

Bean Counting or Gardening: Is the global church making converts or disciples?

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Counting numbers and gathering statistics has a long and noble history, biblically and in church and mission history. But, in recent years, has focus on number crunching and concern to shape strategy in the light of numerical data sometimes obscured the true state of the church? Is it quite as healthy as raw numbers might seem to suggest? In recent decades, we have often been overwhelmed with news of the rapid growth of the church in China, Korea, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America amongst others. But in many of those countries, there are signs that all is not well: people are leaving the church, especially young people; others are clearly syncretistic in belief or untouched in fundamental values and behaviour, even where that is inconsistent with the gospel. The time has come when we need to take stock, and ask how the church may grow in depth as well as breadth, in order that in the present she may glorify God, and may be preserved into the future to disciple another generation.

Christians have never been ashamed of counting.

The Gospel writers – all four of them – record the Lord Jesus' miraculous feeding of five thousand men (plus women and children, numbers unspecified) at an unplanned picnic. They also all tell us that one small boy produced the unlikely seed for this more than ample feast in the shape of five loaves (small) and two fish (size unknown), and that afterwards the disciples collected up twelve baskets filled with the leftovers. The story is found in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:32-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-13.

While scholars may argue about who provided sources for whom, the interesting thing in this particular incident is not only that it appears in all four Gospels (rather few do), but that each Gospel writer chooses to retain the same numerical details, even though some other details vary. It would have been easy enough to be exact about five loaves and two fish. Perhaps each of the Twelve collected one basketful of leftovers (or carried it away afterwards), enabling them to be very sure of the total – and in the process also driving home in a very personal way the gracious provision of God for his children. As for the five thousand, I doubt whether we are to deduce that there were neither 4,999 nor 5,001 but precisely 5,000. This surely is an approximate figure, a guideline which enables us to sense the size of the crowd, which in turn tells us something about the scale of the miracle.

Nonetheless, at the end of the day, the numbers are hardly the true heart of the story. They are valuable supporting information, but if all we remember is the numbers we have missed the point. No, the point of the story has to be the Lord's compassion expressed in concrete form, and his purposeful miraculous power, demonstrated not for the sake of it but for love, and as evidence of his authority.

There are, of course, many places in Scripture where under the inspiration of the Spirit the writer records numbers. In the Old Testament, the book of Numbers is peppered with facts and figures. In other writings, too, frequently there are census-type figures for each of the tribes of Israel and Judah. We are sometimes told the size of enemy armies. In the New Testament, the Gospels and Acts include numbers of groups or crowds. And Revelation has many numbers, some of them highly problematical (how do you interpret exact numbers in

the context of figurative writing and vision?) So, while probably few Christians have an argument over the three thousand who embraced belief in Christ on the day of Pentecost, the seven days of creation in Genesis 1, or the 144,000 'sealed' Jews in Revelation 7, have provoked centuries of acrimonious disagreement. Numbers can be problematical as well as enlightening or simply informative.

Numbers can be misleading

Counting clearly has good biblical precedent, then, but we do well to ask ourselves what purpose such activity serves, what we may usefully learn from counting numbers, and what we need to beware of. Further, Scripture itself contains implicit warnings about what we can deduce from numbers when trying to discern who is or is not part of the believing community (which is one of the attempted exercises of some current bean counting). Exodus 12:3 records that 'There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children' who had responded to Moses' instructions and thus experienced the Passover deliverance. They went on to experience the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, and crossed over in safety, only to see the pursuing Egyptian army drowned. Yet, within a very short space of time, they forsook the one true God and made a golden calf as a symbol of the gods they wished to worship. As judgement, they did not enter the Promised Land, though the subsequent generation did. If we were counting them today, would we include them among the figures of believers or of unbelievers? And what of the thousands at that impromptu picnic with which we began? Did any of them become life-long disciples of Jesus Christ, or was that the limit of their interest? Certainly, similarly ambiguous stories could be told all round the world today: numbers (often large) of people who seem to be setting out to follow Christ, but who soon disappear, or who are found to be engaged in practices which are wholly incompatible with genuine faith.

