

What would Jesus count? A faithfulness index: A faithfulness index

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

At a church staff devotional the other day, a colleague read the passage from the 25th chapter of Matthew about the separating of the sheep and the goats, and about how we minister to Jesus Christ himself in serving the hungry, thirsty, naked or imprisoned. As always, I was struck by the directness and utter clarity of Jesus' words: "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me."

There is something unmistakable about Jesus' notion of what his followers ought to be doing, and about the priority he assigns to ministries of compassion, healing and justice. "Ignore this at your peril," he seems to be saying. The small group of church staff assembled that morning agreed that we had just been given our marching orders for the day.

Then I went to my desk and read John Dart's article ([Who's counting](#)) on the complexities of assessing membership figures for religious bodies. Having just heard Matthew 25, I had to ask myself why anybody cares about church statistics, especially in a world in which terrorism strikes fear in every heart, and in a country, the most affluent in the history of the world, that still refuses to feed and care for all of its own children.

It is so American to count numbers, to assume that you have important information, maybe the most important information, about an enterprise when you know how many adherents, converts, clients or customers it has. I engage in such counting myself, but I always feel a little guilty about succumbing to market categories of thinking.

I don't think Jesus would ask us about the size of our membership rolls. I do think, based on Matthew 25, that he would ask us about how many people we have fed,

clothed, housed and visited.

I recall a conversation I had with the clerk of session of a tiny Church of Scotland kirk in the Western Highlands, where I served one summer long ago. It was our first meeting to acquaint me with my new responsibilities. “How many members are there?” I asked. He looked at me quizzically. I asked again, “How many members are on the roll?” He did not understand. I tried several times before realizing there was no roll—that in that remote village all the people thought of themselves as belonging to the parish kirk, and that no one was counting. Frankly, I concluded after several months that a little head counting might be a healthy exercise. But I’ll never forget that the little church was bumping along without anyone even trying to define it in terms of numbers.

My denomination, like most of the rest of the mainline, thinks about numbers a lot. Someone is regularly putting data into a computer and announcing that at the current rate of decline the last living Presbyterian will die in the year 2,137.

Jesus, so far as I know, never said a word about numerical success, but he had quite a bit to say about helping, healing, feeding and sheltering. So maybe our statistical reports ought to have a “faithfulness index” to record the numbers of persons fed, housed and visited by each church—recorded just as accurately as our confirmations and adult baptisms and letters of transfer. Jesus would like that a lot more.