International Churches of Christ

2007 Membership Survey: Report and Analysis

Summary

For the first time since 2002, our annual survey of membership among International Churches of Christ shows an increase in estimated membership.

- Total membership increased by an estimated 1.7% in 2007, to 90,130.
- We now have over 560 churches in 147 countries.
- The losses that started in 2003 were the culmination of a ten-year trend of declining growth rates since at least 1994. Growth in 2007 continues an improving trend apparent since 2005.
- The ratio of growing-to-non-growing churches improved substantially in 2007. Over 200 churches reported growth, not including newly planted churches.
- Recovery has been uneven. Many churches continue to struggle to stop losses, much less initiate a turnaround.
- Overall, the numbers tell a remarkable, if uneven, tale of survival, repentance and recovery.

Background

The 2007 survey is the fourth in a series since the initial survey conducted by *ICOC Info* in 2004.

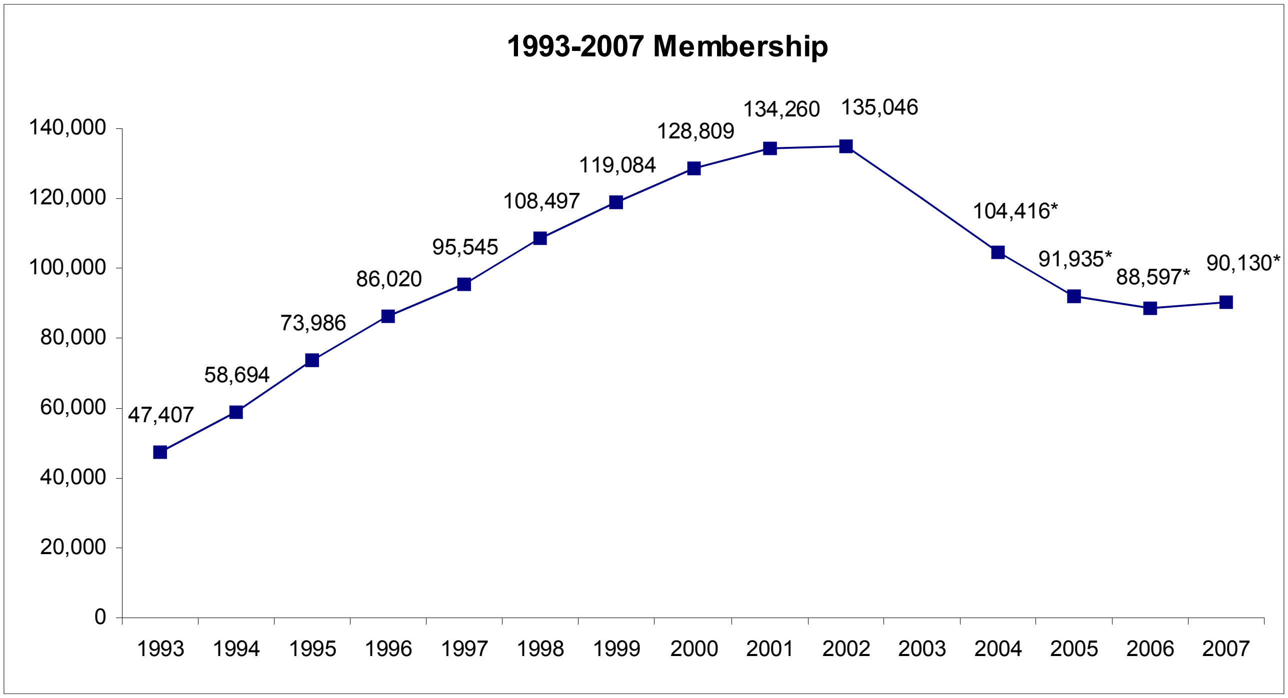
At that time the churches lacked any a formal mechanism for collecting membership statistics, and many were still wary of repeating our past unhealthy emphasis on, and use of, statistics. *ICOC Info*, a member-edited website with no official church status, put out the call for churches still interested in voluntarily providing annual membership statistics. That year, over 416 churches responded, and this annual survey was born.

Kelcy Hahn, the editor of *ICOC Info*, and Roger Lamb, who had recently launched *Disciples Today* as a successor to KNN, met in 2005 at the Seattle International Leadership Conference. They agreed to cooperatively build an official directory of churches on *Disciples Today*, and to conduct the annual membership survey together. Kelcy collects and analyzes the data, while Roger, through *Disciples Today*, provides the largest network of relationships with leaders and members in our churches worldwide, raising awareness of, and building support for, the survey.

