

WHY PRESBYTERIANS GIVE

Presbyterians gave more than \$2 billion to their congregations last year, or an average of around \$936 per member. A simple average, however, masks the wide range of amounts given, from nothing by some members to tens of thousands of dollars by others. Clearly income has some effect on giving: you cannot give what you do not have. But relative to income, the range of giving is still wide, from zero to well over 10 percent. Why do some people “give till it hurts” while others cannot be bothered?

HIGHEST MOTIVATORS

We asked Presbyterians on a 2003 survey to select the two factors, from a list of 10, that “influence you the most in your decisions about giving to your congregation.” Then we looked at how members who give a relatively large share of their family income, 10 percent or more, differ from those who give less than four percent.

The results show that faith is a strong motivator for those who give the most (“largest givers”). Two-thirds of those who give 10 percent or more cite *a sense of gratitude for God’s love and goodness** as a factor influencing their giving decisions.

The second most-chosen factor among high-percentage givers is *wanting to contribute to God’s work in the world*. Only about half as many low-percentage givers (those who give less than four percent of their family income to their congregations) cite either of these factors.

The Bible’s teaching on giving is also chosen by a sizable percentage of the largest givers, but by only nine percent of the smallest givers.

LOWER MOTIVATORS

The most-chosen factor among the smallest givers is *a sense of obligation to support the work here*. Other factors chosen by more of the smallest than largest givers are *a sense of gratitude for help I or my family have received here*, *hearing about specific needs*, and *habit or custom*.

Factors chosen by very few of any members are *the congregation’s or the pastor’s urging to give* and *the tax benefits I receive for my contributions*.

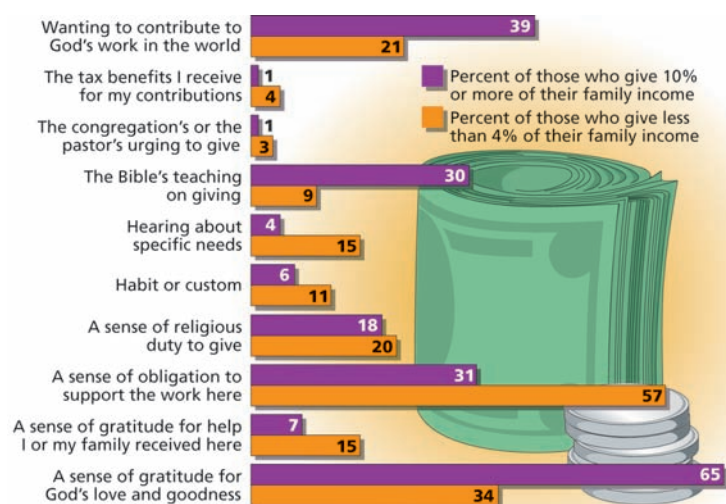
WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Explicit faith considerations motivate more of those who give relatively high percentages of their incomes. More personal or pragmatic concerns are cited as motivators by those who give the least.

Taken at face value, the findings suggest no quick fix for increasing the relative amounts members give to the church. The effect of direct appeals for specific program needs or trying to instill a sense of obligation will likely be limited, and mainly among those giving the least. The best approach may be long-term and indirect— focusing on the core mission of being God’s people. Members seem to be saying, if you increase our awareness of what God has done for us and what God wants us to do for others, greater giving will follow.

Jack Marcum is associate for survey research, Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

** The phrases in italics indicate the response choices on the Presbyterian Panel questionnaires.*



This article originally ran in the Presbyterians Today, August 2004 issue.