

Measuring Ministry Progress: Five Practitioners Tell What They Track and Why

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Dare we quantify the spread of the kingdom of heaven? What are the pitfalls and limitations of counting, and where does it add value? Why track certain things and not others? And how does Scripture shape the way we count and communicate ministry data?

Five “counting” practitioners answered questions along these lines, edited and formatted for clarity. Read on to compare the practices and perspectives at work in a BAM (Business-As-Mission) in the desert, a house-church network in the Middle East, movement-oriented ministries in Southeast Asia, and a global church-planting partnership among UPGs.

The five cases are presented, without further editorial comment, as fodder for discussion, aided by the “Questions for Conversation” at the end.

Case 1: A For-Profit BAM in the Sahara Desert

Reflections from K.K. Reynolds, who lives with his wife and children in a small town in a big desert. When not trying to find ways to turn unused

agricultural products into value-added products they enjoy playing in the sand, camping, and sledding down sand dunes. As committed learners, they are exploring different ways to share God's truth and love through Jesus with all of those around them.

A parable that describes our view of tracking and metrics compares the kingdom of God to yeast in bread (Luke 13:20–21). When the yeast is there, the bread changes. One cannot see the yeast, or count the yeast, but one can see it is there because the dough is different. One loaf might rise quickly, another more slowly, but either way one can tell the yeast is in fact present.

We, and our business as an institutional extension of ourselves, are that yeast of the kingdom. Our tracking metrics measure the dough. We cannot track the yeast, or at least we do not want to spend our time building “yeast trackers.” We do not know exactly where God is working or what he is doing (John 3:8). But we can take snapshots of the whole dough (our community, our employees) and see whether the yeast is active or not by looking at the longitudinal effects on the dough.

What We Track

Our metrics focus on the holistic impact of our business. We buy fruit that has been rejected for physical blemishes, dry it out, and grind it into a powder that we export as an all-natural sweetener. We are the only believers in our small town, but we work in the broader region with encouraging and discipling believers and with other CP strategies both in our town and the broader area.

Almost everyone in our town (including our employees) had never met a Christian before we moved here. Our business gives us a way to spend a lot of time with people and engage with them holistically. We are integrated fully into the fabric of our town.

We have developed a holistic social and community impact index to track the impact that we are having on our community. This is a

major metric that we devote about a month to each year to collect the necessary data. We track this data over time to ensure our ongoing presence is positive. The tool also highlights areas of weakness in our efforts to bring holistic blessing.

Our entrance into this community is through this business, and so we need to make sure that it is positive. If people see our business as “bad news,” then how could they see us as bringing “good news”? So instead of tracking spiritual conversations (of which there are too many count) or baptisms (of which we have not yet had any), we use an index to monitor whether or not our business is having a positive impact on the community and in the lives of people or not. In other words, we are trying to track if we are “good news” for this community. We track people’s physical, emotional, and social health (both through self-reported surveys and wherever possible, through objective means as well). We also ask them questions about where they are spiritually.

The information is mostly used by the management of the business to make decisions about what changes need to be made. The actual numbers are reported to our company board and to the investors as well to review.

Why Track These Specific Items

We believe it is difficult and probably unhelpful to track things like conversations and baptisms. Most likely it is going to take a very long time for a church to form in our context. Since we need to bring our faith into as many conversations as possible, we believe trying to track spiritual conversations is impossible.

We also realize that a major part of what we are doing here is engaging in spiritual warfare. The enemy thinks this is his territory. We believe that Jesus is the rightful ruler. In reading Ephesians, we have become convinced of the role of the church to display the greatness of Jesus over the enemy powers. We believe our very presence, and in particular the presence of an institution—our business—is a direct assault

on the alleged power and authority of the devil over this place. The kingdom of God is coming, and we are the front heralds of that. But this type of work cannot be quantified. (Hours of prayer? I do not think that is helpful.) And yet, it is important.

