesus' name" be grammatically moved so as to avoid any confusion in the phrasing. Thus, a national policy decision to promote "an effort to help, in Jesus' name, stop global child deaths" has an already demonstrated broad base of support among church leaders in the U.S.[6]

Finally, the particular focus on stopping global child deaths builds on a long tradition of outreach within the historically Christian church that has become more relevant in light of recent events. Church outreach in word and deed, through basic health clinics, education institutions, hunger and disaster relief, all pre-date the post-September 11, 2001 consensus that poverty must be addressed in order to prevent future terrorism.

After the horrible tragedy of 9/11, world leaders acknowledged a relationship between poverty and terrorist activity. In March 2002, global leaders gathered in Monterrey, Mexico for a United Nations summit on poverty. One conclusion from that meeting was that there is an association between desperate poverty and terrorist actions. An Associated Press article about the "Monterrey Consensus" stated, "Leaders of poor countries from Tunisia to Venezuela and rich countries from France to the United States all agreed that terrorism will not be eliminated without a major push to help the world's poorest. Three billion people—half the world's population—live on less than $2 a day."[7]

In a second article on the topic, President George W. Bush was quoted as stating, "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terrorism."[8]

Church structures based in the U.S. have long been on the front lines in many of the world's poorest areas, fighting poverty not to end terrorism, but to demonstrate the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. In light of post-9/11 perspectives, these ongoing works take on new significance. Many of these church-related outreaches impact the well-being of children. As one United Methodist Board of Global Ministries official wrote to the authors, "Just about every program UMCOR supports assists children directly or indirectly."

Yet, an important point about these ongoing activities of church mission agencies has not been generally understood. The value of these activities is evident to those in direct contact with the people in need. It is also clear to those poor people receiving the benefits of these activities, and to the denominational and agency supervisors who receive reports about these activities. What most church leaders have not understood is that church members in the U.S. could benefit greatly from a more complete understanding of the church's helping works. That fact is particularly painful because church members in the U.S. are in great need of healing in their attitudes toward faith and money; knowing more about these church efforts to impact global need could be an agent of transformation for these members . Without

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[6] For a full discussion of this survey, see "National Church Leaders Response Form" in John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, *The State of Church Giving through 1999* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 2001), pp. 79-119. A synopsis is available at <http://www.emptytomb.org/research.html#Response Form>.

[7] Niko Price, "World Leaders to Give More to Poor," the Associated Press AP-NY-03-22-02 1430EST, printed from AOL News on March 22, 2002.

[8] Sandra Sobieraj, "Bush Vows to Help Globes Poor," the Associated Press AP-NY-03-22-02 1459EST, printed from AOL News on March 22, 2002.

a compelling need to raise their vision, most church members are abandoned to the self-centeredness resulting from a steady diet of consumer advertising promoting overindulgence. Within the Christian tradition, many verses sound like an oxymoronic idea: It is the rich, and not the poor, who are in greater need. That concept challenges the basic assumption of a culture built on "more" equaling "better." Yet the Roman philosopher Juvenal, documenting the latter days of a decaying empire, made an observation that may also speak to early 21st century American culture when he wrote, "Luxury, more deadly than war, broods over the city." It may be harder to successfully handle affluence than to overcome strife, including poverty.

If the Christian Scriptures are accurate, then church members who have attained a level of comfort beyond basic needs are in potential spiritual trouble.[9] To ask those members only to pay for keeping the church institutional structure functioning is to fail them at a point of their own need. The excellent work conducted by church mission agencies that addresses both the physical and spiritual needs of global neighbors, particularly needs of children, could be a vital tool to help focus church members in the U.S. on "others" rather than "self." The process of giving to a gripping and vital cause becomes a strategy for spiritual growth rather than an institutional maintenance activity. It may not only be more blessed to give than to receive. It may also be absolutely necessary for the spiritual health of church members in the U.S. to discover a more constructive use of a larger portion of their resources than increased and sustained personal consumption.

