

Statistics and Church Growth

Doug Jacoby, 20 November 2000

Statistics are not necessarily bad, but when used wrongly by inexperienced or fleshly leadership, they lead to unspiritual behaviors and drain away joy. This paper, which I began sketching in 1999, is a partial response to discussions stimulated at Jubilee 2000 Leadership Conference.

I. Introduction

For Americans, Census Day was April 1, 2000. (No fooling!) Results are due to the president by December 31, 2000. In fact, the first census took place under Thomas Jefferson in 1790, and has continued every ten years ever since. The United States records a number of statistics about its citizens, and for a host of reasons: budgeting and taxation, design of programs to meet citizens' needs, and demographic study, to name a few. In the ICOC, we also survey our membership, recording statistics in a variety of ways. And yet (it is my contention) statistics (or "stats," to all of us staff members) are becoming increasingly problematic. Though we are not wrong to measure our progress, it is my contention that relatively few leaders know how to make use of statistics without unwittingly causing those they lead to feel an unhealthy pressure.

This is not to say that accountability in itself is wrong. Accountability is healthy. In a book distributed by DPI to attendees at the worldwide leadership conference, the author of *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches* rightly states:

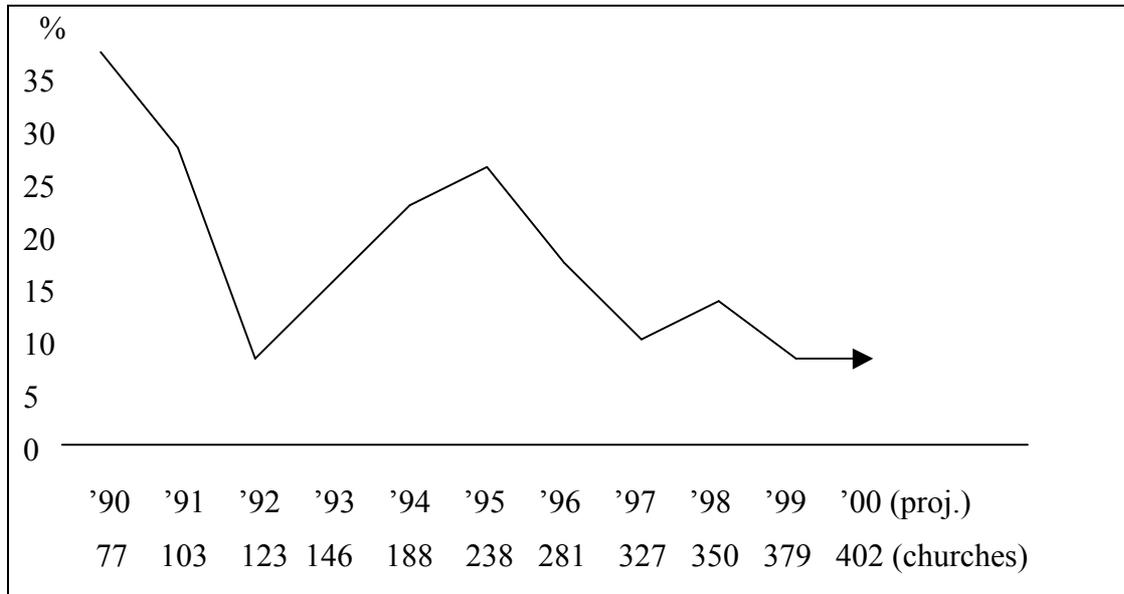
In my study of highly effective churches there have been four factors that stand out as critical to making accountability work. First, the leader/pastor must be a relentless champion of accountability. If he/she constantly promotes the value and necessity of self-assessment (both individually and as a body of believers), then the congregation will eventually embrace that call to excellence. Not surprisingly I have found the converse to be true as well: If a leader/pastor does not champion accountability, the church never seriously calls for it and the consequence is a church where activity is mistaken for purposeful ministry.¹

So let me say it again at the outset, this paper is not calling for the abolition of all stats. Accountability is biblical (Hebrews 3:12). And yet there is a wrong kind of accountability, and it is quite possible for statistics to be misused. In fact, it is common.

ICOC growth rate

Our growth rate has slowed; it has been on the decline for several years now, and many suggestions have been made as to how to reverse this decline. For example, in a recent study of one large congregation, it was revealed that over 50% of members quitting the church had been baptized in the previous 12 months. I for one refuse to believe it has to be this way. Although we refuse to accept long-term failure to baptize, the way forward means we need to think differently, explore options, be courageous. Spiritual Recovery has been recognized as an excellent "defensive" strategy for maximizing growth. Revamping how we think about and "do" stats is another strategy.

