



From 35,000 to 15,000 Feet: Evangelical Statistics in the U.S. and Canada: A State/Province, Metro, and County Glimpse

By J. D. Payne¹

According to the U. S. Religious Landscape Survey of 2008 released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, among all U. S. adults, Evangelicals consisted of 26.3% of the population.² Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk in *Operation World* noted that the Evangelicals comprised 10.8% of the Canadian population in 2000.³ Rick Hiemstra with the Center for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism estimates the average percentage across the provinces being 12%, with Quebec consisting of 2-3%.⁴ As a missiologist, educator, and strategist, I am extremely interested in finding out what locations in North America are in the greatest need for the gospel. On the one hand, everyplace is in need of the gospel. On the other hand, to be a good steward of the resources our Lord has provided the Church for mission, we need to know where the areas of greatest need are located.

This brief report is to be used in conjunction with the corresponding PowerPoint presentation showing evangelical statistics in selected places of the United States and Canada. We have made an attempt to visually display the areas of the greatest evangelical need. It is my prayer that churches and denominations would seriously consider the realities presented here, and would make any necessary adjustments in their church multiplication strategies to better extend the Kingdom into areas where few are laboring.

Corresponding PowerPoint Presentation

The PowerPoint presentation for this report can be downloaded for free from the Articles section of www.NorthAmericanMissions.org.

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² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U. S. Religious Landscape Survey 2008," 5. The full 143 page pdf is posted at NorthAmericanMissions.org. See <http://northamericanmissions.org/files/2008%20America's%20report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>; Accessed 11/19/2009.

³ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st Century Edition*, updated and revised 2005 (Milton Keynes, UK and Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2001), 144.

⁴ Email to author 12/7/2009.

Background of the Study

The Church in the United States and Canada is in dire need of healthy missiological research that influences missionary strategies. I am amazed that we have excellent information about a small unreached people group on the backside of the Himalayans or tucked away in a dark corner of a Brazilian rainforest, but *have little to no understanding of the peoples living in our backyards*. The United States and Canada are two of the most sophisticated, educated, resourced, and researched nations in the entire world, and the Church here has little understanding of the Somalis living across town, the Quebecois in the community across the river, or the Anglos moving into the new subdivision.

While the Lord leads His Church, even when she is ignorant to reality, how much better is it when the Church understands her context? Or, to put it another way, it is difficult to hit a target, if you do not know what target you are shooting at. The Church may have a great zeal to reach others with the gospel and plant churches; but zeal with ignorance is not healthy for the Kingdom. The writer of Proverbs reminds us, “desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way” (Prov 19:2, ESV).

Since 2006, The Association of Religion Data Archives (The ARDA) has made available for free and on-line the data from the well-respected *2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study*.⁵ While this data is presently ten years old, it is probably the most extensive and best research available to date on congregations and memberships in the United States. The 2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Study will provide the next comprehensive religious portrait of people in the United States. However, it will still be in the future when this extensive study will be conducted *and* the results made public.

For some time, Outreach Canada has been a champion for knowing the numbers of Evangelicals in Canada. In 2005, Murray Moerman, edited the book *Discipling Our Nation: Equipping the Canadian Church for Its Mission* with an extensive amount of tables revealing a wealth of data presenting the church planting needs across the country. This information was based on 2001 statistics. Lorne Hunter with Outreach Canada shared with us their 2006 data for this research project.

The Problem

The statistics on U. S. Evangelicals have been made available for free *and* on-line to the public for the past four years. Prior to that time, the data was available for purchase in 2002, appearing in the book *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United*

⁵ See <http://www.thearda.com/>; see also <http://www.asarb.org/rcms.html>; Accessed 11/19/2009.

States: 2000 published by the Glenn Mary Research Center.⁶ While such information has been readily available for anyone wanting to search through and compile the findings on Evangelicals, *I am not aware of any organization that collected these findings and disseminated them widely to the larger evangelical body, so they could develop evangelism and church multiplication strategies accordingly.* I am thoroughly impressed by Outreach Canada and their collection and dissemination of such statistical information for Canada. Those of us comprising the Church in the U. S. need to learn from the example set forth by our Canadian brothers and sisters.

