Big money

CHARITY: Giving while you’re living so you’re knowing where it’s going | Rusty Leonard and Warren Cole Smith

What do Christian families with big money—$50 million, $100 million, or more—do when they want to give it away?

In the past, foundations and trusts were the answer. In fact, an astonishing 50,000 foundations exist in the United States today. But some Christians have grown wary of foundations. Over time they often give money to organizations and causes that the founders would have found abhorrent. One example: Theological and fiscal conservative J. Howard Pew supported Billy Graham and funded a biography of John Calvin when he was alive. But today, the Pew Charitable Trusts support policy positions on social issues that Pew would surely find objectionable.

That’s why some Christian philanthropists look for other ways to give away large sums. Peb Jackson has worked in fundraising with Focus on the Family and is now with Saddleback Church, raising money for Rick Warren’s Global AIDS Initiative. He said, “There is no one formula. All families do it differently. But people who come into significant wealth, from the sale of a business or other means, usually give to organizations they already have a long relationship with.”

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Entrepreneur Dennis Washington and his wife Phyllis, for example, were long-time supporters of the Christian ministry Young Life. So it was no surprise that when their business flourished they continued giving there. But the magnitude of that support became a significant news event when they gave their Oregon ranch to the ministry. Estimated value: over $20 million.

Jackson said this gift was made possible because Young Life had an ongoing relationship with the Washingtons—and the ministry had the capacity to receive such a large gift. "Without care taken by both donor and recipient, a large gift can distort an organization," Jackson said. "Matching the gift with the organization or individual project is critical."

Generous Giving helps "high-capacity" families make prudent giving decisions. President Daryl Heald said his own funding comes from the Macellan Foundation, "so I don't want to be too hard on foundations." But he readily acknowledges that the risk of deviating from the original donor’s intent "goes up with each passing generation." That’s why at a Generous Giving conference you’ll likely hear the old saying: "Do your giving while you’re living, so you’re knowing where it’s going."

Calvin Edwards is one of a small but growing number of philanthropic consultants who work with "high-capacity" families. He said few have the ability to give the kind of "legacy gift" the Washingtons gave Young Life. But a growing number of families have the ability to give $100,000 gifts one or more times in a lifetime.

The Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College estimates that $41 trillion will be transferred to children, charity, or the IRS by 2052. The majority of that wealth has been accumulated by middle-class families who have paid off their homes and accumulated smaller
but still significant assets. And the cumulative philanthropic effect of these middle-class families will be far greater than headline-making $100 million gifts—like the one the Rockefellers made to Harvard on April 25.

So "big money" is a relative term. And Heald says the Bible certainly does not prohibit parents from leaving money to their children, but he says those gifts should not be a disincentive to doing meaningful and fulfilling work. His preference—and scriptural counsel—would be not to hoard money, but to put it to work.

Peb Jackson noted that if that $41 trillion is given wisely, "That's enough money to make the world a different place."

Giving a “Legacy Gift”

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Families of even modest means can, once in a lifetime, give a "legacy gift." But pay attention to the following:

- Have a clear statement of purpose for the use of the money you are giving.
- Make sure the board members of the organization share your views and values.
- Do not be afraid to place restrictions on how the money can be used.

SOURCE: Generous Giving, Calvin Edwards and Company —

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