Some have seen our foreign-funded, export-oriented business as an example of American neo-colonialism, coming to take advantage of cheap labor and a supply of raw material. If that accusation sticks, we are not accomplishing our goal of “heralding” (or proclaiming) good news of great joy. Therefore, it is of vital importance that our business brings healing, comfort, prosperity, safety, freedom—and so much else—to our community. This is why we track what we track. If our business is bringing goodness, and we are keeping in step with the Holy Spirit, then we leave the actual results to God, yet we know we are part of the work of his kingdom. In this way, we are trying to hold the tension of recognizing that metrics are important and help with planning and vision, while not becoming slaves to them.

Value and Impact on Ministry Practice

We came in with a lot of ideas on how to impact people. Some things have worked, other things have not. The data has helped us learn. The single best use of it is in identifying and correcting blind spots we did not realize that we had but showed up in the data. The surveys help us ask questions we do not yet know to ask. There are many unintended negative results to many things we do. We assume that people can see our good motives; they often do not. Our tool has helped us identify both of these challenges and then to explore other ways to do things.

In addition to giving us an opportunity to step back and evaluate at least once per year, our tracking practice opens us up to some other voices, in particular those with which we are working. It also encourages us that progress is being made even when it does not feel like it.

Potential Pitfalls in Tracking and Reporting

Probably the biggest pitfall is the potential to manipulate the tool to say things that it really does not. For example, several of the questionnaires are for management of the company. Since I understand how the tool works, I could answer more positively than is warranted beyond what we are really accomplishing. The tool could then be a way to justify a mediocre ministry hidden under a business.

The way to navigate this is to know that the tool is there to help the ministry be more effective, not to sit as judge over me. I do not believe data is effective for accountability. Accountability can only be done in relationships, and one cannot have a relationship with data. But I do believe data can really help. How? In business there is the maxim: “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.” The numbers give us information to manage what we are doing. Accountability has to come from a person who cares about us and the work, and who engages with the numbers to see what is going on, but also with us as people. Our business is not the numbers only. Our business is mostly the people. Therefore, keeping this in mind, we try to use the tool as objectively as we can, knowing that “lower” results do not stand as judge over us, but will actually help us learn how to improve.

What Cannot Be Quantified in Reported Numbers

Actually, most things cannot, including what we would say is the main spiritual fruit: (1) lives changing, (2) families healing, (3) communities growing stronger, (4) people’s guards coming down so they can search for truth, (5) spiritual forces being disarmed as the gospel increases.

Case 2: A House-Church Network in Country Z

Reflections from Peter Jensen (pseudonym), who has been journeying alongside indigenous leaders in a Middle Eastern country for nearly two decades.

What We Track

A guiding biblical principle for how we collect and interpret data is stewardship—seeking to disciple well those whom the Lord has entrusted into our care.

Data is collected on an ongoing basis. Monthly reports gather some information while other data points (such as baptisms) are recorded as they occur. The data is inputted directly into a secure, online CRM database. The network indicators are collated at the mid-point and end of each year by a database administrator for comparison and analysis.

We track three dimensions: the faith journey of individuals, the growth/health of house churches, and activities related to the growth and development of the network.

Individual Indicators	House Church Health Indicators	Network Indicators
• has access to a Bible • is reading the Bible • professes faith in Christ • can share their faith • sharing their faith with others • baptized • baptizing others • part of a house church fellowship • starting new house church fellowships • has experienced persecution¹	• members are praying • members are praising/ worshiping • members are studying the Word • members are fellow- shipping • members are committed to the house church • members are practicing communion • members are sharing the gospel	• number of people being followed up virtually (through social media correspon- dence) • number of seekers being followed up • number of believers being followed up • number of believers actively participating in house church fellowships • number of house church fellowships

1 Training modules that seekers and believers have participated in are also recorded for each individual.

Individual Indicators	House Church Health Indicators (contd.)	Network Indicators (contd.)
	• members are baptizing • members are giving towards needs • there are recognized leaders	• number of family units in house church fellowships • how many new contacts were made in a six month/year period • how many new professions of faith were made in a six month/year period • how many believers were baptized in a six month/year period • how many believers joined a house church fellowship in a six month/year period • number of reported visits with seekers and believers in a six month/year period²

Why Track These Specific Items

We believe that these individual journey indicators and church group health indicators are the most important aspects of those respective dynamics. The network indicators were chosen because we believe that they provide a good perspective on the state and growth of the network as well as activities that support the growth of the network.

