

Editorial: Is the Great Commission slipping beyond our grasp?

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Christianity is growing, but not rapidly enough to fulfill the Great Commission, according to “The Future of World Religions,” a comprehensive demographic study from the Pew Research Center.

The Pew report describes the roadblocks obstructing Christians’ path in the quest to fulfill Jesus’ demand to share the gospel with the whole world.



Editor Marv KnoxThe study, gathered across six years, analyzes a variety of variables—ages of religious adherents, fertility rates, death rates, immigration and conversion patterns—to estimate how much faith groups will grow or decline by 2050.

(To see a summary of the Pew Center’s report, [click here](#). To read the article we reported on the survey, [click here](#).)

Global picture—paint by numbers

The global religious picture is a montage. Among the notable predictions:

- Islam will grow faster than any major religion, from 1.6 billion followers (23.2 percent of the world’s population) in 2010 to 2.76 billion (29.7

percent) in 2050. That's a 73 percent rate, more than twice the pace of any other group.

- Christianity will grow, but less rapidly, from 2.17 billion believers in 2010 to 2.92 billion in 2050. Christianity's share of global population will remain the same, 31.4 percent. And Christianity's growth rate, 35 percent, mirrors the overall population growth.

- But the distribution of Christians will shift dramatically. While their percentage will decline in Europe and North America, it will soar in the Southern Hemisphere. For example, by 2050, nearly 40 percent of Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa.

- Muslims will almost catch up to the number of Christians worldwide by mid-century. (An extrapolation of the report predicts they will have the same number of followers in 2070, and Muslims will outnumber Christians by 2100.)

- Besides Muslims and Christians, all other groups are expected to decline as a percentage of the world's population.

- Hindus will increase from 1.03 billion to 1.38 billion. But their share of the population will dip slightly, from 15.0 percent to 14.9 percent.

- While the number of religiously unaffiliated will climb from 1.13 billion to 1.38 billion worldwide, their share will descend from 16.4 percent to 13.2 percent.

- Globally, the swings of faith switchers—who individually decide to change religions—are projected to help the unaffiliated (expecting an influx of almost 65 million) and hurt Christianity (expecting an outflow of 66 million). Islam will see an increase of about 3.2 million converts.

On the home front ...

Closer to home, the outlook appears worse for Christianity. U.S. predictions indicate:

- The national population will increase from slightly more than 310 million in 2010 to slightly more than 394 million by mid-century—a gain of 27 percent.
- However, the Christian portion of the population will decline from 78.3 percent to 66.4 percent. While two-thirds of the nation will remain dominant, a 12-point decline in just four decades is ominous.
- Muslims, meanwhile, will increase from 0.9 percent to 2.1 percent.
- Curbing their global decline, the unaffiliated—often called “nones” today—will increase from 16.4 percent of the population in 2010 to 25.6 percent in 2050.
- Only Jews—who will decline from 1.8 percent of the population to 1.4 percent—are expected to join Christians in losing share.

Accounting for change

The Pew Center based its projections on demographic trends whose patterns shape the increase or decline of population segments. These trends—such as the fertility rate of Muslims (a world-leading 3.1 children per woman) compared to the fertility rate of Christians (2.7)—aren’t likely to change significantly. From that perspective, the calculations may be quite accurate.

The center does not account for supernatural activity or spiritual movements. So, while a great awakening or revival among one or more of the major groups could alter the conversion rates, such events cannot be predicted.

That’s where we come in. Baptists and many other Christians claim we

believe we should fulfill the Great Commission. We say we intend to begin nearby and go around the globe with the gospel, making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to follow Jesus.

If you look at raw numbers, it's easy to see the most "ripe" spiritual fields are among the "nones" and the Muslims. They comprise the largest portions of people on our planet. If we intend to reach them, then we must mobilize.

Three tasks to make a difference

This is an enormously complex task; covering it in an editorial seems almost silly. But for the sake of argument, let's say we could pick three tasks to make a difference. What should they be?

- **First, produce sharper, more-informed Christians.** To talk compellingly with "nones" (not to mention people on the margins of Christianity who are leaning toward abandoning belief), lay Christians need to be fluent in apologetics. It's not about arguing theology. It's simply understanding how to talk about faith and the "hard issues" of life with clarity and compassion.

If we're going to lead people of other religions to Jesus, we can do a better job if we understand their beliefs. So, education on world religions is vital. Many are important, but if you only choose one, choose Islam.

So, is your church training laypeople to articulate their faith and to have spiritual conversations with people of other faiths or no faiths? If not, it's a stretch to say you're a Great Commission church.

- **Second, embody the gospel.** That means being the presence of Christ to people in need. The power of Christian love can bridge all other chasms, but most of the time, we must be the living ladders that help people reach that bridge.

What if our love were so obvious everyone in our communities knew it? What if our churches were known as the go-to places for helping people get on their feet? For providing jobs training, food and clothing, tutoring and mentoring, health care, legal aid. What if, when people hear “Baptist,” they think “love”?

Similarly, we must do an even better job of transmitting that love to other places. We already expend enormous energy and spend huge amounts of money providing food, clean water, disaster relief and other aid to people abroad. None of it is wasted, and we always can do more. We must do more.

- **And third, make sure people have access to the gospel** in a language and context that enables them to make sense of the message. This means training more leaders and starting more churches.

Close to home, that probably means starting churches in languages and worship styles we don’t understand. It means educating and supporting pastors who don’t look or sound like any pastor most of us have ever known. Overseas, it means trusting Christians from other cultures and languages with the gospel. Rather than impose our leadership on them, we must give them access to culturally appropriate training and financial resources to start their own churches for their own people in their own culture and context.

Of course, we’re already trying to do this. But the Pew Center research documents a sobering fact: We’re falling further and further behind. If we love Jesus, we’ll love the world. If we follow Jesus, we’ll prioritize our efforts to reach people near and far with the gospel.