ICOC Growth Rate 1990-2000



To question our statistical approach at first feels like questioning whether we should aim to grow at all—but this is far from true. This paper urges us to reconsider our strategy: to focus on long-term growth and spiritual health rather than on short-term goals. I realize this issue is not necessarily the greatest need in the movement; we are confronted by a number of challenges as we enter the 21st century. The pressing call for new leaders; the urgency of establishing elderships in our congregations; the care of souls; the need for personal discipling; worship; biblical literacy; the slowdown in growth; faith itself—all are causes for concern and prayer. And yet the misuse of stats issue surely ranks very high on the list. In a sense, ranking the needs is pointless, as each area is interrelated with all the others.

How we got where we are today

In the “old days” (late 1960s to mid-1980s), with a less structured approach to church growth, we kept track of baptisms only. We tried to baptize as many as possible, without closely monitoring new growth, attrition rates, etc. Members were held accountable for Bible Talk visitors and studies. Accountability was simple. Our lives were simpler, the overwhelming majority of us being singles and college students. We were “low tech.” Later (in the mid-'80s), concerned about our “back door,” several of us (for example, in the London church) suggested that *net growth* was a more accurate, honest measure of how we were really doing. I (as chief stat-keeper) was one of those who pushed for the net growth approach. At the time it did seem more reasonable to monitor net growth; we were battling to keep the “back door” shut. We were not then in a position to read the future—to anticipate how, in time, stats would “take over.”

Stats-driven ministry

The fundamental problem, as I see it, is that **stats are used as a tool for driving the ministry, instead of as a tool for measuring** the various indicators of the spiritual health of a congregation. Undue emphasis has been placed on the ends, insufficient emphasis on the means. For the sake of the short-term, the long-term is frequently lost sight of. Ministry leaders are becoming proficient in analysis, computer use, and monthly projection. Too easily faith is omitted from the process; it is so easy to become “ministry technicians” instead of ministry shakers and movers. Yet the church of the New Testament does not seem to have been “stats-driven.”

II. Effects of the present monthly stats system

Drift from principles

We have certainly come a long way in the thoroughness and professionalism with which we keep stats, yet the present system has a number of undesirable effects, both on staff members and church members alike. It is not that recording growth is unbiblical (although the Bible does contain some caveats). It is that the stats-driven ministry easily comes loose from its moorings—the principles that should undergird it.

Every corporate entity is based on fundamental principles. Losing sight of these principles is a recipe for confusion and (eventually) deterioration. Our principles as a movement are few, not many. This is to our credit, and is a major key to the remarkable unity of the movement. (The more rules and doctrines to enforce, the more potential heretics to monitor, and the harder it is to remain streamlined and unified.) A short list of our basic “principles” might include: prayer and Bible study, the restoration plea, mission, multiplication of leadership, and grace.

Principles are vital because they keep us out of “the pit.” And if we hold to our convictions and still end up “in the pit,” it is our principles (assuming they are the right ones) that will bring us out. Yet all too often our response to “bad news” is to jettison principles—usually to achieve some short-term goal. Leaders typically respond to “bad stats” by becoming more analytical. More meetings, steeper accountability, restructuring—we are tempted to rely on “mechanics” rather than on our principles.

Moreover, we have taken our successes too seriously. In Luke 10, the returning disciples are overjoyed by their apparent success. Jesus reminds them *not* to rejoice over their success, but rather that their names are written in heaven. I am afraid our people’s sense of God’s presence, however, rises and falls on their ministry success. Considering what God has done for us, and that we are saved by grace, there should not be such insecurity in the kingdom. When we drift away from our principles, short-term fog obscures long-term objectives.

End-of-month behaviors

Today, ask a staff member what the real “bottom line” is, and he is likely to think, “my stats.” All things being equal, we are largely monitored, evaluated, praised, and reproached for our “good stats” or lack thereof. This focus leads to and reinforces a wide range of behaviors of the part of our sector, region, and church leaders.

Have you ever noticed policemen on the highways out in force during the last couple of days of the month? Like state troopers and salesmen at month end, many, many of our ministers are more “urgent,” “care more” about the lost, and strive harder to “make their goals” as the calendar month draws to an end. I believe that many of our leaders sense this, and not a few of the membership at large question motives when we become unusually intense in the final five or ten days of the month. Something about this is very wrong. It’s not a Christlike behavior. We are not a corps of salesmen! We are ambassadors of Christ who believe in total disclosure of the truth, who espouse integrity, and who have Jesus as our model and our master.

I personally am embarrassed by how staff members often talk about “month-end.” I am ashamed at the thought that members might come to know of the short-cuts their leaders sometimes take in order to make goals. I do realize that short-cuts are not the norm in every part of the movement, yet they do appear to be common. I also realize that different leaders have different “consciences” when it comes to this matter. Yet for me I feel that all too often we as staff would be awkwardly “exposed” if members were to compare our conduct against the example of the Master.

