



Seeking Movements a



Among Frontier Peoples

Needed: A Strategy for the 300 Largest Frontier People Groups

By **R. W. LEWIS**

R. W. Lewis has lived among and worked on behalf of frontier people groups for over 40 years.

In July 2023, some 70 mission leaders from multiple organizations (plus another 40 online) met at the Telos Center in Washington state to discern God's plans for starting movements to Christ within frontier people groups (FPGs), beginning with the nearly 300 FPGs that are larger than 1 million people. These largest groups, collectively 1.6 billion in population, represent 20% of humanity and 80% of the total population in FPGs. This article is a condensation of R. W. Lewis' kick-off talk for the consultation.

God's Telos: All the Families

God has promised to bless all the families and peoples of the earth. Jesus said that his gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all peoples, and then the end, the *telos*, will come. Telos Fellowship (telosfellowship.org) was named after this verse. *Telos* not only means the end; it points to the plan, fruition, or accomplishment of all things. After listing all the families on the earth, God

promised Abraham, "through you (and your family), all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

Today, some people call the meaning of this covenant into question, saying that there is too much emphasis on the people groups and family lines. When the covenant is repeated throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, with every *ethne* before the throne in Revelation, God did not say all the countries, cities, or places. He said all the families (i.e., every language, tribe, and *ethne*/nation).

Family-based people groups matter to God. After 400 years in Egypt and in the wilderness years that follow, God never says, "You are all going to be Israelites now. No one is going to be from this tribe or that tribe anymore." No, God has them camp by family lines and later gave them land based on family heritage. Throughout the Bible, God strengthens and blesses the world's families.

If we forget what God promises, we overlook many families and peoples. In this way, we undermine rather than bless families. We hurt families when we encourage people coming to Christ to leave their families and communities, to join new Christian communities rather than bless their own people. As one Hindu background believer wrote, the offense is not the cross but the community.

A People Group Focus Sparked Great Progress of the Gospel

Great progress in spreading the gospel came simply by focusing on overlooked people groups. The first two eras of Protestant missions focused on geographic areas, such as coastal and inland areas. The third era, starting with Cameron Townsend and Wycliffe Bible Translators (1934), focused on overlooked people groups. This began when somebody asked Townsend, "Why can't God speak my language?"

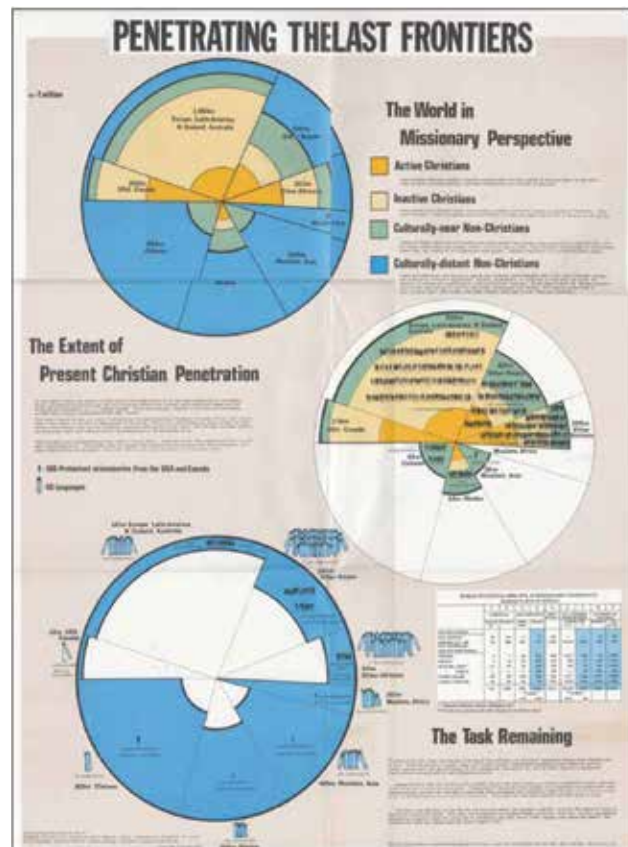
We need to realize we have just lived through the greatest expansion of Christ's kingdom in history!

