

U.S. is feeling charitable, just not through churches

by [Whitney Jones](#)

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(RNS) Americans are being more generous to religious charities, but why are they skimping on their giving to churches?

A new report from Empty Tomb Inc., an Illinois-based Christian research organization, contains an analysis that found from 2007 to 2008, Protestant churches saw a decrease of \$20.02 in per-member annual charitable gifts.

Meanwhile, Empty Tomb's analysis of federal data found that annual average contributions to the category of "church, religious organizations," which includes charities like World Vision and Salvation Army, increased by \$41.59.

Sylvia Ronsvalle, executive vice president of Empty Tomb, said the good news/bad news difference is stark: giving to religious charities is up, while giving to churches is down.

One reason? Churches spend more money on congregational finances and less on missions beyond the church walls, which is unappealing to people who want to support specific causes with a tangible, visible benefit.

"People overall give to vision, and this is just what we've observed, that you see that kind of outpouring when there is a specific

need," said Ronsvalle, who co-wrote the 20th edition of the "State of Church Giving through 2008" with her husband, John.

For example, The Salvation Army's iconic Red Kettle Campaign, which provides food, toys and clothing to the needy during Christmas, reached a new record in charitable gifts in 2008 that was up 10 percent from the year before.

Israel Gaither, the national commander of The Salvation Army, attributed the increase in charity to Americans' willingness to serve during a time of great need, aided by increased use of user-friendly technology like cashless kettles, the iPhone and the Online Red Kettle.

According to the Empty Tomb report, U.S. churches devote more than 85 percent of their spending on "congregational finances" such as salaries, utility bills and brick-and-mortar maintenance. Religious charities, meanwhile, can focus on serving people outside their institutions.

The report's hefty subtitle calls out churches on their lack of charity: "Kudos to Wycliffe Bible Translators and World Vision for Global At-Scale Goals, But Will Denominations Resist Jesus Christ And Not Spend \$1 to \$26 Per Member to Reach the Unreached When Jesus Says 'You Feed Them?'"

Christian Smith, the director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, said the main reasons Christians hold back on their generosity are bad personal financial habits, distrust of where the money is going and a lack of teaching from the pulpit.

Churches trying to serve and survive in difficult economic times should not obsess about finances, Smith said, but conceded that the financial bottom line is a daily reality for congregations.

"Obviously, churches are more than financial," he said. "They are more than about just money, but it takes resources to hire people and put programs into action and to serve the community."

Conrad Braaten, pastor of the Washington's Lutheran Church of the Reformation, said his Capitol Hill congregation continues to support outreach ministries -- a food pantry, a GED and job-training program, and repairing houses of low-income homeowners -- despite difficult financial times.

Even though the church has seen a decline in giving, he said it has continued charity work by "tightening the belt" on operating expenses.

"That's why the church exists," he said. "When we're focused in upon ourselves, we've lost our reason for being."

Ronsvalle worries about the long-term implications for philanthropy since churches are where most people learn how to be generous. A U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics survey found that 92 percent of charitable giving from people under the age of 25 went to church or religious charities.

"Religion," Ronsvalle said, "serves as the seedbed of philanthropic giving in America."