The survey has also been an important tool in updating the churches' contact information available on the *Disciples Today* online church directory.

After announcing the 2007 survey, we heard from 545 of the 562 churches. We thank God for this sign of maturity and health. By faith, we are entering a new era where churches feel safe sharing vital information without fear of competition and comparison.

I. Total Membership[1]



After five consecutive years of declining membership, we estimate membership increased by approximately 1.7% in 2007, to 90,130 members.

Survey participation in 2007 was by far the best to date. The estimated portion of total membership covers just 17 of 562 churches[2] in our fellowship, and amounts to fewer than 1,000 members, or only 1.1% of the total membership estimate. Of the total membership figure we are reporting for 2007, 98.9% of that amount is compiled from actual survey responses.

Two cautions apply when considering what appears to be an increase in membership in 2007:

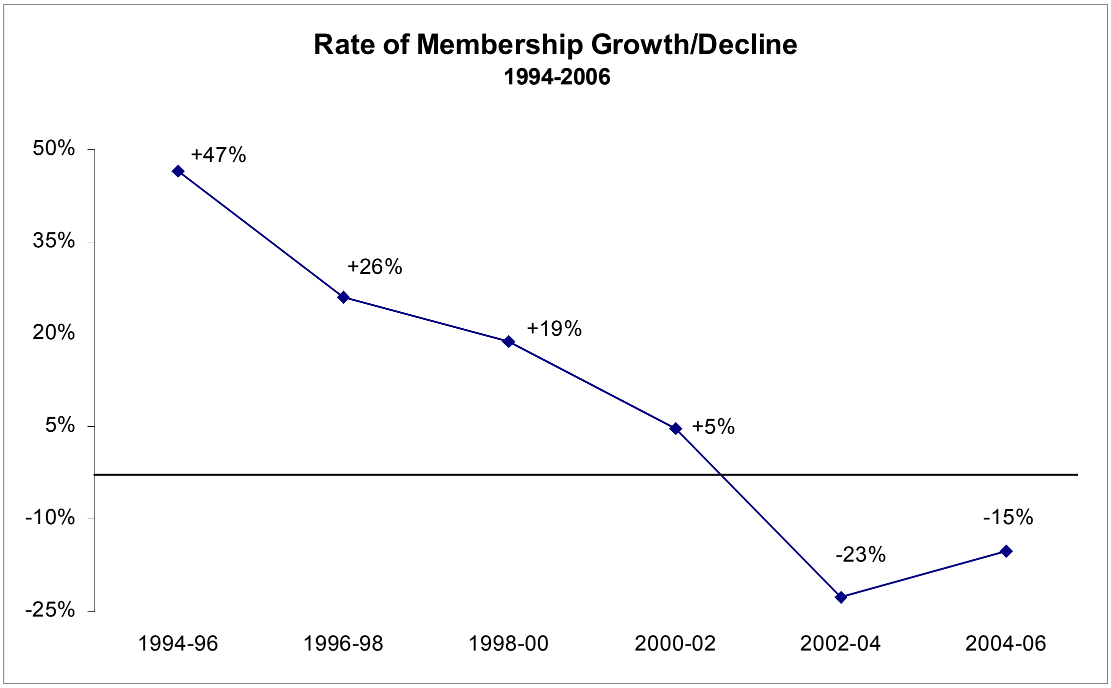
1. The estimated portion of 2006 membership was greater than the estimated portion of 2007 membership, covering 70 of approximately 546 churches. The estimated portion of the 2006 total membership was 4,043 members, or 4.5% of the total of 88,597. As a matter of course, we estimate conservatively for churches which do not report membership, so it is entirely possible some or all of the apparent increase from 2006 to 2007 is the result of under-estimating the membership of non-reporting churches in 2006.

2. The survey reports are based on membership as reported by the churches themselves—their leaders, administrators, and in some cases, church members. While we have little reason to doubt the accuracy of these reports,[3] there is enough margin of error to keep us from stating the 2007 finding of growth with complete certainly.

