

Crime data

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

Every year I wait for the January issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. I tear it open to see its center spread: the Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission, compiled by David B. Barrett, research professor of missiometrics at Regent University, and his team.

My respect for their effort and awe at their computers' achievement is great, even though—not being a missiometrician—I'm nervous about the supposed precision of their figures. They round things off, but even rounded statistics sound precise.

Here's a shocker: at the end of "the ecumenical century," there are 33,800 "distinct and organizationally separate denominations" in the Christian world. And the number is growing, thanks to prophetic Pentecostal movements and the like. In mid-2000 (presumably precisely at 12:00 p.m. on June 30), there will be 1,999,566,000 nominal Christians in the world. And North America, which we tend to think of as a big part of the Christian world, is second last to "Oceania" among the continents in respect to the number of Christians.

Barrett claims that, in U.S. funds, the personal income of church members rose from \$8,950 billion in 1990 to \$12,700 billion now. The most startling and the chanciest of his figures appear in a column I especially like to monitor: "Ecclesiastical Crime, \$." For a while we thought that TV evangelists were swelling this category, but so many of them have gone belly up or are behind bars that we can't hold them accountable for much of this. A couple of sad stories of embezzlement in denominational offices may indicate another locus of ecclesiastical crime. But one wonders who is reading the police blotters in Belize, Auckland and Zambesi.

Still, the figures show that this is a real growth industry. Barrett and company somehow know that a century ago, when the world was 34.4 percent Christian, ecclesiastical crime netted or cost only \$300,000. By 1970 it had risen to \$5 million. By 1990 it had jumped all the way to \$3 billion.

And now, when international markets spread Christian capitalism and religion prospers everywhere, so does ecclesiastical crime. By mid-2000 \$13.2 billion will be sucked up by the international Christian cosa nostra. The missiometricians—who must operate with dour theories of original sin and a good eye for finding out actual sin—project \$65 billion worth of ecclesiastical crime in 2024.

Ecclesiastical crime means a plundering of innocents, of donors to good causes, of lovers of God. Perhaps it's time to forget about fighting over whether the Ten Commandments should be posted in public-school classrooms and in courtrooms. Let's put them in the places where people claim to follow them—in church sanctuaries and in the hearts of those who serve the church.