What is the status of the gospel in the world? The starting point for a clear assessment is to make sense of the enormous amount of information collected by Christian churches on their members. Every year, churches of all kinds initiate a census costing $1.1 billion, sending out 10 million questionnaires in 3,000 languages, covering 180 religious subjects. This “mega-census” includes massive church surveys, such as the Roman Catholic’s Annuario Pontificio, and also detailed country studies done by evangelical alliances and others. In addition, over half of the world’s governments include a question on religion in their decennial censuses. These two major sources, and dozens of others, produce more than adequate information for Christians to evaluate the status of the gospel in the world today.

Seven Signposts of Hope and Challenge in Global Christianity

**Two contrasting views of church statistics**

Nonetheless, two contrasting views of church membership censuses have emerged. The first view is the so-called objective view. In the 1960s, scholars in western universities were fond of predicting the complete demise of organized religion, including Christianity. In 1968, renowned sociologist Peter Berger told the *New York Times* that by AD 2000, “religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.”

At the same time, a second view was emerging as missionaries around the world were noticing the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Anglican missionary David Barrett published an article in the *International Review of Mission* in 1970, projecting that by AD 2000 there would be “350 million Christians in Africa.”

In 2006, it is more than obvious that the second of these views was a more accurate depiction of what Christianity and religion look like around the world. Nonetheless, there is still a latent tendency to consider church statistics as “exaggerated” and “notoriously unreliable.” Fortunately, the enormous annual documentation of church members around the world provides strong evidence that counting Christians is a thorough and reliable discipline.

**Bookkeeping vs. accounting**

If the churches collect so much valuable information, what is the role of researchers dedicated to collecting and analyzing church statistics? One parallel can be found in the financial world with the distinction between bookkeeping and accounting. Bookkeeping is “recording financial transactions,” whereas accounting is defined as “the system of classifying and summarizing financial transactions and analyzing, verifying and reporting the results.” In the financial world, no one would say that only bookkeeping is necessary. Accounting is essential to make sense of financial transactions. In the same way, researchers in global Christianity are needed to make

---

sense of the information collected by churches. For example, a web article recently stated that, "there are 2.3 million Episcopalians in the United States, compared to 62 million Roman Catholics and 16 million Southern Baptists. (Note: the numbers game is a dicey one in religion reporting because churches have different standards for membership, but you get the idea)." Notwithstanding the humor in the note, one quickly finds that the three numbers quoted above are not comparable. Roman Catholics and Episcopalians count baptized infants and children, whereas Southern Baptists do not. Therefore, without adjustments, the numbers are not comparable.

**Global religious demographics**

Once data on global Christianity and world religions is collected and adjusted, it can be directly related to demographic data of all kinds. Examples of the intersection of demographic data with religious affiliation are shown in Table 1.

Note that Christians (or Evangelicals) take up twice as much floor area per person as tribal religionists or Muslims. Another trend is that Christians and Buddhists are approximately 40 times wealthier than Hindus.

The mega-census of churches and religions intersects with other data to reveal at least seven signposts or trends in global Christianity.

**Signpost #1: Christians are found among thousands of peoples, languages, and denominations**

Christians now form 38,000 denominations ranging in size from millions to less than 100 members. These are listed for each of the world’s 238 countries in the World Christian Database. These can be grouped into six major ecclesiastical mega-blocs and can be further divided into 350 Christian World Communions. The six mega-blocs, classified by us but based on their own membership figures, are:

- Roman Catholics 1,129 million
- Independents 433 million
- Orthodox 381 million
- Anglicans 220 million
- Marginal 81 million

The fastest growing mega-bloc is the Independents, which includes 20% of all Christians. Today, we are witnessing some of the fastest Christian expansion in China with 10,000 new converts (babies born to Christians as well as adult conversions) every day.

---

3 Evidence for this is the popular series *Operation World*, which under the authorship of Patrick Johnstone (and now Jason Mandryk) has informed millions of users about the status of Christianity since 1974. (Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, Paternoster Press, 1974)


6 "Floor area in square meters per person" is a United Nations designation defined as the sum of the area of each floor of all buildings in square meters divided by the number of individuals residing in the country.

