

Counting Christians: how, what, why and where?

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The traditional church in Europe is in crisis. Both membership and attendance in mainstream Christian denominations are tumbling. Cathedrals are standing empty, or worse, being transformed into restaurants, nightclubs and flower shops ([source](#)). These are the headlines we read in the media. These are the results we see in recent religious research.

Europe's Christian growth trend is the lowest of all six continents at 0.04% per annum (according to *Status of Global Mission 2007: An Annual Update – Lausanne World Pulse*, by Todd Johnson, February 2007 – Global Table 5, “Status of global mission, presence and activities, AD 1800-2025”), while she also holds the record for the lowest population growth rate of 0.03% (1998, UN stats). This means the continental Christian growth trend in Europe is barely keeping up with population growth.

Concurrent to the downward trend in traditional church attendance, Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic groups are growing, including many ‘immigrant’ churches. Beliefs and practices from these newer strains are influencing sectors of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions. *Alpha* courses, for example, are multiplying pan-denominationally. Less visible perhaps is the dynamic growth of house churches, youth churches and new emerging forms of meeting together to worship and celebrate life with Christ, among them those who flock to Taizé in the thousands or embark on various spiritual pilgrimages. Sprinkled among these various groupings are Christians who have become disillusioned with the church – the “out-of-church Christians” ([source](#)). Yet, at the same time, the rise of spiritual interest and awareness continues in the realm of New Age, occult, Celtic, voodoo and other beliefs/practices, all expressions of unsatisfied and thirsty hearts in a postmodern context.

Given this dynamic, gaining a clear perspective of the changing spiritual landscape in Europe is not easy. Such a task draws us into a discussion of several issues, a discussion which will help us see more clearly how God is moving among the hundreds of sub-cultures represented across the continent.

Though some Christian research projects focus on society's spiritual needs, many have begun by asking: *How many ‘Christians’ - true followers of Christ, actively sharing their faith with the testimony of their lives – are there in Europe today, or How ‘Christian’ is Europe?* Both

theological beliefs and practice have traditionally been at the core of our common definitions of who 'Christians' are, but there is a wide discrepancy in the meaning of terms used in each Christian research report or survey.

Then there's the quandary of how to get a 'real' picture of the current spiritual scene if we draw only on existing, denominationally-generated data strictly based on church attendance figures and/or 'known' numbers of 'Evangelicals' in a country? Not only definitions of terms, but the scope of our search must be clarified and broadened.

But, before we go any further down this road of questioning, we need to back up and start with several foundational questions: *How do we define **what** a 'Christian' is, if this is what we should be counting? What other definitions of terms are imperative in order to end up with at least some general outlining focus on Europe's spiritual picture? **How** do we conduct research in a field where one term can have many meanings? And **why** would we want to count 'Christians' or 'Evangelicals' or 'Christ followers' of 'Believers' in the first place?*

The questions of 'why count' and 'what are we counting' are inquiries wrapped together with 'how do we count.' If we start with 'why,' we quickly get to 'what' and 'how.' And there's certainly no point starting with 'how' as long as we do not know the 'what' and 'why.'

The 'why' behind our interest in discovery lies in our shared desire to know how many people are 'Believers' – and perhaps more importantly – **where** we could find these followers of Christ. We want a view of our Kingdom task for a specific region. And for strategic church-planting reasons, we want to know the areas where there are fewer 'believing' churches per capita.

As part of our wider research in the face of the how's, what's, why's and where's, it becomes important to take a look at a variety of ways some have sliced the population pie into belief patterns and/or practices. Following is a quick sampling of various ways to 'count Christians,' slice-and-dice definitions and analyze the results.

Scott Friderich's [European Spiritual Estimate 2005](#) attempts to estimate how many "Europeans would claim to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and also be actively concerned about the people in their community and their relationship with Jesus Christ" ('Gospel-Oriented (GO) Christians' = ca. 4.2% for Europe), while contrasting the numbers who "would be culturally affiliated with Christianity" (72.7%) through a questionnaire which makes an attempt to "reveal the true spiritual condition of Europe by asking questions that ignore denominational and cultural affiliation."

George Barna of the U.S.-based Barna Group [states](#) that, though some 40% of Americans are self-proclaimed 'Evangelicals,' only 8% believe a

set of core 'orthodox' values/beliefs and are regularly involved in practices by which this research group defines the term 'evangelical.'