Short-cuts and their effects

Short cuts and compromises are rife, and this has sadly surfaced in several prominent ministry situations in recent years. The temptation to “bend” rules and definitions is amplified when leaders are assessed on the basis of empirical goals. I remember working with one leader who had come from another ministry. In my staff meeting he asked, “So, when does the month end?” I replied, “What do you mean? As far as I know, January ends on the 31st!” Another common practice is pre-seminar fudging: membership numbers are inflated before a leadership conference at which commendation or censure is likely to be given based on a leader’s stats. “Growth” is reported but “tidying up” is left till the next month. The shrinkage or “0” growth the following month puts into question the “praiseworthy” performance put on the month before. In short, many leaders are tempted to manipulate stats so that they will look better to others.

Not infrequently, people are rushed into baptism to make stats look better. Non-attending members are left on the membership list when there is no serious plan to retrieve them back from the world. People are “restored” before they are ready, all in the interest of making the monthly goal. To use a rough analogy, the procreative goal of parents is not just to bring as many children into the world as possible, but to care for the children they do have, expanding the family with God’s sense of timing. “Premature babies” are not the goal. When a baby is born, say, three months early, it takes much more care to see him survive and mature than if the pregnancy goes full term. When we rush people to baptism (often in order to make a growth goal), we actually *hinder* growth, instead of promoting it.

Taking the few extra weeks/months allows a “baby” to be born healthier, less dependent on others. A “prematurely” re-born man or woman stands on his/her own feet later, and less easily, than the one who was not rushed. God expects fetuses to grow for 40 weeks. I suppose, in our zeal to have babies, we could perform standard c-sections at the 35-week mark, and the newborns would most likely survive. Yet this is unnatural, and in the long run, counterproductive. I believe this describes the dynamic in many ministries. Reaching the lost will always be a matter of great urgency. And yet, ironically, if we would *slow down* our studies to produce a depth of conviction, I think we would probably *grow faster!*

Low productivity?

For all the emphasis on evangelism and numbers, when we examine staff productivity in terms of net growth per staff member, what do we see? Assuming a ratio of 1:50 staff to members, which is fairly common in the larger churches, and a 10% annual growth rate, typical of recent years, we find the following scenario. A couple leading 100 persons sees their ministry grow after 12 months to 110 (10%). That’s an increase of 5 persons per staff member annually.

I am not saying that a couple whose net growth is 2/month are doing poorly; that would be an annual net of 20%, which in most circumstances would be praiseworthy. As much work goes into keeping the saved saved (probably more) as into studies and baptisms. And yet, for all the changes in structure and approach we have tried, still as a movement we struggle to produce more than around 10% growth per year—or 5 per staff member. I believe we can do better.

Herky-jerky planning

Why are plans so frequently changed? Is the latest new program really “the will of God,” or is there another motive? Actually, ministers get nervous about hitting their goals, so they change plans. Sometimes they claim that the change is “from God,” “from the Spirit,” or is something which “the Lord placed on my heart.” Herky-jerky ministry planning causes staff to lose credibility.

Faithfulness to plans (though not enslavement) is commendable. Flexibility also is a virtue. The balance between faithfulness and flexibility is lost when we become overly controlled by stats. When members (especially those with families) sense the gap between what leaders *said* the church would do and the *new, revised* plans, often at late notice, they lose confidence. People enter a form of silent and inward

rebellion. Often this manifests itself in foot-dragging—which only further frustrates staff members. Yet the basic problem isn't the commitment of disciples. Sluggishness may be at least as much a function of reactionary scheduling as of lack of commitment on the part of the members.

Awkward feelings

(1) *Feeling dropped:* People may feel “dropped” after baptism. The solution, when those neglected sheep drift off, is not necessarily to retrieve them (Matthew 18:12-14), but rather to find new prospects. Meanwhile, discouragement and falling morale within the fold put the more mature Christians in a bind, as they feel obligated to defend the system, though in their hearts they are deeply saddened that so little emphasis is placed on shepherding. To make people feel special, to devote hours and hours and hours to them in order to get them into the water, only to pass off the discipling responsibility to others who lack the time and the resources to maintain the pace, the care, and the level of spiritual feeding, is indeed likely to make people feel they have been “dropped.” The present system rewards those who bring in new members; it does less to reward those who confirm and consolidate those who have become new members.

(2) *Feeling of failure:* Leaders, even new Christians, often feel significant pressure to baptize. A number become controlled by guilt, fear of not measuring up, or even of public humiliation (particularly in leaders' meetings). Disciples may develop a negative self-concept, a critical spirit, or (if they are among the more productive) a self-righteous demeanor. It is difficult to find this sort of dynamic in the scriptures. It is true that we are to be compelled by the fear of the Lord, as well as by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5). And yet, surely people will share their faith more freely if they are not threatened with “being cut off” if they have not measured up.