2 The network indicators are collated by gender and age (minor/adult) except for the number of visits, house church groups, and family units in house church groups.

Value and Impact on Ministry Practice

Tracking and reporting these indicators provide leadership with the information necessary to discern what areas/activities are weak and need strengthening. Leadership is also encouraged to see the growth resulting from their labors.

By *tracking individual believers*, we can see a clear picture of their discipleship journey and any areas that may need to be strengthened. Additionally, we ensure that contact with the house church network is not lost if their group leader is imprisoned, since many do not have relationships within the network outside of their house church group for security reasons. By tracking *house church health*, areas that need to be strengthened in that group and throughout the network are identified.

Tracking *network indicators* provides a means to measure whether the activities of network members, leadership, and foreign workers partnering with the network are effective (that is, having the desired impact) or whether strategies should be reevaluated.

Potential Pitfalls in Tracking and Reporting

There is a danger of data collection taking undue time away from ministry. For that reason, we attempt to develop simple, intuitive reporting tools to decrease the time required for good reporting. Another danger is that the focus shifts to numbers and reporting growth rather than making disciples and planting churches. To combat this, we constantly remind all involved that these are snapshots in time, and while our desire and expectation is to see numerical growth over time, there may be snapshots that do not show growth during periods where greater focus is placed on deeper discipleship and capacity building.

What Cannot Be Quantified in Reported Numbers

The depth and maturity of believers cannot be truly quantified, nor can the soundness of the doctrine being taught in house church groups.

Case 3: A Ministry Focused on Disciples Making Disciples and Churches Planting Churches to Reach Every People and Place

Reflections from M.K., a disciple of Jesus in Southeast Asia serving with [The Timothy Initiative](#) alongside fellow disciples across movements, striving to hasten Christ's return in his generation.

Reporting and tracking movement progress is, first and foremost, **an act of worship**. All credit MUST go to God and Him alone. It is not about logo and ego.

Reporting and tracking movement progress is **an act of integrity**. We are accountable to God and to our partners to responsibly share what God has done. It is always better to underestimate numbers, rather than exaggerate.

Reporting and tracking movement progress is **an act of stewardship**. God has entrusted us with both resources of global partners and ongoing work with local leaders. Stewarding well means we report to both global partners as well as share the reports to on-the-field leaders. Stewarding well means we track what is significant to Christ's mission in this ministry: his disciples, churches, and leaders.

We track three main things: new disciples, new churches, and new leaders. This information is gathered quarterly. We communicate it to partners, as well as to on-the-field leaders.

- # of new believers
- # of new disciples (new believers who are continually discipled)
- # of new church plants (gen-1, 2, 3)
- location of new church plants
- # of baptisms
- # of widows cared for
- # of orphans cared for
- evaluation visits to local partners and new church plants

- # of organically-developed mentor-trainers
- # of organically-developed movement leaders

Why Track These Specific Items

The main focus of our tracking is to monitor new disciples, churches, and leaders. We also track widows and orphans because a healthy, local church should be a tangible blessing to the needs surrounding her. We track locations because we want to see that every church-planting effort aims towards real saturation in unreached villages/districts in a collaborative manner, avoiding duplication of work.

Value and Impact on Ministry Practice

It supports a quarterly evaluation for on-the-field leaders: what is/ is not working, still confusing, still missing. On-the-field leaders make course-corrections every quarter.

It also strengthens the integrity of the ministry. We trust what is being reported, and we also verify the work, by making actual visits to both local partners as well as new church plants.

Potential Pitfalls in Tracking and Reporting

- Pushback against evaluation visits.
- Explaining the “why” of tracking movement progress, again and again.

What Cannot Be Quantified in Reported Numbers

Actual health of the leaders, churches, and disciples. We do have a self-assessment scoring tool for leadership, church, and disciple health. But pursuing real health of leaders, churches, and disciples is more of a culture to be cultivated and multiplied, rather than a strategy to be adhered to.

Case 4: A Family of Movements in Cousin UPGs in Southeast Asia

Reflections from Trevor Larsen (PhD), a teacher and “come-alongside coach” convinced of God’s desire for all peoples. A former math teacher, pastor, and wrestling coach, and current seminary professor, he and his wife live in Southeast Asia alongside the “Fruitful Band of Brothers” featured in his books on movements, which are available at <https://focusonfruit.org>.

