

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 44 • Number 3 • August 2020

Published by



WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Department of Theological Concerns

Printed by



WIPF *and* STOCK Publishers

199 West 8th Avenue • Eugene OR 97401

wipfandstock.com

To order hard copies, contact orders@wipfandstock.com

The Correlation between Church Growth and Discipleship: Evidence from Indonesia

Bambang Budijanto

This article presents and analyses data from surveys conducted by the Bilangan Research Center, which were patterned after similar surveys by the Barna Research Group in the United States. The findings have important implications for improving congregational engagement in effective disciple making.

One of the primary tasks of a leader is to make decisions for his or her organization, company, church, community and nation. The more access a leader has to reliable information (data), the better chance that leader has of making well-informed and wise decisions.

In most cases, news articles and reports on the growth of Christian churches in Indonesia have historically been based on anecdotal information. It has been impossible to discern how much these often amazing anecdotes reflect the reality of church growth in Indonesia as a whole. On the other hand, in 2016 and 2017, when I met with several denominational leaders in Indonesia, I heard stories of how their denominations were suffering decline. They were very eager to know if the decline they had been experiencing was a phenomenon affecting only churches within their denomination or if it was a widespread trend at the regional or even national level.

The inability to define the reality they were facing created frustration for these Christian leaders, as they could not respond to the challenge with confidence. There was no way to know whether their ministry strategies and investments were addressing the situation confronting them with the best possible solutions.

The discrepancies between those anecdotes of spectacular church growth in Indonesia and what I was hearing about decline from several denominational leaders provided the background for the establishment of the Bilangan Research Center (BRC), based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The BRC came into existence after a number of Christian leaders met in Jakarta to discuss this question: What would be the most strategic gift we could give to the church in Indonesia, which would empower believers to fulfil their mandate and mission in this country? As a result of this discussion, the BRC was founded in 2017 as a Christian, interdenominational research centre. Its vision is to provide churches and Christian communities with relevant, valid and current data on Christianity and the spirituality of Indonesian Christians.

Survey data

In its inaugural year, the BRC launched two national surveys. The first one looked at the spirituality of Christian youth in Indonesia. To some extent, this survey was triggered by the Barna Research Group's findings among youth in the USA, which were published in *You Lost Me* (2011).¹

This first national survey involved 4,095 Christian respondents, age 15 to 25, scattered across 44 cities and towns in Indonesia. The survey was administered at schools, universities and community gatherings. Its many eye-opening findings have been very helpful in stimulating churches to develop strategies to strengthen youth ministry in Indonesia.

The survey found that 73.1% of those who had accepted Christ as their personal saviour identified a parent as the one(s) who led them to Christ. Unfortunately, only 23% of parents were considered good at nurturing their children's spirituality (i.e. making disciples at home).

The second survey was on Indonesian church growth between 2007 and 2016, with some 4,394 respondents—most of them pastors. In response to the same question, the participants in this survey, who were on average 25 years older than those in the first survey, indicated that 46.5% were led to Christ by their parents. (See Figure 1 for answers on both surveys.)

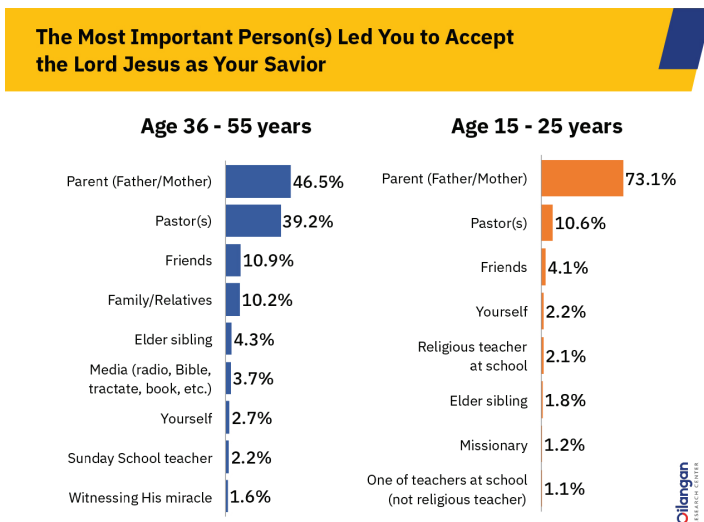


Figure 1: Who introduced believers to Christ

The second survey found that between 2007 and 2016, 58% of churches in Indonesia were growing quantitatively and 42% were not. This is roughly the reverse of the situation among US Protestants, where during the years 2016 to 2018, 39% of churches were growing.²

