

Measuring success: How the Century is doing

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

How are we doing? The editors and staff of this magazine periodically ask themselves that question. Are we succeeding? Is the magazine meeting or at least approaching the goal we have set for ourselves of helping Christians think critically and live faithfully? Are we engaging people with lively articles, timely reports, thoughtful reflections?

One obvious way to measure success is by the numbers, and on that score we can point to steady growth over the past four years. The Century's circulation figures rank it as one of the largest of independent religious journals of opinion. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that circulation at thoughtful magazines such as the *Economist* and the *New Yorker* is climbing. Maybe we are part of a trend. Maybe we are doing something that is attracting attention.

Another benchmark in the publishing business is the percentage of readers who renew their subscriptions, who "stay on the bus," in the parlance of the marketers. The Century has a remarkably loyal readership, especially when compared to the average renewal rates in the magazine business. Those who know the magazine best want to keep reading us.

Professional recognition is another way to measure success. A year or so ago the *Chicago Tribune* called us one of the 50 best magazines in the land. Every year the Century wins multiple awards from the Associated Church Press. Our news editor, John Dart, this year received the American Academy of Religion's prize for in-depth reporting. Our work is being noticed.

Finally, there is anecdotal evidence. I read every letter to the editor that arrives in our office, and because of who we are and who you are, we receive a lot of letters. When people are provoked to write, it's often because they disagree, and I have to remind myself that prompting them to think and argue is part of what we are in business to do. Angry letters can also be a measure of success. But I confess it is nice to receive letters like this one from a husband and wife: "If thinking were writing, you would receive letters with every issue of the Christian Century. We enjoy it that much." The writers added that they were doubling their annual gift to the Century. A letter like that definitely makes you feel successful.