The Purpose

The purpose of this report and corresponding PowerPoint presentation include the following:

- To note the need for better missiological research in North America
- To note important data is available to Evangelicals if they are willing to search for it
- To emphasize wise missionary strategy is guided by accurate missiological research
- To point out the least evangelical areas of the United States and Canada
- To urge strategists across denominations and churches to consider the importance of focusing on the most needy (and most receptive) areas

Research Methodology

My research methodology concerning the United States consisted of searching through the on-line 2000 data regarding Evangelicals, as found on The Association of Religion Data Archives. Based on this information, we were able to observe areas of the country where evangelicals were the least represented. Evangelical percentages and evangelical church to population ratios were then calculated.

The information for Canada came from correspondence with Lorne Hunter with Outreach Canada.⁷ The Canadian information on the Power Point file is 2006 data. It should be noted that Outreach Canada has extensive information regarding evangelical statistics for the country.

Contents of the PowerPoint Presentation

The contents of the PowerPoint file include the following:

⁶ See <http://www.glenmary.org/grc/>; Accessed 11/19/2009.

⁷ See <http://en.outreach.ca/>; Accessed 11/19/2009.

- The percentage of Evangelicals per U. S. state
- The evangelical church to population ratio in each U. S. state
- A sampling of some U. S. counties with an evangelical population of less than or equal to 10% AND the evangelical church to population ratio in each of those counties
- A list of U. S. Metro areas with less than a 10% evangelical population
- A specific list of U. S Metro areas with less than a 3% evangelical population
- The number of evangelical churches and the evangelical church to population ratios in selected Canadian metro areas (2006)

The Evangelical Benchmark

When conducting missiological research in order to better understand what percentage of the people in an area are followers of Jesus *and* are the most likely to continue to share the gospel with others, we look to the number of Evangelicals present. Now, clearly not all Evangelicals are regenerate and are faithful in sharing the good news with others. Also, I know there are people who do not consider themselves Evangelicals but are faithful followers of Jesus and faithfully share the gospel with others. However, by most definitions, an Evangelical is someone who professes to have had a conversion (regenerate) experience by grace through faith in Christ and believes in the importance of telling others about the good news of this salvation. Therefore, missiologists need a benchmark to attempt to gain a better understanding of how many people have had a conversion experience and are calling others to Jesus as well. This is the reason the generic category of “Evangelical” is the focus of this research project.

Limitations

In addition to using Evangelicals as a benchmark, there are a few other limitations. The findings of this study for the U. S. were limited to the data found on The ARDA’s web site. The findings of this study for Canada were limited to the data collected and shared by Outreach Canada. It should also be noted that while the Canadian data is from 2006, the best public U. S. data is much older, from 2000. Though the U. S. data is a decade in age, this information is a good point of orientation for us today.

The definition of *Evangelical* is worth mentioning here as a limitation. From a sociological perspective, the definition of Evangelical used when collecting the data published in *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States: 2000*, would be fairly accurate. While there are a few limitations noted by those disseminating the data, most researchers would be mostly in agreement with what groups were considered Evangelical. From a conservative, Evangelical, missiologist’s perspective—and more

importantly—from a Kingdom citizen’s perspective, I am not comfortable with the original definition of “Evangelical” found in *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States: 2000*. While the original researchers did separate mainline churches, world religions, and cults from Evangelicals, the definition on which the research was based is too broad for accurate understanding of the number of Kingdom citizens present *and* involved in engaging their communities with the gospel.⁸ Also, the definition of evangelical “adherents” in the data set is also more problematic when attempting to determine the estimated number of Evangelicals in a particular area of the U. S. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives’ web site: “Congregational ‘adherents’ include all full members, their children, and others who regularly attend services. The historically African American denominations are not included in the 2000 congregation and membership totals.”⁹

With these facts in mind, *the number of regenerate people in all of these locations in the U. S. is much lower than presented in this document and the PowerPoint presentation; therefore, the need for the gospel in all of these areas is much greater than what is represented here*. Since I do not know the *evangelical* groups counted by Outreach Canada, I cannot comment on possible realities in Canada.

