

It adds up

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

Decades ago I heard someone from IBM project computer size. In the 1950s, he said, it took a whole building to house one that punched holes in cards. In the 1960s, a computer would fit into a single room, duly air-conditioned. By the 1970s the reductions would continue, and a computer would fit on a desk. By the 1980s the laptop would take over, and in the 1990s you would wear your computer. In 2000? He said that the only problem with further reduction was the size of our fingers and the sharpness of our eyes. In theory, a computer need be only one neutron wide.

I recalled a scene from the 1950s: in a huge office in Richmond, Virginia, nerds and geeks and geniuses and saints fed data into whirring computers. Spinning, clunking and blinking, the machines calculated reams of facts and figures on Christianity. The office belongs to the World Evangelization Research Center, workplace of David B. Barrett, editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 1982), which has nourished me for 17 years. (Barrett, being a precisionist, would come up with something like 17 years and 3.14159 months.)

Each year, for the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Barrett & Co. lines up statistics for 1900 and 1970 and projections for mid-1999, 2000 and 2005. In mid-1998, there were 1,965,993,000 Christians ("total all kinds") in the world; now there are 1,990,018,000. They expect that next year we will crash the 2 billion mark, with 15,743,000 to spare. (In 1998 there were 15,050,000 Jews in the world, and there are 14,214,000 this year-fewer than there are Southern Baptists in the U.S. But I digress.)

We slipped in respect to percentages of world population-from 33.2 percent to 33.1 percent-but the Richmond computer projects that we will hold our own at 33.1 percent next year and by 2025 we'll rise to 33.7 percent, or 2,710,800,000. Trust Barrett to have programmed in all eventualities about abortion, birth control, famine, lust, environmental pollution and marital love.

By continent? In mid-1998 there were 329,882,000 Christians in Africa and 223,454,000 in North America; by mid-1999 there will be 333,368,000 in the former

and 224,140,000 in the latter.

The Richmond crew also keep tabs on evangelization, urban mission, broadcasting, scripture distribution, Christian literature and Christian finance. The list that catches my eye and fills it with tears of shame, regret and stupefaction is "Ecclesiastical Crime, in U.S. dollars." In 1900 this amounted to a petty \$300,000 and by 1970 it was still a paltry \$5 million, only a few cents per Christian-hardly more than a couple of pennies scooped out of the collection plate. Televangelism was largely unpoliced back then, and crime leaped to \$11.3 billion in mid-1997-but is \$12.2 billion now. Hold on to your wallets: it's heading for \$13.2 by next year, and expected to reach \$65 billion (that's sixty-five thousand million dollars!) in 2025, to divvy among 2,710,800,000 Christians, some of them nominal.

Experts will whisper that much of this crime occurs in the poor world, but one still wonders how the whirring, spinning, clunking, blinking machines in Richmond factor in variables such as original sin, governmental scrutiny and the like. Maybe cloning engineers will come to the Christians' rescue and help us reproduce baptized and born-again sinners who show marks of true redemption and sanctification. I'd love to see figures about them-and at least a one-neutron wide glimmer of hope.