

The World's 10 Spiritual Hot Spots

Where is the church growing fastest today? A leading researcher crunched the numbers for Charisma—and the results may surprise you.

Christianity around the world is growing! From a handful of frightened followers hiding in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, the church has expanded to more than 2 billion people today. They are found in every country, among thousands of ethnic groups, speaking thousands of languages.

Most remarkably, Christianity is growing rapidly in places considered unreachable a few decades ago. Church-planting movements today are exploding all over Africa and Asia, and hundreds of new churches are being planted in months rather than years.

Yet much work remains. More than 6,000 distinct people groups have little or no access to the gospel. More than a quarter of the world's population has yet to hear about Jesus Christ for the first time.

In my research I have identified 10 countries where the church is rapidly expanding. All these nations still have significant numbers of people who have yet to hear the gospel. Perhaps this report will inspire you to head to the mission field. And if you don't feel called to go there full time, you can pray for these nations and financially support the work of indigenous churches there.

Nestled in the mountains of Tibet between China and India, this small Himalayan kingdom is a bright spot for Christianity. The church is growing faster there than in any other nation. In 1960 missiologist Patrick Johnstone reported just 25 believers. Today the number has risen to almost 1 million.

Nepali Christians have faced all kinds of abuse and isolation in recent years. Many paid the ultimate price for their faith.

The old saying, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church," is true for Nepal. Missionary spokesman Nate Wilson tells of a 20-year veteran of ministry to Tibetans who warned new recruits in 2001, "There are more dead Tibetan [mission] workers than there are Tibetan Christians." The same courage can be found in Nepal.

Yet great fruit has come from their sacrifice. Although Nepal is the world's only Hindu kingdom, and Hinduism is still the state religion, political unrest in 1990 brought a wave of reform and an end to most religious persecution. In this time of openness, Christianity has had explosive growth. Today there are almost 900,000 believers in Nepal, and churches are springing up all over the country.

Hindus still make up 72 percent of the nation. Buddhists claim 9 percent, and Muslims have 4 percent. Christians trail at fourth, with 3 percent. Nevertheless, Christianity is growing twice as fast as other faiths.

Today more than half of all Christians belong to independent groups, and charismatics number some 650,000. In the next 25 years the total number of Christians is projected to double to

more than 2 million.

Anybody watching trends in the church knows China's phenomenal story. It is a mysterious country, one with the largest population, the third largest geographic area and one of the fastest growing economies.

Communists have shaped China since 1949, but after the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s Communism began to unravel. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China's policies have slowly become more open. Though still isolated, much material progress has led to improvements in literacy, education, health and the economy.

Missionaries have established the church many times in China, only to see it wiped out through revolution and war. During the late 1960s no communication from the Chinese church was received outside. But the church was very much alive.

From around 1975 the Chinese church began growing rapidly. From 1.5 million in 1970, the church grew to an estimated 64 million in 1990, then to perhaps 90 million today. It will likely be in excess of 120 million in 25 years.

Believers in independent churches make up the majority, numbering perhaps 80 million. Charismatics are estimated to number 60 million. Already the church in China is planning outreach to minority groups within China and the neighboring Muslim nations. China could potentially mobilize a huge mission force.

FASO

The number of Christians in many African nations is on the rise due to population growth as well as to aggressive Christian evangelism. Burkina Faso is an excellent example of this.

A small, landlocked country in the midst of the Sahel desert of northern Africa, Burkina Faso is prone to drought and famine. Most of its 13 million are subsistence farmers victimized by malnutrition. They have also suffered much civil unrest since their country gained independence from France in 1960.

Half the people have never heard the gospel, and half are Muslims. Yet in the midst of this bleak picture a Christian revival has swept this nation.

From 1983 to 2000 church growth has been remarkable. From 1983 to 1990 the total number of churches more than doubled. Catholics make up 1.3 million of the more than 2 million Christians. Charismatics total some 900,000. Numerous church-planting movements are active among the country's 72 ethnic groups.

A tiny city-state on an island in the middle of Southeast Asia, this small trading center was part of the British Empire in the 1820s. It developed into a commercial powerhouse and today is one of the most important financial, manufacturing and shipping points in Southeast Asia. Green with trees through intentional planting, flush with wealth through

intentional economic development, Singapore is highly modernized and in some ways more technologically sophisticated than the West.