The U. S. counties that are presented in the PowerPoint presentation were selected from The ARDA’s web site because of their lower evangelical populations. It should be noted that the counties presented do *not* necessarily represent all of the U. S. counties with less than 10% evangelical populations. These are only presented to give you an idea of the realities in the United States.

From 35,000 Feet to 15,000 Feet

This report on Evangelicals in the United States and Canada is an attempt to assist the Church in moving its missiological perspective of these two countries from what I refer to as a high altitude perspective to a lower altitude perspective. An examination of world maps showing the global status of evangelical Christianity are usually color coded to provide the reader with a quick understanding of the percentages of evangelicals in countries across the world.¹⁰ Red areas are the least reached areas while the dark green areas are the most reached areas. While such maps and color codes are good and needed for both a proper understanding of Evangelicals and global strategy development, there is an inherent problem. The major limitation is that the perspective provided does not offer the realities in the communities within those countries. Rather, an average approximation is provided.

⁸For a list of the evangelical Protestant congregations included in the Religious Congregations and Membership Study 2000 see <http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/evangelical.asp>; Accessed 12/10/2009.

⁹http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/RCMS_Notes.asp; Accessed 12/10/2009.

¹⁰For example see the pdf document at <http://www.imb.org/globalresearch/downloads/GSECMAP.pdf>; Accessed 11/19/2009.

Again, such mapping is helpful and necessary. However, we must not stop at the 35,000 feet perspective. Rather, the Church must move to a lower altitude and eventually *land the plane* in order to know truly what is going on in the communities where she is found.

My presentation is an attempt to change our perspective on the United States and Canada from being seen as simply green countries, and thus “reached” with the gospel. By moving into the state/provincial, metro, and county levels, church planters will get a better perspective of the reality of lostness in these two countries. *It should be noted that in no way does this presentation attempt to diminish the fact that by far the world’s greatest needy areas are found outside of these countries.* Rather, my hope is that this information would sound the alarm to the realities and opportunities facing the Church in the United States and Canada.

What is Not Here

Prior to examining the PowerPoint presentation, you need to know what is not represented in this project.

First, this project does not reveal the ground-level realities, but only the perspective from 15,000 feet. Pockets of significant lostness are not represented in this study. For example, the slides of Kentucky reveal that this state is 34% evangelical with a ratio of one evangelical church for every 788 people—a high evangelical percentage and a fairly low church to population ratio. If we only looked at this information, we could easily assume that there is not much of a need for evangelical churches in this state. However, such a perspective does not reveal the apartment complex down the street with only 3% of the resident population being followers of Christ. It does not provide us with numbers related to subdivisions, mobile home and condo communities, etc.¹¹

Second, at the 15,000 feet perspective we do not see the reality of least reached minority people groups. For example—to return to Kentucky—in Louisville, Kentucky there are many Nepali and Somali peoples (two of the world’s least reached people groups) with few known believers in Louisville at the time of this writing (none among the Somali), and no churches among either group. Also, many Bosnians have chosen to reside in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Again, here is one of the world’s least reached people groups and no Bosnian believers (to my knowledge at the time of this writing) in Kentucky, and no church. From the 15,000 feet perspective we miss the number of least reached minority people groups, sub-cultures, and population segments.

¹¹ At this point, I would like to direct you to an article I wrote a few years ago titled, “42,000 + Southern Baptist Churches: Do We Really Need Another One?” Even for those of you who are not Southern Baptist, I think this article will be of assistance to you and your church and/or denomination because of the universals addressed. You can find the article at NorthAmericanMissions.org here: <http://northamericanmissions.org/?q=node/41>; Accessed 11/19/2009.

Finally, for strategic purposes, my research only looked at the number of Evangelicals in an area. Need alone is not always the best place to begin or to concentrate missionary resources. *Good strategic planning also takes the Holy Spirit's leadership and His work related to receptivity to the gospel into consideration as well.* In my book, *Discovering Church Planting*, I advocate the *general* use of a Receptivity-Need Analysis Guideline to assist in wise strategic planning as good stewards of the resources and opportunities the Lord has given to us.¹² Space will not permit me to go into additional detail on this discussion of receptivity and the work of the Spirit. For more information on my understanding, I will direct you to *Discovering Church Planting*.

