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Missions giving not keeping up with church offering increases

By Mark Wingfield

(ABP) -- The amount of money flowing through Baptist church offering plates has increased 112 percent in the last 15 years, but the amount of money churches give to missions causes has increased at only half that rate.

An analysis of financial data reported by Southern Baptist Convention churches shows congregations nationwide are sending smaller percentages of their undesignated offerings to the Cooperative Program unified missions budget. That budget funds both state and national missions programs.

Further, designated giving to special missions offerings also has increased at only half the pace of increases in undesignated giving to church causes.

This is a trend found not only among Baptists, explained Sylvia Ronsvalle, executive vice president of empty tomb, a Champagne, Ill., ministry devoted to increasing awareness of missions funding needs. "These trends are common to the church in the United States," she said. "Churches seem to be turning inward. They seem to be emphasizing the comfort and happiness of members over the transformation of those members."

Just the facts

Here are the facts among Southern Baptist churches, as reported on the Annual Church Profile and published by the SBC Executive Committee in the convention's annuals:

-- Undesignated receipts in SBC churches grew 112 percent from 1987 to 2002, from \$3.2 billion to \$6.8 billion.

-- Total receipts in SBC churches, combining regular budget gifts and special offerings, grew 120 percent over 15 years, from \$4.3 billion to \$9.5 billion.

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-- Total missions expenditures reported by churches, including Cooperative Program, special offerings and local missions, grew 55 percent in the same period, from \$663 million to \$1 billion.

-- Gifts to the Cooperative Program nationwide, including both the portion retained by state conventions and the portion forwarded to the SBC, grew 49 percent, from \$337 million to \$502 million.

-- Designated giving to the SBC's special offerings -- primarily the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for international missions, Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American missions and the world hunger offering -- grew 56 percent, from \$109 million to \$170 million.

-- The average percentage of a church's undesignated receipts sent through the Cooperative Program decreased from 10.52 percent in 1987 to 7.39 percent in 2002. As a percentage of undesignated offerings, local churches have decreased their Cooperative Program giving by 30 percent.

That trend line more than any other is the one that worries denominational officials, missions leaders and missions workers.

"That's not a healthy trend if you want to name Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior," Ronsvalle said.

Church challenges

So what's going on? Are churches simply hogging more money for themselves while mission boards freeze appointments?

It's not that simple, according to several analysts.

"I personally feel Baptists' commitment to missions is as strong as ever, but it has been influenced by other factors," noted Clay Price, research director at the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Price has monitored these giving trends across three decades of denominational employment.

First, Price said, "as the education level of pastors and church staff has increased, so has cost of salaries and benefits."

That was echoed by Phill Martin, education director for the National Association of Church Business Administration based in Richardson.

Specifically, he said, rising health-insurance costs have wreaked havoc on church budgets. "With multiple years of 25 and 30 percent increases in the cost of health coverage, it is a significant impact on church budget issues."

Second, churches have faced increasing land and building costs.

Third, the price of keeping the lights on and the heat or air conditioning running has increased significantly.

Fourth, churches have experienced a long-term trend of members wanting to be personally involved in direct missions -- sometimes as a full or partial substitute for giving to send others.

That point was echoed by Cliff Tharp, research director at LifeWay Christian Resources and coordinator of the Annual Church Profile.

"Many more churches have groups go on trips, do volunteer missions," he noted. "That may be impacting

Cooperative Program giving, but I have nothing to quantify that."

Price recalled a book written about 30 years ago by Robert Kilgore, then director of church loans at the SBC Home Mission Board. In *How Much a Debtor*, Kilgore drew upon his banking and church experience to estimate that most churches in 1973 spent 15 percent to 20 percent of their money on local expenses, another 10 percent to 15 percent on missions, 40 percent to 50 percent on staff salaries and benefits, and 15 percent to 35 percent on debt service.