Precisely because most, if not all, Christian communions already have efforts in place to address the needs of children around the globe, the agreement sought by the blue-ribbon commission would actually be a recognition and affirmation of what is already taking place. This fact means that the blue-ribbon commission would not be designing a new distribution agency. Rather, the commission's task would be to ask church leaders to recognize and acknowledge the common agenda already being pursued to a relatively limited extent among the denominations in the U.S., and to affirm at a priority level the value of increasing the level of church member support for each denomination's own related activities.

Thus, an effort of helping, in Jesus' name, to stop global child deaths is recommended as the focus for a policy decision to gain coordinated support across the whole spectrum of historically Christian churches in the U.S.

Secure $1.25 billion Per Year in Matching Funds. A general practical consensus increases in value as it moves from theory to action. Agreeing that church members should increase giving to help, in Jesus' name, stop global child deaths does not help church members in the U.S. grow in faith, nor does it help the dying children, unless that agreement translates into increased giving.

Therefore, the next facet of this proposed solution to the vacuum of church leadership is that the blue-ribbon commission should secure matching funds from wealthy individual donors. These funds will then be offered to congregations that raise new mission money, in addition to their current budgets, to support mission projects that focus on the basic, life-sustenance needs of children.

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[9] For a discussion of this point, see Ronsvalle, "Theological Implications."

The amount of matching money available needs to be significant enough to communicate a serious attempt to impact global need in Jesus' name. The amount of $1.25 billion a year was arrived at as follows.

In 1990, James Grant, then executive director of UNICEF, estimated that "a programme to prevent the great majority of child deaths and child malnutrition in the decade ahead might reach approximately $2.5 billion per year by the late 1990s."[10] Progress has been made and the death rate is no longer an estimated 40,000 children under five dying each day around the globe, most from preventable poverty conditions. However, a current daily total of 29,000 is still too high for those who claim loyalty to a compassionate and merciful God through Jesus Christ.

Given that a degree of monetary inflation and growth in the economy has occurred over the past decade, one might estimate that the $2.5 billion a year necessary in the 1990s would have doubled by the present decade. That would mean that $5 billion a year is needed in this decade to decrease the rate of global child deaths significantly. If the commission were to raise $1.25 billion, and match it with another $1.25 billion from congregations, then churches in the U.S. would be salting global conditions by providing $2.5 billion, or perhaps half the estimated money needed each year for ten years to address this goal.

It is important to note that, under this proposal, the blue-ribbon commission would not replace individual denominations in distributing the additional money. This proposal does not include a new distribution agency. Church members would be donating the money directly to their local congregations, and the congregations would be using their established distribution channels to support the mission projects of their choice by forwarding the matching money. The commission's job would be that of an incentive and promotion agency, and not that of a distribution agency.

Offer the Matching Funds to Congregations. The blue-ribbon commission that raises $1.25 billion a year would offer to match, dollar for dollar, "new money" raised by congregations to support projects of the congregation's choice that focus on children's needs. This matching offer moves the "positive agenda for affluence" from theory to practice.

The donors from whom the $1.25 billion was secured would be given the opportunity to "leverage" their giving. The term "leverage" applies in the following way. If a donor provided $1 directly to a project that addresses the needs of dying children, the project would have $1 to spend. In contrast, through the commission's matching efforts, every $1 in matching funds that a donor provides doubles its impact. The mission project would receive both the $1 from the matching money donor and $1 from a congregation. Further, the donor would be encouraging members in the congregations that receive matching money to increase giving to missions. The donor would be helping needy children overseas with the financial gift, and strategically involving church members in the U.S. in an integration of their faith with practice. One might say that not only are the dollars doubled through the financial matching arrangement, but the impact is doubled as well, affecting both church members in the U.S. and the children helped through the mission projects.