		<u>RECEPTIVITY</u>	
		High	Low
<u>NEED</u>	High	A Priority Field 1	B Priority Field 2
	Low	C Priority Field 3	D Priority Field 4

Figure 1. Receptivity-Need Analysis

The use of the Receptivity-Need Analysis Guideline, however, does not call for taking the gospel to certain fields and withholding it from others. We take the gospel to everyone! Rather, the point that I am attempting to make here is that in light of the large numbers of unbelievers in the United States and Canada, the Church must be a wise steward with the resources the Lord has provided. As we broadly sow the gospel, we strategize accordingly whenever we encounter those more receptive to the truth.

I want you to understand this research project is only providing you with a better understanding of the “NEED” side of the guideline. *My call, at this point, is for other researchers to assist us in understanding how to better ascertain receptivity.* Also, I want to challenge churches and church planters to look around their areas and, unless the

¹²J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 161.

Lord is specifically guiding them to a hard-soil area, spend most of your effort with those peoples who are the *most* receptive to the gospel. Withhold the good news from no one; but be a wise steward with Kingdom resources.

Why Percentages and Ratios

Again, since the world is a very big place and some benchmark is necessary for strategic thinking about Kingdom expansion, evangelical percentages and evangelical church to population ratios are helpful.

Missiologists have labeled people groups “unreached” or “least-reached” when the evangelical percentage among the particular people examined is less than or equal to 2% AND when the total Christian Adherent population is less than or equal to 5%.¹³ Others have simply defined an unreached people group as one “in which less than 2% of the population are Evangelical Christians.”¹⁴

Comparing people group percentages to state/province, county, and metro percentages is similar to comparing a ground level perspective to the 15,000 feet perspective. However, at the present time, this is the best comparison we have for the U. S. and Canada on a country-wide scale. Therefore, I want you to keep these commonly accepted “unreached” and “least reached” statistics in mind in relation to the 15,000 feet perspective of the U. S. and Canada. While both of these nations are considered “reached” when viewing them from the 35,000 feet perspective, at 15,000 feet the evangelical percentages drop substantially.

Another important benchmark when it comes to missionary strategy is that of the evangelical church to population ratio. As you read the corresponding PowerPoint presentation, keep in mind that a good strategic ratio is 1:1000, for urban contexts, and 1:500 for rural areas. There is nothing biblical about this ratio. Rather, it is based on the diffusion of innovation theory. Such a theory argues that whenever 10-20% of a population accepts a concept, the society reaches a “tipping point” that will result in the diffusion of the concept across the people. While such a line of reasoning is purely secular, it is a concept to consider. Edward R. Dayton and David A. Fraser note in their book *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization* “Observation and research has shown that when approximately 10 or 20 percent of the people within a group have accepted an idea or a new religion, they have the ability to evangelize the rest of the group.”¹⁵

¹³For example, Joshua Project: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/global-progress-scale.php>; Accessed 12/4/2009.

¹⁴Global Research Department, International Mission Board [on-line] http://imb.org/globalresearch/sge_terms.asp; Accessed 12/4/09

¹⁵Edward R. Dayton and David A. Fraser, *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 38.

Assuming that each church in the urban contexts consists of 100 evangelicals and 50 evangelicals in the rural contexts, which is 10% of each respective population, missiologists consider such numbers substantial for being able to saturate the community with the gospel for ongoing witness.¹⁶ There is nothing magical about these numbers; they are simply a way to think about reaching four billion people with the gospel.

The Findings

The findings in this study are visually displayed in the corresponding PowerPoint presentation. This presentation can be downloaded for free from the Articles section of www.NorthAmericanMissions.org.