The purpose of tracking movements is to help leaders of those movements maximize their fruit. Tracking helps leaders improve their movement leadership. Tracking highlights “fruitful practices” which inform evaluation, coaching, and training within movements.

We do not track activities. We track outcomes, the result of activities. Tracking our **Fruit Metrics Ladder** shows outcomes and guides the “ekklesia progress” phase by phase. Tracking **Structural Leaders** guides our expanding network to follow Jethro’s advice about expansion which requires improved leadership structure (cf. Exodus 18). Tracking **Leaders’ Teams** highlights Paul’s priority on selecting teams of elders in the first year of every church plant (Acts 14:23). Tracking **Equipping Leaders** reminds leaders to use this gift-set to equip all believers for ministry (Eph. 4:9–11). Tracking **Community Development Outcomes** plants love-in-action in movement DNA and supports believer group multiplication. Tracking **Evaluative Metrics** helps movement catalysts increase their capacity.

Our tracking reflects what was reported in the New Testament, including passages which describe the social fruit of the gospel. For example, the category of “mini-groups” is not yet ekklesia but is a sub-unit of ekklesia which births or restores believer groups. This category is based on Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three gather in my name,” as well as Romans 16 which commends pairs of gospel workers as notable mini-groups.

We track quantitative indicators which frame qualitative health. We complement quantified qualitative data with case studies of selected phenomena, which adds a “thick” (more layered) description of the reality behind the numbers.

Quantitative Outcomes Tracked Each Quarter		
Individuals	believers/baptized believers	
Fruit Metrics Ladder	mini-groups	1–2 local believers with seekers in ongoing spiritual dialog
	groups	at least 3 believers (average 5–6 believers)
	cluster church	at least 5 linked believer groups in 3+ generations (average 15 linked groups), with a leaders’ team
	small region church	3 or more linked clusters in 6+ generations (with 150 to 3000 believers), with a leaders’ team
		“emerging movement” is hundreds of believers in groups, in a place or Unreached People Group (UPG)
	wide region	3 or more linked small regions in 6+ generations (with thousands of believers), with a leaders’ team
		“movement” is 1000+ believers in a place or UPG
		“10k movement” is 10,000 or more believers in groups, in a region or people group (a large movement in a UPG, multiplying other movements in its affinity cluster)

Quantitative Outcomes Tracked Each Quarter		
Fruit Metrics Ladder (contd.)	wide region (contd.)	“1% movement” is believers who recently surpassed 1% of the population of a UPG or region
		“10% movement” is believers who recently surpassed 10% of the population of a UPG or region
Leaders Groups and Teams	cluster leaders’ groups (all group leaders in a church cluster)	
	cluster leaders’ team (3 or more leaders selected to lead a cluster, who meet elder criteria in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1)	
	small region leaders’ group/team (all cluster leaders in a small region, or 3 or more leaders selected to lead the small region)	
	wide region leaders’ group/team (all small region leaders in a wide region, or 3 or more leaders selected to lead the wide region)	
	catalysts’ core team (each catalyst selects some regional leaders and some from central team to empower regional leaders’ teams)	
Structural Leaders	group leaders	
	cluster leaders	
	small region leaders	
	wide region leaders	
	movement catalysts	

Equippers	sent ones (evangelists, apostles)
	counselors (pastoral people; inner healing specialists)
	facilitators (community development facilitators; finance or admin people; data collectors; media specialists)
	“guru” (Bible teachers; trainers; children’s study groups tutors)
Equippers (contd.)	core team members
	catalysts
	alongside-coaches for catalysts
Community Development Outcomes	A wide variety of community development outcomes are in four broad categories: 1) beneficiaries, 2) participants in trainings, 3) people actively helping others with community development needs, and 4) community development groups formed. Each outcome progressively advances the fruit by supporting community development and believer-group formation.