With no natural resources to speak of (more than half its drinking water is imported from Malaysia) and lacking assets, Singapore has pushed its 4 million people to excel in business, banking, science and invention. Singapore's drive has led to incredible competition for the best schools, housing and jobs.

With its prosperity also comes an element of control. There are stringent government policies on everything from car ownership to speech. Gum-chewing was legalized only in the last year, and gum-chewers still must register with the government.

In the midst of Singapore's drive for growth, it is not surprising that the church is growing as well. Singapore has about 500,000 believers (12 percent of the country), organized in everything from small house churches to megachurches. There is religious freedom, but in its struggle for stability Singapore does not allow missionaries to go from there to other countries.

India is projected to surpass China in total population by 2050. Its current population of more than 1 billion gives India an enormous diversity and complexity. Thousands of languages and cultures are represented, as well as every world religion. Many Indians are locked into a caste system that has ingrained cruel prejudice into society.

Some 80 percent of India's population, or 800 million people, practice Hinduism. The next largest group is Muslims, who number more than 123 million. Christianity is embraced by only 6 percent, or 60 million people, and Pentecostals and charismatics number more than 30 million. Two percent of the people practice other religions.

Although nearly half of India has yet to hear the gospel, the church in India is making enormous strides. Some of the largest mission agencies are based there. With hundreds of thousands of local workers, and thousands of Indian missionaries sent to other nations, the church is growing at nearly double the rate of the overall population.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is governmental restrictions, particularly on the Dalits, or the "untouchable" class. When Dalits convert to Christianity they face the threat of persecution. This is a sensitive political issue that, if changed, could result in many millions of Dalits professing faith in Christ.

Though Vietnam remains under communist rule, it is rapidly changing as it—like China—implements economic reforms.

Most of its 78 million people live in rural areas and are part of an agricultural economy. Nearly half the country's population practice Buddhism or a variety of it. Christians make up about 9 percent of Vietnam, or some 6.7 million people, of whom about 5 million are Catholics. Charismatics number some 800,000.

Most Protestants are from tribal minorities, more than half of which have been reached with the gospel. The government has permitted Christian ministries to work in the country, especially in the area of community development and compassionate relief programs.

The church is growing at roughly 1.2 percent per year, slightly ahead of the population rate. There are thousands of church workers, and Vietnamese missionaries are sent abroad. In principle there is religious freedom but the church is restricted.

A 1999 religion decree enshrined religious rights and allowed people to choose to follow, not follow, or change their religion, but warned of punishments for those who used religion to harm the state. The current trend appears to be one of a gradual improvement in relations between the church and the state, coupled with continued attempts at state control. Under these conditions the church will likely triple in size by 2050.

Located in western Africa next door to Nigeria, Benin represents the massive church growth occurring in Africa. Its population of 7 million is mostly young—more than half are under the age of 15. The population could triple to 21 million by 2050.

Like many African nations, Benin suffers from deep ethnic division, poor health care, lack of clean water, poor education and a high rate of HIV/AIDS. Yet despite its limited resources, Benin's present rate of church growth is explosive:

3.1 percent annually, with nearly 120,000 new members joining churches every year. By 2050, it is probable that Christianity in Benin will reach 40 percent of the total population.

As with most countries in western Africa, Benin is split between Christians in the south and Muslims in the north, with a large minority still practicing animistic tribal faiths. Benin is home to about 2 million Christians, 1.2 million Muslims and 3 million ethnoreligionists. About half the Christians are Catholics; charismatics number 650,000.

As the church continues to grow, this could lead to new clashes between Islam and Christianity. The church may pay an increasing price in martyrs.

With the most land of any nation, Russia is home to 147 million people, most of whom live in the cities west of the Ural Mountains. But the population is in decline, many families are poor, and fewer families are having children.

This country has known tyranny since it became a nation in the eighth century. Beginning with the Marxist Revolution of 1922, communism systematically ravaged the economy despite Russia's literate, educated workers and abundance of natural resources. Further, the Communist Party attempted to eliminate all religious affiliation in the name of eradicating superstition. With the demise of communism in the early 1990s, however, interest in religion exploded.

