

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.”¹ 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.”²

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

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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.³

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

Table 1. Global Religious Demographics

Religion	Floor Area, sq. m. per person	Human Development Index	Male Literacy %	Female Literacy %	Gross National Product per capita
Christians	23	73	88	81	\$8,224
Evangelicals	22	64	82	72	\$8,038
Atheists	15	67	92	79	\$3,544
Buddhists	17	69	92	82	\$8,951
Hindus	12	45	65	38	\$441
Muslims	11	54	68	48	\$1,655
Nonreligious	16	68	91	78	\$4,176
Tribal religionists	11	48	75	56	\$998
Non-Christians	13	58	78	60	\$2,907

1 “A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion” in *New York Times*, April 25, 1968, p.3.

2 “AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa” in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LIX, No. 233, January 1970, p. 39-54.

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).”⁴ 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 1.⁵ Note that Christians (or Evangelicals) take up twice as much floor area per person⁶ as tribal religionists or Muslims. Another trend is that Christians and Buddhists are approximately 40 times wealthier than Hindus.

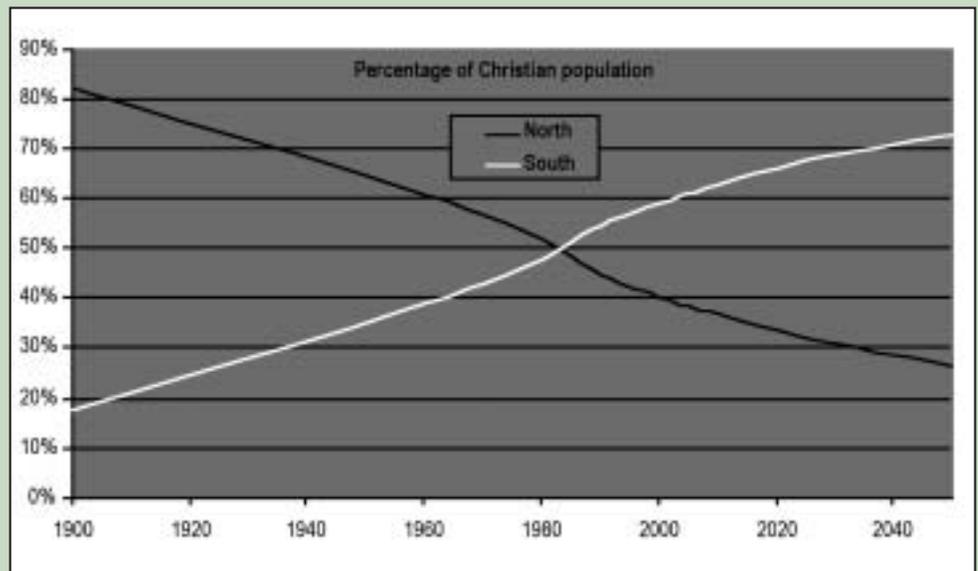
The mega-census of churches and religions intersects with other data to reveal at least seven signposts or trends in global Christianity.

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.⁷ The six mega-blocs, classified by us but based on their own membership figures, are:

- Roman Catholics 1,129 million
- Independents 433 million
- Protestants 381 million
- Orthodox 220 million
- Anglicans 81 million
- Marginal⁸ 35 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.⁹



Graph 1. Christians, North and South, AD 1900-2050.

Table 2. Top 10 countries with the most Christians, 2005, 2025, 2050

	2005	Christians (millions)	2025	Christians (millions)	2050	Christians (millions)
1	USA	252	USA	295	USA	329
2	Brazil	167	Brazil	193	China	218
3	China	111	China	173	Brazil	202
4	Mexico	102	Mexico	123	DR Congo	145
5	Russia	85	India	107	India	137
6	Philippines	74	Philippines	97	Mexico	131
7	India	68	Nigeria	95	Nigeria	130
8	Germany	62	DR Congo	91	Philippines	112
9	Nigeria	61	Russia	85	Ethiopia	104
10	DR Congo	53	Ethiopia	67	Uganda	95

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)

4 University of Southern California Online, Kelly McBride, (www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/soin/poynteronline.html) accessed March 2004.

5 Most of the statistics in this report can be found in one of four places: (1) Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 2001), (2) Barrett and Johnson, *World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2200* (William Carey Library, 2001), (3) Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing, “Missiometrics 2006: Goals, Resources, Doctrines of the 350 Christian World Communions,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, (Vol. 30, No. 1, January, 2006), pages 27-30, (4) World Christian Database, online subscription service found at www.worldchristiandatabase.org.

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).”

9 Recent documentation on the house churches includes D. Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Regnery, 2003), Brother Yun with P. or Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man* (Monarch Books, 2002), and T. Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions* (Monarch Books, 1999).

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).¹⁰ In 2006 this movement involves approximately 14 million people (the majority counted as both Hindus and Christians).¹¹

At the same time, Philip Jenkins has highlighted the consequences of the southern shift of gravity of Christianity.¹² 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.¹³

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 South¹⁴ are comprised of 22,500 denominations, 6,000 peoples and 10,000 languages. In a similar fashion, Christians of the North¹⁵ 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

7. Science and theology
8. Pilgrimage sites
9. Scholarship on pre-modern Christianity

Another reality is that Christianity has yet to be represented among the unreached peoples: 13,000 cultures not yet penetrated with the gospel and are therefore not represented among the “ethne” of Matthew 28.

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.¹⁶ 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).¹⁷

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.¹⁸

- 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

10 Defined as members of non-Christian religions who become converted to faith in Christ as Lord but choose not to join Christian denominations but to remain in their religions as witnesses there to Christ.

11 See H. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (William Carey Library, 2001) and D. Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bow*, (ISPCK, 1997).

12 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press 2002).

13 For a more detailed analysis of the center of gravity of Christianity throughout its entire history, see Johnson and Chung, “Tracking Global Christianity's Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33- AD 2100,” in *International Review of Mission* (Vol. 93, No. 369, April 2004), pages 166-181.

14 South is defined as 16 current United Nations regions (185 countries): Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, Western Africa, Eastern Asia, South-central Asia, South-eastern Asia, Western Asia, Caribbean, Central America, South America, Australia/New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

15 North is defined here in a geopolitical sense by 5 current United Nations regions (53 countries): Eastern Europe (including Russia), Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Western Europe, and Northern America.

16 See Part 4 “Martyrology” in *World Christian Trends* (Barrett and Johnson) for complete documentation.

17 See Part 20 “Finance” in *World Christian Trends* (Barrett and Johnson).

18 For a more complete list see Part 27 “Geostrategies” in *World Christian Trends* (Barrett and Johnson).

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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 responsiveness 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.²¹

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 postmodernity 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*.²² These and many other resources²³ 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.



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From the evangelical context, this must be done, as David Wells writes²⁴, in an "ambassadorial" 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.²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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. 5:9) 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. <<

19 For encouraging signs of change in missionary deployment see D. Bloecher, "How Shall They Believe? Evangelical Missionary Deployment vis-à-vis the Least Reached Peoples," in *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, (Vol. 22, No. 4, October-December 2005), pages 147-152.

20 Johnson and Tieszen, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, forthcoming.

21 See Part 26 "Georesponse" in *World Christian Trends*.

22 Youth Specialties, 2005.

23 One of the most substantial is P. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Trinity Press International, 1997).

24 See David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 10.

25 These are discussed in S. Grenz and J. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

26 Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Baker Books, 1998), page 39.

27 One of the most entertaining and insightful books on this subject is Franklin Foer's, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (HarperCollins, 2004).

28 See Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Orbis, 2002), pages 77-81.