Through NACBA, Martin continues to monitor the ratio of church personnel costs to total church budget, and the portion spent on personnel continues to grow, he said, adding health insurance cost is the driver.

"As local expenses, salaries and debt have risen, there has been a squeeze on the missions portion of church budgets, including the Cooperative Program," Price explained.

More local missions?

One of the explanations churches often give for reducing Cooperative Program giving is increased expenditures on local missions.

The statistics support this assertion to a small degree. Total missions expenditures reported by churches grew 55 percent from 1987 to 2002, a better growth rate than the 49 percent gain in Cooperative Program giving. However, that small distinction pales in comparison to the 112 percent growth of undesignated receipts.

Martin, a former church business administrator who has filled out the Annual Church Profile form before, believes it may not accurately report all church missions expenditures.

Tharp, too, agrees with that caveat, noting that while the definition of what constitutes "mission expenditures" on the report is defined broadly, not all the correct data gets passed along. National data in recent years could be slightly skewed downward, he added, because two state conventions have not reported their numbers on this item.

Price is willing to give churches the benefit of the doubt and acknowledge many may not accurately report their full missions spending on the profile. Often, missions spending is spread throughout a church's budget in such a way that the person who completes the annual statistical report may not know where to gather all the data.

Yet, a clear trend still exists, Price added, noting the consistent pattern of Cooperative Program giving, total missions expenditures and designated offerings to grow at only half the rate of undesignated giving to the churches.

"The fact that all three of these have experienced about the same growth seems to be some indication that other factors have pushed or pulled these missions dollars downward," he said.

Is politics to blame?

Political tensions in Southern Baptist life over the last two decades could be explored as a factor in missions-giving trends, but Price discounted that as not a likely influence. Ronsvalle affirmed that the picture of SBC churches looks similar to what she sees in other evangelical and mainline churches regardless of whether they have experienced controversy.

Put another way, has the SBC lost missions money to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the group formed by

moderate Baptists disenfranchised from the SBC in the 1990s?

Total dollars given to the Cooperative Program did hit a brief plateau from 1991 to 1993, the same time the CBF was launched. However, in those early years, the CBF served as an alternative pass-through funding mechanism for a number of SBC ministries.

That plateau in giving also corresponded to a national economic downturn in the second half of the first Bush administration.

SBC leaders never claimed to have taken a financial hit from churches defecting to the CBF. To the contrary, the SBC has boasted of sailing along without missing a beat.

CBF supporters, meanwhile, have contended the combined missions reach of the two organizations is greater than what the SBC could have accomplished alone.

The \$8.7 million in undesignated gifts to the CBF in the fiscal year ended June 30 represents less than 2 percent of more than \$501 million given through the Cooperative Program in 2002. The undesignated gifts to the CBF represent less than 5 percent of the Cooperative Program income that flowed to the national SBC in 2002.

In 1996, the first year for which complete giving data is available for the CBF, it received \$7.4 million in undesignated gifts. Had that amount been given directly to the SBC's national causes instead -- which CBF supporters claim is unlikely -- the SBC's undesignated income would have increased by 10 percent rather than 4 percent.

Such a leap is inconsistent with the 1 percent to 4 percent gains posted by the SBC in the decade prior.

What cannot be deduced from the available data is how much of a shift in giving might have occurred between various types of Baptist churches. For example, it is possible that increases in giving to the SBC by more conservative churches have offset decreases in giving to the SBC by CBF-friendly churches.

How low can you go?

Regardless, one fact remains unchanged: The percentage of churches' undesignated receipts going to missions has dropped by one-third in 15 years.

Charted on a linear path that assumes a continued steady rate of decline, it would take Cooperative Program contributions to zero in another 30 years -- bad news for state conventions and the SBC as well.

Both Ronsvalle and Price believe that's not likely to happen, however.

"It will never reach zero," Ronsvalle said, noting her agency had generated controversy in the past by extrapolating such a course-to-zero missions giving.

