A provocative study of tithing trends in Australia

Robert McIver and Stephen Currow



Robert McIver, Ph.D., is senior lecturer in Biblical studies at Avondale College, New South Wales, Australia.



Stephen Currow, D.Min., is senior lecturer in ministry and mission, Avondale College, New South Wales, Australia

If tithe receipts in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are going up each year as they are, how can this be bad news? It is if tithe does not go up as fast as wages and costs. In the Australian Seventh-day Adventist Church, tithe has actually declined about 45 percent in the last 20 years when compared to wages that are earned by church members. A similar decline may be noted in the Adventist Church in many other western nations, including the United States.

Our research shows that a large number of faithful tithe returners in all age groups attend church, including the young. Yet, the younger you are, the less likely you are to return tithe. Further, the tithe-giving behavior of those over 50 is markedly different from that of the under 50 member. Approximately 59 percent of tithe comes from the over 50 group, who earn about 34 percent of the total income realized by church members as a whole. So, as the over 50 group ages, the downward trend in tithing practice is likely to continue.

Our research further shows that a considerable amount of tithe ends up in places other than the conference office treasury. Should these trends continue unchanged, the worldwide Church will be greatly restricted in its ability to perform its mission.

This article will set out the evidence for each of the above statements. It will begin with data gathered in Australia, and will then briefly analyze American tithing figures before moving on to consider the implications that this data might have for the world Church.

Tithing data in Australia

Tithe has fallen approximately 40 percent in the last 20 years relative to the income of Australian Adventists. Early in 1999, the youngest member on the executive committee of the North New South Wales Conference (NNSW) made a short speech along these lines: "My age group is not giving tithe. We need to do some research into the future financial viability of our Church." As a result of the discussion flowing from this observation, the NNSW executive committee took the initiative to fund research into the age-related demographics of tithe giving, and invited us to coordinate this research.[1]

To date, data has been gathered from four different sources: local church tithe receipts, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), a church-attender questionnaire, and conference records. Although the actual research started with the analysis of tithe receipts, the data from the Bureau of Statistics is a more logical place to begin a presentation of the research findings.

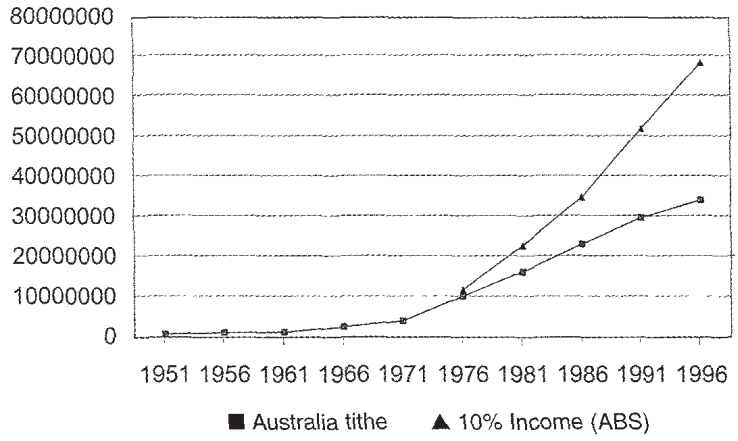
The quinquennial Australian Census seeks to assess denominational affiliation. Since 1971 there has been a separate item box for Seventh-day Adventist. The Australian Bureau of Statistics provided the number who identified themselves as Adventists on the census, broken down by their incomes and their age. These were obtained for both Australia as a whole and the territory of the NNSW Conference. These details were only available for censuses conducted since 1976, but they have made possible a comparison between income earned by church members and actual receipted tithe for a period of over 20 years.

While those who identified themselves as Adventists on the census and those who attend church are not exactly the same group of people, there is considerable overlap, and their numbers track each other closely. The census figures provide the best estimate available of Seventh-day Adventist income. One can therefore estimate what tithe returns might be if every church attender contributed 10 percent of their income. For Australia the results are shown in Graph 1.