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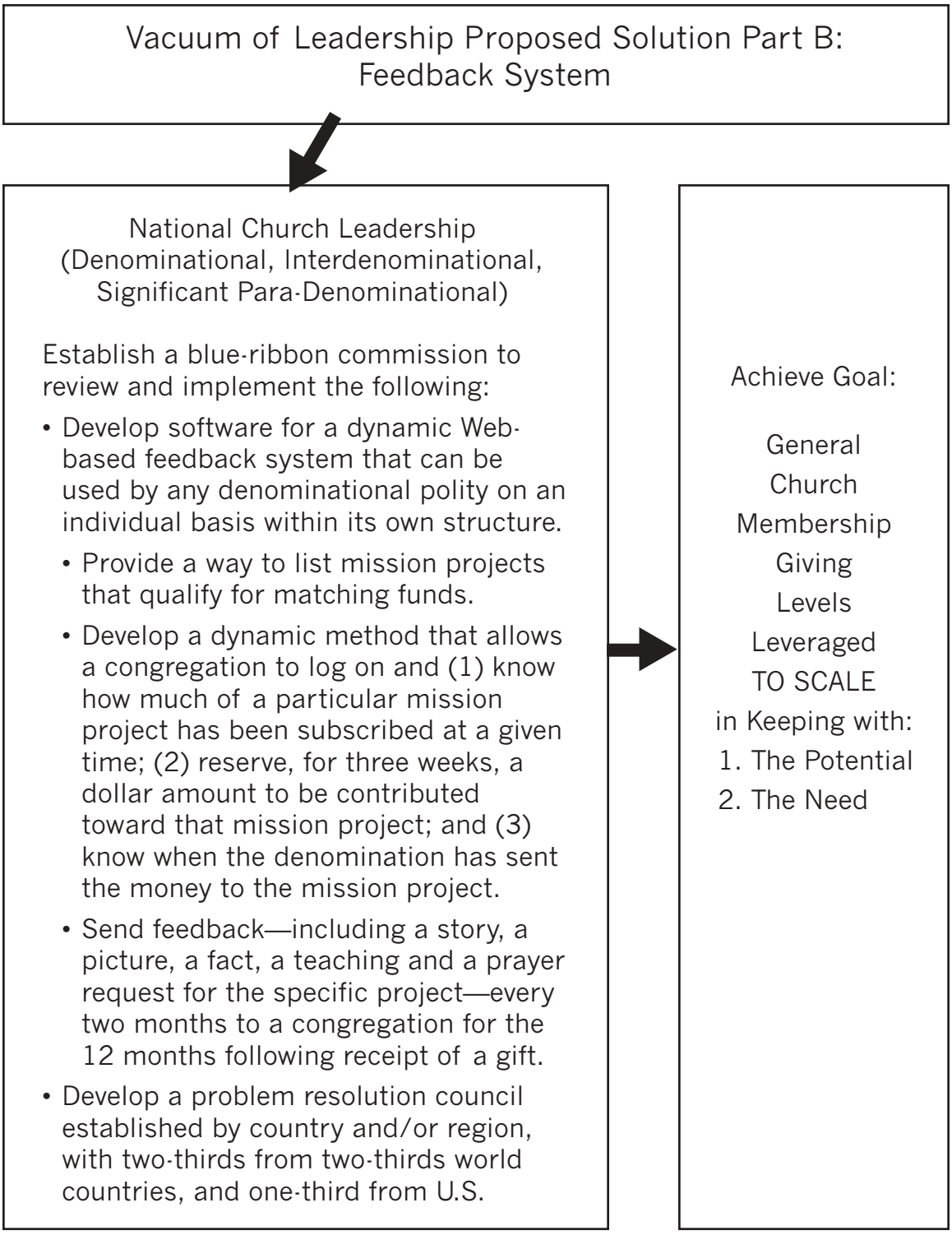
[10] James P. Grant, *The State of the World's Children 1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p 16.

