

Study Finds Decline in Tithing

Linda Pateo of Gardendale, Alabama, says she and her husband, Robert, try to give 5 percent of their income to their church and 5 percent to Christian charities, but it's difficult with three children in college.

"I have strong feelings that God expects first fruits," Pateo said. "Sometimes we fall short. It's something we are all called to do."

A recent poll by pollster George Barna shows that only 5 percent of Americans say they tithe, or give at least 10 percent of their income to religious congregations and charitable groups.

According to other studies on church giving, congregants give an average of 2.58 percent of their income to their churches. That's down from 3.11 percent of their income in 1968, according to studies published by Empty Tomb, a ministry that studies church finances.

"Tithing is in decline," says William Hull, a research professor at Samford University. "The older generation was taught to tithe. It's not being taught very much any more."

Decades ago the church was a focal point of philanthropy. Now parachurch ministries, schools, and charitable agencies compete for those dollars, he said.

"The church has been losing market share," said Sylvia Ronsvalle, executive vice-president of Empty Tomb. "That concerns us. There could be a crisis in the very heart of the church."

Many major mainline denominations are suffering budget shortfalls. "The churches don't get enough money to send on to headquarters," Hull said.

Donors and local churches may also reduce the amount of money they forward to denominational headquarters because of disputes over national church policies. "In many cases it's a boycott," Hull said. □