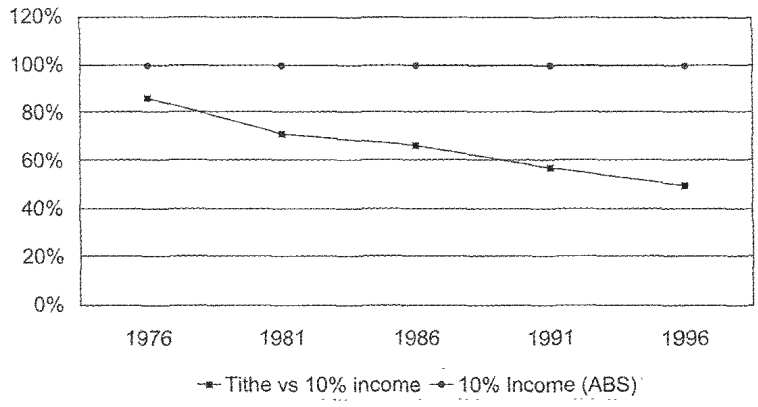
Although church figures for tithe are available since the church began in Australia, it proved convenient to graph tithe receipts back to 1951. Tithe receipts have shown a continuous upward trend, and the Australian church has been rightly proud of the faithful tithe stewardship of its members. Yet, if one fully assesses the 10 percent of actual income earned by church attenders since 1976 it is clear that this income has been increasing faster than tithe receipts. In 1976, the actual tithe was about 86 percent of what might have been estimated to be 10 percent of the church attender's income. By 1996 this had dropped to 50 percent. It is easier to see the real state of affairs if one keeps the 10 percent income constant, and draws a graph of receipted tithe as a percentage of that figure. Graph 2 illustrates this.

In other words, during the last 20 years there has been a steady decrease in the percentage of Adventist income that is returned to the Church in tithe. This decline is in the order of 40 percent. As almost all tithe is used by the Church in wages, this has meant that the Church has been unable to employ the same number of Church workers per church attender.

Graph 1 **Tithe Compared to 10% Income: Australia**



Graph 2 **Tithe as a Percentage of 10% of Income: Australia**



Age-related tithing patterns. There are any number of factors which might be put forward to explain why tithe receipts have fallen so markedly against actual incomes, but the analysis of tithe receipts show that one of the significant contributing factors is that there is an age-related difference in tithe giving patterns.

It was clear from the first that tithe receipts held by the various churches would provide valuable insights into the patterns of tithe return. Yet, a procedure had to be implemented to ensure the tithe-giver's continued confidentiality. As a result of widespread consultation and a submission to the Avondale College Human Research Ethics Committee, it was decided that the best way to do that would be to have local church treasurers perform the actual analysis, given that they already knew the identities of tithers.

Peter Colquhoun, the conference president, wrote to church boards requesting permission for the church treasurer to provide this data. Where permission was given, the church treasurers used a list put together by the pastor of those who attend church twice a month or more, together with their ages. They then reported how many from each age group on that list returned tithe and totaled up the amount of tithe that came from each age group.[2]

Church treasurers are volunteers, and the analysis they were asked to do was time consuming and tedious. Nor was the task a trivial one for pastors of larger congregations. The data provided represents the tithe-giving behavior of those attending 23 churches. Between them are 5,152 members on the church rolls. These represent 53 percent out of the total conference membership of 9,760. At the time of the study, more than 2,529 worshipers attended these churches at least twice a month,[3] with between 270 and 459 in each ten-year age bracket. Nineteen of the churches reported tithe totals from the various age groups. These totals amounted to 43 percent ($1,697,674) of the $3,955,877 tithe that was receipted through local churches in the NNSW Conference.

We thus had access to figures that gave an age-related breakdown of receipted tithe, as well as percentages of those in each age group who attend church. The most significant finding arose from a comparison between the

Table 1

Comparison of Tithe & Income by Age Group, NNSW Conference

Age	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Income (ABS)	17.1%	22.9%	25.2%	15.0%	9.1%	10.7%
Tithe (NNSW Survey)	7.3%	13.6%	19.4%	21.7%	17.9%	19.6%
Difference	-9.8%	-9.3%	-5.8%	6.7%	8.8%	8.9%

Table 2

Age	<15	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Number	9	76	132	98	135	133	107	100
Percent	1	10	17	12	17	17	13	13

percentage of total tithe contributed by a particular age group, and the percentage of total income earned by that age group. We compared the two numbers by subtracting the two percentages. This procedure would produce a zero if that age group was contributing an amount of tithe that corresponded to its income. The results are as follows (see Table 1).[4]

This graph reveals a striking difference in tithe-returning behavior between the under 50 group, and that of the over 50s. The results show that the younger a tithe payer is, the less likely he or she is to return tithe. This difference shows in the percentage of tithers in the two age groups as well: Under-50-year-olds, 42 percent. Age 50 and above, 62 percent.