Operation World's definition of 'Evangelical,' based on Bebbington's quadrilateral ("conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism"), comes closest to Barna's use of the term, affirming that some with 'Evangelical' beliefs also exercise 'Charismatic' gifts 'such as glossalalia, healing, prophecy and miracles.' But this use of the term 'Evangelical' in the OW context also includes those who may not have experienced a 'valid conversion.' It "is a theological and not an experiential definition," according to editor Jason Mandryk, "[but] does show the numbers of people who align themselves with churches where the gospel is being proclaimed." OW's broad use of the 'Christian' label includes 'marginal sects, liberal Protestants,' as well as Orthodox and Catholics. The term 'Christian,' in this publication, simply refers to all who affiliate themselves with any expression of Christianity. It is not indicative of commitment or theological adherence to Biblical truth. 'Pentecostals' in OW-usage "in contrast to [C]harismatics, who pop up in every expression of Christianity, are defined by denominational type and are exclusively within the Protestant and Independent mega-bloc," explains Mandryk.

Ruth Robinson's (Greater Europe Mission) [European Believers Report 2007](#) attempts to estimate those in countries across Europe "who have chosen a personal, obedient relationship with Jesus, the only way to God and to eternal life in heaven" (ca. 1.42% as a continental average), including not only E(e)vangelicals, but an estimate from within the Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic churches. However, since terms, definitions and ways of counting are not consistent from country to country, the findings and analysis of this report are most helpful at the national level.

Brian D. McLaren says of the term 'evangelical' (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, Epilogue, 2004, p.343): "even though it begins with a smaller letter [as opposed to 'Evangelical'], represents a bigger tent," and "[p]erhaps Robert Webber's 'younger evangelicals' is a gentle way of saying 'post-evangelical' (Dave Tomlinson) ... At the end of the day, I hope *evangelical* can become an inclusive and positive term, rather than a sectarian and restrictive one – an essential element of a generous orthodoxy." (p.133)

Christian Research's analysis of 2005 English Church Census data attempts a discovery of what 'brand' of church, or 'churchmanship' would apply to respondent congregations through a complex system of self-categorization by way of a questionnaire. Their nine, self-designated labels include 'broad,' 'evangelical,' 'low church,' 'catholic,' 'liberal,' 'charismatic,' 'anglo-catholic,' 'orthodox,' and 'radical.'

Dr. Todd M. Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary writes, "The key quantifiable imperative in the Great Commission is 'Baptize!'" This is "the only imperative enabling exact enumeration," says Johnson. (*Status of*

Global Mission 2007: An Annual Update – Lausanne World Pulse, by Todd Johnson, February 2007) Johnson's group chooses to define 'Christians' as baptized persons, which would include most 'cultural Christians' in Europe.

French Christian sociologist Sébastien Fath (admitting that it is impossible to collect precise French data since no national survey exists which would give us knowledge about the number of French who see themselves as 'Born-again' – those who indicate they have a personal and living relationship with Jesus Christ) counts 'Christians' as those in regular church attendance, rounding out the demographic picture with national census figures. Fath also touches on the practice of prayer as a good indicator for an 'active Christian.' This thread leads him to look at the CSA poll *French and Religion* (December 2004) which asks respondents if they pray 'often' (at least once a day, once a week, once a month) or 'rarely' (several times a year or for ceremonies and important festivities). "In order to evaluate the impact of broad Christian beliefs," says Fath, he looks at the European Values Survey 1999 with data broken down into those who say they "believe in a 'personal God,'" "believe in the existence of sin," "believe in the existence of life after death," and who say they "trust the Church (a little or a lot)." French results are 21%, 37%, 39% and 44% in answer to these questions - this data certainly not attempting to be compatible with percentages of 'Born-again' as defined above. [translation from the French by RR]

The Angus Reid World Poll by AngusReid/McLeans (November 2006) indicates that among 20 countries questioned, France is the one which ascribes the least importance to an active religion. This poll asked respondents to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the question: "Religion is very important for me in my daily life"; 23% of the French responded 'oui' – hardly indicative of the numbers attending 'evangelical' churches regularly.