Even if the Cooperative Program ceased to exist, Baptists would find a way to cooperate to fund missions, Price insisted. "Baptists have too long a history of working together to do missions. We would come back to the point of saying, 'We could do more if we pooled our money.'"

And despite the decreasing percentage of church offerings given to missions, the Cooperative Program remains a "sizable" force for missions, Price noted.

What's the answer?

If denominational bodies want to increase missions giving from churches, they need to increase feedback, suggested Ronsvalle.

"We have found, repeatedly, church members will give to missions if they understand the need," she said. "But people want to know what their money is doing when it leaves the congregation."

Most denominations are not well equipped for this type of reporting, she admitted. What's required, she suggested, is more like the statements of activity that airlines send frequent fliers.

"If you're a frequent flier, you can fly, and two weeks later, you're going to get a specific report back showing you where you've been, how many miles you flew."

On the other hand, "you can give money to your denomination and not be able to track it."

That failure combines dangerously with a trend of church members wanting to support missions efforts they not only can see but can personally participate in, added Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

"The day has long been over when churches were willing to give their money to someone else to determine what to do with it," he explained. "People want to see their money at work. It's an issue of trust. They ask, 'Why should we give our money to a bureaucracy?'"

Back to the root of all evil

While it's easy to blame churches for keeping more of the offerings for their own discretionary use, the root of the missions funding challenge lies with individual Christians, Ronsvalle asserted.

"The church, and particularly missions, is shrinking as a market share of people's spending," she said.

The average member of a Christian church in the United States gives only 2.6 percent of his or her income to the church, Ronsvalle reported.

If all church members gave a biblical tithe of 10 percent, nearly \$80 billion in additional funds would flow into missions annually, she said.

How does that figure compare with world need? By some estimates, a mere \$2.5 billion could stop the deaths of 11 million children worldwide under age 5. An \$80 billion investment could end the worst cases of world poverty, empty tomb contends.

Ronsvalle wishes churches not only would give more money to missions, but would challenge Christians to be better stewards of their financial resources.

"There has been a vacuum of leadership on the national level to raise people's eyes off their own individual needs," she said. "There has been a lack of comprehensive vision to challenge people to be willing to invest in the kingdom" of God.

Church leaders ought to more boldly counsel church members who seek fulfillment through consumerism, Ronsvalle urged, suggesting that buying a third car and moving to a bigger house is not the stairway to heaven.

"We don't really believe what we say we do," she concluded. "Because if we did, we'd be spending our money differently."

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Dennehy's father files lawsuit against Baylor, claiming 'conspiracy' contributed to son's death

By ABP staff

HOUSTON (ABP) - In a lawsuit filed August 22 in Harris County, the father of slain Baylor University basketball player Patrick Dennehy claims his son's decision to expose improprieties in the basketball program led to threats against him, a cover-up and ultimately to his murder.

Patrick Dennehy Sr. has filed a wrongful death suit against Baylor and its board of regents, President Robert Sloan, board chairman Drayton McLane Jr., former athletic director Tom Stanton, former basketball coach Dave Bliss, Bliss assistants Doug Ash and Rodney Belcher, assistant athletic director Paul Bradshaw and Baylor booster William Stevens. He alleges the defendants "intentionally, knowingly and/or recklessly" caused the 21-year-old Dennehy's death and then formed a "conspiracy" to conceal the truth about it.

The younger Dennehy disappeared in mid-June and his body was found July 25 in a gravel pit outside of Waco. Former teammate, Carlton Dotson, is charged with shooting him twice in the head and is being held in a Maryland jail.

The suit claims Dennehy voiced concerns about wrongdoings in the basketball program to university administration and to the athletic department, but received no response. When he "determined that it would be up to him to expose the improprieties," the suit says, he began receiving threats that made him fearful for his life. When another attempt to enlist the help of "his Baylor family" failed, Dennehy took steps to protect himself.

