

# Body Count Syndrome:

## How both the Vietnam War & the Church Growth Movement failed



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Vietnam was like no war before it. The Americans who waged it were World War II veterans who were used to assessing the progress of a military campaign by how much ground had been taken from the enemy, by how many of their cities had been captured, and how many military and industrial installations had been destroyed.

But none of that applied in Vietnam.

The Viet Cong and the regular North Vietnamese army waged something more like a guerrilla campaign. They would ambush American forces, attack them swiftly and then melt away into the jungle. If the Americans bombed their networks of trails and tunnels, the North simply built more nearby. There was no traditional “front”, so there was no way to measure whether the Americans were advancing. No one could tell if they were winning the war or not.

Back in Washington, Defence Secretary Robert McNamara and his coterie of whiz kid number-crunchers needed data desperately. With the anti-war movement building, they wanted to be able to assure the public that progress was being made and that the terrible human and financial cost of the war was worth it.

The grisly answer was ***body count***.

The leader of the American campaign in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland and Secretary McNamara decided to start measuring the progress of the war based on the number of enemy forces killed. Their goal was to reach the tipping point where they had eliminated more bodies than the North could replace.



Soon, soldiers in every battle and skirmish were required to prepare accurate counts of the number of enemy casualties. These numbers were analysed back in Washington to show evidence of US progress. Westmoreland and McNamara needed body counts, and the higher the better.

You can guess what began to happen.

Body counts are easily manipulated, and difficult to verify.

To justify themselves, or to cover up their mistakes, military leaders in Vietnam would sometimes instruct their forces to add civilians to the day's body count. In some cases, there was out-and-out inflation of the numbers.

If your success is measured in body counts, you count everyone you can. General Norman Schwarzkopf, the allied commander in the Persian Gulf, and himself a Vietnam veteran, said he abhors body counts as a measure of military success, stating, ***“These statistics are not only meaningless but misleading because body counts can push junior commanders into a numbers game that compromises their integrity.”***

In Ken Burns' documentary, a Vietnam vet says sagely, ***“If you can't count what's important, you make what you can count important.”***

The body count syndrome effects all kinds of industries. Instead of measuring what the company, church or organisation is meant to be achieving, it is simpler to count heads or dollars.

***For church leaders, it's really difficult to develop metrics for assessing spiritual growth or the growth of missional effectiveness. It's easier to count stuff that's, well, countable.***

I can't help but wonder whether the leaders of the church growth movement of the 1970s and 80s weren't our General Westmoreland and Secretary McNamara. America had been through huge social upheaval in the 60s and 70s. The nation's values were shifting significantly. The civil rights movement

and the feminist movement had changed the way society and families were being understood.

Church attendance was plummeting, and church leaders struggled to know how to understand their place in this strange new world.

How were they to **measure** their effectiveness in this emerging landscape?

Enter Donald McGavran. He was a nerdy numbers man just like Robert McNamara. As a missionary in India he developed a paradigm for measuring the effectiveness of missionary work essentially in terms of multiplying Christian churches in number and in size. He produced tables and graphs and detailed lists to show where the church was flourishing in India and where it wasn't.

It was an ecclesial version of **body count**.



When McGavran moved to California to start teaching at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission, he brought his new metric with him, and adapted it to the American scene. And it was an instant hit.

Counting attendance now became the primary means of determining if the church was "winning" or not. Everything, it seemed, started to be run through the grid of how many people attended.

And just like in Vietnam, it meant local leaders starting fudging the numbers to impress their superiors. As the Vietnam vet said, if you can't measure what's actually important, you add false importance to measurable things.

The bitter irony is that while Westmoreland's forces in Vietnam were counting Vietnamese bodies, trumpeting the fact that they were inflicting ten or twenty times more casualties than incurred to American forces, they were slowly but surely **losing the war**.

It's the same with the church.

Since the introduction of McGavran's church growth movement to the United States in early 1970s, pastors have been persistently counting congregations, submitting statistical returns, and crunching numbers, and yet overall church attendance has **continued** to fall.

In the 1980s, membership in the church dropped almost 10%; then, in the 1990s, it worsened by another 12% – some denominations reporting a 40% drop in their membership.

It dropped even more through the first decade of the 21st century. In 2002, only 18% of Australians “frequently” attended church.

On current estimates, church attendance is forecast to drop to 15% 2025, and a further drop to 11% or 12 % in 2050.

But you don’t hear stats like these very often. Can you see the parallels with Vietnam?

*Like the US forces in Vietnam, we’ve been counting our way to oblivion.*

As long as we focus on numbers, we’re not focusing on what we’re meant to be doing as the people of God. What the church needs is a fresh new metric for determining its **effectiveness**, a measuring device that releases church leaders from focusing on how many people attend, and starts mobilising them to greater missional effectiveness in their neighbourhoods and communities.

Because, let’s face it, **what you count, counts.**

So how about we learn ways to measure missional effectiveness ? A new way to count. For example:

- ***Number of people reporting improved relationships over time;***
- ***Number of people reporting improved friendships over time;***
- ***Number of people being mentored;***
- ***Number of people serving as mentors;***
- ***Number of people able to articulate a life mission;***
- ***Number of people serving other people, whether in the church building or not;***
- ***Number of people practicing an blessing strategy for those around them;***
- ***Number of people growing in financial giving to kingdom causes.***

***Its going to*** need us to go back to the drawing board and ask God **why we exist** and then figure out how to **measure THAT. !**

Rev Dr Mike Frost