(3) *Feeling unmotivated:* We complain about a lack of motivation, especially among our older members, across the movement. We want our members to serve God joyously and freely. We don't want them to be burdened by rule keeping, but rather to enjoy their freedom in Christ (Galatians 5:1). (Of course I'm not speaking against accountability; it is biblical.) The little letter of Philemon teaches us an important principle about motivating people: *Spontaneity is far better than coercion*. They should not feel ordered around (a common complaint). The idea is to get them to act responsibly, and on their own. And yet many have been taught that to weigh or question advice is “disloyal,” or even “divisive.” After all, why study your Bible for yourself if your decisions are going to be orchestrated by those over you in the Lord? Yes, I realize that as a factual description this is an oversimplification, but it is a real *feeling* in many of our members. Bottom line, grace motivates; law stifles.²

(4) *Feeling resentful:* Yes, resentment is sinful, but blaming our members when it is we leaders who have made their lives hard is not going to get us anywhere. People like to be treated with respect, led collaboratively, asked for input beforehand and for feedback afterwards. It seems to be a rule of human nature that when we are told what we *have* to do (give 10%, give over 10%, invite 10 people, read 20 minutes...), we tend to do the minimum. We fulfill the “letter of the law” but do not exceed it by much. Yet when we are trusted to act with integrity, cheerfulness, and sincerity, we are inspired to go beyond the minimum.

I think too many leaders are afraid that if accountability—not expectations and Bible teaching—is dropped, the people will decide not to be committed. Do we underestimate the hearts of our people?

How to you tell if your ministry is stats-driven

- In light of monthly goals, most leaders focus on those who can be baptized most quickly.
- Demographically, the ministry's foreign element is significantly higher than that of the community.
- Staff meetings and leadership huddles resemble sales managers' pep talks—reaching quotas is the focus.
- Quotas lead to conversion of more “high maintenance” people than the leadership can realistically disciple/counsel.
- Members are routinely told “It isn't best,” or “It isn't God's will for you to move”—for stats' sake.

- Shallow teaching and preaching quickly cease to feed the flock.
- Leaders are held accountable for baptisms more than for discipling, for ministry responsibilities than for their marriages, for other adult members than for their own children.
- Leaders are reluctant to let the “crankers” go and serve in Kids’ Kingdom.
- Cynicism, especially where there has been a turnover of leaders. This takes time to undo; faith has been damaged.³
- Members speak of feeling torn (or even guilty) about spending time with their own children because of demands of church meetings. And yet family is what church is all about!
- Staff members “collapse” on the 1st, recoup their strength, then gradually increase urgency as month end approaches.
- A classic “binge-and-purge” pattern is established, alternating push/growth months with periods of stagnation or “clean-out.” Months of hard work are seemingly undone by a week of “pruning” at year end. Meanwhile the “back door” opens wider and wider.

All of this plays into the hands of our critics. People feel like they are trapped in the machinery of a baptism mill—recruitment taking precedence over building family—and more and more the accusation rings true.

Summary

While we must resist the temptation to attribute *every* problem to misuse of stats, still many of our troubles are directly brought on or aggravated by the stats-driven approach. All of this is not to say we should not keep stats, back off on evangelism, or fail to appreciate those who have worked hard to enable us to professionally monitor our ministries. **The problem is not stats; it is that stats are used to drive the ministry.**

I believe, like David in the Census,⁴ we have trusted too much in the arm of flesh. We talk much about evangelism and growth, campaigns and goals, but teach too little Bible. In all likelihood, the people would respond very well to a “pep talk” now and again if they were being fed regularly with a wholesome diet of biblical teaching and preaching. What we have in common with David is a lack of faith. When stats become the bottom line, rather than faith in God’s word, we have a problem. We have created an inversion of God’s plan.

Our “back door” stats make it abundantly clear that as a movement we don’t have possession of our people’s hearts as we should. We are losing connection with a larger and larger portion of our membership. Some leave the faith entirely; others are present in body but apathy is steadily replacing their “first love” for the Lord. Somewhere along the line the love and discipling is being diluted. As long as we do not have the people’s hearts, the temptation will be to misuse stats. Judging by its undesirable effects on the body of Christ, the present system—the ways stats are used—needs reevaluating.

III. Confusion of cause and effect

The hypochondriac, taking his own temperature hourly, stepping on the scales and taking his blood pressure after every meal, is overly concerned with biostatistics. He is obsessed! And for all his effort to check up on his own health, he is no likelier to be healthier. In fact, his approach will inevitably be counterproductive. Anxiety and short-term solutions are not the need of the hour.

What the Bible says about Counting

Some time after I had written the first draft of this paper, which included an extensive discussion of 2 Samuel 24 (David's ill-advised census), I was sitting in church with a visitor who remarked on how large the attendance appeared. (It was several thousand.) I told him the approximate membership of the church and the usual attendance, to which he replied, "You know, God will oppose us if we count." How uncanny, I thought, this admonishment by a non-disciple! Although I have no problem with counting, I believe there is something to his words of unsolicited counsel. In this section we will study the scriptures in order to see what light is shed on our subject by the Word itself.