Figure 21: Vacuum of Leadership Proposed Solution Part B: Feedback System



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even a congregation that requests specific information will not be able to obtain it from the denominational structure. This lack of communication is in direct conflict with the donors' desire to know what contributed dollars are doing.

In times past, a denomination might expect congregations to forward money for mission projects with no expectation of specific feedback. The attitude of the 1950s might be summarized as people being content to give because it was the right thing to do. However, the environment has changed considerably. The level of denominational loyalty of the 1990s did not compare favorably with that of previous decades. Of those pastors responding to the Stewardship Project survey, 96% disagreed with the statement, "Most congregations have as strong a denominational identity as they did forty years ago."[14]

Thus, it dearly concerns denominations that other groups will offer individuals and congregations communication services not offered by a denomination. For example, two former officials of the World Bank have established a Web-based "marketplace" for the support of international projects. "Potential donors are able to communicate with a project leader as soon as a project description is posted." The Web host, developmentspace.com, charged seven percent of the money donated for its services when it first began.[15]

Several different Web-based options are now also available for use by local United Way campaigns. For example, United-eWay provides a software program which, according to promotional materials, creates an "enhancement" to existing efforts so that "employees are given choice in how to give, how much to give and where to invest their contributions."[16]

Para-denominational groups have long had the reputation of being responsive to their donors' need for detailed information. This level of service is necessary since para-denominational groups do not have a historical support base that denominations have traditionally counted on. That lack of an established base has encouraged para-denominational groups to pursue entrepreneurial approaches that recognize the donors' desire for information. With the denominational loyalty base eroding, denominations will have to develop some of the same communication skills as other charitable organizations, or risk seeing their level of support diminish.

While some may argue that the decline of denominations is a natural structural evolution, that view may be shortsighted. First, some denominational structures were formed for the efficient use of congregational mission funds. Mission boards, both domestic and foreign, were the first structures formed as denominations took shape. The same efficiencies exist today. If these structures erode, it may be a decade or two before their past value is recognized and their loss mourned. At that point, it may be very difficult to build them again. Meanwhile, the global works that benefited from their existence will stall and in some cases end.

Second, much of the philanthropy education that takes place in the United States takes place in religious congregations. For example, the Independent Sector series on giving has

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[14] Ronsvalle, *Behind the Stained Glass Windows*, p. 335.

[15] Nicole Wallace, "Web Site to Aid International Projects," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 16, 2002, p. 33.

[16] "United-eWay: Revolutionizing the World of Charitable Giving, <http://www.united-eay.org/>; 8/22/02, 8:51 AM printout.

repeatedly found a correlation between regular worship attendance and the level of charitable giving.[17] It is conceivable that, without a denominational structure calling attention to issues beyond internal needs, most congregations would continue to encourage support of mission activities beyond members' own needs. It is possible that each congregation might choose one or another para-denominational mission group to support. These diverse mission activities would not be part of a larger coordinated multi-congregational strategy but rather would reflect the individual tastes of the congregation.

However, the trends of giving between 1968 and 2000 heavily favored Congregational Finances over Benevolences, even with regular denominational requests for support. What would happen without denominational efforts to raise the vision of the congregation on a regular basis? Since congregations are such a vital component of philanthropy education in the United States, a further turning inward, with the definition of "charity" being reduced to present members' needs, would have a broad impact on charitable behavior in the U.S. as a whole, and not just in weakening the religious life of the congregations.

For these and other reasons, it is vitally important that denominations respond to the need for improved communication to address congregation members' desire for information about what their mission dollars are doing.

It may be noted that the second part of the present proposed solution was in formation before the authors became aware of other Web-based giving opportunities. The fact that the details of the present proposed solution are similar to services now being offered by other groups suggests that these ideas are addressing commonly acknowledged needs of donors.