While these results are significant for the whole group of church attenders, they do not provide us, of course, with the ability to predict who individually returns tithe. This age-related difference in tithe-returning behavior explains why tithe receipts have decreased against wages earned for the last 20 years. The group now aged between 40 and 50 have most likely always contributed less tithe than their elders, as has each younger group. As these groups represent more of the salary and wage earners in the Church, tithe has declined compared to wages.

Is the news all bad? No, indeed not. There are still a large number of faithful tithe returners in the younger age group. Moreover, while our survey analysis supports the conclusion that there is an age-related difference, it also reveals many aspects of church attenders' beliefs and attitudes that give hope that there still remains some basis on which an appeal can be made to reverse this downward trend in the matter of tithe returns.

Hopeful indications from surveys of church attenders

The third set of data is not yet complete. This survey is designed to discover what is motivating church members to contribute tithe. So far, we have developed a theoretical model, completed and analyzed a pilot survey, and developed a final version of the survey. We hope to get about 1,500 church attenders to complete the survey by the time we finish. To date there are about 800 of the final versions of the surveys that have been entered into our database, which are yielding between 690 and 780 usable answers to questions. About equal number of males and females answered the usable surveys, and the age distribution is illustrated in Table 2.

The surveys reveal a number of interesting preliminary results. These results again tend to support the observation that there is a difference in tithing behavior between the under 50 and the over 50 groupings. The following tables report on how much of a respondent's income is given as tithe. They also report the tithing behavior as subdivided into three other age bands: 20-39, 40-59, 60+ years (see Table 3).

The trends are clear. The older groups are more likely to tithe, and they tend to tithe a full 10 percent. Among the younger groups, while many still tithe, they frequently do not tithe the full 10 percent.

Another question that suggests interesting and significant results is where tithe has actually been directed by those who return it. The data so far is showing that the practice of directing tithe to places other than official church channels is not age related (see Table 4).

Perhaps the most significant statement on the survey was the following: "I do not currently contribute a full 10 percent tithe or do not tithe. The following changes would need to happen in the church before I would consider returning a full tithe." The following responses to this query were given, and have been ranked by placing the most frequently occurring responses first. This time, the percentages given are based on those who answered this question and are not currently returning a full 10 percent tithe (see Table 5).

Some responses to this question reveal what all pastors know already: that congregations have within them mutually exclusive expectations. How one might make "worship more relevant to today's youth" and stop

Table 3

Percent of income as tithe, NNSW

	All	20-39 yrs	40-59 yrs	60+ yrs	<50 yrs	50+ yrs
0 percent	72	23	22	7	61	11
Percent	10	11	10	4	15	4
1-9 percent	161	74	43	17	123	38
Percent	23	34	19	10	31	13
10+ percent	458	121	166	148	212	241
Percent	66	56	72	86	54	83
Column Total	691	218	231	172	396	290

"experimenting with worship" at the same time is problematic, to say the least. Nor is it always clear what "relevant to today's youth" means.

But there is one response that stands out above the rest in terms of the number of people who chose it, and this response is one about which it is possible to make some changes. Fifty-seven percent (137) out of the 241 respondents who do not tithe a full 10 percent of their income said that they thought that they should tithe, while at the same time they have not established the habit of doing so. In other words, well over half of those who are not currently tithing a full 10 percent of their income indicated that they are already persuaded that they should do so, and only need to establish a consistent way of actually tithing. Thus, while there may be need of some extended and more traditional persuasion that tithing is a biblical practice that brings blessing to the giver, perhaps more attention should be given to how the Church might facilitate tithing as a regular part of everyday life in the Church. For instance, is there a brief reminder about tithing given frequently through the year with clear information as to how to actually return the tithe? Do we allow for inspiring stories of those who have been blessed through their tithing? Further, in a society where we now have a variety of methods for conveying money between us, have we made it possible for people to contribute their tithe in as many of these ways as it is possible for us to properly facilitate? Are we well prepared for cash contributions? Are credit card or Internet facilities available? Has the local church or conference made payroll contributions possible?