On the one hand, we have no option but to count 'from the outside', that is, on the basis of external factors such as baptisms, church attendance, religious identification on ID cards or census returns, and suchlike. On the other, we should be very cautious indeed about saying that such figures give us remotely accurate information as to those who are authentic disciples of Jesus Christ. To be fair, some of those engaged in compiling statistics today, such as Peter Brierley of Christian Research, or David Barrett and Todd Johnson whose annual statistical tables on global mission appear each January in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, are scrupulous in explaining carefully the way in which figures are to be interpreted, and the assumptions and limitations informing them.

Nonetheless, there are frequently figures flying around that are not so carefully garnered, and may be grossly inflated (such as some of the claims a few years back as to the number of Dalits converting to Christ in India). Further, there are plenty of people who build excitable plans for world evangelisation on rather flimsy foundations, developing strategic plans and priorities (not to mention catchphrases and slogans) on very shallow data. Two years ago I listened with a heavy heart as an evangelist with a high profile in numerous countries outlined his plans for world evangelisation. Anxious to unite the world church in a co-ordinated effort to 'complete the task' within five years or so, he had embarked on a survey of the state of the church in every country in the world, to identify what needed to be done where, and how. As I listened to his 'data', I became increasingly distressed, because his so-called facts and figures were patently inaccurate for country after country. His informants (however sincere) were probably often quite unskilled for their task, and what came to be extrapolated from their feedback simply magnified inaccuracies and led to some very false and unhelpful conclusions.

“Does it matter,” a friend asked, “if the end result is that more people get enthused about world mission?” I believe it does, because truth always matters, and Christians need to be passionate about influencing others always to the very best of our ability on the basis of truth. In the sphere of world mission, we cannot afford to lose that integrity. Compiling figures is always a tricky business, especially when larger numbers are extrapolated from smaller samples. And probably our fallenness tempts us to exaggerate figures that appear to measure ‘success’. Further, the things that lend themselves to being measured – numbers of new churches planted, numbers of baptisms, etc – may not be the critical things. Numbers by definition focus on quantity, not quality. It is arguable that much that goes on today pays too little attention to quality, and too much to quantity. It is also arguable that while today’s church is global as never before – and that this is a marvellous grace of God for which we give thanks – all over the world there are alarming indicators that much of it is syncretistic and shallow. I believe that we face a crisis.

The C.18th century cradle of the modern missionary movement

When William Carey published his famous ‘Enquiry’ in 1792, he included an extraordinary series of 24 charts. These listed every country in the world, each with its length and breadth measured in miles, its population, and its religion. We don’t know exactly how Carey compiled all this data, though we do know that years before, above his cobbler’s bench, he had created a world map on which he wrote a growing resource of facts and figures as he discovered them, and it is presumably this data that appears in the ‘Enquiry’.

While we could cavil that many of his figures are at best approximate (which is undoubtedly the case, and Carey makes that clear), what is intriguing is quite how comprehensive his information is. Today, at the touch of a few computer strokes, we can access more information than we know how to use. But how did a seriously impoverished village cobbler-cum-pastor gather all this? Perhaps he borrowed volumes from the local lord’s library, though as a nonconformist pastor he might well not have been welcome. Certainly he did find sympathetic friends who lent him precious books, such as Guthrie’s ‘Geographical Grammar’. Perhaps he scraped together pennies for the almanacs and newspapers which included a digest of news from around the world. Perhaps he found some way to access the news from Moravians, already cross-crossing the world on their missionary journeys. Certainly he read and was greatly influenced by Captain James Cook’s ‘Journal’; this amazing explorer, who captured the imagination of many in Britain, recorded with extraordinary accuracy enormous amounts of geographical and social data from his world travels.

In turn, Cook’s records reflect the intellectual culture of the time, where there was an explosion of discovery and measuring and exploring, widespread curiosity about the wider world, and the application of modern scientific discipline to a multitude of spheres. Interestingly, a disproportionate number of Dissenters (and Carey as a Baptist was part of that community) were at the forefront of exploring, investigating, experimenting with new processes and inventions. No wonder, then, that Carey should be captivated by the significance of drawing up charts and tables for his reasoned appeal to engage in strategic missionary activity. Further, Carey’s charts immediately make visible those populations which are least evangelised, challenging Christians to devise plans to carry the gospel there. This particular thread of Carey’s argument has informed the world mission movement ever since, so that concepts such as Unreached People Groups or the 10/40 Window are both widely familiar and also frequently determinative of agency policy and deployment of personnel. And, ever since Carey, mission personnel have collected and published data as a matter of course.