Last year Bliss persuaded Dennehy to give up his scholarship to another player, and then received money from a third party to help pay his tuition. Bliss has admitted to his involvement in the improper payments to Dennehy, but secretly recorded tapes made during the investigation reveal Bliss tried to get players and assistant coach Abar Rouse to go along with a plan to say Dennehy made the money as a drug dealer.

Rouse told the Baylor committee investigating the program that Bliss gave him "talking points" to go over with the players. When Rouse objected to portraying Dennehy as a drug dealer, he said Bliss implied he would be fired if he didn't cooperate.

The lawsuit alleges that such behavior by Coach Bliss "created an unsafe atmosphere for the student athletes and ultimately led to the murder of Patrick Dennehy Jr."

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**Moore: Defender of faith
or dangerous demagogue?**

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By Robert Marus and Greg Warner

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- There's not much in-between when it comes to views on Roy Moore, Alabama's "Ten Commandments judge." Most people with an opinion on him seem to think he's either a latter-day Martin Luther King, Jr., or a latter-day George Wallace.

Opinions don't get much more divergent than that. King used civil disobedience to promote the civil-rights movement; Wallace defied federal court orders to hinder civil rights.

The state's chief justice has been stripped of his duties temporarily while a court charged with handling cases involving judicial ethics decides whether to remove him permanently from his position. The state's Judicial Ethics Commission formally charged Moore Aug. 22 with six counts of conduct unbecoming a judge. The charges stem from his pointed refusal to obey a federal court's order to remove a 5,280-lb. granite monument to a Protestant version of the Ten Commandments from the rotunda of the state judicial building in Montgomery.

Hundreds of protesters have gathered in Montgomery to pray and hold rallies and vigils outside the building, which has been closed to the general public. Many are vowing to engage in civil disobedience in an attempt to prevent the monument's removal.

Barbara Labbous, 56, of Prattville, Ala., was among the protestors gathered on Aug. 23. Her job was to enlist protesters for the "action list" -- those willing to come to the courthouse at a moment's notice and try to prevent the removal of the statue through civil disobedience. She told Associated Baptist Press the people came from as far away as California and Massachusetts, but the majority were from Alabama. "These are people who maybe have never taken a stand but feel like the federal government has gone too far this time," she said.

Thirty-two-year-old Moody, Ala., resident Kim Isbell said she was in Montgomery "to support Roy Moore so all the liberals will see there are people in America that believe in God."

But Birmingham-area minister Jim Evans offered a slightly less heroic assessment of Moore and his actions. "If he's motivated by a genuine concern about the Scriptures, then he's terribly misguided," Evans, pastor of Crosscreek Baptist Church in Pelham, Ala., said in a phone interview. "And if he's motivated by political ambition and he's using this to advance himself, then shame on him, because that's the kind of worst example of the callous use of things sacred."

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson declared the monument a violation of the Constitution's ban on government endorsement of religion. Moore won national notoriety in the late 1990s by fighting similar battles over a Ten Commandments plaque he had placed in his courtroom as a county judge.

Moore was elected chief justice in 2000, calling himself "the Ten Commandments judge" in campaign advertisements. In 2001, he had the monument carved and placed in the building in the middle of the night, without the knowledge or consent of the eight other justices on the state supreme court.

Moore, who has claimed the federal courts have no jurisdiction to act on the matter, said he was bound to defy the order by his oath of office. "We must acknowledge God in the public sector because the state constitution explicitly requires us to do so," Moore said in an Aug. 25 *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece.

Noting that the Alabama Constitution invokes "the favor and guidance of Almighty God," Moore said his monument was simply a way of upholding that constitution. "By telling the state of Alabama that it may not acknowledge God, Judge Thompson effectively dismantled the justice system of the state. Judge Thompson never declared the Alabama Constitution unconstitutional, but the essence of his ruling was to prohibit judicial

officers from obeying the very constitution they are sworn to uphold."