The Bible says very little about counting our membership, growth, etc. Since we aim to speak only where the Bible speaks, the silence of the scriptures should not be interpreted as a prohibition. Still, it is instructive to examine what the Bible does say on the subject. The consistent pattern of the Bible—in both testaments—is that males only were counted, not females or children.⁵ I'm not suggesting we count men only—though oddly enough perhaps healthier ministries would result if we did adopt this unusual practice.⁶ Moreover, we find only four censuses of God's people in all the Bible.⁷ In the Bible I think it is fair to say that the people of God were rarely focused on censuses or reporting of stats. What is the feel we get from the New Testament?

Counting in Acts

What light can the book of Acts shed on stats-driven ministry? After all, this book is the inspired record of the inception and growth, successes and failures, expansion and theology of the nascent movement during its first generation (starting in 30 AD). The theme we find in Acts is the theme of growth, not counting itself. What is the Spirit saying to us here? The church is a movement on the march. It is destined to expand into every stratum of society. It is characterized by fervent preaching and many baptisms (16:5). Although the disciples were counted at Pentecost and again in Acts 4, there is no mention of their numbers thereafter—only that they continued to expand worldwide through bursts of growth.

Further observations surface as we read afresh the "growth passages" of Acts. For one, counting is approximate (rounded to the nearest thousand) and occasional. Growth is discussed in connection with the ministries of various individuals, but never apart from the concern to show the greatness of God. Finally, there is no evidence that ministers were compared one to another on the basis of their net growth. Nor is it correct that Jesus' leaders' meetings were a time of reporting stats, as is sometimes taught on the basis of Mark 6:30. ("The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.")

The feel of Acts is quite different from the feel of our present system—apart from the same heart for the lost and the concern to reach the whole world with the saving message (1:8, 20:24, 28:31), to which we as a movement are firmly committed.

Passages on growth in the rest of the N.T.

In Colossians 1:6 (see also 1:23) we read that the gospel is bearing fruit all over the world. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1 we read of rapid growth. And yet it is questionable whether anyone reading the New Testament would come up with an elaborate system for recording visitors, baptisms, etc. These techniques, though well intended and partially justifiable in terms of the urgency of the mission, are taken more from the business world than from the Bible.

I am not suggesting we become clueless as to how many members are on our books, or that we forget about evangelizing our communities, or neglect to measure how we are doing. For planning (budgeting, securing venues, ministry development and more), knowing the condition of our flock(s) is vital. Yet, as we have seen in the scriptures, there is no explicitly biblical warrant for the statistical science of which we have become technicians. Moreover, the scriptures warn of the pitfalls associated with excessive reliance on our numbers, as seen vividly in the case of David's census.

Passages serving as correctives to over-reliance on stats

Our “stats-driven ministry” involves strategies—often short term—based on the need to reach short-term goals. When empirical measurements (target levels in growth, contribution, and other areas) become the bottom line, preaching and teaching tend to be oriented around the reaching of “goals.” Leaders tend to feel good about themselves only when they are measuring up in reaching these goals, which in most cases they are led to set through the direction of their superiors. The word of God is not silent here. Consider the following passages from the hand of master church builder Paul.

- ✓ **1 Corinthians 1:17**—Beware of boasting about baptisms. Baptism is *not* the goal in and of itself; preaching Christ is. The baptisms will follow, and we ought not to be anxious over this.
- ✓ **1 Corinthians 3:10**—God will give the increase. Recently I heard one evangelist preach, “Some of us plant, others water, and still others ‘bear the fruit.’” What? This is exactly what Paul was *not* saying. His point is that we are fellow workers with God. While it is true in one sense that we, his bride, bear fruit (spiritual children) for him, that’s not Paul’s point here. Rather, it’s *God* who makes things grow.⁸ Moreover, the passage emphasizes the *quality* of our growth (i.e., will it stand the test of fire?) more than *quantity*, as important as that is.
- ✓ **1 Corinthians 4:2**—Faithfulness is more than mere fruitfulness. How does God evaluate his ministers? If they only “grow their church” 7% in 12 months, is it his will that we move them for re-training? The primary criterion of ministerial effectiveness is not church growth, but what counts is faithfulness to a trust—the trust God has given us. God’s criteria are righteousness, godliness, faithfulness—not “growth,” as presently defined. We are right to aim to grow, yet the ministry is not about techniques. The business world has had too much of an influence on the church!⁹
- ✓ **2 Corinthians 10:12**—“...When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.” Although it is not necessarily wrong to compare our efforts to others’ (2 Corinthians 8:8), true excellence is more than having better statistics than last year, or than the movement as a whole. What *could* God do in our movement, if we trusted him more?
- ✓ **Philippians 1:15-18, 2:1-21**—Tainted motives may well be present, and there may be a dearth of pure-hearted Timothys around, yet still we must strive to follow Christ’s selfless example. Even when ministers aim to expand their personal empire, awkwardly or selfishly interacting with other parts of the kingdom, we still rejoice, since the gospel is being preached.
- ✓ **1 Thessalonians 1:3**—Faith leads naturally to work, love to labor, and hope to perseverance. Rather than telling our people to “work harder,” why not emphasize faith, hope, and love – and expect God to bring the fruit:?

