

Struggling Economy Causes Americans to Cut Back on Church Donations

Americans have cut back on donations and tithing to churches as the economic downturn tests the generosity of donors, a new study found. The latest study by Barna Group shows three out of ten Americans are reducing their giving to churches, a statistic virtually unchanged from last year, when giving was at an all-time low since the economic crisis began. Thirty percent of respondents to the April 2011 survey said they had reduced their giving to a church or religious center within the past three months, compared to 29 percent in January 2010. In the immediate aftermath of the economic crisis in November 2008, only 20 percent said they had cut back giving to a church or religious center.

About one-quarter of Americans have now stopped all giving to churches. "Donors have cut back significantly in their giving to churches and nonprofits. Now, even as the economy shows some signs of improvement, donors are still reluctant to return to their previous levels of generosity," said David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group. Three-quarters of Americans believe the economy will take at least two years to recover.

The Barna study also reported that only 4 percent of Americans now give 10 percent of their income to churches, a drop from last year's rate of 7 percent. The national tithing rate has typically been 5 to 7 percent of Americans over the past decade.

An April survey by the National Association of Evangelicals found that a majority of its leadership doesn't think tithing is required by the Bible.

"Most Americans think of their giving as secondary to their survival," said Kinnaman. "Yet, from a biblical perspective, generosity should be part of Christians' fundamental response to the downturn."

This Month You Can . . . Support "See You at the Pole"

See You at the Pole (SYATP) is a student-initiated and student-led movement that started in the Fort Worth suburb of Burleson, Texas, in 1990. It brings students to their school flagpoles to intercede for their leaders, schools, and families, asking God to bring moral and spiritual awakening to their campuses and communities. SYATP serves as a springboard for unity by joining students in prayer at the beginning of the school year. Challenging youth to take leadership on their campus is always a good idea. Every year, the event offers a fresh challenge for them to minister to their friends. This year's SYATP will be observed on Wednesday, September 28, 2011 with the theme "CONVERGE."

Church congregations nationwide can show support for SYATP by sponsoring special Campus Challenge Sunday commissioning services the weekend before the event. Participants will recognize and pray for Christian students and educators in their congregations. Campus Challenge Sunday resources, including sermon outlines and program ideas, have been created by the National Network of Youth Ministries and can be downloaded free from www.everyschool.com.

Everything necessary for students to plan and promote a successful SYATP is available free at www.syatp.com. Additional promotional resources can be ordered online or by calling 817-447-7526.

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CHURCH AROUND THE WORLD

NEWS OF SIGNIFICANCE TO CHRISTIANS

Some news that's encouraging—some disturbing. Please read with discernment. Watch and pray.

Focus on ... *Syria*

Syria is an ancient land, and its capital, Damascus, is known as the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Syrians have endured decades of economic hardship, political repression, and corruption under the rule of the al-Assad family, which has been in power since 1971. Emergency law has been in place since 1963. Pro-democracy protests began in March of 2011, and human rights observers claim that 800 have been killed and more than 10,000 arrested. Christians make up 10 percent of Syria's population, and few have joined the protests, having been generally well treated by the secular Baathist party.

As demonstrations continue, Christians are fearful that a radical Islamic government might replace the current ruling party. A Syrian church leader appealed to Western leaders, "Ask the heads of state of Arab countries to work for real development, but don't encourage revolutions. The situation has deteriorated into organized crime, robbery, fear, terror being spread, rumors of threats to churches. Fundamentalist groups are threatening citizens and wanting to create 'Islamic Emirates.' Christians will be the first victims of these revolutions, especially in Syria. A new wave of emigration will follow immediately."

Some fear that, for Christians, a post-Assad Syria could deteriorate like post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. Saddam, like current

Syrian president Bashir al-Assad, restrained the influence of militant Islamists, but after his fall they were free to wreak havoc on the Christian community; hundreds of thousands of Christians were consequently forced to flee the violence. Many of them went to Syria, which has a long history of welcoming Christian refugees, but the current unrest is driving some back to their dangerous homeland.

Christians in Syria have been able to worship and practice their faith largely without interference, although evangelism among Muslims is strongly discouraged and conversion from Islam to Christianity is forbidden by law. Pray for

- a peaceful end to the bloodshed and political turmoil
- Christians and Muslims to once again peacefully coexist in Syria
- Christians to exhibit a loving attitude toward Muslims



*You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds,
O God our savior. —PSALM 65:5*

Christians Accused of Trying to Turn Malaysia into a Christian State

Allegations that church leaders are plotting to make Christianity the official religion of Malaysia are stoking religious tensions in the Muslim-majority country once again. The accusations were quoted in the front-page story of a daily newspaper owned by the ruling party. The story claimed that Christian leaders had dinner with Penang chief minister Lim Guan Eng and discussed making Christianity Malaysia's official religion. Lim denied the claims, and his party, the Malaysian Democratic Action Party, has lodged a complaint with the police against the newspaper. "We have never asked for Malaysia to become a Christian, Hindu,

or Buddhist state," he said.