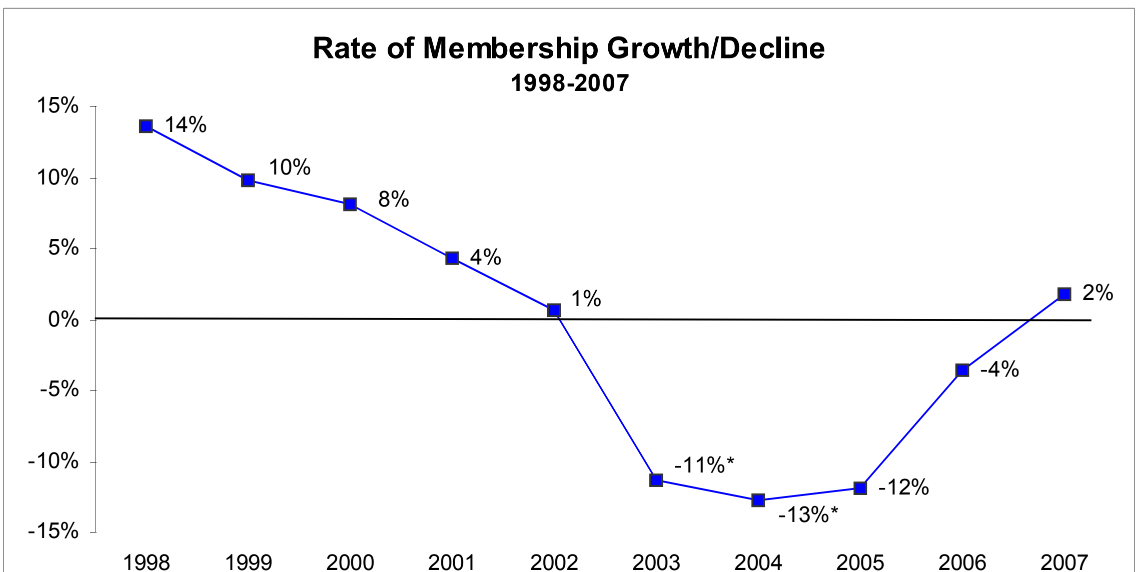
Having stated the above cautions, we feel free to make this observation: the 2007 result is really quite remarkable. The change from -3.6% in 2006 to +1.7% in 2007 is in many ways the equivalent of going from no growth to 5.3% growth. The financial and leadership dynamics that exist in churches which have lost members over several consecutive years make turnaround growth extremely rare,[4] but that appears to be what we are now seeing among many of the churches.

II. Rate of Membership Growth/Decline

Measured in two-year increments, it is clear that our unprecedented losses beginning in 2003 were actually the continuation of a ten-year trend. Looking at changes in the *rate* of growth and decline, instead of merely at the membership totals themselves, shows a picture quite at odds with the notion that our troubles erupted suddenly in 2002. In fact, they were well on the way by then.



We will update the above chart when the 2008 membership survey is complete and we have another two-year period to add. In the meantime, a year-to-year comparison of rate of growth and decline shows a similar picture: 2003-2005 may well turn out to be a turning point, when whatever dynamics contributed to the ten-year declining growth rate trend began a painful process of correction.