As we trace through the nineteenth century, it became commonplace for missionary societies to keep numerical records and to write these up in their journals to encourage supporters back home that their prayers and giving were not in vain. In my own mission, then the China Inland Mission, there are regular reports in the monthly journal, *China's Millions*, of numbers of baptisms, new mission stations or preaching points established, Chinese evangelists and Bible women trained and active, pupils enrolled in mission schools. In the face of hostility and resistance, such figures convey that the church is growing, the great Christian enterprise achieving something, the gospel's triumph is assured, and the victorious Christ will soon be able to establish his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven..... It is human nature to want to be on the winning side, and news of numerical growth is reassuring and motivating, particularly if the implication is that ongoing growth is certain. At the same time, such figures of growth are frequently set alongside balancing figures to illustrate how much remains to be done (again expressed in numerical terms): how else would people's commitment be retained?

Many agency magazines, missionary reports and prayer letters, to the present day echo this same pattern: enough good news to encourage, and enough challenge to keep people engaged. In Western cultures, where success in quantifiable terms has become increasingly the yardstick by which people decide whether or not an enterprise is worth investing in, it is noticeable that missionary communications have become more upbeat, more focused on success stories, more concerned to highlight increasing numbers (of serving personnel, of people recruited for short-term mission, of people baptised or tracts distributed or children fed or.....) and almost certainly less accurately truthful or at least more selective in their presentations. Appeals have become more obviously emotive (starving children, acute poverty, etc) and arguably less clearly rooted in theological or biblical rationale. Perhaps that's because you can photograph a starving child (which rightly should outrage us) but cannot in the same way so easily capture the reality of spiritual lostness (which should grieve us even more), and sheer dogged perseverance in obedience to the Lord with little obvious progress simply does not appeal. In the secular world, successful companies are those that grow numerically (preferably internationally), grow their market share, and produce satisfactory dividends for their shareholders. Maybe we need to examine ourselves to see how much of this set of assumptions has been transferred into the world of the church and mission. Our accountability is first and foremost to God. And God is interested in more – so much more - than simply numbers.

The dilemma of measuring spiritual growth

Part of our dilemma is that while we can measure numbers it is genuinely very much harder to evaluate quality, depth and maturity. Yet, growing evidence from around the world indicates that all is far from well in the Christian community, and that there is great vulnerability in many places, raising some hard questions. Consider the following.

In the UK Census of 2001, 72% of the population indicated that they regarded their religion as Christian. Peter Brierley very helpfully unpacks what this may mean in the recently published *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 5* (London: Christian Research, 2005), p.2.3. As a raw percentage, 72% is extraordinary and impressive. However, almost any meaningful indicator – church attendance, ethical behaviour, doctrinal and biblical understanding – suggests that only around 10% of that 72% are in any way active in their faith.

At the Keswick Convention 2005, Peter Maiden referred to Charles Colson, who 'in his book 'Salad-Bar Christianity', tells us that 20% of Christians in America believe in reincarnation, and 26% believe in astrology. To what degree have these people, who consider themselves to be evangelical, really understood the gospel?' (quoted in Keswick Update 2005, p.3).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the East African Revival attracted great attention as a wonderful work of God. Yet, a few years later, men and women professing to be deeply affected by the Holy Spirit at that time were engaged in one of the bloodiest genocides of known history in Rwanda as ancient tribal and ethnic hatreds dominated over even the most basic values and truths of the Christian faith.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where the growth of the church is frequently cited as one of the great success stories of the C.20th, corruption, brutality and civil war is endemic. Further, AIDs is rampant and life expectancy plummeting. What kind of Christian discipleship is being taught?

In Korea, another frequently quoted success story of the church in the C.20th, for the past two decades more people have been leaving the church than have been joining it. A well-respected Korean Christian leader recently told me that where ten years ago a Christian student could invite fellow students to join a group to study the claims of the Christian faith, and many would come, now few show any interest at all. On the other hand, if a student invites fellow students to a group studying traditional Korean religions, many are eager to come, and quickly come to believe that this is the authentic way to live as Koreans today – even when they may have been raised in Christian homes.