STATE	TOTAL EVANGELICAL PERCENTAGE	EVANGELICAL CHURCH TO POPULATION RATIO
Connecticut	2%	1:7403
Massachusetts	2%	1:8078
New Hampshire	2%	1:6088
New Jersey	2%	1:7540
Rhode Island	2%	1:8454
Utah	2%	1:8589
Vermont	2%	1:4349
Maine	3%	1:3783
New York	3%	1:6607
Delaware	5%	1:3628
Nevada	5%	1:5124
Pennsylvania	6%	1:3014
California	7%	1:3760
Hawaii	8%	1:2898
Maryland	8%	1:3655
Idaho	9%	1:2193

Table 1. States with an Evangelical Percentage Less than 10%

There were sixteen states with evangelical percentages lower than 10% of their total populations. Aside from Utah, Nevada, Idaho, California, Hawaii, and Maryland (being Mid-Atlantic) the rest were located in the Northeastern United States.

¹⁶It should be noted that Joshua Project lists the “Progress Stage” as “Established” when the evangelical number is greater than 2% but less than or equal to 10% and “Significant” when the evangelical number is greater than 10% Evangelical, but less than, equal to, or greater than 15% Evangelical. See <http://www.joshuaproject.net/global-progress-scale.php>; Accessed 12/4/2009.

U. S. Metro Area	Total Evng. Percentage	Evng. Chu. to Pop. Ratio
Provo-Orem, Utah	0.6%	1:18,427
Pittsfield, Massachusetts	1.5%	1:9640
Barnstable-Yarmouth, Massachusetts	1.5%	1:8889
Providence-Warwick-Pawtucket, Rhode Island	1.7%	1:8230
Springfield, Massachusetts	1.9%	1:9814
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-CT-PA	2.3%	1:8517
Salt Lake City-Ogden, Utah	2.3%	1:9808
Boston-Worcester-Lawrence-Lowell-Brockton, Massachusetts	2.5%	1:7786
New London-Norwich, Connecticut	2.5%	1:6477
Hartford, Connecticut	2.7%	1:7557
Albany-Schenectady-Troy, New York	2.7%	1:5837
Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, Pennsylvania	2.8%	1:6577
Burlington, Vermont	2.9%	1:6630
Dubuque, Iowa	3.1%	1:6857
Glens Falls, New York	3.1%	1:4288
Scranton-Wilkes-Barre-Hazleton, Pennsylvania	3.1%	1:4733
Utica-Rome, New York	3.4%	1:4837
Philadelphia-Wilmington-Atlantic City, PA-NJ-DE	3.6%	1:5704
Syracuse, New York	3.7%	1:5049
Bangor, Maine	3.8%	1:3535
Portland, Maine	3.8%	1:4580
Laredo, Texas	3.9%	1:4598
Reading, Pennsylvania	4%	1:4018
Rochester, New York	4.1%	1:5084
Binghamton, New York	4.4%	1:3504
Reno, Nevada	4.6%	1:4715
Salinas, California	4.7%	1:3686
Lewiston-Auburn, Maine	5%	1:4152
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	5%	1:3978

Table 2. U. S. Metro Areas of 5% or Less Evangelical

There are at least twenty-nine U. S. metro areas with an evangelical population less than or equal to 5%. The Provo-Orem, Utah area is by far the least evangelical metro area in the country. Evangelicals comprise 0.6% of the 368,536 people living there. There are 20 evangelical churches in the area, making the church to population ration 1:18,427. The runner-up category is a tie between two Massachusetts areas. Pittsfield and Barnstable-Yarmouth, Massachusetts are only 1.5% Evangelical. The church to population ratio in Pittsfield is 1:9640, and for Barnstable-Yarmouth, 1:8889.

METRO AREA	PROVINCE	EVANGELICAL CHURCH TO POPULATION RATIO
Quebec City	Quebec	1:23,331
Saguenay	Quebec	1:21,733
Trois-Rivieres	Quebec	1:9508
Montreal	Quebec	1:8688
Sherbrooke	Quebec	1:8668
St. John's	Newfoundland	1:6718
Ottawa-Gatineau	Ontario	1:6129
Oshawa	Ontario	1:5381
Toronto	Ontario	1:5229
Great Sudbury	Ontario	1:4764
Calgary	Alberta	1:3818
Windsor	Ontario	1:3773
Victoria	British Columbia	1:3674
Hamilton	Ontario	1:3654
Kingston	Ontario	1:3604
Halifax	Nova Scotia	1:3539
Edmonton	Alberta	1:3420
London	Ontario	1:3351
Vancouver	British Columbia	1:3269
Thunder Bay	Ontario	1:3214
Winnipeg	Manitoba	1:3169
Regina	Saskatchewan	1:3148
St. Catherine's-Niagara	Ontario	1:2390
Saskatoon	Saskatchewan	1:2331
St. John	New Brunswick	1:2099

