

The missing "Christians": A global call

The Lausanne Rome 2018 Statement on Nominal Christianity

Lausanne Global Consultation
Rome, 14-18 March 2018

Something has gone terribly wrong. One third of the world call themselves "Christians" but a significant proportion of them are missing. Many of them are missing from our churches. Many others are present, but are missing out on the joy of truly knowing and following Christ. Something has to change! Mission to nominal Christians is too often missing from the agenda of the global Church and its leaders.

PART I

Responding to the biblical mandate to communicate and to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ, forty theologians, missiologists, social scientists, and mission practitioners from all regions of the world have come together in Rome for a renewed focus on the key topic of Christian witness among nominal Christians. We have done that in 'the Lausanne spirit' of prayer, study, partnership, hope, and humility, and with a renewed sense of the urgency to fulfil the task that the Risen Lord has given his Church.

In approaching our task, we built on the rich evangelical heritage of the *Lausanne Movement with The Lausanne Covenant* (1974), *The Manila Manifesto* (1989), and *The Cape Town Commitment* (2011) as the three foundational documents.¹ In previous documents and gatherings, the Lausanne Movement already reflected on the missional challenges of nominal Christianity as it relates to Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants.² We now take these reflections further with a view to the current situation, and by including nominal Christianity as it relates to Evangelicals.

Being aware of the danger of superficiality and over-simplification, we have chosen a fresh approach from the three different, yet interrelated, perspectives of social science, theology, and missiology.

From a *sociological* point of view, the phenomenon of nominal Christianity is often described negatively in terms of Christians who are not affiliated, not practising, not converted, or not committed. The fundamental limit of these markers is that they are all defined by negation. The aspects of believing, belonging, and behaving suggest that the following dimensions might be used as parameters:

1. Initiation (becoming a Christian);
2. Faith (spiritual experience, believing *in*);
3. Beliefs (knowledge, believing *that*);
4. Church attachment (membership or other affiliation);
5. Church participation (attendance and ministry);
6. Spiritual life; and
7. Practice in daily life (personal and public).

These parameters may then be used to evaluate orientation and direction of travel towards or away from maturity in Christ.

Pulling these threads together, nominal Christians can be described as follows: *People who identify with a Christian church*

or the Christian faith, but are in contradiction with basic Christian principles with respect to becoming a Christian, faith, beliefs, church involvement, and daily life.

Theologically speaking, while the name “Christian” was already in use during the New Testament times, it later became the self-designation of the followers of Jesus. Interweaving different biblical threads about the identity of being a Christian, the *Lausanne Covenant*³ refers to a person with the following characteristics:

1. Faith in the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord;
2. Repentance towards and reconciliation with God;
3. Commitment to discipleship in following Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit: denying self, and taking up the cross;
4. Incorporation into Christ’s community, the local church; and
5. Engaging in responsible service in the world for Christ.

Conversion to Christ is fundamental to Christian faith. Without repentance and faith in Him, turning from sin, trusting Him alone for our salvation and transformation, and obeying Him as Lord, there is no authentic Christianity. How to relate conversion to Christ to the ordinances (sacraments) and the participation in the Church is a matter of ongoing discussion even amongst ourselves as Evangelicals.

From a *missiological* standpoint, a fundamental observation is that nominal Christianity is more of a problem when Christianity finds itself in a dominant or a majority situation, especially when Christian faith so shapes culture that there is a confusion about the nature of one’s identity. Nevertheless, the reality is that nominal Christians may be found in every congregation, every denominational tra-

dition, every theological stream, every generation, every cultural context, and every diaspora people.

Furthermore, nominal Christianity may take different shapes in majority Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox contexts, and in places where Christians are a minority. It is also shaped by culture, race and generation. We realize that the missiological challenges of reaching out to nominal Christians with the gospel of Jesus Christ also apply to situations and contexts where evangelical Christianity is a majority or a significant presence in society. This is true in the West as well as in the Global South, and in historic churches as well as in younger ones, including immigrant churches and people on the move. We also realize that nominal Christianity has contributed to a negative reputation of the Christian Church, including such demanding realities as secularization, moral confusion, racism, colonialism, and prosperity theology.

Therefore, the task of “bearing witness to Jesus Christ and all his teaching, in every nation, in every sphere of society, and in the realm of ideas”⁴ is no less urgent in nominal Christian contexts. The first point of the Lausanne fourfold vision —‘the gospel for every person’—applies equally to those who carry the name ‘Christian’ but have never truly understood or welcomed ‘the gospel of God’s grace’ (Acts 20:24).

We renew our commitment before God to be humble witnesses to Christ and courageous agents for this task of bringing home the missing Christians for the global Church and for the glory of God.

PART II

A CALL TO CONFESSION AND PRAYER

As individuals and as representatives of our church communities:

1. **We confess that, all too often, we have overlooked the nominal Christians in our midst**, both in the broader society and in many of our own Evangelical churches.
2. **We confess our faltering witness, our defective discipleship and our lack of concern** for those who bear the Name of Christ but through ignorance, sin or rejection are far from the way of Christ, and his church.
3. **We confess that we have often been "quick to judge and slow to listen"** to the stories of nominal Christians, especially when they come from another church tradition than our own.
4. **We confess that – at times – our actions, attitudes and structures have weakened the credibility of the church of Christ.**

We call the churches we represent and all churches everywhere to:

1. **Pray for all those who are Christians in name only that they might come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.**
2. **Pray for a spiritual awakening of nominal Christians, a strengthening of the weary and struggling, and a renewal of our commitment to disciple all those who bear the Name.**

A CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP AND WITNESS

Recognising the commandment of Jesus to make disciples of all peoples, we urge our church communities to:

1. **Prioritize a holistic discipleship** that brings all believers to maturity in Christ.
2. **Proclaim the biblical gospel with clarity and boldness** but always attending to the context so that the message of Christ is properly understood.
3. **Plant new churches and work for the renewal of existing churches;** churches that embody the joy of the gospel, that reflect the character of Christ in their community life, and display the power of Spirit in transformed lives, to the glory of God.

A CALL TO REFLECTION AND ACTION

We also call for profound reflection and determined action to seek and save the missing millions, those who are missing from our churches and those who, whilst present, are missing out on salvation and the fullness of life in Christ.

This must involve:

1. **An honest and widespread reflection on why people have distanced themselves from various forms of Christianity** (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant /Evangelical), coupled with further theological research as to the possible contribution of contemporary Evangelical theology and practice to self-secularisation and nominality and how it might be prevented.

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2. **A research initiative on historic and contemporary renewal and disciple-making movements**, that might inspire a new generation of leaders that can be used by God to awaken dormant Christian faith.
 3. **A thorough review of theological training**, to ensure that it is faithful to Scripture, theologically sound, and centred on discipleship and mission, but also ensure that it includes sociological tools to understand nominal Christianity and how literature, the arts, media and technology can be used to build bridges for the gospel.
 4. **A parallel review of leadership training**, to ensure that leadership is focused on mobilising the young and empowering lay ministry, and to discern toxic leadership patterns that may be contributing to nominal Christianity.
 5. **A renewed focus on lived discipleship**, on living holistic lives centred on Christ that demonstrate in word and deed the love of God in the midst of the contemporary challenges of our global world today.
 6. **A commitment to creativity**, in our evangelism, in our discipleship and in how we go about forming new Christian communities, that the missing sheep might hear the call of the Good Shepherd and turn again to Christ.

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