Table 4

In the last 12 months, I have given tithe to:

	All	20-39	40-59	60+	<50	>=50
Tithe envelope	481	143	160	137	253	223
Percent	65	66	63	74	60	72
Budget/offering	238	73	81	64	132	104
Percent	32	33	32	35	31	34
SS Offering	186	63	53	45	114	70
Percent	25	29	21	24	27	23
ADRA	144	40	44	44	78	64
Percent	19	18	17	24	18	21
Red Cross, etc.	95	20	33	29	49	44
Percent	13	9	13	16	12	14
Mission	51	13	22	14	24	27
Percent	7	6	9	8	6	9
Youth Volunteer	42	7	20	12	22	20
Percent	6	3	8	6	5	6
Independent Ministry	29	14	7	3	20	8
Percent	4	6	3	2	5	3
Not answering	741	218	254	185	423	310

Note: The columns do not add up to 100 percent because there were often multiple responses to this survey question.

Trends in North America

While there is a serious decline in tithe returns for the Australian church, Australia is not unique. The Australian experience probably represents trends that are already affecting the worldwide Church. Take, for example, tithe returns in the North American Division. Graph 3 shows the per member tithe in North America. Per member tithe is calculated by dividing the total tithe by the number of members in the division. On the same graph are shown two other lines: one for what the graph would have looked like if tithe grew at the same rate as the cost of living (CPI[5]), and the other graph depicting tithe income if the tithe had grown at the same rate as the average North American wage.[6] Graph 3 is drawn from 1976 so that a direct comparison may be made with the Australian graphs of the same time period.

Thus it appears that in North America, total tithe has increased, but per-member giving has declined significantly compared to wages earned. In terms of the average wage, tithe has declined to 51 percent of what it was in 1976. When compared to the cost of living, it has declined to 68 percent of what it was in 1976.

No doubt there are a number of explanations that would show that these figures over-estimate the decline in per-member tithe giving. For example, not everybody on the official church rolls attends church each Sabbath, and perhaps a smaller percentage of "official members" now attend when compared to 1976. This would mean that the figures are underestimating per-attender tithing that is taking place. Perhaps wage figures for the general population do not correctly represent Adventist wages. Yet such explanations, even if true, would not account for all of the drop, and it appears quite likely that tithing per member in the U.S. has experienced a decline similar to that observed in Australia. There is no equivalent published research to that reported here, which investigates the age-related tithing patterns from North America, but anecdotal evidence supports the thesis that there is a similar age-based difference in tithing behavior in North America to that observed in Australia.[7] Again, the

older groups are more likely to tithe, and more likely to contribute a full 10 percent of their income. Thus, as in Australia, the observed downward trends are likely to continue, unless there is dramatic change.

This is particularly important because of the financial contribution made by North America to the world Church. In 1998, the year for which the latest figures were available at the writing of this article, the North American Division accounted for only 9 percent of the world membership, but it contributed 59 percent of the total tithes and offerings received by the world Church. Thus any decline in giving in North America has a disproportionately strong effect on the world Church. Furthermore, there is evidence that many of the other parts of the Church based in the developed Western countries are experiencing a similar decline in per-member tithing.[8]