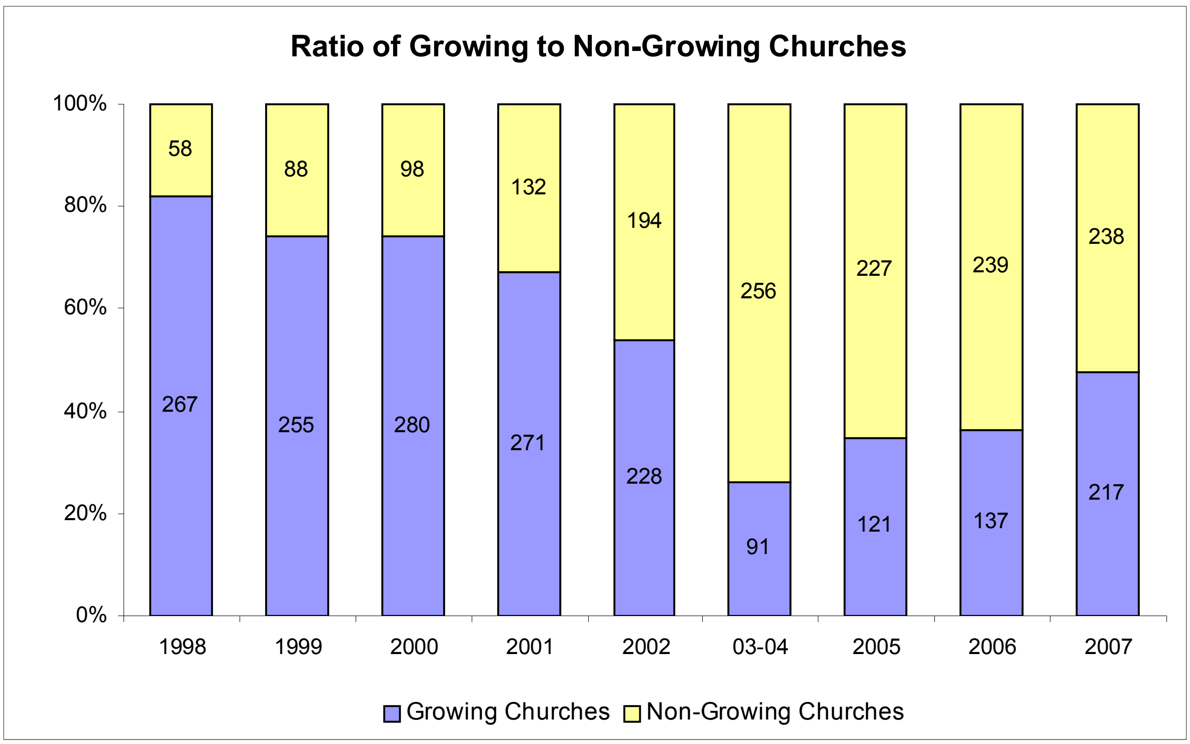


Note: The decline from 2002-2004 is known (23%), but since there was no survey in 2003, the amount of annual decline in 2003 and 2004 is an estimate only.

III. Growing to Non-Growing Church Ratio

In 2005 we saw the first signs of reversal in another disturbing trend. From 1998-2005, the percentage of churches reporting no growth or losses grew. In other words, it wasn't just that total church membership was growing far more slowly leading up to 2002. Increasingly, individual churches themselves were simply not growing, or were losing members, well before 2002.

In 2005, for the first year since 1998, an increasing percentage of churches reported growing. There was another slight increase in churches reporting growth in 2006. But in 2007 we see a definite increase in both the overall number and percentage of churches reporting year-on-year growth.



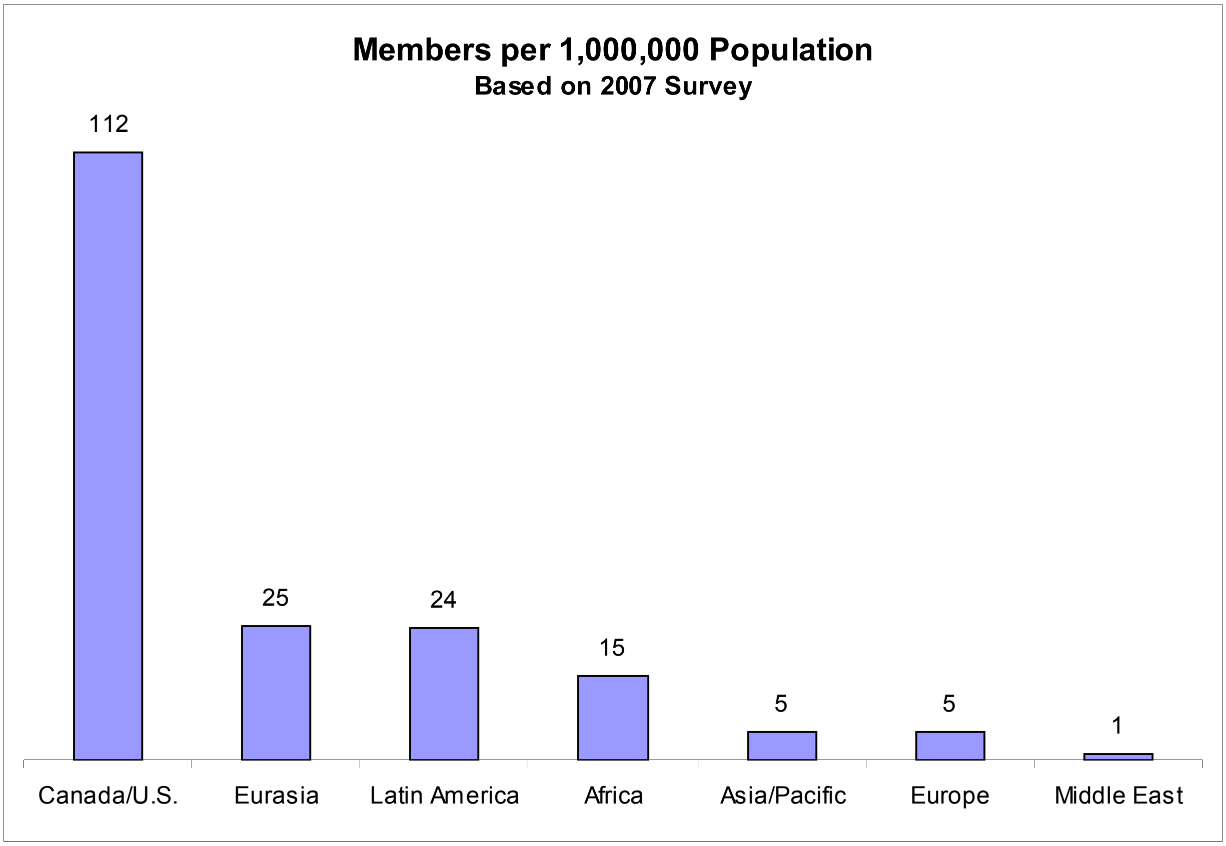
This ratio of growing to non-growing churches is perhaps more helpful to understanding what is really happening in the church in terms of growth than is the overall growth rate itself. The growing to non-growing church ratio is something of a leading indicator of future overall growth or decline, since a few large, fast-growing churches can mask underlying declines in a greater number of small, newly planted, or struggling older congregations—but only for a time.

