

WHY NUMBERS MAKE US IRRATIONAL

Many observers claim that the church has a tendency to pick up political fads and trends from the business world just when they are starting to become passe in the secular society. In a review article in the Epiphany 2002 issue of LOGIA Kevin Vogts contends that the church's increasing obsession with numbers and statistics is an example of this phenomenon. Vogts' springboard is a review of the book *The Sum of Our Discontent: Why Numbers Make Us Irrational* by David Boyle.

Boyle's thesis is that complex systems and abstractions cannot be quantified and measured meaningfully by statistics. Many attempts at such measurements produce only inaccurate, simplistic caricatures. Boyle states that such misguided attempts at quantification are not only meaningless but increasingly disruptive and disturbing to individuals and society.

Vogts' premise is that the same is true in the church. Unable to measure spiritual growth and faith the church measures new members and attendance. It can't measure commitment so it measures money. In the church too such measuring often produces "inaccurate, simplistic caricatures, largely negative and disturbing."

Vogts' test case for his thesis is the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He observes that the spin put on the statistics gathered is often more revealing about the psyche of the group than the statistics themselves. The LCMS and ELCA reported very similar membership statistics for 1999—slight declines. The ELCA press release reported: Membership remains stable. The LCMS release reacting to essentially the same results reported: Membership flat. The same results—different spin.

This raises the question how "successful" the LCMS really is in the statistical race with other church bodies. The LCMS has 2.6 million members with 1 million in church on a given Sunday (38.5%). The ELCA has 5.2 million members with 1.5 million in church (28.8%). [WELS congregations during this same period had an average attendance of 44.6%. This figure, however, may not be strictly comparable to the other two since it is not clear how it was calculated.]

Lutherans seem to have a tendency to beat themselves up with feelings that they are being trounced by Baptists, Evangelicals, and charismatics in the statistical race. Is this justified? The Southern Baptist Convention claims 15.7 million members with 2.5 million in church on a given Sunday (15.9%). SBC president Paige Patterson admitted, "We have known for a long time the boasting numbers were inflated." The Assemblies of God reported that they may have been over-estimating their growth by as much as 30% because existing members who were rebaptized were inadvertently being counted as new members each time they were baptized. Concerning charismatics statistics-master David Barrett writes, "They do, however, have a growing dilemma in that charismatics in the non-Pentecostal mainline Protestant and Catholic churches experience an average involvement of only two or three years. After this period as active weekly attenders at prayer meetings, these become irregular or nonattending."

The LCMS Church Membership Initiative suggests that churches must adopt contemporary worship to grow. More extensive studies by pollster George Barna and Lutheran Brotherhood showed the exact opposite result. In his 1995 study Barna reported, "Most nonchurched adults would prefer a service that incorporates traditional hymns rather than contemporary Christian music." Often poll results seem to be heavily affected by what the pollsters choose to measure and how they measure it.

Vogts decries the throwing about of statistics that are shallow and out of context, leading to clumsy comparisons of congregations and pastors without regard for their history and setting. Many of the most “successful” LCMS congregations are located in areas that are not growing in population. They are faithfully reaching people with the gospel without the boost of population growth in their area of service.

Vogts does not reject all use of statistics and counting, but his point is that the use of statistics must be ministerial not magisterial. Statistics can give some indication of *what* is happening. By themselves they cannot often explain *why* it is happening. One of the most difficult things to accomplish in laboratory tests is to eliminate variables which will skew the comparisons. In living, dynamic systems this becomes even more difficult. Are we really comparing apples and apples? Comparing congregations from different eras may be as meaningless as comparing athletes from different eras. We should not make statistical studies bear more weight than they are capable of carrying.

The Bible reports three censuses. The first census in Numbers was a cause for great rejoicing. The 70+ souls who had gone down to Egypt with Jacob had exploded to 600,000+. It also served the practical purpose of organizing Israel’s army for the march to the Promised Land. After 40 years another head count revealed 600,000+. Forty years of stagnation. “What a poor leader Moses must have been! During his tour of duty Israel had suffered a modest statistical decline after generations of explosive growth.” Is that the message of Numbers? Or is the message that in spite of the unfaithfulness of many the Lord had preserved his people and assembled the army that would take the Promised Land. Some centuries later David took a census that to all outward appearances looked very much those taken by Moses. But there must have been enough tell-tale signs that even Joab, not exactly your ideal spiritual counselor, could see that this was a really bad idea. In gathering statistics a great deal depends on motive. Both egotism and masochism are bad attitudes.

Jonah’s ministry was a great statistical success, but the results were ephemeral. Isaiah’s ministry was a statistical failure. He knew up front that when he was done preaching the holy seed would be only a “stump in the land,” but from that stump the Branch of David grew up. Who was the more faithful prophet? Whose work produced more lasting results?

Jesus’ ministry was not a statistical success—500 or so followers. Peter’s first sermon was a statistical marvel. More than a few of Paul’s fields were not rousing statistical successes. Most estimates suggest that the church labored for three centuries with only modest growth before an explosion of growth that was not an unmixed blessing. If statistics were the measure, Constantine would be tough to beat in the missionary hall of fame.

The sower knows some of the seed he sows will never sprout. Much will be snatched away. Of that that does take root much will wither. Much will be choked. But he is not deterred by that. He knows that at the right season there will be a harvest if he does not grow weary. In countries like Zambia and Malawi we reap an abundant harvest, but the ground was prepared by the missionary pioneers in Africa who worked hard for meager results. Perhaps the modest results we experience in some countries of Asia are just the ground breaking for future harvests.

The most important counting we can do is to count the cost of being a disciple in a hostile world, and then to be ready to pay that cost. There will be a harvest, 10, 20, 50, 100-fold. Only God knows.