Software for a Dynamic Web-based Feedback System. The blue-ribbon commission would also foster the development of software for a dynamic Web-based system to provide feedback about mission projects. The design of the system would be generic enough that any denomination could use it with its own congregations, for the denomination's own mission projects. The software would assist the denomination in addressing donors' desire for project-specific information about mission activities.

The dynamic feedback system would also provide a creative inductive teaching tool. Adults learn on a need-to-know basis. National news recognizes this fact. For example, few Americans knew where Afghanistan was until U.S. soldiers were sent there. Then maps of that part of the globe appeared regularly in TV and print media news reports. Yet church leaders often spend great amounts of time, energy and dollars on didactic education, telling church members what they ought to know rather than responding to what members express a desire to know.

Further, the denominational emphasis on undesignated mission dollars to support the entire structure rather than a specific project runs counter to congregation members' interests. The basic operations of the denomination—and the congregation—can be promoted as the foundation on which valued outreach is built. But only if the congregation and the denomination are providing outreach that is recognized as valuable by the members. In spite of the denominations' present preference for undesignated giving, designated giving to

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[17] Arthur D. Kirsch, et al., *Giving and Volunteering in the United States, 1999 Edition* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 2002), pp. 83-84.

specific mission projects remains popular at the congregational level. Yet, in most denominations, when a congregation contributes to a particular mission activity, there is little specific feedback. Even in denominations that provide for designations to a specific mission project, perhaps over and above general denominational support, no feedback mechanism provides the congregation with desired information. Did the money arrive? What is happening in the project? The congregation may be sent a subscription to a mission magazine that may—or may not—in any twelve-month period contain an article about the country in which the mission project is located. Since there may be many denominational mission projects in a given country, an article about a particular country may—or may not—contain a reference to the specific project that the congregation supports. And certainly, the article will not indicate when the congregation's money arrived, and whether the project has been fully funded.

Technology now makes it easier to provide information to congregations. Feedback can serve as positive reinforcement for the behavior of supporting mission projects, and thus, increased giving at the congregational level.

The software for the Web-based feedback system should include several features.

List of mission projects. The software should allow a denomination to list its mission projects. In addition, the software should allow a special designation for those projects that qualify for the blue-ribbon commission's matching grants.

Funding Status information. The software should allow a congregation to log onto the denomination's Web site and obtain information about the funding status of particular mission projects. How much of a particular mission project's budget has been subscribed? By regularly updating this information, a denomination can avoid the dreaded situation of having some very popular mission projects oversubscribed while other less dynamic but just as valuable projects are under-funded. In fact, a denomination could use this system to analyze which worthy projects need more attention. The denomination could focus its promotion efforts on those projects that are under-funded, as well as use the undesignated mission funds that the denomination receives to insure that all mission projects receive the support they deserve.

In a related matter, the congregation could use the Web to "reserve" for a limited period of time, perhaps up to three weeks, a set amount of dollars it intends to contribute toward an under-subscribed project. This reservation system would prevent a congregation from sending money to a denomination, earmarked for a project, only to have the money returned because in the meantime another congregation has fully funded that project.

Another operating status fact could be keyed to the individual congregation's record, perhaps obtainable by password. The congregation could log on and confirm both, when the denominational office received the money for the project, and when the denomination sent the money on to the mission project. The extent to which it may be a common occurrence is not widely known. However, the authors became aware of a delay between money arriving in a U.S. denominational office, earmarked for an international mission project, and then being forwarded from the U.S. denominational office to the international mission project.

In the interim, the U.S. denominational office was earning significant amounts of interest on the donated money. While that strategy may be viewed as wise stewardship of funds from the national office's perspective, it delayed the help that was meant to be given to the international project, and it weakened any momentum built up in the donating congregation. A Web-based status window could help to insure speedy transfer of funds to the project in need, with the accompanying benefit of speedy feedback to the donating congregation members.