Taken together with the above analysis of our changing rates of growth, there is little doubt that the trend leading up to the events of 2003 had been in place for many years. Just as the steady increase in the ratio of declining churches was the handwriting on the wall of an imminent overall decline, the current clear increase in this ratio indicates a broadening base of healthy churches.

Despite an overall estimated increase in 2007 membership, the survey shows that a majority of churches still are either not growing or are losing members. Besides the obvious solution of strengthening stagnant or declining churches, the best long-term strategy for maintaining a positive growing to non-growing church ratio is aggressive new church planting: young, small churches consistently grow more than older, larger churches.[5]

IV. "Men for God from Every Tribe and Language and People and Nation"

The growth of any single church or group of churches has never, of course, been the goal. Obedience to the Great Commission means caring about the progress of disciple-making beyond our immediate environs. The following chart and lists illustrate the enormity of the task ahead.[6]



Region	2007 Membership	Population	Members per 1,000,000 Pop.
Africa	10,750	694,000,000	15
Asia/Pacific	18,489	3,618,000,000	5
Canada/U.S.	37,154	332,000,000	112
Eurasia	6,797	277,000,000	25
Europe	2,724	529,000,000	5
Latin America/Caribbean	13,748	566,000,000	24
Middle East	468	499,000,000	1
WORLD	**90,130**	**6,515,000,000**	**14**

There is at least one International Church of Christ in 147 countries.[7]

However, of these 147 countries:

- In only 24 countries[8] do we have churches with a combined membership 500 or more.
- In 35 countries, combined membership is 100-499.
- In 88 countries combined membership of all churches is fewer than 100 members.

There are approximately 48 countries in which we have yet to plant a viable church. These countries are listed below by region in Appendix A.

APPENDIX A

NATIONS WITHOUT AN INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF CHRIST

Region	Country	Population
EUROPE	Poland	38,500,000
	Portugal	10,600,000
	Serbia	9,400,000
	Slovakia	5,400,000
	Macedonia	2,100,000
	Slovenia	2,000,000
	Montenegro	600,000
	Malta	400,000
	Andorra	100,000
	Greenland	100,000
	Liechtenstein	34,000
	Monaco	33,000
	San Marino	29,000
ASIA/PACIFIC	North Korea	23,000,000
	Bhutan	2,300,000
	East Timor	1,100,000
	Solomon Islands	600,000
	Brunei	400,000
	Maldives	400,000
	Vanuatu	200,000
	Samoa	200,000
	Tonga	100,000
	Kiribati	100,000
	Marshall Islands	100,000
	American Samoa	100,000
	Palau	21,000
	Nauru	13,000
	Tuvalu	12,000
AFRICA	Somalia	8,900,000
	Eritrea	4,800,000
	Comoros	700,000
	Equatorial Guinea	500,000
	Djibouti	500,000
	Cape Verde	400,000
	Sao Tome and Principe	200,000
	Seychelles	100,000
MIDDLE EAST	Iran	69,000,000
	Algeria	33,000,000
	Yemen	22,000,000
	Syria	19,000,000
	Libya	5,900,000
	Mauritania	3,200,000
	Oman	3,100,000
	Western Sahara	270,000
CARRIBEAN	Saint Lucia	200,000
	Antigua and Barbuda	100,000
	Dominica	100,000
	Saint Kitts and Nevis	39,000