Ecuadorian veteran missiologist and theologian, Rene Padilla, in an interview with Emma Balch for Evangelicals Now (Nov 2005, p.29), says of Latin America (another region of the world where C.20th numerical church growth has been colossal), 'With regard to the church, we need to go back to our basic mission, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, not simply to increase the number of members and fill church buildings..... We have a lot of popular evangelical religion, but that does not mean that the gospel is producing the fruit that one would expect it to produce. Injustice and corruption are rampant in this continent which registers the greatest distance between the rich and the poor in the world.'

Dr Ramesh Richard, at a conference in Manila concerned with training pastors in areas of the world where the church is growing fast, says: 'For example, there are parts of Africa where pastors are preaching that you climb trees in order to meet Jesus, because Zacchaeus did that. I even heard of a pastor in Nepal who did not know that Jesus is coming back because they're semiliterate – 70 to 80 percent of pastors in Nepal are semiliterate and therefore can't read their Bibles' (quoted in WEA Theological News on-line, Issue 40, September 2005, taken from Agape Press Crosswalk on religion Today Summaries, September 20, 2005).

In China, where the church has grown enormously in the last twenty years, especially (though by no means exclusively) among poor rural families with very little education, and where Bibles remain in very short supply, heresies from the minor to the appalling abound.

These glimpses from around the world should banish any hint of triumphalism as numbers of professing Christians creep up. Of course, it is entirely right and proper that we acknowledge the extraordinary growth of the church globally during the past century. We are privileged to see in emerging reality a global church about which only a few generations ago our Christian forebears could only dream. It is very right and proper that we give thanks to God, whose grace and mercy is indeed birthing the church in people group after people group.

Nonetheless, as we watch numerical growth indicators, we need most soberly to ask questions about the quality of what is developing, about why the life of the church is so compromised in so many places, and about whether or not authentic Christian faith is being transmitted to the upcoming generation. Clearly the positive statistics often presented do not tell the whole story. There are spiritual, social and cultural reasons why some soil may be very fertile at a particular moment. But as any farmer will tell you, the quality of the harvest is of as much significance as the volume; and he looks for his land to be fruitful year after year, not simply on one occasion.

In the mission community, we need with great (and painful) honesty to ask whether we have contributed to the current problems by rushing to see as many apparent converts as possible in the shortest possible time, at the expense of ploughing deeply and discipling radically and profoundly. Maybe we haven't been able to do that because our own Christian discipleship is too shallow, and we have simply exported what we know. The tragedy is that what we have modelled is in turn being replicated in churches and missions around the world.

Some pointers for the way ahead

This is not meant to be an exercise in navel-gazing, though it may need to be a reality check. So it is important that as we admit the vulnerability and spiritual poverty of the church in many places, including of course here in Britain, we also humbly ask the Lord to direct us to ways we need to change. What may be some of the things we need to ponder?

First, we need to recapture in a very deep way that the true growth of the church is a spiritual matter. Strategising, planning, implementing programmes may all have their place, but unless the Lord gives the increase we shall achieve only sociological change. Rebirth and genuine spiritual life are as they have always been solely the prerogative of the Holy Spirit. In some respects we have made huge strides in recent centuries in mastering our world, and that has made us rather arrogant. On the one hand, we are called by God to committed, thoughtful hard labour on behalf of the gospel. On the other, there is no automatic correlation between that and the growth of the kingdom.

Second, we need to be very cautious about the way we use numbers. We must beware of the temptation to regard increasing numbers as valid goals in and of themselves. Focusing on numerical targets can gravely distort what we do and how we do it. And we need to recognise that nobody has yet devised a satisfactory way of distinguishing especially in large-scale figures between nominal Christians, syncretists, and those deeply converted to serious discipleship. At the same time, we can value the clues that figures may give us of the profile of Christianity in a given people group, and some idea of the proportion of the population who might have access to at least a minimum of Christian truth.