7 See Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing, "Missiometrics 2006."

8 Marginal Christians are defined as "members of denominations who define themselves as Christians but who are on the margins of organized mainstream Christianity (e.g. Unitarians, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science and Religious Science)."

At the same time, Christianity is growing outside of its own cultural and ecclesiastical borders in the form of non-baptized believers in Christ (NBBCs). In 2006 this movement involves approximately 14 million people (the majority counted as both Hindus and Christians).

At the same time, Philip Jenkins has highlighted the consequences of the southern shift of gravity of Christianity. In 1900, 81% of all Christians were living in the North, but by 2006, this dropped below 40%. Graph 1 (see previous page) illustrates this phenomenon.

Though it may be fashionable to speak of Southern Christianity or non-Western Christianity, it is important to realize that this is by no means a monolithic, homogeneous category. In fact, Christians in the South are comprised of 22,500 denominations, 6,000 peoples and 10,000 languages. In a similar fashion, Christians of the North represent 11,300 denominations, 3,000 peoples, and 3,500 languages. Table 2 (see previous page) illustrates that although the largest Christian countries are shifting to the South, by 2050 the largest Christian country in the world will still be the USA.

In light of this reality, there are still unique roles for Northern Christians in the future of global Christianity. The following are a few examples:

1. Engaging culture on a missiological, philosophical, theological, and ecclesiastical level
2. Bioethics and genetics
3. Financial accountability
4. Reaching postmodern youth
5. Radical contextualization beyond Christianity
6. As members of multinational churches and missions

Signpost #2: Christians are sharing their faith in numerous ways

Every year, Christians expend enormous amounts of time and energy in global evangelization. For example, regular listeners to Christian programs over secular or religious radio/TV stations rose from 22% of the world in 1980 to 30% in 2000. At the same time, Scripture distribution has grown dramatically. Non-Christian countries have been found to have 227 million Bibles in place in their midst, more than needed to serve all Christians, but poorly distributed.

Christian martyrdom also plays a unique role in world evangelization; 70 million Christians have been martyred since Christ and over half of these were in the 20th century. Today, the 5 most dangerous vocations (greatest likelihood of being martyred) are bishops, evangelists, catechists, colporteurs, and foreign missionaries.

However, the most significant finding in our survey of evangelization is that with 1.27 trillion hours of evangelism produced by Christians in 2006, there is enough evangelism for every person to hear a one hour presentation of the gospel every other day, all year long. The irony cannot be lost that over 1.7 billion people still have no opportunity to hear of Christ, Christianity, or the gospel.

Signpost #3: Christians have enormous resources for evangelization

The personal income of Christians globally is approaching 16 trillion US dollars. 78 countries each have Great Commission Christians whose personal incomes exceed US$1 billion a year. Nonetheless, emboldened by lax procedures, trusted church treasurers are embezzling $22 billion each year out of church funds, but only 5% ever get found out. Annual church embezzlements by top custodians exceed the entire cost of all foreign missions worldwide ($21 billion).

Signpost #4: Christians are still planning to evangelize the world

All throughout the 20th century, Christians of various traditions were putting forth books (in italics), conferences (C), and campaigns (M) on how the world could be evangelized in a relatively short period of time. We call these “global plans.” A short list appears here.

1900 The Evangelization of the World in This Generation
1908 The Modern Crusade
1910 The Whole Church Taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World (C)
1912 Reaching Every Home (M)
1914 Inauguration of the Kingdom of God on Earth (M)
1929 Each One Teach One (M)
1930 Bringing Christ to the Nations (M)
1934 Evangelize to a Finish to Bring Back the King (M)
1943 Into All the World
1946 Complete Christ’s Commission (C)
1950 Help Open Paths to Evangelize (M)
1956 The Gospel to Every Creature
1957 Global Conquest (M)
1959 Two Thousand Tongues to Go
1963 The Master Plan of Evangelism
1967 Crusade for World Revival (M)
1974 Let the Earth Hear His Voice (C)
1976 Bold Mission Thrust (M)
1980 A Church for Every People by the Year 2000 (C)
1984 Strategy to Every People (M)
1986 One Million Native Missionaries (M)
1990 Decade of Universal Evangelization (M)

One can instantly spot a strong tendency to recreate plans without reference to previous plans. The most significant problem with this list of plans is the passage of time. One can see this in Samuel Zwemer’s Unoccupied Mission Fields of Africa and Asia (1911). He wrote this book in response to a request for a
pithy survey on the unfinished task from the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Reading this book today one can immediately see that little of what Zwemer wrote has changed in nearly 100 years. In other words, his description of the unfinished task in 1911 stretching from Morocco to Indonesia is largely true today.