Table 3. Selected Canadian Metro Areas Where the Evangelical Church to Population Ratio is Greater than 1:2000

The overall percentage of Evangelicals in Canada is much smaller than that found in the U. S.. Table 3 shows the church to population ratios in metro areas across the country. The five greatest ratios are found in Quebec, with Quebec City at 1:23,331, and Saguenay at 1:21,733 dwarfing the other cities. It should be noted that at the time of this



research, I did not have data on any of the Canadian Territories, or the overall evangelical percentages in each province or metro area.

Strategic Recommendations

After examining the data in the presentation, the following are several strategic recommendations that I wish to pass along to my evangelical brothers and sisters laboring to multiply churches throughout the U. S. and Canada.

The Kingdom Ethic by which we live also governs our missionary strategies. While the Spirit is free to work according to His will, as wise stewards in the Kingdom, we must make certain that our church multiplication endeavors do not generally occur by happenstance. Rather, we must be faithful with the opportunities our Lord has placed before us, in the contexts where we serve in the U. S. and Canada.

As Kingdom Citizens, wise stewardship requires us to not only understand where the neediest areas are located, but to strategize accordingly. Certain areas of the U. S. and Canada should be given a greater missionary priority than other areas.

Please understand, I am not saying that since Alabama has a 41% evangelical presence and one evangelical church per 717 people, that churches should not be planted in Alabama. Rather, all of us must be more strategic when it comes to missionary activity in our communities. *Whether we live and minister in a high evangelical area of Mississippi or a low evangelical area of Quebec, the Kingdom Ethic demands that we be wise stewards and intentionally strategic in church multiplication labors in our areas.* However, individuals across churches and parachurch organizations responsible for developing strategies on a state/provincial, regional, national, or continental level must give a higher priority to the areas with the greatest need.

As I mentioned earlier in this document, strategizing based on need alone is not sufficient. Need is important, and the easiest data to discover, but we must begin to ask questions about receptivity to the gospel. In our contexts, beginning with the neediest areas, who are the most receptive people groups, population segments, subcultures, etc. to the gospel? Among what people is the Spirit clearly working to create openness to the gospel? Rather than simply being haphazard with our opportunities and resources, we must be wise stewards and ask, "Who in this city/province/county is asking the Philippian Jailer Question: 'What must I do to be saved?'" (Acts 16:30). Such an approach does not lead us to avoid sowing the gospel broadly; but rather, as we go sharing this good news, we look to see where the Spirit is working and concentrate our efforts there. However, our lack of data must not lead us to refrain from missionary activity until such data becomes available.



As a place to begin, I am suggesting that we should prayerfully consider setting as goals 1 evangelical church for every 1000 people in urban areas and 1 evangelical church for every 500 people in rural areas.

Disclaimer/Permission

While I promise that we used real calculators with good batteries when calculating the statistics for the PowerPoint slides, and the fact that we double-checked our work at times, errors occur, especially when crunching so many numbers and the fact that my unsteady hand could have easily punched the wrong button due to four shots of espresso that day. Therefore, if you find problems with the research and numbers, please contact me, so I may make the necessary corrections. Please, just do not yell at me; I cry easily. ☺

While the content of this report and PowerPoint presentation is copyrighted material, it is being given away to you with the expectation that you will pass this information along as well for Kingdom use. I have given credit where credit is due; I only ask that you give credit where credit is due. As long as you are using the information for Kingdom endeavors without charge to others, please do not feel obligated to contact me or the Church Planting Center for permission to use or disseminate the information we have provided. It would be great, if you would send me an email (jpayne@sbts.edu) to simply say "we're using it."

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