

Church giving seen rebounding, but Catholic picture may be different

WASHINGTON - Church giving is beginning to rebound from challenges posed by the recession, according to a new survey involving mostly Protestant churches.

In the third annual "State of the Plate" survey, which included responses from more than 1,500 congregations, 43 percent of the responding churches said donations were up in 2010, 39 percent said they were down and 18 percent said they remained the same as the year before.

"There is good news here but also some continuing bad news," said Brian Kluth, founder of Maximum Generosity who began the State of the Plate surveys in 2009 to measure the effects of the recession on church giving. Christianity Today International and the Evangelical Council for Financial Responsibility joined with Kluth's group in soliciting responses to the latest survey from among their constituencies.

Because the three organizations work primarily with Protestant congregations, most of the responses came from evangelical (24 percent), Baptist (23 percent), nondenominational (21 percent), mainline Protestant (13 percent) or charismatic/Pentecostal churches (12 percent). Only 2 percent of the responding congregations described themselves as Catholic or Orthodox.

But a Catholic expert in giving said the survey results might or might not reflect Catholic giving patterns.

"Despite the economy, people support causes to which they feel the most attachment and engagement," said James K. Kelley, president of the International Catholic Stewardship Council.

Noting that giving increased during eight of the 10 years of the Great Depression, Kelley said "offertory collections should not be down at this time" as long as churches are welcoming and community-building places that educate parishioners properly about the need to return their time, talent and treasure to God.

Kelley, who is director of development for the Diocese of Charlotte, N.C., said the stewardship council urges Catholic parishes to follow the eight recommendations of Charles Zech, director of the Center for the Study of Church Management at Villanova University, in his 2006 book, "Why Catholics Don't Give And What Can Be Done About It," and subsequent publications.

Zech outlines "the eight things the strongest parishes did," Kelley said, and found that if other parishes adopt those practices they should not be damaged by a tough economy.

A key "best practice" is financial accountability and transparency, he said, adding that "if you communicate well and often, our experience is the offertory does not go down."

The State of the Plate survey found that declines in church giving were greatest in the Southeast states - West Virginia south to Florida and as far west as Louisiana. In the previous two surveys, the Pacific states - California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii - were found to be hardest hit in terms of declining church collections.

Asked about a proposed plan by the federal government to change the deductibility of charitable contributions, 91 percent of the respondents expressed concern that this would negatively impact giving.

The survey results were released March 30 in a webinar for media. A related "View from the Pew" survey on the financial, debt and giving patterns in individual Christian households was to be released sometime in April.

Because the respondents were self-selected and constituency-based rather than random, there was no margin of error given for the survey.