There is one simple explanation for the ultimate failure of all of these global plans. Over 90% of all Christian evangelism is aimed at other Christians and does not reach non-Christians. As long as this is the case, the world will not be evangelized and the unreached peoples will not be reached.  

At the same time, two other developments should be noted. The first is that global plans continue to be launched at an alarming rate. Some recent examples include Rick Warren’s PEACE plan, the Global Pastors Network Billion Soul Campaign, and YWAM’s 4K plan. The second is that Christians still remain largely out of touch with non-Christians. Recent research seems to suggest that nearly 90% of all Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims do not personally know a Christian. 

Signpost #5: The least reached peoples are the most responsive to the gospel

At the same time, research has uncovered a remarkable fact. A study of the responsive-ness of the world’s peoples (baptism rate divided by hours of evangelism) has revealed that the most responsive are the least reached! For peoples over 1 million in population, the top five are the Khandeshi of India, the Awadhi of India, the Magadhi of India, the Bai of China, and the Berar Marathi of India.

Signpost #6: Postmodern youth are uniquely situated for world mission

Converging with these trends is the changing nature of today’s global postmodern youth. Many church and mission observers see this solely in a negative light (e.g., encroaching relativism). But a positive side of postmodern-ism is found in the conference, “Out of the Christian Ghetto: French Roast Tall Latte Evangelism in a Decaffeinated, Nonfat, Post-Christian World,” or in Steve Taylor’s recent book, The Out of Bounds Church: Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change. These and many other resources illustrate how Christian youth around the world are making missiological adjustments to their evangelism to more effectively reach people in their cultures and in other cultures.

From the evangelical context, this must be done, as David Wells writes, in an “ambassado-drial” fashion, where the Word of God is properly represented and communicated among the peoples of the world.

As a result of this focus on faithfully engaging culture in a postmodern context, a new vocabulary is emerging in missiology and philosophy: critical realism, epistemological humility, generous orthodoxy, chastened rationality, faithful uncertainty, and non-modern metanarrative. This vocabulary does not promote relativism, but rather is an admission that even in a vibrant personal relationship with Jesus Christ, there is a great deal that one does not know. Millard Erickson clarifies this by stating, “It is one thing to have absolute truth; quite another to understand it absolutely.”

Global youth today are developing some perspectives such as, (1) learning to operate in the context of global Christianity, (2) partnering with young Christians with post-colonial perspectives, (3) celebrating the world’s cultures, (4) an openness to dialogue with and learning from other cultures and religions, (5) a desire for community, (6) a comfort with uncertainty and doubt, and (7) a strong faith without the need to have all the answers. These seven characteristics could make today’s youth some of the most effective missionaries in Christian history.

Two other trends need to be considered in light of these opportunities in a postmodern world. The first is globalization, which can have a negative top down effect. At the same time, tribalism is pushing local culture up to the global level. In both cases, mission is impacted.

Signpost #7: The face of Jesus is emerging among the peoples of the world

Books about Jesus in today’s libraries number 175,000 different titles in 500 languages, increasing by 4 newly published books every day. At the same time, one can talk about the changing face of Christianity, both in the changing ethnicity of Christians around the world referred to earlier, and in the way that each culture offers a differing cultural perspective of Jesus. No culture has as an unhindered view of Jesus. Only when all peoples worship Jesus will we see his face clearly. In this way, one can speak of the “missing faces of Jesus” belonging to those peoples not yet reached with the gospel.

Nonetheless, we can conclude with the strong assurance that we have from the Scripture (Rev. 3:9) that as every tongue, tribe, nation, and language is represented at the throne of God, our worship of Jesus will reach new heights. It is towards this that the church and its mission inevitably move: the glory of God revealed among all the peoples of the world. <<