In 2005, during a Berlin gathering of the European Missions Research Group ([emRG](#) – an "open-door network focusing on strategic research for church multiplication in Europe"), attendees tried to come up with a common definition for a term as seemingly simple as 'church.' Our commitment to transparency in data collection and publication brought us to a point where we felt we could not count only those who fell into a neatly packaged 'Christian' definition, but rather that we would propose a 'morph grid' analysis – an attempt at touching on some of the nuances of 'churchmanship,' as found later in the English study.

Using this grid, the individual personality of a particular gathering of Believers could be analyzed through a mix-and-match addition of its 'Affiliation' (say, Evangelical Alliance or World Council of Churches), plus several elements relating to the 'Intention' of the group (for example, 'societal transformation' and/or 'reproduction'), defining characteristics under a 'behavior' category (for example, 'cross-cultural missions' and/or 'discipleship'), some indication of the group's 'style' (for example,

'liturgical' and/or 'contemporary'), some attempt at defining 'structure' (for example, 'cell church,' or 'congregational'), and a theological alignment of 'evangelical,' 'creedal,' 'Charismatic,' 'Pentecostal,' 'Catholic,' and/or 'Orthodox.' Implementation of this chart would allow a common structure for researchers to clearly state what it is they were counting in their studies, thus allowing for a wide variety of approaches without mixing and matching definitions.

Natural Church Development (NCD), created by author Christian A. Schwarz, provides another perspective on measuring 'Christian' belief and practice as found in a church setting. This group encourages church growth through scientific surveys of eight 'quality characteristics' or 'growth factors' – encouraging a church to "strive[ing] for spiritual balance," not necessarily numerical growth (though a rise in participation and attendance is often noted over time). Part of this approach includes the tabulating of numbers of individuals regularly taking part in various, specified events and practices connected with the local church.

Though the above litany of research efforts may be more confusing than clarifying, some clarity of terms and definitions (or, at least, the continuation of an open discussion which admits the thickness of the definitional fog) is crucial to moving ahead with any hope of a clear compass sighting for our quest. If we are each counting different kinds of 'Christians' or 'churches,' how can we hope to see the 'big picture' or form a unified approach to Christian research within each nation of Europe?

In our search for how many 'Christians' or 'Believers' there are, we are aware that figures will not be readily available in any one database. The European Evangelical Alliance and her national entities are helpful in seeing a holistic national picture. Insider knowledge of each unique cultural setting is imperative to an educated and reliable estimate of numbers of 'Believers.'

However, since each country uses different terms and definitions of terms to complete their surveys, it is nearly impossible to scrutinize the numbers and come up with some kind of national or regional estimate without 'mixing apples and oranges.' The task of compiling figures across country borders is even more treacherous. These estimated figures are extremely fragile in a research sense, and are shaky as foundations on which to build longitudinal studies which would show growth trends not only in attendance but in numbers of 'Believers' as well. Only in smaller population segments, on a national or sub-national level, are longitudinal results reliable.

Though we do not always agree on **what** we are counting, we can come to some consensus on **why** we are counting. The Alliance for Saturation Church Planting 'Harvest Force' terminology helps us get at this 'why' of counting all the different kinds of 'Christians' out there. Their interest in discovering the size of the harvest force begins to give us a handle on the

number of individuals and fellowships ready to engage in reaching their region(s) for Christ and a sense of the size of our task.

Accepting we will never have completely accurate numbers, we have discovered that the *process* of interaction, collaboration and of sharing resources with our colleagues is really the most effective element of this research tool. This collaborative process is equally as important as the data collected, linking us together as leaders and nationally strategic thinkers across the breadth of the believing community.

The step from data collection/publication to the development of ministry strategies and implementation often centers on finding areas where fewer resources are available – spots that could be targeted for new church plants. However, church renewal within historical church traditions is also a viable strategy. Future religious research projects could focus primarily on attempting to find out how many ‘true followers of Jesus’ are within a certain segment of an established church tradition which may no longer preach/teach ‘grace by faith alone.’ Some ‘true believers’ will always stay within these churches and faithfully work within them as ‘loyal radicals.’ ([Bob Hopkins](#)) For example, there are resurgent waves today within the Romanian Orthodox Church and among charismatic Catholics in France, Spain and Italy. Yet others feel that remaining in this church setting is too long a process, meriting the planting of completely new forms of church outside the confines of the traditional.