Evaluative Metrics for Each Catalyst's Team ³	• median generation of groups • highest group generation • % increase of believers in 12 months • % of believers baptized • ratio of leaders' groups to groups • ratio of cluster churches with leaders' teams, to groups • ratio of group leaders to groups • total number of leaders
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We do fruit management quarterly. Leaders of 100, 500, and 1000 believers gather data, validated by leaders' teams. They send this data to their mentors. Someone in each regional team inputs data into our excel form. Data from each movement catalyst's team is checked and collated by a central data team and evaluated in comparison with 12-month-old data.

Our first priority for data use is that each regional team and movement catalyst get coaching from someone who evaluates the data, to help them better empower the leaders' teams which they mentor. Alongside-coaches help movement catalysts and leaders improve their leadership. Catalysts and regional teams use this information to set priorities and make decisions. Our secondary use of data is sending information on leading indicators to stakeholders who have vested interest.

3 Each catalyst's team has leaders in his Ring 1, Ring 2, and Ring 3 who should discuss their progress in these evaluative metrics. Each team is cross mentored by three mentors from outside their team, who can help give perspective. We call three relational ties between each leadership team at the top three levels 'Triple Three Mooring,' which best supports resilience, expansion, and succession. Our slogan 20-7-3 represents our ideal of no more than 20 leadership teams under each catalyst, being empowered with the help of seven people in their core team and helping at least three young "Timothies" who are at least 20 years younger, develop as apostolic agents.

Why Track Fruit

Tracking fruit places the focus on ministry outcomes, not ministry activities. Tracking fruit data is fruitful practice research, which informs our evaluation, decisions, priorities, coaching, and training. Tracking specific outcomes supports greater fruitfulness because it encourages movement leaders to prioritize behaviors that produce more fruit.

Tracking helps movement leaders evaluate fruit from different perspectives. Professions of faith are just one indicator of “believers,” which is a key outcome. There are also several other indicators pointing to “believers,” since coming to faith is an internal process that we cannot fully see: Are they baptized? Are they in a believer group? Do those close to them report transformation? Do they report changes in their life? Did they form or are they leading a believer group? Has a believer group they lead multiplied? Are they sharing with others what they are learning and applying from God’s word? Are they praying? No single indicator makes us certain someone is a “believer.” A leader considers a combination of these indicators when they decide each quarter who is a believer. We only count believers in believer groups, which promotes growth through group involvement.

Mobilizing each cluster leader and regional leader to track their fruit empowers them to become new centers of the movement. This decentralizes power in the system, which supports increasing fruitfulness.

Value and Impact on Ministry Practice

Our fruit or outcomes orientation allows us to:

- attract and retain creative initiative-taking apostle-like catalysts. The people choose what means/activities to evaluate, and which to prioritize as the most fruitful.
- establish outcomes-based-evaluation in the DNA of their movements. We do quarterly data gathering, evaluation, revision of plans, and coaching in our interactive patterns to get to more fruitfulness.

- build an “innovation incubator” in which catalysts are encouraged to experiment. They are accountable to describe their experimental design and report on progress on experiments each quarter.
- research and discover “fruitful practices.” This shapes our training and our dreams. We do not just train what we like to train; we train what God reveals to be fruitful.

This “outcomes-based” evaluation model provides for internal accountability of leadership teams to one another. Our leaders sharpen one another, in leaders’ teams over wide regions and those over clusters of 100 believers. Embedding this DNA in the generations of multiplying groups helps reproduce leadership teams as new centers of the movement, yet they remain connected to one another. It encourages us towards processes that validate data and keep reflecting on both quantitative and qualitative indicators of maturation. It sharpens our communication with stakeholders, including donors and organizational leaders.

Tracking and reporting helps us identify what kind of people we need to recruit and what kind of training and leadership support they need to be successful.

Potential Pitfalls in Tracking and Reporting

Fear of being evaluated and of jealousy are common in collectivist Islamic contexts. So, in a group we discuss totals of all workers combined rather than reporting individuals’ progress. In this way each catalyst’s total is unknown to others, except by their trusted coaches.

We celebrate experiments including those which fail. I interview, in front of others as case studies, those who lead certain ministries well and see more fruit. In this way we share what human actions God is blessing. In personal conversations, I discover the best patterns and simplest terms.

