

Report says church giving on the rebound

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The recession and a sluggish recovery have made for a lighter collection plate in recent years, but a new study shows that giving to U.S. congregations bounced back in 2011 as the economy improved.

According to the fourth annual "State of the Plate" survey released on Tuesday (March 27), 51 percent of churches last year saw an increase in giving, up from 43 percent in 2010 and 36 percent in 2009.

The national survey, sponsored by MAXIMUM Generosity, Christianity Today and the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), asked more than 1,360 congregations of different sizes to report on their donations and budgets.

"This has been the worst season of our lifetime in declines in giving," said Brian Kluth, founder of MAXIMUM Generosity and the "State of the Plate" research. But 2011 "is the first time we're seeing an upswing after three very hard years."

A separate report issued last week as part of the 2012 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches showed the impact of the recession's worst damage: churches lost \$1.2 billion in giving in 2010 -- nearly three times as large as the \$431 million in losses reported in 2009.

The increase seen in 2011 was most noticeable in the most mega of megachurches: 86 percent of churches with more than 10,000 congregants saw an greatest rise in giving, compared to 39 percent of churches with fewer than 100 people saw an increase.

Still, nearly one-third (32 percent) of churches said giving was down in 2011 -- although a smaller share than the 39 percent of churches that reported a

decline two years ago, according to the survey.

The survey included small and large churches, although more than half had fewer than 250 members. Respondents included mainline Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal and nondenominational congregations; just 1 percent were Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

Church leaders attributed the reversal in fortunes to better attendance, which was reported by half of the churches surveyed. Many others also cited their efforts to address giving and generosity with the congregation.

In addition, according to the survey, 51.3 percent of churches enjoyed a bigger budget, with extra money going to pay raises (40.3 percent) and missions (36.5 percent), among other priorities.

A shift away from "envelope packets" toward electronic giving -- such as using cell phones, online donations and lobby kiosks -- changed the way churches received donations in 2011, a trend that has accelerated in the past four years, according to report.

The survey also showed churches in the past year have tried to be more transparent with their finances: 92 percent make their financial statements available by request to members, and 89 percent do the same for their annual budgets.

The majority of churches "really do desire to handle their finances with integrity and they use financial best practices that ensure that integrity," said Matt Branaugh, the editorial director for Christianity Today's Church Management Team.

"If you handle your finances with this kind of integrity up front," he said, "then people will respond."