In all this, as part of our involvement in church growth processes, we desire to be aware of the pattern of spiritual resurgence in Europe, and, in particular, want to see “a witnessing fellowship within reach of every person” ([Greater Europe Mission](#)’s vision statement) across the continent. This ‘reach’ is more than just geographical reach; this refers to a cultural/linguistic reach as well. In discovery of this pattern of spiritual growth (or decline), we want to find out **where** Christ’s followers are. No attempt, effort or desire to ‘count souls’ (as some critics would have it) is plausible, however. We may wish we could peer into the Lambs’ Book of Life to get that 100% accuracy with which we would be totally comfortable. This, however, is not the point.

We believe, missiologically, that God’s plan of redemption for a society centers around his body, the Church. While part of our discovery process begs that we reorient ourselves to looking outside strictly ‘E(e)vangelical’ circles for a measure of where the ‘Believers’ are, we must also focus on finding ‘lighthouse’ groups – churches that are grace-filled centers out of which blessing and service pour into their communities. The mapping of these lighthouse groups will be key to our future strategic efforts, both nationally and continentally.

Prayerfully, we can learn to live with a multitude of approaches and sets of data which, when taken as a whole, will give us insight into the work of God’s hand and where we can best jump in. If our desire is to tell the

stories of God's faithfulness and the movement of his Spirit in peoples' lives, we will want to know where and to what extent God is at work. Though the work of the Spirit is invisible, tangible behavioral evidence that translates into empirical data will hopefully help us measure, in part, the impact of the existing body of Christ on the communities in which they are planted.

It is certain that we need to move beyond the scope of our present way of 'counting Christians.' There are the 'believing without belonging' numbers cited by Grace Davie, for which we can try to find some general percentages through European-Values-Study-type surveys.

One good indicator for numbers of spiritual seekers can be found among participants in *Alpha* courses. Eighteen European countries have web pages on the [Alpha](#) site. "Over 8 million people [world-wide] have now attended an *Alpha* course...running in tens of thousands of churches of all denominations across the world." *The Economist* says, "*Alpha* is already changing British church life," and London's *Evening Standard* describes it as "...The only unqualified success there has been in recent years to arrest the seemingly inexorable decline in attendances..."

At the end of the day, where do we land, after this whirlwind ride through the tortuous and labyrinthian paths of data-gathering approaches and definitions of terms?

Our unified desire to be part of advancing Christ's Kingdom influence in Europe may lead us – with Brian D. McLaren – toward being described as "*missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*" (subtitle to Brian D. McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 2004 – and one which the author describes as "awkward and confusing," p.23). Or our common task may draw some to be self-proclaimed 'post-evangelical.' And yet others who partner together in God's ministry may choose to stay within a denomination and find ways to join with those in other 'actively Christian' groups.

One thing is certain: since our over-reaching goal goes beyond 'counting Christians' to reaching our nations with the Gospel message, our definitions, strategies and research approaches must be brought into some kind of harmony so that we can work together, or, at least, that we can begin to understand each other.

Let us be encouraged by the Polish example. An evangelism and church planting initiative – *Mission Possible* – was launched in Warsaw in January 2007. Those united in this effort (a seven-year strategy to reach the nation with the gospel) have agreed to agree on the following essentials while keeping their own identities as denominations and organizations:

- a. **One must believe & confess:** That the Bible is God's infallible revelation and trustworthy in all it declares. There are no other books or revelations equal to it.
- b. **One must believe & confess:** That Jesus Christ is the Son of God, born from the virgin Mary and equal to the Father and the Spirit
- c. **One must believe & confess:** That all men are sinners in need of salvation
- d. **One must believe & confess:** That salvation is by God-given grace alone and faith alone (not by works) through Jesus Christ alone
- e. **One must believe, confess & practice:** The respect of Christians who agree with the above, who may form other denominations, and who are connected to other organizations (with possible different practices to their own) as brothers & sisters in Christ

Young Polish Christian leaders making up the steering committee have chosen the slogan, "Real Hope for Poland." This statement verbalizes our common goal: that Europe will find real hope through a real encounter with the living Christ.

As in mathematics, our discovery of the 'lowest common denominator' – for us here, the bare-essential definition of active followers of Christ – will be key to adding up our collaborative efforts for the Kingdom, totaling a sum that will prayerfully be greater than its unique parts. Where we can agree, we can work together.

Quelle: <http://emrgnet.eu/wordpress/method/innovation/articles/abacus>