1 David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

2 Aaron Earls, 'How Many US Churches Are Actually Growing?' Lifeway Research, 6 March 2019,

Interestingly, the highest numerical growth in Indonesian churches over the period of 2007–2016 occurred among children. Amongst Indonesian congregations, 58.1% experienced growth in their adult membership but 64.2% saw growth in their Sunday school (i.e. children up to age 14). The lowest frequency of growth occurred amongst youth (age 15 to 24), with only 53.2% reporting an increase in numbers (Figure 2).

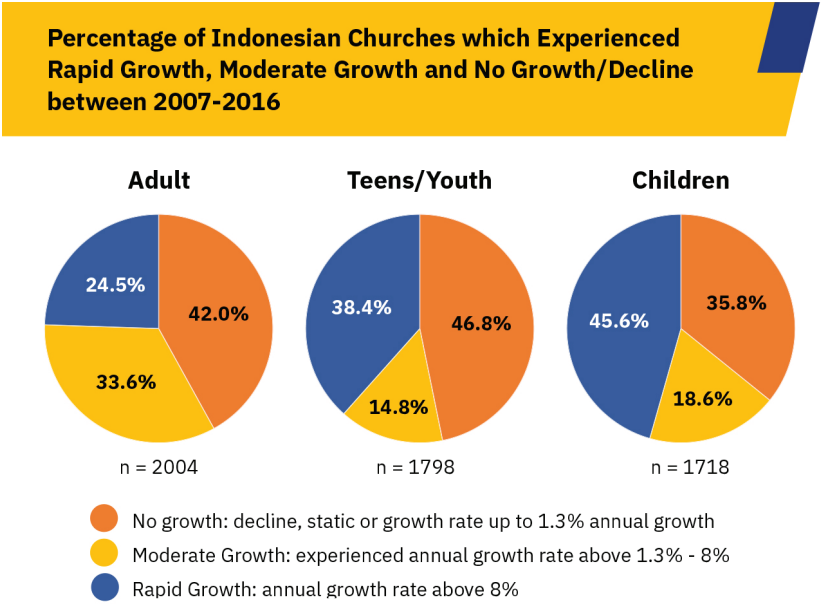


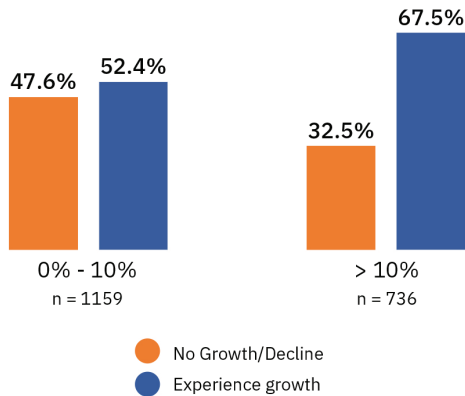
Figure 2: Indonesian church growth patterns by age group

The BRC also found that amongst those churches where more than 10% of members engaged in disciple making, 67.5% had experienced growth. This means that disciple-making processes in Indonesia have produced, in most cases, both spiritual growth and quantitative growth (Figure 3).

Interestingly, the highest level of correlation between disciple making and quantitative growth occurred among mid-size churches (with 51 to 200 adult members). In 74.5% of cases, mid-size churches with more than 10% of their members engaged in disciple making experienced numerical growth. On the other hand, during the same period, more than 60% of large churches (more than 200 adult members) with little or no disciple-making engagement experienced no growth or declined in numbers (Figure 4).