But, according to a Birmingham legal scholar, Moore's case is "grossly oversimplified." Chriss Doss, director of the Center for Study of Law and Church at Samford University and an ordained Baptist minister, said Moore's insistence on the state's acknowledging God via such a monument is a bit arrogant.

"I think he's very sincere in saying 'I determine how we acknowledge God -- how the state acknowledges God,'" Doss said in a telephone interview. "And I suspect that, when he does that, he is saying that the state should [acknowledge God], and he is the one to determine [how to do] that. And that is a little bit overly ambitious of him."

But Jay Wolf, pastor of First Baptist Church of Montgomery, said Moore's cause is just and that the chief justice is sincere. "America -- by its customs, laws, tradition and people -- is a Christian nation," Wolf said in a telephone interview. "The symbol of the Ten Commandments being removed from a government building is the symbol of our turning our back as a nation on our creator and preserver. And I think it boils down to that simple fact."

Like Moore, Wolf argued that Thompson's application of the First Amendment's ban on government endorsement of religion to the states is wrong, because the Constitution's framers merely intended to prevent establishment of a national government-sanctioned religion, such as the Church of England.

"They never tried to take God out of government," Wolf said. "Our Founding Fathers would basically say that there is a God, he has expressed himself in Jesus Christ, and there are basic laws that are immutable" that are represented by the Ten Commandments.

But a lawyer with a Baptist church-state watchdog group said Wolf's and Moore's assessments of religious freedom in American history are off-base. "The [First Amendment's] establishment clause means that government can't endorse or promote religion and should not take sides in religious matters. Our freedom of conscience depends on it," said Holly Hollman, general counsel for the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Hollman said it is a well-established principle from federal case law on church-state issues that the First Amendment applies to state governments as well as the national government.

"Religion is too important to be left to public officials, who are tempted to play politics" with it, she said.

But Wolf contended that without the "moral foundation of law" represented by the commandments, America would eventually descend into moral chaos. "We are entering a more and more godless, pagan era," he said. "It's all woven together, so when you start factoring out God and the absolutes, I'm afraid that we're on a track like that."

News accounts have taken note of Moore supporters kneeling in prayer before the monument. One even reportedly said he would risk his life for the statue's survival. That has led Evans and others to charge that Moore is inspiring the very kind of idolatry that the Ten Commandments themselves ban. "It's just an example of pure idol worship," the Pelham pastor said. Doss agreed. While obeying the commandments contributes to moral order, he said, "How does it further this truth by having a monument like that?"

"In fact," he continued, "I think that comes very close to idolatry, or that there's something magical -- that if we just put that monument at the right place, it's going to work all kinds of great things. And I don't buy that at all."

But Kim Isbell, the 32-year-old protester and preacher's daughter, said she didn't understand religious opposition to Moore's monument. "I don't see how a Christian couldn't want it to be there," she said. Asked if she was concerned about how it might make citizens of non-Christian faiths feel when entering the courthouse, she replied, "But our country wasn't founded on them."

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Moore suspended as chief justice as monument's days appear numbered

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore's monument to the Ten Commandments was still in the state judicial building at the end of the day Aug. 22 -- but he wasn't.

Moore was suspended, with pay, from his duties as head of the Alabama Supreme Court after the state's Judicial Inquiry Commission filed a six-count charge against him for violating judicial ethics. The suspension will last at least 10 days. Moore will be prosecuted in the Alabama Court of the Judiciary -- a group convened for the purpose of adjudicating cases against judges.

That court may decide to relieve Moore of his duties permanently.

The charges of judicial misconduct stem from Moore's defiance of a federal court order. He balked when a federal judge ordered a 5,280-lb. granite depiction of the Protestant King James translation of the Ten Commandments removed from the public areas of the building by midnight on Aug. 20. But Moore's colleagues on the Alabama Supreme Court ended the stand-off by unanimously overruling him Aug. 21.