Third, we need to focus more, not less, of our resources on in-depth discipling. Every so-called Christian who then reverts to a former religion, or who lives syncretistically, or by word and life denies the radical message of Jesus Christ, is not only personally a spiritual tragedy, but also is a great deceiver of others who assume this is what being a Christian is all about. Discipleship is not simply about a moment of decision, which or may not be followed through on. It is about life-long servanthood as well as companionship with the living God, and the day in day out transformation of every level of our personality, in the wholeness of our lives. It is about changing our minds, our values, our priorities, our relationships. It is about living out the truth that Jesus is Lord, the one who calls the shots. It is about lining up with God's revelation through Christ and his Word. It is about being visual aids demonstrating what God

is like. That kind of discipleship and disciple-making is a lifetime's calling, not something that is achieved in some brief encounter or short-term mission.

Fourth, we need to examine whether in attempting to contextualise the gospel, or to make it more acceptable to more people, we emasculate it. The gospel is not a cosmic aspirin to make us feel better in the headaches of life. It makes enormous demands on us, and requires that our response to the grace and love of God is nothing less than total commitment. It is not possible even to begin to grasp what salvation is all about without having some understanding of sin and condemnation, of our need to be rescued, of the fact that Christ alone in all the universe through his death and resurrection is able to deliver us from death and destruction. It is arguable that it is not possible to have any meaningful understanding of the gospel without also grasping that we are reborn into a community, the Christian family, with worldwide privileges but also worldwide responsibilities. It is difficult to communicate these things clearly without spending a long time becoming deeply attuned to a culture and religious context.

Fifth, we need to invest heavily in training leaders and pastors who are not only able influencers of others but also themselves being so shaped by God and his Word that they influence others in line with the character and truth of God. Training institutions need to ask whether they are producing godly men and women or simply better educated ones. The majority of leaders in the world's churches, particularly in poorer communities, will not have institutional training, and some may be illiterate or semiliterate. What must we do to ensure their better equipping, so that what they pass on is truly in line with God's truth? It is especially vital that leaders should be those whose conversion and transformation engages at the deep levels of worldview and hidden suppositions, and who evidence being life-long learners. One popular church-multiplication programme, formulated in the USA, claims that all any leader needs is to master twenty basic lessons, and that that will be all they need to go and plant more churches wherever they go. Superficially attractive as this may sound (and coming as it does from one whose passion to see as many people as possible 'become Christians' is beyond question), especially in the context of unreached people groups or people who are illiterate or semiliterate, this reductionism swiftly becomes deadly, not life-bringing. God has given us his whole Word because we need it, all of it. We need all of it, to equip us to follow Christ in the whole of life, in the whole of society. Selecting a handful of lessons from the whole breadth of Scripture may be a starting point but is disastrous if regarded as all that is needed.

Sixth, we need to invest deeply in children and young people. In many countries, including my own, there is a conspicuous breakdown in transmitting the faith down to the next generations (even though there is also often a great responsiveness to the gospel among young people who have grown up outside the church). In the UK, churches haemorrhaged children in the 1990s, and now many congregations have no children or young people at all. In some parts of Africa and Asia, or among Africans and Asians of the dispersion, a growing tide of young people are disaffected from their parents' Christian faith, and either reverting to traditional faiths or becoming secular. A church without children and young people is heading for extinction – and this challenge faces some of the recently fastest growing non-western churches quite as much as it does churches in the west.

Seventh, those of us in the missionary community need to do some very hard heart-searching about what we do and how we do it. Are we contributing to the problems, or helping solve them? Do we have a healthy balance between urgency to reach the unreached and commitment to in-depth patient discipling? Are we seduced by an upward curve in numbers, or is our concern the glory of God and men and women who increasingly look like the Lord Jesus?

Breadth and depth should not need to be mutually exclusive. The contention of this article is that at the present time the world church needs to recover depth. May God in his mercy show us our part in that, and by his Spirit make us shining mirrors to the Son.

Biography of the Author

Rose Dowsett has been a serving OMF missionary since 1969. Together with husband Dick she worked in student ministry in the Philippines for eight years before being appointed to OMF UK homestaff. For nearly twenty years, she lectured part-time at the Bible Training Institute/Glasgow Bible College, now International Christian College, in Church History and Missiology. She is International Chairman of Interserve International, and Vice-Chair of the Mission Commission of the WEA, where she co-ordinates the Global Missiology Task Force. She and Dick have three adult children and four grandchildren.

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