

EXPERT ON CATHOLIC GIVING CITES \$7.5 BILLION ANNUAL “GIVING GAP”

Dr. Charles Zech, professor of economics at Villanova University and the leading expert on Catholic giving, spoke on “Seven Things That The Local Catholic Parish Can Do To Increase Giving”, on Tuesday, June 17, at the Boston College Club in downtown Boston. The event was sponsored by Parish Growth Partners (PGP), a group of committed Catholics focused on helping parishes create and implement innovative stewardship programs that drive measurable increases in contributions of time, talent and treasure.

Addressing over 70 Catholic leaders in the greater Boston community – including bishops, pastors, pastoral assistants, and heads of parish finance committees – Dr. Zech stated that even before the recent scandals that have rocked the Church, U.S. Catholics have a long-established pattern of contributing less to their parish than nearly every other Christian denomination.

According to Dr. Zech’s research, the typical U.S. Catholic household contributes only half as much to its parish when compared to its Protestant counterparts. Furthermore, Dr. Zech stated that almost 80% of local parish contributions come from just 20% of parishioners.

There were audible gasps from the audience when Dr. Zech estimated that the total shortfall in U.S. Catholic giving versus Protestant giving amounts to \$7.5 billion a year, or an average of roughly \$400,000 per parish. “Imagine the ministries you could support, the outreach programs you could create, and the overdue maintenance you could attend to with an additional \$400,000 each year,” said Zech.

Using a “true or false” format, Dr. Zech quizzed the audience on their assumptions about parishioner giving patterns. Some of the revelations:

parishioners who believe they have an input into parish decision-making contribute more to their parish, as do parents who send their children to parochial schools, and those who attend Mass more frequently. Interestingly, agreement or disagreement with Church teachings had no major impact on giving patterns.

With regard to income levels and giving, Dr. Zech said that contributions tend to increase as income increases, but at a slower rate. And while upper income households contribute more than lower income households, when contributions are examined as a percentage of income, the highest earners give dramatically less than other parishioners. For example, those households earning more than \$100,000 annually contribute only about one-fourth as much of their income as those earning less than \$20,000 a year.

“We are doing a great disservice to our wealthier parishioners by not teaching them the responsibility, as well as the joy of giving”, said Dr. Zech. “Likewise, we are not doing a good job of reaching younger parishioners, the next generation of stewards, with the spiritual message that giving is an acknowledgement of the blessings we have received, an expectation as well as an obligation.”

The seven steps outlined by Dr. Zech included: starting a stewardship program within your parish to promote contributions of time, talent and treasure; providing parishioners with more direct input into the decision-making process of the parish for both financial and non-monetary issues; consider the impact of parish size on giving, with an ideal of 1000-2500 members as a goal; recognize that existing parochial schools are a valuable asset and have a positive impact on giving; promoting a spirit of ecumenism; educating parishioners on the status of parish finances and reminding them of the importance of their contributions; and communicating more effectively with specific segments of the parish population, particularly so-called Generation-X parishioners who may feel alienated from Church teachings, and adults who do not have children in the home, who are often over-looked by an emphasis on family-centered programs. An eighth opportunity that Dr. Zech's studies have recently unveiled is the emerging popularity of structured estate giving programs.