

# Demographics

## *What's the Fuss All About?*

JIM BEHRENDT



**I**F YOU ARE INVOLVED with any type of evangelism or church planning task force, committee, or team, chances are it won't be long before the subject of demographics arises. "Demographics" has become the newest buzzword in church planning, especially since the government has begun to release the results of the 2000 census.

So what are demographics? How can they help church planners and planters? Where do you find demographic information? Are demographics the answer to church growth? These are some of the questions commonly being asked in church-planning groups.

What are demographics? Strictly speaking, demographic information refers to information describing a population within a given geographic area. It usually includes such items as age, income, marital status, occupations, number and age of children, and so on. The most obvious source of this information is the United States Census. Every ten years, the U.S. Census Bureau surveys the entire population of the nation. This information is analyzed and released in a series of reports that are available at local libraries.

Demographics, however, only contain information about a person's status—what they do, how old they are, and so forth. While this information may be useful, by itself it does not give insight into what people think, believe, how they behave, and what is important to them. To obtain this information, one must go beyond basic demographics. This is precisely where many planning committees begin to founder. They may spend hours in a library obtaining all sorts of demographic information about their community. When they finally come up for air, they discover that they now know who lives in their community but little or nothing about the lifestyles and values of the people around them.



Obtaining this type of information about a person's values, beliefs, lifestyle, and so on is more difficult and complex. It usually requires the assistance of marketing research firms. Before you run out and retain such a firm, however, there are a few more terms with which every church planner and planter should be familiar. These terms are psychographics, praxiographics, and mediagraphics.

Psychographics refers to information on attitudes, values, opinions, and beliefs. This information is important in understanding how to connect with people.

Praxiographics refers to information on what people do, how they behave, where they go, what they are involved in, how much they give, and so on. These are important considerations when designing outreach ministries.

Finally, mediagraphics refers to information on how people receive their information. This is critical when trying to figure out how not just to get your message out but also how to get your message heard.

Obviously, the best way to obtain psychographic, praxiographic, and mediagraphic information is by surveying the community and asking them questions.

Most churches, however, do not have the time, people, or training to do this. So where do you turn? Hiring a market research firm is always an option, but it is expensive and time consuming. This is where firms such as Percept, Inc. are such a valuable resource for church planning. For modest fees, they are able to provide detailed information on any area of the country. Some companies will even prepare custom reports for individual congregations.

A word of warning is in order to those who see this information as the magic bullet for the problem of church growth. Demographic information, including psycho-, praxio-, and mediagraphics, is simply that—information. It is easy to become overwhelmed with information. That is why information can help you realize a vision but it will never take the place of a vision.

Nothing will ever replace the necessity of a church or conference spending time in prayer and discussion around the question, “What does God want us to do?” On the other hand, many churches and Conferences can avoid the disappointment and

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frustration of failed outreach programs and new church starts by spending time understanding and using the sophisticated demographic information available.

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### Sources of Demographic Information—

In your community:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Board of Realtors
- Local Libraries
- UCC Research Office
- Percepts

Web sites:

- U.S. Census Bureau  
<www.census.gov>
- American Demographics  
<www.marketingtools.com>



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