

Crime wave: Ecclesiastical theft

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

I wait each year for the January issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* with its “Table C. Status of global mission, presence, and activities, AD 1800-2025.” Each year my eye falls on Table C’s saddest line, Line 62:

“Ecclesiastical crime, \$.” Before me is Vol. 32, No. 1, January 2008.

The researchers helpfully provide context from the past before leaping toward the future. Get ready for statistics, and do not let your eyes glaze over, since these are startling. Ecclesiastical crime in 1800 amounted to \$100,000; in 1900, \$300,000; in 1970, \$5,000,000; in mid-2000, \$16,000,000,000; and at midnight of July 1, 2008, it will rise to \$25,000,000,000. (I can’t actually prove that it will be midnight, but I arrive at that hour of that day because the category is “mid-2008.”) Now, hold on to your hats or crystal balls or trend charts: here is what the *IBMR* projects for 2025: \$65,000,000,000!

But what actually is ecclesiastical crime? How do the researchers arrive at these numbers and projections? Do they check stolen paper clips? Lifted computers? Or does much of this reckoning deal with formal, explicit cooking of the books or embezzlement? How is it that the *IBMR* can project a jump from a mere \$25,000,000,000 in annual ecclesiastical crime now—\$70,000,000 per day—to \$65,000,000,000 in 17 years?

Sometimes one hears that “the poor world” has rich Christian criminals, while the “rich world” Christians are so well off that they do not need to embezzle, raid the offering plates and poor boxes, or disguise corrupt trades of pension fund stocks. But somehow I find this unlikely.

I know there are answers to my questions about how the researchers work and what and how they count, but I don’t find myself seeking them out. I have numerical dyslexia or some such disability and cannot even accurately balance my checkbook. So I’ll stay with the anthropological and theological questions: “Wretched people that we are! Who will rescue us from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24. See Answer No. 1 below.)

Do some institutions do better at inhibiting ecclesiastical crime than others? Christians can't exactly go to *Consumer Reports* to find out. Since ecclesiastical crime is global, we might look at global denominationalism.

The IBMR tells us that in 1800 there were 500 denominations; in 1900, 1,900; in 1970, 18,700; in mid-2000, 33,700; in mid-2008, there will be 39,000; and the projection for 2025 is 55,000. This means that there are two or three new denominations each day. In this case, the growth in numbers of denominations is indeed in the "southern" and "poor" and "still developing world," in part because that's where the growth in numbers of Christians is, and when they organize, they don't all agree with each other. Again I find myself turning to Paul as he looked out at the various competitive factions of his own day: "Has Christ been divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13. See Answer No. 2 below.)

Answer No. 1: "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." Answer No. 2: Yes, empirically; no, theologically.

Does that compute?