The dinner was organized by the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship, Global Day of Prayer, Marketplace Penang, and the Penang Pastors' Fellowship. Organizers insist that the only issues discussed at the dinner related to corruption and bribery in the marketplace and had nothing to do with Christianity's position in Malaysia. "The Christian community in Penang is disturbed by the unwarranted and unsupported claims," they said. Relations remain volatile between Malaysia's Muslims and Christians, who make up only 10 percent of the population.

Presbyterians Vote to Clear Way for Gay Clergy

Prominent pro-homosexual groups are applauding a decision by the Presbyterian Church (USA) that opens the door for churches in that denomination to ordain individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

The PC (USA) has struck down a requirement that unmarried clergy remain celibate, removing a key barrier for homosexuals who want to be ordained. Ordination standards under the new policy removed the constitutional requirement that all ministers, elders, and deacons live in "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" and replaced it with "joyful submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life." The change required ratification from the majority of the denomination's 173 regional districts, known as presbyteries.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force described the move as a "gift" that reflects the PC (USA)'s "sacred persistence, its faithful pursuit of justice, and its joyful celebration of the gifts God has given to [LGBT] persons called to ministry." More Light Presbyterians, a pro-LGBT group within the denomination, hailed the change, saying that it re-

stores the denomination's "long-standing emphasis upon faith and character" regarding ordination. "Now, faithful and qualified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Presbyterians can openly serve the church with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love," noted a spokesperson for More Light Presbyterians.

A conservative Christian group is predicting the PC (USA) will pay a price for its decision to open its pulpits to homosexuals. Alan Wisdom, vice president of the Institute on Religion & Democracy, said, "It is very distressing to see the Presbyterian Church (USA), one of our most historic mainline churches, going along with the culture and dropping its affirmation of the historic Christian teaching on marriage and sexuality."

A number of coalitions within the denomination also fought to maintain the traditional standard of sexuality.

In its departure from traditional biblical teachings on sexuality, the PC (USA) follows the declining memberships of the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—all of which have chosen to "go along with the culture" in the area of sexuality.

Christians under Attack from Anti-Government Protesters in Syria

Christian communities across Syria have been attacked by anti-government protesters in recent weeks. International Christian Concern says that protesters are being led by hard-line Islamists and that Christians have come under pressure to either join in protests demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad or leave the country.

Masked men on motorcycles opened fire on a home in a Christian village outside Dara'a, in southern Syria. A source said

that churches had received threatening letters. In Al Karak, Muslim Salafis forced villagers to join the protests and to remove pictures of the president from their homes. One man who refused was reportedly found hanged on his front porch the next morning. Observers have said that Christians will be the first to pay the price of terrorism. A Syrian Christian leader said, "If Muslim Salafis gain political influence, they will make sure that there will be no trace of Christianity in Syria."

Suspected Drug Traffickers Kidnap Pastor

Worshippers were gathered at the Christian Center El Shaddai in the Mexican city of Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacan, when four masked men burst in, firing machine guns into the air. Before the frightened believers realized what was happening, their pastor, Josué Ramírez Santiago, had been kidnapped. The kidnapers are suspected drug traffickers who demanded a ransom of \$1.7 million. Even if Santiago's family could raise such an immense sum, payment would not guarantee that he would be returned alive.

Arturo Farela, director of the National Fraternity of Evangelical Churches, said that organized crime syndicates and

drug cartels target Christians because they view churches as revenue centers and because churches support programs for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and alcoholics.

Farela stated that 100 Mexican clergymen have been kidnapped in recent years, with 15 of them losing their lives to organized crime. The college-age daughter of a prominent pastor in Mexico City was held by kidnapers for a week, but was released when the criminals grew tired of her father's prayers every time they telephoned him; the family has not revealed whether money was given for her return.

Fears of "Grave Future" for Egypt's Christians

After violent clashes in Cairo that left at least four Christians dead and churches ablaze, a human rights organization is warning of a "grave future" for Egypt's Christians unless the government takes immediate action. Aidan Clay, of International Christian Concern, warned that Islamic militants are becoming bolder "because the law is not being applied and criminals are not being brought to justice. While the majority of Egyptian Christians participated in the revolution, they were uncertain what the future held," he said. "That uncertainty has turned to fear as Islamic militants have taken advantage of newfound freedoms

by imposing a radical agenda and attacking anything they view as contrary to their Islamic doctrine."

Egypt's caretaker government has promised to handle the perpetrators of the Cairo clashes with an "iron hand," with around 190 arrested to stand trial. It also announced that it will enact a new law making it easier for Christians to build churches and will ban demonstrations and gatherings outside places of worship. The government also plans to impose a ban on religious slogans in the run-up to the country's first parliamentary elections since the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak.