**On Tracking & Monitoring**

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Frequently the topic of tracking and monitoring the progress of the Great Commission emerges, and often in the context of identifying, counting, and verifying churches. Questions emerge which are at the intersection of need, trustworthiness, self-monitoring, surveillance, and GPS-style direction/visibility.

The first question is about the Biblical basis--does Jesus care about numbers? "David's Census" (2 Samuel 24) is the big case often cited, but is the counting the sin, or something else? We see lots of other counting in the OT - the first chapters of Numbers are filled with it. And in the New Testament, someone counted the 5,000 who were hungry, the 40 days and nights Jesus fasted, and Jesus talked about the 99 and the 1. Jesus seems to talk mainly about orders of magnitude (“doubled his money”, “30-, 60-, 100-fold”) but also describes big impossible numbers known to God - all the sparrows who fall and the hairs on our heads. Revelation 7:9 describes a “big crowd” that is “too numerous to count” from “every tribe, language, people, nation” before the throne. Presumably it’s not too big a number for God, but falls into the same sort of order of magnitude as the “stars in the sky” and the “sand on the seashore” and the “sparrows in the trees.” God counts them, even when we can’t.

Second is nearly always the question of trustworthiness--do we trust the numbers, or, really, the reporters. "How are the reports verified?" I’ve found there’s really only two reasons this question is asked. The first, overwhelmingly, is money—given in some form to support or pay for the work, and for some reason (often to get more money?) an accounting is necessary. The second, adjacent to (or perhaps at the root of) the first, is a comparative fruitfulness issue—that ministry has a lot more fruit than our ministry, although we’ve been working in the same place among the same people for ten times as long. This can lead to pride, jealousy, envy, and thus to motivated distrust. (We are reasonable people. We can find a reason for anything we want to think.) The question of “how are the reports verified” or “who has audited the numbers” really have very little to do with tracking (except in the mechanics) and far more to do with relational issues.

Verification is often impossible (even if it were good motivations) for the third topic - security. The need for security directly conflicts with the desire for verification. In America, you can just “go and see the churches.” But not so in many of the places where the unreached are, and where questions of data arise. And this is often the problem—in a place of great persecution, a report comes out of large numbers, and then people react to that and want to see it verified and “proven”—but you can’t, because, security. People throw up their hands about it, and some think the security issues are overblown. But they aren’t. We have to grapple with the fact that security is a huge issue. It can be life and death for some.

Aside from the life-and-death problem, security usually leads to a lack of physical buildings to count. "Churches" are communities of people which shift places and makeup frequently. And that leads to a fourth and less-asked question about accuracy, precision, and what is counted. Some who haven’t been involved in religious demography think that any numbers related to a denomination or network of Christian churches ought to be very precise and countable. The reality is, nearly all denominational numbers are rounded to a certain order of magnitude because they are constantly changing. Think about your own church. How do you count the number of members? How frequently are the numbers updated? Since the last annual “report” (to whoever your church sends its report to), how much have the numbers changed? For some churches, the numbers might be less than 200. For other churches, it might be thousands or tens of thousands, and would change dramatically from one week to the next depending on how they are counted. In addition, what is a "church"? Who is a "believer"? How do you count them, then?

This week, I linked to a video talking about Christianity in North Korea. In that report, it tells us there are “somewhere between 100,000 and 400,000 believers in North Korea.” A quick check of [JoshuaProject.net](http://joshuaproject.net/) shows an estimate of 1.66% Christian out of a population of 26 million, or 432,164 (by multiplication). Setting aside the difference between those two numbers (negligible, and fairly standard in my line of work), that’s a fairly large number. It can’t be immediately verified because you can’t send Westerners in to North Korea to do any kind of counting. Even if you could, that number would change day by day—the North Korean church, by the same report, is one of the fastest growing churches in the world.

Fifth and finally is the question of granularity of reporting, which is related to the reason (and also the motive) for counting. Let’s say there’s a country in which a thousand churches have been planted. How are those churches distributed - are they clumping in a particular area? Or are they spreading out? Are they able to get into the languages that previously haven’t been reached? Are they going across caste lines? For all sorts of good reasons, these are the questions that missiologists and church planters often ask. They want to turn to tracking processes to find the answers to the questions.

Unfortunately, often it’s just not possible to track down to this level of granularity, and even if it could be, security suggests it shouldn’t be. More unfortunately, it’s often Westerners that are asking such granular questions and offering “advice and direction” to non-Westerners who face all sorts of challenges and risks related to implementing them. Who gets decide how much is tracked, and how much is reported?  (This starts to verge on surveillance, which is really going to be unacceptable in these areas.)

A lot of this comes down to issues of trustworthiness. What’s happening in some parts of the world is very different from what’s happening in ours. I do think some level of tracking is essential—but this should be done internally by each denomination/network. I also think some level of reporting is inspirational, and a great testimony to the glorious work of God, but here I suggest three rules of thumb that may be useful:

* The old proverb, “If you don’t want a thing heard, don’t say it,” is a good rule to keep in mind, especially with things that can get people arrested, jailed, tortured, and killed. People who don’t live and work among the people don’t Need To Know everything.
* I try to remove money from the equation of relationships as much as possible; but where money must be involved, I think we should untie as many strings as possible. I am fascinated by the giving pattern of the MacKenzie Scott Foundation (former wife of Jeff Bezos): “While an application is required to be considered for the $1 million unrestricted gifts, no financial or narrative reporting is required after receiving the award. Ms. Scott does her due diligence up front and then trusts each nonprofit to make the best decision on how the money is spent.” Why is this not impossible for others? (<https://bloomerang.co/blog/mackenzie-scott-foundation-grant-guide/>).
* We should reconsider our expectations about what can be counted. My kids share an iPhone plan with me, so I can know where they are at any given moment. My GPS tells me where I am on a map, and where I need to go next. My computer tells me when my next appointment is. My email client tells me who’s opened an email from me, and when. I’ve come to expect exact, precise, real-time clarity on anything of interest to me. But that’s an artificial expectation that just isn’t reality for most of the world.

The world is relational and complex and often opaque not knowable and controllable. I should relax into the Spirit’s sovereign control over everything, and follow where he leads.