

NUMBERS WE CAN TRUST

Statistics. We're getting buried in them. How many virus cases in our county, our state, our nation. How many deaths because of COVID-19 (the count rises daily). How many more will die next week, next month, etc. How many people are unemployed because of the virus. The virus data heaps up and changes by the hour.

How much of it can we trust? If we can believe anything the media tells us nowadays, China tried to hide the Wuhan epidemic and then falsified data about how many caught the virus and how many died. Their late reports double the early numbers. Who knows how much of our data much closer to home is being massaged to let states tap into various disaster funds or to let them relax shelter-at-home rules sooner than the rest of us?

In this robo-call age, can we trust anybody? A Fox News headline in mid-April told us, "Chile counts people who have died from coronavirus as 'recovered' because they can't infect anyone else." So they have an impressive recovery rate. (So did LBJ have winning totals when they counted votes by dead people in Hidalgo County.) An old proverb used to say, "Numbers don't lie." Really?

Even those who are trying to be honest may still mislead us with data they put out. Anyone reporting the number of cases of coronavirus in a certain locale is wrong. What they're actually counting are the number of people who have tested positive for the disease. By far the larger percentage of the population in any specified area have not been tested, and new studies show that at least 25 percent of those with the virus are asymptomatic, so we really have no idea how many have caught the bug.

Accurate counts can still be deceptive unless we know what percentage of the population caught the virus in the states or countries we're comparing. New York's virus victim tally sounds atrocious, for example, until we stop and realize how many millions of people live there. We have some tiny towns in Texas who have minuscule numbers but a higher rate of infection.

One number all of us can agree on: the number of Sundays our churches have been closed. Since my little church is a non-prophet organization, nobody among us can predict how many more weeks will pass before our doors can be unlocked and our lights turned back on. But as these lonely Lord's days slip by, all of us are counting them, because we believe the numbers Jesus gave us when he promised that he would be present where two or three are gathered in his name.