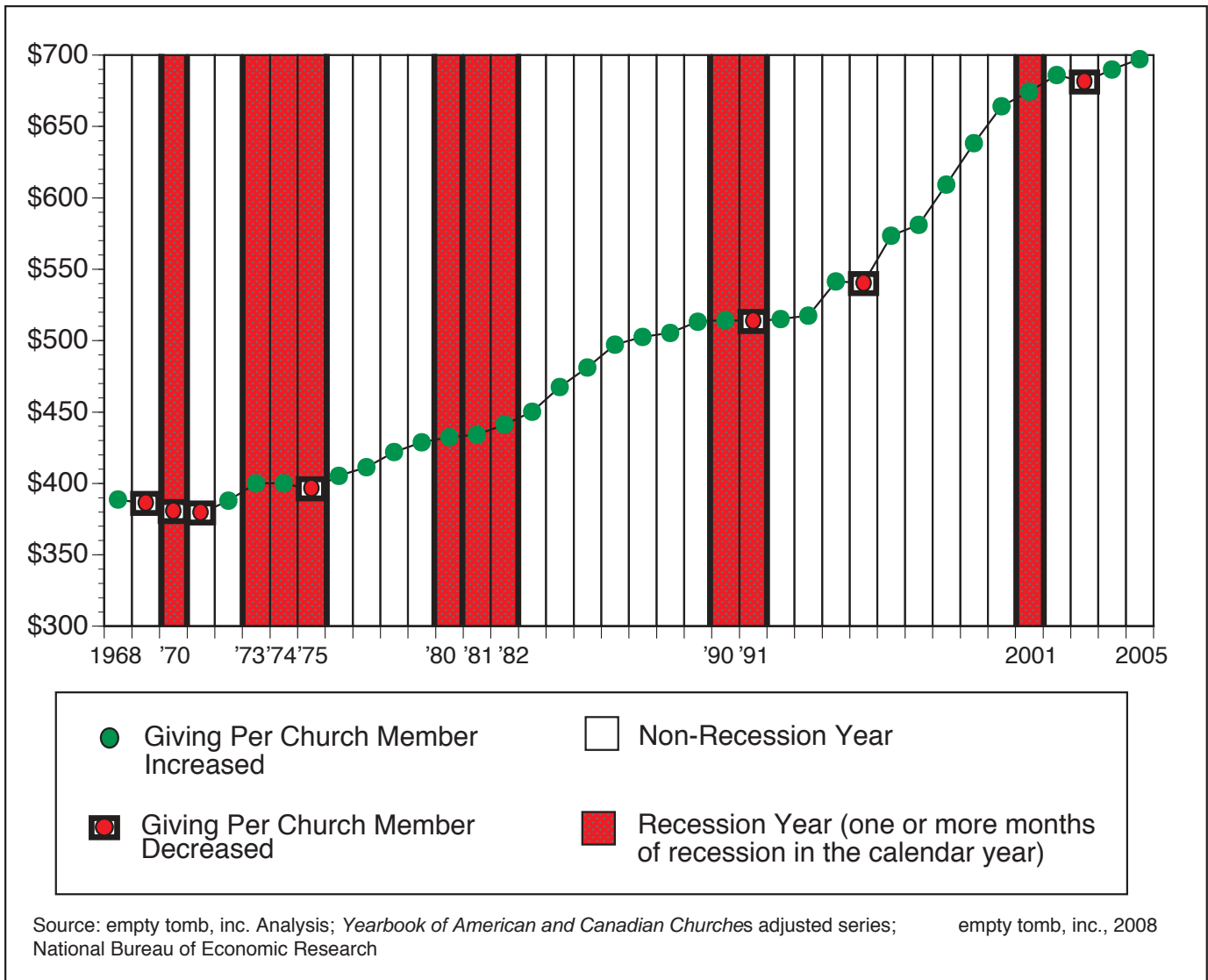


Church Member Giving and Recession Years, 1968-2005

by John and Sylvia Ronsvale, *empty tomb, inc.*, Champaign, IL, February 2008

Figure 1: Giving Per Church Member to the Category of “Total Contributions” in Inflation-Adjusted 2000 Dollars, and Calendar Years with at least One Month of Recession, 1968-2005



Does church member giving decline in recession years?

Figure 1 presents an analysis of church member giving and recession years. Between 1968 and 2005, six recessions occurred.

In three of the recessions, church member giving declined, while in three it increased.

Between 1968 and 2005, ten years displayed one or more months of economic contraction during a recession. Church member giving declined in three of those ten years, that is, 1970, 1975, and 1991. Two of those three years were the last year of a multiyear recession.

Figure 1 also indicates that church member giving declined in four non-recession years during the 1968 through 2005 period.

It may be observed, therefore, that church member giving does not necessarily decline in a recession.

Figure 1 and Table 1 present giving per full or confirmed church member to the congregational category of “Total Contributions” from 1968-2005.¹ The giving data is presented in inflation-adjusted 2000 dollars. Also indicated are those calendar years in which at least one month of recession, or economic contraction, occurred.

Recessions and Declines in Church Member Giving. It may also be noted that church member giving declined in one of the three one-year recessions, and in none of the first years of the three multiyear recessions in the 1968 to 2005 period under consideration.

An economic peak occurred in December 1969, meaning that a contraction began in January 1970. Church member giving declined in 1970, but also in 1969, before the contraction began, and in 1971, the year after the trough had been reached and economic expansion had begun again. Other factors may have influenced church giving in this period. For example, a Gallup poll found that in 1970, only 14% of respondents felt that religion was increasing in influence in American life, while 75% felt it was losing influence. These findings showed a decline from 1957, when 69% thought religion was increasing in influence. By 1974, the percent who felt religion was increasing in influence had recovered to 31%.² The 1970 poll results may have reflected cultural controversies that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, suggesting the possibility that other factors, in addition to recession, may have influenced church member giving in the early 1970s.

