

## Two-thirds world - what we learn from MWC's membership census

We don't call it the Third World anymore. Cold War categories of capitalist West, communist East and Third World no longer apply. For a while, "two-thirds world" was in vogue for what we now call the global South.

Today the "two-thirds" concept is right on the statistical mark. Mennonite World Conference has counted the world's Anabaptists, as it does every three years. For the first time, people in the global South make up two-thirds of the membership. Africa, Asia and Latin America account for 66.6 percent of baptized believers.

For at least two decades we've seen the contours of 21st-century Anabaptism emerge. In 1990, the tipping point was near: 48 percent of Anabaptists were from outside North America and Europe. In the 22 years since, Anabaptist world membership has nearly doubled, from 856,000 to 1.77 million. In 2003 Africa passed North America as the leading continent, and the gap keeps growing.

The numbers tell us Anabaptism's identity as a Southern-majority movement grows stronger by the year. What else can we learn from the statistics?

- The Amish are keeping U.S. Anabaptism from shrinking. Amish membership (114,440 baptized adults) grew by 8,540 since 2009, while U.S. Anabaptist membership overall increased by only 4,797. Without the Amish, the U.S. would have shown a loss.
- Ethiopia remains a model of unity and growth. With a membership of 224,407, an increase of 30 percent in three years, the *Meserete Kristos Church* retains its status as the world's largest Mennonite body.
- Stagnation or decline continues in Europe, the only continent to record a loss. The Dutch reported 8,000 members, down from 9,025 in 2009 — and down from about 50,000 a half century ago.
- The threat of persecution still looms. Two church bodies — one with 34,000 members in Southeast Asia, one with 400 in Africa — are listed as "unnamed country" so as not to put the church at risk.
- The Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe, which hosted the 2003 MWC assembly, still thrives. In the past decade it grew 69 percent and now has 42,382 members.
- Handfuls of Anabaptists can be found in Eastern Europe — Poland, Romania and Moldova. These outposts of one or two dozen people belong to plain groups such as the Beachy Amish Mennonites.
- A Russian Mennonite remnant survives, but it's hard to get information about it. MWC has left unchanged its 2009 estimate of 3,000 members in Russia. An observer says congregations in Siberia, officially known as Evangelical Christian-Baptists, maintain their Mennonite identity.

Once, the North saw the Third World as impoverished and backward. Now we look to the South for signs of the spiritual riches and progress we lack. We pray for our own renewal as Anabaptism's two-thirds world takes the lead in shaping the church's future.

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