Key passage: Acts 2

Acts 2:42-47 is a helpful, familiar old friend in the discussion. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer. It is never stated “They devoted themselves to evangelism”—and yet they were evangelistic! It is never stated “They devoted themselves to church growth”—and yet they grew! I believe it would be fair to conclude that *Acts 2:47 is the effect of Acts 2:42; daily growth flowed naturally from a daily commitment.*

Asking our members who have been around a while to write a list of what it *feels* we are most devoted to would likely yield some interesting results. Certainly evangelism would come near the top of the list, if not at the very top. Quotas, push days, invitation or contact goals, talk about fruit-bearing—all these feature prominently in our leaders’ meetings, sermons, and discipling. Probably they would also mention the contribution and the Missions Contribution. Finally, there is a tremendous stress on being “fired up”—typically defined as saying “Amen,” singing loudly, and behaving “zealously.” Reading through Acts 2:42-47, let’s compare the “feel” of our churches to the “feel” of this bird’s eye view of the early church.

“DEVOTED TO” IN ACTS 2:42-47?

OUR AIM

	1 st century	21 st century
1. Apostles’ teaching (2:42)	YES	YES—Church classes, DPI.
2. Fellowship (2:42)	YES	YES—Throughout the week
3. Breaking of bread (2:42)	YES	YES—Weekly
4. Prayer (2:42)	YES	YES—It is included
5. Sense of awe (2:43)	NO	YES—“Are you fired up?”
6. Financial generosity (2:45)	NO	YES—Budget, poor, missions
7. Gladness & sincerity (2:46)	NO	YES—“Look happy!”
8. Church growth (2:47)	NO	YES—Prominently.
9. [Evangelism—implicit]	NO	YES—Strongly.

What do you notice? We emphasize *the entire list*. It’s not that all nine of the elements (somewhat subjectively selected, perhaps) above are not essential. In fact, there are verses in other parts of the N.T. which emphasize them. Yet if the Spirit is showing us something in Acts 2:42-47, it’s that when we set our hearts on nos. 1-4, nos. 5-9 happen naturally. We fail to discriminate between causes and effects, trying to push all 9 elements simultaneously—and then we wonder why people are tiring spiritually. In “pushing” nos. 5-9, which are really *effects* of the Spirit, we send a confusing message, while crowding out nos. 1-4, which are at the very heart of our spiritual power and connectedness to God.

Once again, **church growth is a result of God’s working, not an end to be pursued in itself.** When the people are rooted in the Word (Luke 8:13, Colossians 2:6-7), locked into the fellowship (Hebrews 3:12-14), checking their own hearts in the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28), and prayerful (1 Peter 4:7), they will *naturally* share their faith, live joyfully and zealously, and give ungrudgingly. They will not disappoint us. But we have been pursuing effects as though they were causes, results as though they were the method.

IV. A fresh approach to stats

Is there a more healthy way to approach stats, at the staff or leadership level? It seems to me we are quite happy with a 2-year-old (or older) congregation to grow 20% a year. Why, then, do we publicly talk about *everyone* leading someone to Christ every year—which would lead to a stunning growth surge? If 20% is commendable (I realize the figure is arbitrary), what would this mean in the life of, say, a staff couple without interns leading a ministry of 100?

- The couple sees their ministry grow from 100 to 120—a net growth of 20%.
- Considerable time is devoted—as always—to discipling, raising up leaders, Bible teaching, fellowship, prayer, and general edification. The effort that goes into keeping the saved, saved is not to be underappreciated.
- They retain the majority of their baptisms in the first year—say a retention rate of 67%.
- This would mean they baptize or restore 30 persons. 67% (2/3) of +30 is +20. (We’re not including move-ins/-outs in our analysis.)
- Leaders are told not to rush people along in the studies, nor are they shamed if they have not “borne fruit” for a while.

- The man would be used by God to see a net growth of 15 men, the woman 15 women. Spreading it out over the year, we might see 12-month net growths (men's ministry) of: 1st quarter: +0, +1, +1; 2nd quarter: +1, +1, +1; 3rd quarter +1, +1, +0; 4th quarter: +3, +0, +0. Monthly goals for the combined ministry would be, by quarter: 4 / 6 / 4 / 6. Total = 20 (20%).
- Baptism goals (if retained) would be set, by quarter, at: 6 / 9 / 6 / 9. Total = 30 @ 2/3 = +20%.
- With these parameters, a “blow-out” might be a net growth of 33%—the equivalent of the man and his wife seeing about 2 men and 2 women baptized each month through the year.