After a special conference Aug. 21, the court's eight associate justices ordered the building manager to remove the monument from the rotunda as soon as was practical.

Compounding the problem of where and how to move a two-ton piece of granite are threats of civil disobedience from supporters of Moore, who have gathered in Montgomery from around the country. Many of them already have been arrested for refusing to end prayer vigils and leave the building as it was closing.

Moore, a Southern Baptist layman, placed the monument in the center of the building's rotunda during the summer of 2001 -- without the associate justices' consent or knowledge. He then was sued by a coalition of civil-rights groups, acting on the behalf of three Montgomery attorneys.

In November, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson declared the display a violation of the Constitution's ban on government endorsement of religion. After being upheld unanimously by a panel of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Thompson ordered the monument removed by Aug. 20, threatening to levy stiff fines against the state if Moore did not comply with his injunction.

Moore refused, saying to do so would violate the state constitution, which he says requires the state to "acknowledge God" as the source of law.

But the eight associate justices -- seven of them, like Moore, Republicans -- invoked a little-used Alabama law that allows them to overrule an administrative decision of the chief justice. The building manager placed

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partitions to block the monument from public view on Aug. 21.

In their order, his peers issued a stern rebuke to Moore. "The justices of this court are bound by solemn oath to follow the law, whether they agree or disagree with it," they said. Moore's continued failure to comply with a higher court's order "would impair the authority and ability of all the courts of this state to enforce their judgments," they added.

In a statement released through a spokesman, Moore said of the move to hide the monument from view, "This is an example of what is happening in this country: the acknowledgment of God as the moral foundation of law in this nation is being hidden from us."

In an Aug. 22 conference call, attorneys for the plaintiffs who sued for the monument's removal agreed not to press immediately for contempt-of-court charges against Moore, thus sparing the cash-strapped state the fines. "Our concern all along has been compliance with the Constitution. Once the monument has been removed, our concerns will have been addressed," said Ayesha Khan of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, according to the Associated Press.

Khan and the other plaintiffs' attorneys reportedly expressed assurance that the monument will be gone before the Labor Day holiday.

Alabama Attorney General Bill Pryor, himself a Republican, a Catholic and a previous defender of Moore's action, endorsed the associate justices' decision after it was announced. "The taxpayers of this state should not be punished for the refusal of the chief justice to follow a federal court order," he said.

Pryor's office will prosecute Moore in the Court of the Judiciary.

The state could incur fines to exceed \$1 billion in the first four months if the monument is not removed, said Gov. Bob Riley.

Riley, also a Southern Baptist, released an Aug. 21 statement saying, "Although I fundamentally disagree with what the federal courts have ordered, the state Supreme Court was correct in unanimously voting to uphold the rule of law." He added that, "Because we are a society of laws, the Alabama Supreme Court has a duty to comply with the federal court order, whether they agree with it or not."

However, Riley also said he would be willing to file a friend-of-the-court brief in Moore's behalf asking the U.S. Supreme Court to review the ruling.

Moore ran out of legal options for keeping the monument in place for the immediate future late on the afternoon of Aug. 20 when that court declined to delay implementation of Thompson's order pending Moore's appeal.

The U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled directly on a case about the display of the Ten Commandments in a public building. But lower federal courts have ruled consistently that such displays may be permissible as long as they would not, to a reasonable viewer, convey an endorsement of Christianity over other religions and as long as they appear as part of a larger display with other historic legal documents. Such a display appears on a frieze at the Supreme Court building itself.

CLARIFICATION:

One sentence in the Aug. 25 article, "BGCT to create funding channel for some former missionaries," stated that the funding channel for former missionaries "will become part of a new, as-yet-unnamed missions network of the BGCT." The decision about whether or not to include the funding channel as part of the network will be made by the network's board of directors.

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