New workers come to us with fears that they will be evaluated and found to be lacking by their peers, which promotes hiding and slows

evaluation, learning, and growth. But when they realize that self-evaluation is in our DNA and everyone does it, the walls go down. Workers can share with one another what they are learning as well as their failures—and also be open to learning from others. This enriches the brotherhood of catalysts and speeds up increasing fruitfulness.

What Cannot Be Quantified in Reported Numbers

The book of Acts is written as brief summaries that are often quantitative, followed by “thick” or fuller descriptions of a phenomena (e.g., story of the casting out of a demon).

Reports are brief quantitative summaries that give an overview. “Thick” descriptions emerge from ethnographic research but can illustrate or give perspective on a trend seen in the number. Each quarter, we listen for the “God stories” that are told internally, which remind us that God is the Mover of Movements, and his priorities must be ours.

Case 5: A Global Church-Planting Partnership/ Organization

Reflections from Dick Brogden, a long-time missionary to the Middle East and North Africa. He currently serves as the global leader for Live Dead, a missions movement aimed at planting the church amongst unreached people groups.

The following biblical principles guide our collection and interpretation of data:

- Tell the truth (Eph. 4:25)
- Rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15)
- Mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15)
- Numbers being recorded in the gospels and Acts (Matt. 14:21; Luke 10:1; Acts 2:41; Acts 4:4)
- Walk in the light (1 John 1:7)
- Have a single eye (Matt. 6:22-23)

What We Track

We gather the data on the items below once a year. We report them to our governing board and to our prayer and financial supporters. We also report them to our sending/mobilization bases. Lastly, we send them to all our workers in the field for the encouragement it brings year by year as we see growth.

- workers (in our missions agency) & partners (from other agencies)
- CP teams & locations
- disciples (believe in heart and confess with mouth that Jesus is Lord)
- disciples that are making disciples (believers leading other locals to faith)
- Bible studies led by workers⁴
- Bible studies led by locals
- churches led by workers⁵
- churches led by locals
- 2nd generation churches
- 3rd generation churches
- 4th generation churches
- movements⁶

Why Track These Specific Items

1. We are a church-planting missions partnership, so we want to have a standardized approach to measuring how we are doing based on basic common definitions.
2. Measuring provides accountability.

4 We count a Bible study when 2 or more are meeting at least 1x/month centered on the word of God.

5 We count a church when 6 or more believers are meeting at least 1x/month for prayer, fellowship, Bible study, and communion.

6 We count a movement when there are 4 streams in 4 generations that total over 1000 disciples.

3. Reporting leads to praise and thanksgiving to God.
4. We want a way to quantify outcomes, not just inputs, so that we can see where we need to pray, where we need to mobilize, where we need to repent, where we need to celebrate and rejoice, and where we need to focus.

Value and Impact on Ministry Practice

Accountability. Encouragement. Mobilization data. Builds trust with our support and donor base. Keeps us focused on making disciples and planting churches, rather than on just building up “inputs” (how many workers, teams, funds, etc.). It keeps us humble and prayerful. It can reveal strategic next steps or course corrections.

Potential Pitfalls in Tracking and Reporting

- Pride or discouragement (both can result from comparison).
- Exaggeration and dishonesty in reporting (making your work seem better than it is).
- Different people reporting differently (whether because of integrity-lack or personality difference), leading to skewed data.

We navigate these by repeating to those who supply the data the WHY behind the request, and by releasing the figures to all so that those who work in proximity can verify the truth or challenge the inaccuracy if needed.

What Cannot Be Quantified in Reported Numbers

Obedience. Grit. Faithfulness. Rock Removing (secret prayers, countless hours or conversations about the gospel). Acts of service that open hearts to hear. All the preparatory work (language, culture, Bible study, missiology, team time, practical logistics, etc.) which provides the “platform” for witness.

Questions for Conversation

1. How do you evaluate and communicate ministry progress among your ministry team and colleagues? What markers do you track, and why track those things and not others? What is the impact (positive or negative) of tracking or not tracking those items?
2. What common themes, and what differences, do you notice among the five cases? What are the most relevant ideas to your own ministry context?
3. Is tracking ministry progress a valuable or a dangerous endeavor in your view? What underlying values shape your current perspective and practice in this area? How has this article affirmed, challenged, or nuanced your views?