While this may sound paltry by some reckoning, it would make for a commendable ministry year. In other words, fairly *low* stats pressure throughout most of the year could still lead to a phenomenal year!

Two contemporary anecdotes

The first story illustrates the principle of grace and spontaneity (the “Philemon” principle). In 2000 the United Kingdom churches dared to undertake an experiment in connection with their Special Missions Contribution. The elders and evangelists planned a “blind contribution.” Individual pledge amounts and giving to date were not tracked, and people were not followed up on individually. The left hand did not know what the right hand was doing! Only on the day of the collection did they know how the nation fared. The UK churches not only made the goal—they surpassed it. And they did not just surpass it—they even exceeded their best contribution ever, taking in \$100,000 above the previous year's surplus!

The second story is acted out many times around the world every year. A church I was associated with (congregation A), over a six month period in 1999, had grown well, as had another church (congregation B) in the same Geographical Sector. In fact, the net growth of each (actual, not %-age) was identical. The difference: congregation B had baptized *twice* as many people as congregation A! The net growth was the same, but the attrition rate of the congregation B (actually the larger of the two) was nearly double that of the congregation A!

At about the same time, I evaluated the net growth of two of the World Sector's largest churches. Although N.G. of the first was slightly better than that of the second, I knew for a fact (by visits and calls) that the staff members of the second kept up a much more challenging schedule. In other words, they worked harder—but for the same result!

It isn't being disputed we should work hard—and love it! But who would choose to work *extra* for an identical (or poorer) result? Short-term stats behaviors are so often counterproductive. What is lacking here? Grace, and long-term planning—key if we are to have a fresh approach to stats.

V. Completing the study

I am fully aware that the things I have written are challenging, that they suggest a paradigm shift. They are not written in a critical spirit. I have simply striven to face the situation with sobriety. This paper *isn't* saying that we should back off evangelism, or that a ministry which isn't growing doesn't have problems. It *is* affirming, however, that “stats” are currently exerting an unhealthy influence in many areas of the movement. We desperately desire growth. We want to see tens of thousands of large churches in every nation of the world. Amen! And yet we, as a movement, are too much controlled by stats. We will grow more quickly and healthily once we establish a more balanced view of numbers and statistics. Where shall we go from here?

- **Let's study the scriptures and our churches.** As we have seen, there are several biblical principles that bear on the discussion. Further, we can try to learn the extent to which our churches may be stats driven. The point is not to be sobered to the point of depression, but to understand the inner dynamics so that spiritual health may take the place of spiritual malaise.

- **Continue to survey the churches that have in fact grown fastest** (adjusted for move-ins/outs) and see if a less stats-driven approach is one of the factors at the heart of their success.
- **Stop sending the worldwide report every month to any WSL but the one whose growth is being measured.** The idea would be to eliminate unnecessary competition and comparison. The Report could be sent to all a couple of times a year.
- **Revamp leaders' meetings.** It might be prudent to reduce/remove stats accountability from the normal leaders' meeting.
- **Encourage people to be rooted in the Lord and his Word and see what God gives us,** rather than aiming to maximize growth each month, or even each year.
- **Call the fluff factor what it is.** Stats often have a substantial “fluff factor,” as evidenced by the annual December purge. Amazingly, many churches reach their *terminal* annual growth by June or July. That is, their membership around mid-year is the same as their true end-of-year figure. Though this trend may be on the verge of changing, the fluff factor must always be reckoned with.
- **Remember grace.** Surely the closer we follow God's Word, the more solid growth will be. We are justified by faith in Christ, not by ministry performance. We cannot pray “grace” and “God,” with one breath, while teaching “works” and “crank” (a verb suggestive of machinery) with the next.
- **Trust God.** We must not fear that if we reexamine this issue we will hurt our (His) growth. Though this is no time to be reactionary, it is a time to do something! The answers lie in the Bible.

VI. Conclusion

Is God trying to show us something?

Movement of the Spirit

We have a choice. The evidence is overwhelming: our approach must be reconsidered. I believe that the present slow-down is unlikely to reverse itself unless we ask some hard questions. We can be more proactive and preemptive, or... we can simply ride it out. Surely we must refuse that option! Let's talk, study, pray, make changes—whatever needs to be done. There are a number of reasons our growth rate is in decline. As stated earlier on, while the misuse of statistics isn't the number one problem, it is symptomatic of deeper, systemic issues.

Is God not showing us something here? Is this not the time to reevaluate and chart a different course? Will we have the faith to put our trust in the Spirit, rather than in the flesh?

- - - - -

ENDNOTES

¹ George Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1999), 46.