The next decline in church member giving took place in 1975, the third year of a recession. During the recessions of 1980, and 1981-1982, church member giving increased. Church member giving declined in 1991, the second year of the 1990-1991 recession. Church member giving did not decline in 2001, the last recession year in the 1968-2005 period.

Definitions. For purposes of the present analysis, a “recession year” was defined as a calendar year during the 1968-2005 period with at least one month of recession. The U.S. business cycle expansions and contractions are delineated by the National Bureau of Economic Research.³ Table 1 indicates the specific dates of recessions for the 1968-2005 period. Church member giving data, published in the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* series, adjusted by empty tomb, inc., is available on an annual basis. In contrast, underlying recession data is published on a monthly basis. To be able to compare church giving and recession data within a single calendar year, it was necessary to develop a working definition of a recession calendar year, as noted above. As indicated in Table 1, the length of contraction in any given “recession year” varied, from one month to 12 months.

“Full or Confirmed Member” is a relatively consistent category among reporting denominations. Certain denominations also report a larger figure for Inclusive Membership, which may include, for example, children who have been baptized but are not yet eligible for confirmation in that denomination. Full or confirmed indicates full participant members. “Total Contributions” refers to the total amount an individual church member gives to the local congregation. The congregation then allocates that amount between what is spent within the congregation and what is spent for activities outside the congregation.

Data Table. Table 1 presents giving per full or confirmed church member to Total Contributions in inflation-adjusted 2000 dollars. The arrows indicate whether church member giving increased or decreased from the previous year. Recession years, as defined in this analysis, are outlined in a bold red border. In addition, the start and end dates of business cycles during the 1968 through 2005 period are presented. The last column presents the number of months of contraction in any given recession-related calendar year.

Table 1: Giving Per Church Member to Total Contributions in Inflation-Adjusted 2000 Dollars, with Recession Years Indicated by Red Border, and Peak and Trough Dates of Recessions with Number of Months of Contraction, 1968 through 2005

Year	Total Contrib.	Giving Up or Down ↑↓	Business Cycle Peak and Trough Dates	Months of Contraction
1968	\$388.82	—		
1969	\$385.87	↓	Peak December 1969	0
1970	\$379.34	↓	Trough November 1970	11
1971	\$379.22	↓		
1972	\$388.03	↑		
1973	\$400.14	↑	Peak November 1973	1
1974	\$400.21	↑	Twelve Months 1974	12
1975	\$395.48	↓	Trough March 1975	3
1976	\$405.40	↑		
1977	\$411.47	↑		
1978	\$422.09	↑		
1979	\$428.90	↑		
1980	\$432.42	↑	Peak January and Trough July 1980	6
1981	\$434.21	↑	Peak July 1981	5
1982	\$441.35	↑	Trough November 1982	11
1983	\$450.30	↑		
1984	\$467.62	↑		
1985	\$481.29	↑		
1986	\$497.29	↑		
1987	\$502.69	↑		
1988	\$505.49	↑		
1989	\$513.35	↑		
1990	\$514.35	↑	Peak July 1990	5
1991	\$513.48	↓	Trough March 1991	3
1992	\$515.21	↑		
1993	\$517.62	↑		
1994	\$541.58	↑		
1995	\$540.32	↓		
1996	\$573.60	↑		
1997	\$581.21	↑		
1998	\$609.39	↑		
1999	\$638.41	↑		
2000	\$664.26	↑		
2001	\$674.53	↑	Peak March and Trough November 2001	8
2002	\$686.13	↑		
2003	\$681.14	↓		
2004	\$689.98	↑		
2005	\$697.28	↑		

Notes

¹The church member giving in the present analysis is based on the composite data set used in *The State of Church Giving* series. The congregations in the composite data set include over 100,000 of the estimated 350,000 religious congregations of any type in the U.S. For details of the Composite Set, see *The State of Church Giving through 2005: Abolition of the Institutional Enslavement of Overseas Missions* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 2007), p. 20, footnote 4, and p. 135.

²George Gallup, Jr., Executive Director, *Religion in America 1990* (Princeton, NJ: The Princeton Religion Research Center, 1990), p. 60.

³The current analysis is an update of John Ronsvalle and Sylvia Ronsvalle, “Church Member Giving in Recession Years: 1970, 1974, 1980, 1982 and 1990,” *The State of Church Giving through 1990* (Champaign, IL: empty tomb, inc., 1992), pp. 25-35, which is also available at <<http://www.emptytomb.org/recession.html>>. The definition of a recession year used in the present analysis differs from the definition used in the 1992 *State of Church Giving* publication. In that earlier analysis, which was based on data presented by the U.S. Department of Commerce, a recession year was defined by empty tomb, inc., for purposes of the analysis of church giving data, as a year in which the Coincident Index declined from one year to the next. However, as a result of subsequent revisions to coincident index component data, as presented by the Conference Board, the relation between recession years and the Coincident Index decreased. “The Conference Board was selected to take over preparation and dissemination of the composite cyclical indexes effective December 7, 1995” (Business Wire; “Composite Index of Leading Indicators: November 1995”; published January 17, 1996; <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/_/print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=17823085>; p. 1 of 1/23/2008 12:25 PM printout), Therefore, the revised definition of “recession year” noted in the text under “Definitions” was used in the present analysis. The recession dates were obtained from the National Bureau of Economic Research; “Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions”; <<http://www.nber.org/cycles/cyclesmain.html>>; pp. 1-2 of 1/23/2008 11:18 AM printout.