<https://factsandtrends.net/2019/03/06/how-many-us-churches-are-actually-growing/>. The BRC research took place in 2017 and covered the years 2007 to 2016, whereas the Lifeway research project was conducted in January 2019 and covered the years 2016–2018.

The Growth of Adult Congregations (Worship Attenders) and Their Engagement in Disciple Making Process



bilangan
RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 3: Correlation between discipleship and church growth. The bars at left represent congregations with 10% of members or fewer involved in disciple making; the bars at right show the results for churches with more than 10% involved.

Correlation between Growth of Adult Congregations (Worship Attenders) and Their Engagement in Disciple Making Process based on the Church's Sizes.

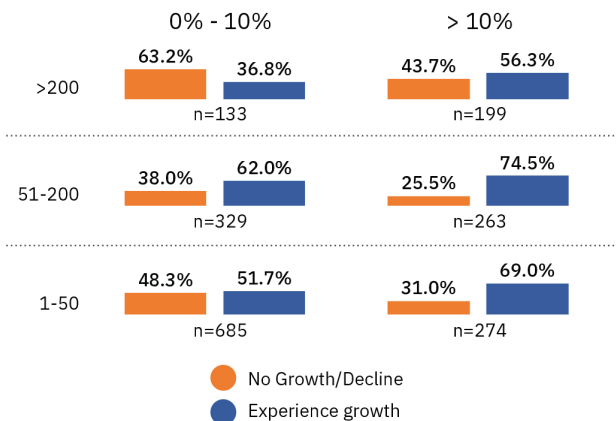


Figure 4: The relationship between disciple making, church size and church growth

Obedience to the Great Commission and its impact

As disciple making has been identified as a significant part of church growth and health in Indonesia, BRC’s fourth survey, in late 2019, focused on the Great Commission of Matthew 28 and disciple making in Indonesia. To some extent, this research was triggered by Barna’s research findings on discipleship (*The State of Discipleship*, 2015) and the Great Commission (*Translating the Great Commission*, 2018). Some of the survey questions and response choices were purposefully framed to align with Barna’s, so as to allow appropriate comparisons between Indonesia and the US on these topics.

This was the BRC’s largest survey yet, with close to six thousand respondents, including 270 pastors, 872 other church leaders or elders, and 4,613 church members, representing more than 50 denominations in Indonesia.

With regard to the term ‘Great Commission’, 17% of respondents in the US and 40.4% in Indonesia indicated that they had a good understanding of the term and could explain its meaning to others. One of the shocking findings of Barna’s study was that 51% of the US respondents said they had never heard of the term ‘Great Commission’. In Indonesia, only 5.5% gave this answer (Figure 5).

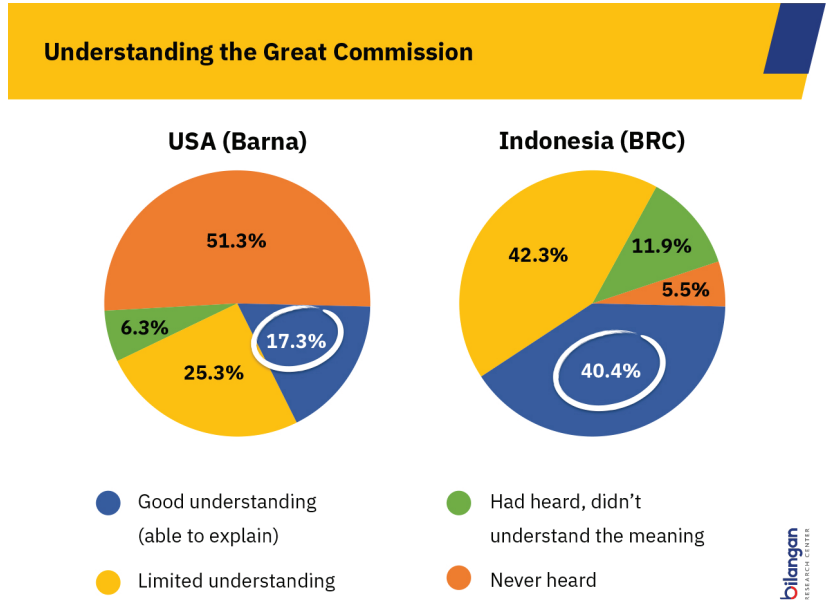


Figure 5: Church members’ understanding of the Great Commission in Indonesia and the US

Sixty-two percent of churches in the US and 52.6% in Indonesia set worshippers’ spiritual growth amongst the church’s top priorities. When church participants were asked whether they had experienced spiritual growth in the past 12 months, 33% in the US and 37.7% churchgoers answered affirmatively (Figure 6).

