

Crime time: Embezzlers in the church

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

Suppose you wanted to do something big for the world mission of all Anglicans, independents, marginal Christians, Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics. Suppose you were given \$1.4 million to spend today and each day, what would that buy?

The experts figured out that with today's amount you could place 286,000 Bibles in China. Or you could save up a year of \$1.4 million days and have enough money to sponsor 17,400 missionaries at \$30,000 a year each. If you want to pay the pittances that go to "national workers," which means \$100 per month average, you could field 5.2 million new workers.

Of course, only 5 percent of Christian giving goes to "foreign missions," and globally the average Christian gives only \$98 per year. If you wanted to match all of this day's Christian donations, you could spend \$26 million, or \$19 billion in all of 2003. The projection for 2025 is that \$65 billion will be available for all causes.

By 2025, unless human nature changes and antitheft devices improve, auto theft is projected to cost \$20 billion a year, and so is pornography. Your \$65 billion will even outpace amounts going to cocaine traffic, envisioned as consuming \$40 billion that year.

That 5 percent of total giving that goes to world mission each year is matched by the percentage that goes to a surprising and regrettable source: ecclesiastical crime. I am citing figures from the World Evangelism Research Center, where the good people I have called "the experts" care about both missions and statistics. Since I don't trust my math, you might check them out at: www.he.net/~dyngrafx/Megatr_15.html

There, David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson monitor the computers. They can also provide a 934-page, tri-columned, small-print compilation, *World Christian Trends* a.d. 30–a.d. 2200, for a price that amounts to the cost of a split second of prime ecclesiastical crime time. (It's c/o William Carey Library, P.O. Box 40129, Pasadena CA 91114.)

Barrett and Johnson say that their figures derive from, for example, calculations of televangelist scandals, Ponzi schemes, embezzlements among counters in local churches, and "third-world nationals who see Western money as an easy target and set up bogus ministries to attract donations." Barrett and Johnson also offer "Suggested Topics of Discussion" on how to prevent crime, how agencies can recover from financial scandals, and how small ministries can implement control systems. I'd add a fourth topic: how to sign on Attorney-General John Ashcroft, who is alert to things religious and is efficient about snooping on citizens. He may even have his eye on "third-world nationals."

Suppose Barrett and Johnson have it all a bit—say, 100 times—wrong. Suppose their estimate were then only one-100th of the \$19,000,000,000, or as I like to put it, nineteen thousand million dollars that they think will get siphoned off by embezzlers, fixers and others this year. That's still an awful lot of money.

After all that supposing, I have one more topic for discussion: How do they and their research team know if the person who counts the money is sneaky, whether the embezzler is uncaught, or if the "third-world national" entrepreneur is skimming? How do Barrett and Johnson know what to feed into the computers so these figures come out?