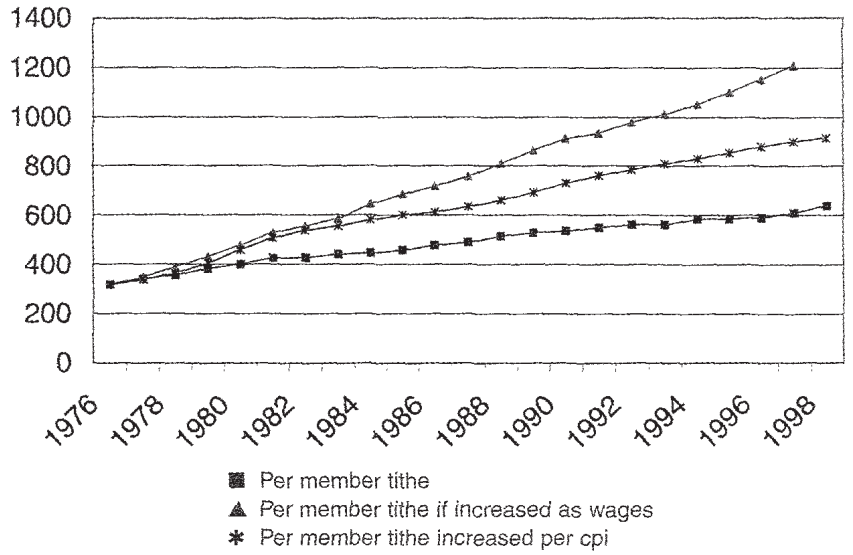
Implications for the world Church

Hence, it is quite legitimate to ask the question, "Is the Seventh-day Adventist Church facing a financial crisis?" Curiously enough, the answer is "no;" well at least, "not yet." This is because, while the per-member tithe has fallen with respect to wages and cost of living, the total number of members in North America and elsewhere has been growing. While individual members may be contributing less on average, there are more individual members contributing. Total tithe from North America has, in fact, done slightly better than the cost of living: tithe in 1998 represents 116 percent of what might be expected if it had increased as fast as the cost of living since 1976. Tithe has fallen slightly behind wages, though: in 1997[9] it was 83 percent of what might have been expected if it had grown as fast as the average wage. The Church, then, has experienced a monetary squeeze but it is not yet experiencing a crisis, especially since in the last few years the American dollar has been as strong as it has been against almost all other world currencies. The financial squeeze combined with the growth in membership has meant, however, that the needs of more church members have had to be met by fewer full-time workers. All indications are that this trend will continue.

Is this the only implication for the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church? Probably not. Many other countries throughout the world are developing more mature economies, and very significant Church growth is occurring in many parts of the world. The Adventist Church is being successful in retaining its membership through several generations, while catering to their needs with a growing network of educational and other institutions. This means that the kinds of attitudes that have led to a relative decline in the tithe in western sectors of the Church may be moving in the opposite direction in other parts of the world, just at the time when they need to be taking more responsibility for their own financial futures. All of this has important implications for the Church.

Graph 3

US per Member Tithe Compared to Wages and CPI



Some preliminary conclusions

All kinds of further implications might be seen in the research represented here. Perhaps the most important is that, with the downward trends in tithing practice, there are some indications of the potential to reverse, or at least slow. Amongst Adventist congregations there is a surprising and heartwarming reservoir of positive attitude towards the Church and its need of financial support. Particularly important is the evidence that there is still a widespread conviction and even willingness to tithe amongst non-habitual tithers. There is the potential that many will generously respond if approached in the right manner. This is genuinely encouraging.

Yet the basic trend is still something that will prove hard to reverse. In other words, the Church will need to fulfill its mission with less resources per member than it has had available in the past. We rejoice that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is expanding, but this expansion is often in those areas least able to support the Church financially. Indeed, one has to wonder, if the present trend continues, whether, as in the past, the Church will have to reduce even further its full-time work force. The challenge to Church administration is to ensure that any cutbacks in employees take place from less productive areas, and that essential roles

Table 5

	<50	>= 50	Total
I think I should tithe, but I need to get into the habit of tithing regularly	117 (62%)	20 (39%)	137 (57%)
Church needs to make its worship relevant to today's youth	50 (26%)	22 (43%)	72 (30%)
I need to be fully financially secure before I give any money to church	60 (32%)	10 (20%)	70 (29%)
Adventist Church needs to bring its doctrines & ideas into 20th century	41 (22%)	16 (31%)	57 (24%)
Adventist Church should make it possible to ordain women to ministry	33 (17%)	21 (41%)	54 (22%)
Adventist Church needs to return to sound doctrine	13 (7%)	16 (31%)	29 (12%)
Stop experimenting with worship and restore proper reverence	15 (8%)	14 (28%)	29 (12%)
Nothing would change what I do about tithing	11 (6%)	14 (28%)	25 (10%)
We need a competent pastor in our church	9 (5%)	11 (22%)	20 (8%)
I need to be convinced from Bible that Christians should tithe	13 (7%)	4 (8%)	17 (7%)
I think I should tithe, but my spouse is very strongly against giving tithe	5 (3%)	3 (6%)	8 (3%)
I tithe a full 10 percent of my income (Yes/No)	233/190	228/51	461/241

are maintained. Along with this, while the Church has begun to harness the untapped resources of volunteer service and begun to make use of the modern media, it will need to do more creative thinking about how best to perform its mission in the light of dwindling resources.