In terms of effectiveness, on average, churches in the US indicated accomplishing 52.2% of their desired outcomes with regard to attenders' spiritual growth. On the other hand, churches in Indonesia were able to achieve 71.7% of their desired outcomes.

Spiritual Growth between Desire and Reality

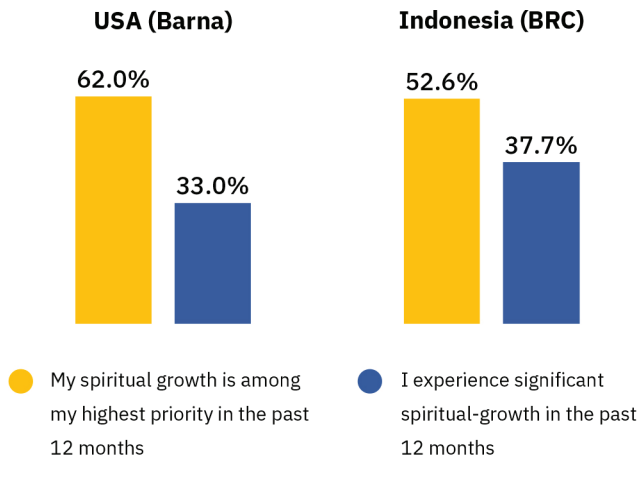


Figure 6: Church priority on spiritual growth and resulting outcomes, in Indonesia and the US

Several factors may have contributed to the higher performance of Indonesian churches in helping their members to grow spiritually. First, socio-religious pressures, and to some extent persecution, as Christians in the country with the world's largest population of Muslims may have an effect. Often in church history, pressures, challenges and persecution have been associated with accelerated spiritual growth and maturity.

Second, there have been several incidences of spiritual awakenings in different parts of Indonesia over the past few decades, which may have fostered a deepening of spiritual hunger and thereby spiritual growth. Amongst others, these include the spiritual awakenings of the early 1960s on Timor Island and revivals in Bandung in the late 1960s, Borneo in the mid-1970s, Semarang and Surabaya in the late 1970s and Solo in the late 1990s.³

But we believe that the strongest factor contributing to the effective achieve-

3 See Avery T. Willis, *Indonesian Revival: Why Two Millions Came to Christ* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977); Bambang Budijanto and Tanto Handoko, *30 Years' Walk with Jesus* (Jogjakarta, Indonesia: Andi, 2009); Bambang Budijanto, 'Evangelicals and Politics in Indonesia: The Case of Surakarta', in David H. Lumsdaine (ed.), *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154–83..

ment of the spiritual growth among Indonesia’s churches, as compared to those in the US, is illustrated in Figures 7 and 8. About 20% of Christians in the US were involved in some kind of discipleship activities (based on their own definition of the term). Indonesian Christians doubled this percentage, with 40.4% of believers claiming to have been involved in discipleship activities in the previous 12 months.