² Why do capitalistic systems bring a higher standard of living than systems based on a planned economy? Because people appreciate room to breathe. Good hearts are always willing to obey, but that shouldn't mean a lifetime of being told what to do. Moving from economics to “home economics,” we brothers see the lesson repeatedly in our marriages. Things have been a bit tense with the Mrs. lately. What are we to do? We bring home flowers, say we're sorry, maybe even take her away on a special overnight trip. And yet if she feels used by us (“I want sex from you,” or “I want you to stop complaining and be happy again so I can get back to my work”), she will grow even more resentful.

³ This is not even to discuss the cynicism that stems from staff contradicting themselves publicly in connection with goals and stats. For example, a medium-sized congregation is praised if it grows 25%. And yet disciples as a whole are rebuked if they

have not led someone to the Lord in six months. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together: net growth of 25% is excellent, yet a net growth of under 100% (every member leading someone to the Lord annually) is unacceptable!

⁴ Although we do find a partial census in 2 Chr. 25:5, as well as the counting of the returning exiles in Ezra-Neh., the next complete census, about which we read in 2 Sam. 24 and 1 Chr. 21, comes some four centuries after the Mosaic censuses. The census under David displeased God so much that punishment fell, and David was grieved that he had ordered it in the first place. Why did this counting incur God's displeasure?

- It was ultimately Satan who incited David to carry out this census (1 Chr. 21:1). Even Joab—hardly the paragon of spirituality—found the command offensive, and tried to dissuade David from going ahead with his plans.
- Instead of trusting in God to protect and prosper his people, David was leaning on the “arm of flesh”—which in this case truly failed him.
- Presumably the counters failed to collect the census tax (Exod. 30:12-16—see also 2 Kgs. 12:4). God's word stipulated that plague would break out if the people did not pay the census tax at the time they were counted, and interestingly this is precisely what happened.
- Most important, David failed to trust God. He should have known from the story of Gideon that God specializes in victories against the odds. Faith is the issue. It is always easier to place our confidence in the flesh—our own talents, assets, instincts, systems, strategies, rules and regulations—than in the Spirit, who calls us to trust him who is invisible.

⁵ Even in the New Testament, this is the focus. For example, the feeding of the 5000 records men, not women and children (Matt. 14:21). In the book of Acts, it appears only the men were counted (Acts 4:4). There is no reason to assume the church broke from the Jewish custom of counting men only, and it seems likely that on the “birthday” of the church, with 3000 men baptized, the total size of the congregation would have been somewhere between 5000 and 7000 at the outset! Even the picture of heaven in Rev. 7 and 14 records men only.

⁶ We are tempted to “stretch” it; not only do we count women, but we add in our kids, visitor's children, even little babies. Our focus on families is also right and biblical. And yet I find it comical when young leaders are short on the adult visitors, and yet they say “Whew, that was a close one. Thank goodness for the single mom with the five kids who came along. God gave us a ‘great,’ after all.” It is not clear what is being measured in such cases: the proclamation of the Gospel, or the ingenuity of ministry leaders to make their goals.

⁷ The true number may be higher or lower, depending on how we reckon partial censuses. In Num. 1 and again in Num. 26 Israel is counted. What does this have to do with counting our members as we enter the new century? Consider the two times Israel was counted in Num. These censuses were conducted for military purposes. (As Jesus mentioned in Luke 14, it helps to know the size of your army before you engage the enemy.) That is why men only were counted. While we know there were over 600,000 males out of their teens and able to fight, we can only guess the actual total number of Israelites. (Apparently, this stat was not important to Moses.) These men had to be of military age; no one younger than 20 was included. They had to be fit for battle. In addition, the results of the censuses were not used to measure how Israel was doing, much less to hold tribal or clan leaders responsible for increasing their numbers. Finally, the censuses were commanded by God. Thus the book of Numbers does not provide us with a model or even a precedent for membership lists, as necessary as these may be.

⁸ Similarly, we often ask about a brother to be appointed in the ministry, “Can he grow the ministry?” Although it is understood what this question (rightly) aims to understand, are we not reinforcing a wrong understanding of church growth? It isn't *we* who grow the church; it's *God*. Perhaps a better question to ask would be, “Does he have a talent for church building” (to use the phrase of 1 Cor. 3).

In this connection, the Parable of growing seed is helpful (Mark 4). The amazing growth God brings is no less miraculous just because it occurs through normal processes. All too often we try to speed up God's processes. And yet, as in the activity of watching the proverbial pot, much time and effort are wasted when we think that it is totally up to us to “grow the ministry.”

⁹ The emphasis in the New Testament, as we read through, is on such things as peace, grace, perseverance, resisting false teaching, hospitality, leading disciplined lives, and caring for our families. There is actually little on evangelism, church growth, or numbers—not because these are unimportant, but because they aren't the fundamental issue. There are many elements in a balanced ministry, and the New Testament does provide us with a “feel” of the ministry.