

Christianity by the numbers

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

With 2.18 billion adherents, Christianity has become a truly global religion over the past century as rapid church growth in developing nations offset declines in Christianity's traditional strongholds, according to a new comprehensive report.

Billed as the broadest and most reliable study to date, the Pew Research Center's "Global Christianity" report on self-identified Christian populations uses more than 2,400 sources of information, especially census and survey data.

Findings reveal major shifts since 1910, when two-thirds of the world's Christians lived in Europe. Now only one in four Christians reside in Europe. Most of the rest are distributed across the Americas (37 percent), sub-Saharan Africa (24 percent) and the Asia-Pacific region (13 percent). The broad trends have been known for decades, but the new report provides some unexpected perspectives.

"In two out of three countries in the world, the majority of the population identifies as Christian," said Conrad Hackett, lead researcher on the report. "I had no idea about that. . . . I was surprised."

The report, issued December 19, confirms Christianity's standing as the religion having the largest following, with 32 percent of the global population. Islam is second with about 23 percent, according to a 2009 Pew report.

The new study, based on a nation-by-nation analysis, found that Catholics make up slightly more than half of the world's Christians—50.1 percent. Protestants, broadly defined, account for 36.7 percent and Orthodox

Christians nearly 12 percent. Pew researchers put "other Christians," such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, at about 1 percent.

A close look at the study reveals these details:

- Although Christianity traces its beginnings to the Middle East and North Africa, only 4 percent of residents in these regions claim the Christian faith today.
- The faith has grown exponentially in sub-Saharan Africa, from just 9 percent of the population in 1910 to 63 percent today. Nigeria, home to more than 80 million Christians, has more Protestants than Germany, where the Protestant Reformation began.

As

a result of historic missionary activity and indigenous Christian movements by Africans, six in ten sub-Saharan Africans identify with Christianity; only one in ten did in 1910.

For its part, Europe is more religiously diverse than it was in 1910, when 94 percent were Christian. Still, Europe hasn't abandoned its Christian heritage, according to the report. Today, 76 percent of Europeans self-identify as Christian.

"Many people may have the impression that a smaller percentage of Europe claims to be Christian" than is actually the case, Hackett said.

The study also sheds light on the difficult question of how many Chinese are Christians. Researchers have struggled for reliable numbers since China's policies on religion are thought to discourage Christians from self-identifying as such in official surveys. Adjusting for such variables, Pew researchers believe that Christianity has flourished despite a policy forbidding Christianity among Communist

Party members. Researchers estimate that the Christian community in China includes 5 percent of the population, or 67 million. —RNS