Feedback mechanism. The software could also be programmed to automatically provide feedback to each congregation that donated to a particular mission project. The reports might be every other month for twelve months from the date of the most recent donation. The reports could contain a fact about the need the mission project is addressing, a story related to the project, a photo, a teaching or insight prepared perhaps by a mission project leader in that country, and a prayer request for that project. Each denomination has a limited number of mission projects, even if the projects number in the hundreds or, in some cases, thousands. Yet, those in the field who are working on the project that is receiving the financial support could be asked to provide the feedback information via e-mail. This need for feedback information could be part of the agreement for continued financial support. The software could be designed to accept the information from the international mission project staff, and to forward it automatically to any congregation that is registered as having contributed to that project in the last twelve months.

Individualization is increasing in general advertising. For some years, magazines have contained advertising pages that are personalized with the name on the magazine's address label. Airlines regularly update frequent flyer accounts and mail the reports to the individual account holder within weeks of a trip. Denominations have a limited number of congregations to service—certainly fewer than airlines have frequent flyer accounts. Creative use of technology could provide a denominationally-brokered system to build a true partnership between the congregation members donating dollars and mission project staff who can broaden the vision of those congregation members.

Problem Resolution Council. When congregation members obtain more information about mission projects, those members may also become aware of problems related to specific mission projects. A structure that may give congregation members confidence is a problem resolution council that could be formed by each denomination, or perhaps by the commission.

Most denominations already are part of an international structure. Denominations in the U.S. have counterparts in other countries. The churches in some of the other countries have changed from being mission-receiving churches to mission-funding churches. Others have received mission support for many years. A problem resolution council could include denominational representatives from the mission-sending and the mission-support-receiving countries.

The composition of the problem resolution council would be important. It is suggested that two-thirds of the representatives would come from what are termed "two-thirds world" countries, and one-third from the U.S. and other mission-sending countries. This composition

reflects the reality that money often confers power. For an authentic exchange of ideas and resolution of problems, that power would have to be neutralized. The Mennonite Global Sharing Fund has implemented a coordinating council based on a similar composition, including representatives of the Mennonite World Conference Churches.

The value of a problem resolution council is that it addresses a valid concern of denominational mission officials. Sometimes, standards and expectations are different in other countries than in the U.S. When money is involved, misunderstandings can occur. If a congregation is receiving dynamic feedback about a specific mission project, then the congregation may learn of a financial problem with that project. Some denominational officials feel they are "protecting" the congregation from this painful knowledge. However, congregation members cannot grow in their understanding, their sophistication, and their authentic discipleship, if they are isolated from global realities. Also, by allowing the few negative experiences to prevent dynamic feedback, congregations are not permitted to learn from the many good experiences that occur in mission activity, the very experiences that convince denominational officials of the value of the international work. A problem resolution council would provide a mechanism to deal with misunderstandings between the mission project and the denominational agency. Having this structure in place removes one reason, however valid, to keep congregations uninformed about the reality of global mission.

Conclusion. One self-help axiom defines "crazy" as doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results. Denominations have been experiencing a decline in the portion of income donated from congregations. Even when church members increase the number of dollars given to their congregations, over 90% of those inflation-adjusted dollars stay in the congregation to meet the needs of current members. The giving trend from 1968 to 2000 suggests a fresh approach is needed.

A vacuum of leadership among church leaders has resulted in these declining trends in giving.

A solution to address declining giving patterns has two aspects. One is to decide to mobilize church members to increase church member giving through a focus on a positive agenda for affluence. This agenda would be compelling enough to raise members' sights above their own needs. A strategy of matching new money for mission projects that address, in Jesus' name, global child deaths, could help mobilize church members.

The second part of the solution is to provide dynamic feedback to congregation members about what their donated money is doing. The days are gone when congregations forwarded large amounts to denominations because it was the right thing to do. Software for a dynamic Web-based feedback system could build an authentic partnership between congregation members, the denomination, and the mission projects being funded.

The goal of both parts of the solution is to move church membership to giving levels that are on a scale with both donors' potential for giving, and the scope of the need.