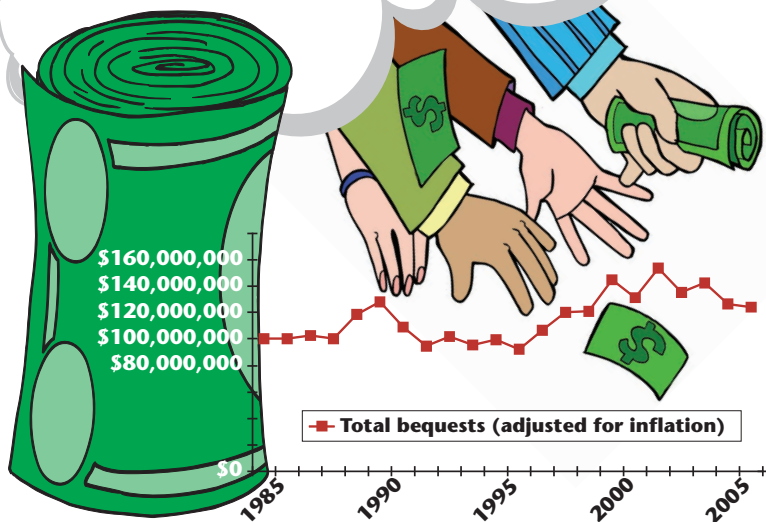


GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



GRAPHICS BY KATE ANYAN

What the research shows

Viewed nationally, bequests are a small but relatively steady source of income for Presbyterian congregations, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Viewed from the perspective of individual congregations, however, bequests have a “feast or famine” quality to them. Congregations cannot depend on them in the way they can count on pledges. In fact, only 9 percent received bequests in each of the last three years. Additionally, amounts vary widely from bequest to bequest, and are often small: in 2005, 57 percent of congregations receiving bequests received \$10,000 or less from them.

Perhaps that explains why so few congregations have programs that encourage members to “remember the church” in their wills. Just 25 percent do, a figure that has remained more or less constant since we began asking about it almost 20 years ago. Yet we have evidence suggesting that such programs work: 65 percent of congregations that had a wills-emphasis program in 1994 received at least one bequest in either 2003, 2004 or 2005, compared to only 44 percent of other congregations.

While an effort that doubles or even triples the number of bequests would hardly put Presbyterian generosity in the same league as Warren Buffett, an additional \$100 or \$200 million dollars annually is hardly chicken feed. Imagine the good that Presbyterian congregations could do with such a windfall! □

Leaving a legacy

Businessman Warren Buffett recently made news by announcing plans to give away the bulk of his wealth—nearly \$38 billion—over the next few years. While that’s a mind-boggling sum to most of us, it turns out that it’s a tiny fraction of the assets that older Americans are likely to redistribute over the next several decades. I’ve seen estimates as high as \$41 trillion. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the church got a share of that wealth transfer?

Actually, many Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations are already benefiting from bequests. In 2005, 2,840 congregations (26 percent) reported bequests totaling \$124 million. That works out to an average of \$43,800 for these congregations, or \$144 per member. Spread over the entire PCUSA, the averages are \$11,300 per congregation and \$54 per member. The full amount is 4 percent of total receipts for all congregations, and 11 percent for those that received a bequest.

A survey among a subset of congregations receiving bequests

indicates that most of them had received just one bequest (64 percent), and of the rest, most had received only two (20 percent) or three (7 percent). Only 1 percent reported receiving more than 10 bequests in 2005. Amounts received range from less than \$20 to \$6 million.

The \$124 million bequest total for 2005 compares to \$92 million in 1995 (all dollar amounts are in 2005 dollars to adjust for inflation) and \$100 million in 1985. While there is some fluctuation from year to year, as the figure shows, the long-term trend is clearly upward, especially when the focus is on amounts bequeathed per member. Nevertheless, in the last few years the pattern has been flat or even slightly downward.

While the amount given may be trending slightly downward, other evidence makes clear that bequests will not disappear. A 2005 survey of individual Presbyterians found that 13 percent of members, 16 percent of elders on session, and 23 percent of pastors have wills that include bequests to theirs or another PCUSA congregation.

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