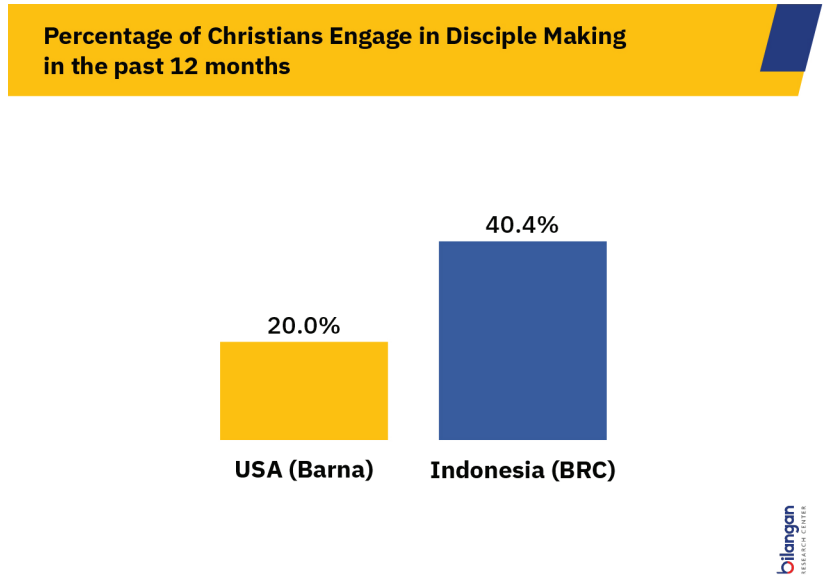
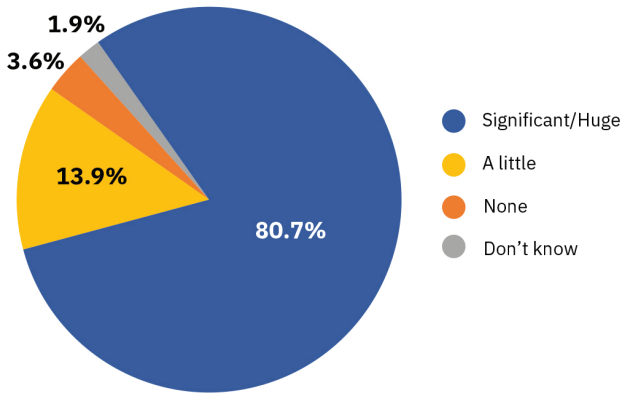


Figure 7: Percentage of Christians involved in any kind of discipleship activities, in Indonesia and the US

Although neither Barna nor we attempted to define the concept of disciple making precisely, nor did we seek to measure qualitative aspects of the discipleship process, the significant percentage gap on this question is notable, especially when the US had a higher percentage of churches expressing a commitment to spiritual growth as a priority than Indonesia reported.

Finally, although the disciple-making process aims primarily at helping those being mentored to grow spiritually, the Indonesian experience suggests that the disciplers have gained as much spiritual benefit, if not more, than the learners from obeying Christ and the Great Commission by seeking to make disciples of all people. More than 80% of all respondents who have discipled others in the past 12 months said that doing so significantly impacted their own spiritual growth. Only 3.6% said that their obedience to the Great Commission did not have any positive impact on themselves (Figure 8).

How Discipling Others Impact Your Spiritual Growth



bilangan
BANGSA
INDONESIA

Figure 8: How making disciples contributes towards spiritual growth of the disciplers

Conclusions

The purpose of the church is to equip every member to grow into Christ-likeness (Eph 4:13). The church has created numerous programmes and invested significantly in many strategies to move carnal or new Christians towards full maturity in Christ. Some of these are more effective than others.

The BRC's study results reveal that amongst those who have obeyed Christ's Great Commission to make disciples of all people in the past 12 months, more than 80% have themselves gained significant spiritual growth. In other words, helping others grow in Christ has enabled the disciplers to grow too. This could be the best investment opportunity for the church, with a four-fifths chance of success in enabling church members to grow spiritually. Probably more effective than sermons, books or seminars is the strategy of equipping, supporting, encouraging and releasing believers of all ages to make disciples of all people.

The essence of discipleship is that none of Christ's followers, wherever they are and whether young or old, should live for themselves. Disciple making is giving one's best to help other people grow in becoming more like Christ. As we focus on leading and helping others to become disciples, we ourselves will experience significant growth in Christ, for the best way to learn is to teach.

At the BRC, we view disciple making as a process of leading other people (primarily through example—i.e. 'follow me') closer to Christ, so that they can experience His love and forgiveness too, and so that they can walk alongside their mentors towards becoming more like Christ themselves.