A third of all Russians still consider themselves nonreligious or atheist, and 7 percent are Muslims (mainly concentrated on

the border with central Asia). Slightly more than half—84 million, or 57 percent—profess Christianity. Most of these are part of the Russian Orthodox Church, though some 1.5 million each belong to the Protestant and Catholic traditions, both of which are growing at a rate far exceeding the Orthodox Church. Charismatics number nearly 4 million.

Believers in Russia experienced one of the most severe and sustained periods of religious persecution in recent history. Martyrs numbered in the millions. The possibility of persecution is still real because the government and the tradition-bound Orthodox Church look with suspicion on the unorganized influx of emerging new ministries. In the midst of this turmoil, however, a window for significant church growth has opened.

The Russian church is growing at about 0.1 percent per year. With the population in decline this is significant. By 2050, the church in Russia will likely have about the same numbers it does today, or perhaps less. However, a higher percentage of the population will be Christian, rising from about 57 percent to possibly 75 percent. The makeup of the church will likely also shift, with Protestants and Catholics gaining significant shares of the total Christian population.

More than 130 million people live in Bangladesh, making it the sixth most populous nation. It is also one of the poorest nations, and it suffers from overpopulation and frequent natural disasters, particularly flooding.

Once known as East Bengal, this predominantly Muslim region of

India was renamed East Pakistan in 1947 when Pakistan became an independent nation. In 1971 a bitter civil war of independence was fought, ending in the defeat of the resident Pakistani administration. Corruption, instability, assassinations and 18 coups have marred the years since Bangladesh became a nation, although some sense of democracy was established in 1991.

Islam is the state religion and Muslims now make up about 85 percent of the population. Hindus comprise most of the remainder, but there are small numbers of Buddhists, animists and Christians. Hindus suffered severe losses because of deaths and refugee movements in the 1971 civil war, but they remain a vocal and influential minority to this day.

There are about 1 million Christians in Bangladesh, making up less than 1 percent of the population. More than half are part of independent groups. Charismatics number about 450,000. Converts from Islam are nearly all secret believers, although there are a few isolated instances of whole villages turning to Christ.

Most public Christians are low-caste Hindu converts and members of minority tribes. The church is likely to double in size by 2050. Still, it will form just slightly more than 1 percent.

Bangladeshi church leaders say the greatest obstacle to the growth of Christianity is fundamentalist Islam. One leader attending the Lausanne 2004 Forum for World Evangelization told me: "Many Muslims, when they think of Christians, think of the Crusades. And this has sometimes been made worse by what has happened since 9/11. We have to struggle with this."

KOREA

South Korea was created in 1948 when the United States and the Soviet Union partitioned the Korean peninsula. From the ashes of the Korean War, South Korea has become one of the largest economies. Yet this massive economic infrastructure is always under the threat of war with North Korea. The border between these two countries is believed to have the greatest density of landmines.

Korea is a good example of how the gospel can rapidly spread in a single people group. The people of North and South Korea are mostly Koreans, sharing a common culture and language. More than 95 percent of people in South Korea are Korean. Japanese make up another million people. Other than these two, there are only four other minority groups in the country, together making up about 100,000 people.

Christians make up the largest religious block in South Korea: 18 million profess to follow Christ (39 percent of the nation). There are about 7 million Buddhists, 7 million ethnoreligionists, 7 million nonreligious and 5 million Confucianists. The reality, however, is that many Koreans practice multiple faiths. Some Christians might still adhere to certain Buddhist practices, for example.

Christianity is growing in South Korea, and many Koreans are active in missions around the world. They also look forward eagerly to the day when they can openly share the gospel with the people of North Korea, which is one of the most restricted areas.

As we look at the growth of Christianity in South Korea, and

in all these other “hot spots” of revival, we see that a remarkable shift has occurred. No longer is Christianity contained or headquartered in Europe or the United States, as it was in past centuries. The gospel is rapidly becoming a dominant force in Africa and Asia.

Already, these nations are sending missionaries to our country. We can pray that the same white-hot fervor that burns in the heart of the church in places such as China and Benin will be ignited in the American church once again.

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