

Church giving won't rise unless pastors embrace Jesus' teachings on poor, report says

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(RNS) Christian researchers tracking decades of decline in charitable giving say the trend will not be reversed until pastors challenge congregants to embrace Jesus' teachings on the poor.

But that, says Sylvia Ronsvalle, one of the authors of the annual "Empty Tomb" reports on Christian giving, will take a different kind of pastor than the counselors and comforters that seminaries and divinity schools have trained for ministry.

Seminaries instead need to school future clergy on the affluence of American congregations, and remind church members of "God's agenda to love a hurting world," the report said.

"The State of Church Giving through 2012: What are Christian Seminaries and Intellectuals Thinking—or Are They?" was issued by Empty Tomb, an Illinois-based nonprofit that tracks the percentage of church members' income that they give to their congregation.

"Pastors are not being prepared to effectively pastor their people within an age of affluence," said Ronsvalle, who wrote the report with her husband, John L. Ronsvalle.

"People are richer," she said. "They have a lot more to spend on. If the church is not giving them a real challenge, the church becomes less important."

In 2012, the latest year for which the numbers are available, church giving dropped to 2.2 percent of member's incomes, the lowest percentage since 1968. Using statistics from international agencies and pictures of malnourished infants, the Ronsvalles seek to illustrate the significant impact an uptick in giving from American

churchgoers could make in the lives of the world's poor.

Most of the poorest in the U.S. have more than the poor abroad, they write. They cite a study showing that an American with an annual income of \$34,000 falls within the world's richest 1 percent.

"From a global perspective, the vast majority of Christians in the U.S. are more on the 'rich' spectrum in Bible categories," and pastors need to let their congregants know that, the Ronsvalle couple wrote.

Alleviating the suffering of the poor is "a key aspect of the gospel," said Ian S. Markham, dean and president of Virginia Theological Seminary. But taking the seminaries to task for shortfalls in Christian charity overlooks the complexity of the problem and the realities of the culture "that are much bigger than any classroom experience," said the Episcopal priest.

Particularly since 9/11 and in light of the recent recession, Americans find it difficult to give more generously, Markham said.

"Even though we're richer than ever before, we're more insecure than ever before," and a greater emphasis on the issue in seminaries would have only a limited impact, he said.

Seminaries are already doing more to boost charitable giving, Markham continued. "The vast majority of seminaries offer courses on stewardship," he said, that help future clergy motivate others to give and overcome what nervousness they may have about asking congregants to share their wealth.