Another conclusion is the serious need for vigorous, well-conceived, and thoughtful promotion of stewardship principles and applications. This must be done not only in the traditionally wealthier countries. It is not as though the world Church has overlooked this, but every sector of the Church must find ways of improving when it comes to these things. This concern is at the heart of the self-reliance strategy adopted in the Annual Council in Bangalore in the early 1990s.

Finally, it is essential to be reminded of the words of Jesus: "'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others'" (Matt. 23:23, RSV). There are many important things on which the Church should concentrate its efforts other than on an overconcern with tithe receipts. It has an urgent message to proclaim that Jesus will soon return. Furthermore, the need of humankind to find salvation in Jesus should be our constant concern, and for that matter, the essential motive for our giving patterns. If we were concerned about doing the right thing, then, as Jesus so correctly says, we should concern ourselves with justice, mercy, and faith, without, of course, neglecting to tithe. Indeed, tithe provides the means by which the Church can accomplish its mission, and viewed thus, can be seen as our response to the great things that Jesus has already done for us. Tithing is a practical way to show commitment to Christ and to the great gospel commission. ■

1 The executive committee set up a research group consisting initially of Rob McIver (Avondale College), Steve Currow (Avondale College), Peter Colquhoun (President, NNSW Conference), and Hank Penola (Secretary-Treasurer, NNSW Conference). At the time of writing, Hank has been replaced by Bob Dale (Secretary, NNSW Conference) and Graeme Moffitt (Treasurer, NNSW Conference). Regular progress reports are given to the executive committee.

2 In actual practice the procedure was a little more complex than this. For example, denominational employees in Australia usually contribute tithe directly from their wages; their tithe does not appear in the books of local churches, and the figures relating to the number of denominational employees of each age group that attended had to be collected so that the correct adjustment to the final figures could be made. A tither was defined as one who contributed tithe six or more times a year; or who contributed significant amounts once or twice a year, such as might be the practice of a tithe-paying farmer or businessman.

3 Two large churches in the conference have over 1000 members on their rolls. The figures from both these churches were derived only from names which appeared on their church rolls. They both have many regular attenders whose names do not appear on the roll, especially College Church at Avondale College. So the number of actual attenders is under-reported. It is the behavior of the 2,529 known worshipers that is reported in this article. A better estimate of attendance may be made from the data from the 17 churches, which were able to give a reasonably accurate accounting of the numbers from various age groups on their rolls and the numbers of those groups that actually attended twice a month or more. From their figures, it appears that about 63 percent (1,794 out of 2,830) of those whose names appear on church rolls in NNSW attend church regularly. If one takes account of members who have their membership in other churches and nonmember attenders, then this figure becomes 74 percent (2,091 out of 2,830). If one considers only those over age 20, then this becomes 70 percent (1,892 out of 2,713). Probably this last figure is the most reliable.

4 Those less than 20 years of age have been excluded from this table: they earn 2.3 percent of the income, and contribute less than 2 percent of the tithe. Furthermore, the figures from several churches on numbers from this age group who attended church and who tithed appeared less reliable.

5 The U.S. CPI figures were found on the Web at http://woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/economy/calc/hist1913.html (9 January 2001) Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

6 The U.S. average wages were found at http://www.econ-line.com/tables.html (15 January 2001) Bureau of Economic Analysis.

7 Conversation with Gordon Botting, Stewardship Director for the Pacific Union Conference, which took place at the mid-2000 General Conference session, Toronto, Canada. Interestingly enough, when asked for the age at which a dramatic difference in tithing behavior occurs, Gordon immediately said 50 years of age. Ask almost any informed Australian and they will say 40 years of age. It turns out, for Australia at least, 50 years of age is correct.

8 Reinder Bruinsma of the Trans-European Division was kind enough to share figures that he has developed for giving patterns in Europe. It varies by country, but most western countries in Europe have experienced significant drops in per-member giving.

9 Figures were not available for the average American wage in 1998.