APPENDIX B

BEYOND STATS

Collecting data from churches is always an interesting project. Besides the normal challenges, there is a spiritual dimension as well. We recognize the dangers of publishing this kind of information—dangers related more than anything to unintended consequences.

These dangers include:

- **Equating growth with good.** What churches do to grow is not always good. Growth that is the result of gimmicks, pressure, or worldly ambition is superficially indistinguishable from healthy growth. Use discernment.

- **Failing to appreciate planting churches.** One of the most selfless things a church can do is start another church. In so doing, the planting church may actually suffer a membership loss.

- **Failing to appreciate leaders who let go.** Several churches in our survey reported membership losses because one or more satellite groups (or regions, or sectors, depending on the church's terminology) reached a point of maturity that allowed it to become a separate congregation.

- **Using numbers to validate** suspect methodology or false doctrine.

- **Using numbers competitively.** Having lived in several countries and a dozen different cities, we know that some fields simply yield a slower harvest than others. Comparing two churches without taking context into consideration is folly.

- **Thinking faster is always better.** Fast growth by God's blessing is always a cause for joy, but all fast growth is unsustainable. Sometimes it's unhealthy. Steady, healthy growth gets less attention, but if it's sustainable, will produce a greater harvest over time.

We recommend not only the measuring of church *growth* indicators (membership, attendance, baptisms) but also church *health* indicators.

One church provided, in addition to its membership report, the following surveys it used to measure members' perceptions of their spiritual life and the effectiveness of the church's small groups.

We share these surveys, and the results, as an example of a balanced approach to measuring growth and health.

- Spiritual Reflection Survey and Report
- Small Group Effectiveness and Dynamics Survey and Report

Endnotes

[1] How churches define membership varies somewhat from church to church. Among International Churches of Christ, only baptized adults and teens are considered members. Children are not considered members. Many churches have more specific criteria for defining membership, including regular participation in church activities or small groups.

[2] It is more difficult than one might imagine to make an accurate count of churches. It is rather difficult at times to confirm, for example, that a church is no longer in existence, by virtue of the fact that if it has disbanded, there is no one left with whom we can communicate about its status. The churches for which we are the least certain are 1) those which may have disbanded but for which we are unable to confirm this directly, and 2) those churches which may be in the process of evaluating the extent of their fellowship with us and are, therefore, reluctant to answer the survey one way or the other. The number of churches in these two categories is, in any given year, quite small (usually fewer than 10) and, with one exception, the churches themselves are also usually quite small.

[3] We all know of egregious examples of false reporting of membership statistics. We find it quite unbelievable, however, that such reporting could go undiscovered for long. Now that we publish the survey results openly, anyone submitting exaggerated numbers runs a serious risk of being caught lying, and even honest mistakes will eventually be spotted. Lately we have been more concerned about a tendency among the churches to be over-conservative in their estimates when an exact membership number is not known (which then unintentionally overstates subsequent growth).

[4] See Thomas Rainer's *Breakout Churches* for a sense of just how uncommon it is for churches of any denomination to reverse a period of plateau or decline.

[5] "Thus, we can conclude that the evangelistic effectiveness of minichurches is statistically 1,600 percent greater than that of megachurches!" *Natural Church Development*, p. 48.

[6] We do not, of course, intend these charts to reflect a view that we are the only disciples of Jesus in these regions, or that if a nation or city does not have an International Church of Christ it is therefore "unevangelized." We recognize as brothers all disciples of Jesus within or without the ICOC, and have areas of agreement with all who call themselves Christian, without compromising our convictions on "life and doctrine." But this need not in the least bit weaken our ambition to plant more disciple-making churches everywhere.

[7] There are some difficulties determining exactly which political entities should be considered countries, but for the sake of this analysis, we have excluded dependent territories.

[8] The 24 nations with over 500 members are Brazil, Canada, China, Congo (DRC), Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the United States.