In 1969, Ralph Winter wrote *The 25 Unbelievable Years (1945–1969)*, which highlighted an explosion of the gospel during that period. Since then, we've seen even more amazing things. In 1974, Winter gave a talk on the state of world evangelization at the Lausanne

International Congress on World Evangelization. Most mission agencies at that time thought that the mission task was nearly complete. They even had “missionary go home” seminars and campaigns.

Winter was shocked that the data in 1974 showed that 60% of the world’s population was in people groups that still had no indigenous church. How could all these agencies be wrong?

The truth is this: Many churches and missionaries could see only what was around them, and everywhere they looked, there were churches and seminaries. Today, over 80% of Christians live in countries that are at least 50% Christian, according to Todd Johnson with the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. Christians looked around and concluded, “The job is done!” Well, the job wasn’t done. So Winter set out to prove it, because almost nobody believed him.



Numbers on a page mean nothing. So, Winter drew a pie chart (above), taking an example from Florence Nightingale, to depict the world in geographic sections. Each section shows the percentage of active Christians,

inactive Christians, non-believers in the same people groups as the Christians, and non-believers in distinct people groups other than the Christians.

When people saw this pie chart, they suddenly started to realize, “It’s true. Our mission agency isn’t in those areas!” But Winter’s own mission agency, the Presbyterian Church, did not accept his findings. The number of their US missionaries working globally decreased from over 2,000 in 1959 to less than 100 in the 1980s. Other agencies also refused to accept the data or thought Global South churches should reach the remaining 60% of humanity, and so curtailed their own programs.

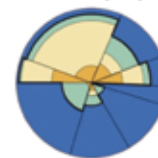
Focusing on Unreached People Groups Brought Even Greater Progress

In 1980, 4.3 billion people inhabited the world. Sixty percent of the world’s population lived in frontier people groups. FPGs are the least reached of all unreached people groups (UPGs) with Christian populations less than 0.1% and no known movements to Jesus. As of 2023, the world has 8 billion people, but only 25% of them still live in FPGs—a decrease from 60% to just 25%. That’s incredible progress!

The Greatest Progress of the Gospel in history

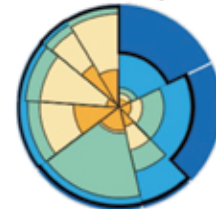
The World’s population:

1980
4.3 Billion people



60% of the World’s Population lived in Frontier People Groups

2023
8 Billion People



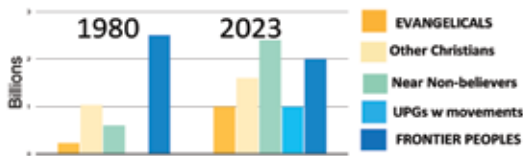
Only 25% of the world’s population lives in Frontier People Groups.

By identifying which UPGs now have self-sustaining movements to Christ, we can see how much progress was made. More importantly, by separating UPGs with no known movements to Christ, we can reveal the remaining frontier mission task—going to frontier people groups. The light blue color shows the UPGs that have movements and the dark blue color shows FPGs.

FPGs are a subset of UPGs that have no progress of the gospel. They have no indigenous churches, no known movements to Christ, nor believing communities with whom to partner. Pioneering is necessary since partnership is not possible. They are the least reached of the unreached peoples. FPGs have been unresponsive to gospel witnesses for many centuries and/or had few or no witnesses going to them. In most cases, FPGs are both resistant and neglected. If they have heard of Jesus, they consider him to be only a god of the Christians—a foreign god, not their god. 97% of the FPGs are Muslim or Hindu.

In 1980 there was 1 evangelical for every 10 people in a Frontier People Group.

Today there is 1 evangelical for every 2 people in a Frontier People Group.



SINCE 1980, EVANGELICALS have increased by 400% (250 M to 1 B) But the population of FRONTIER PEOPLE GROUPS has decreased by 20% (from 2.5 B to 2 B).

Where are these remaining Frontier People Groups?

Notice the bar chart. Since 1980, evangelicals have increased by 400% from 250 million to 1 billion people. At the same time, the population of FPGs has decreased by 20% (from 2.5 billion to only 2 billion). Proportionately, in 1980, there was one evangelical for every 10 people in an FPG. Now, there is one evangelical for every two people in an FPG.

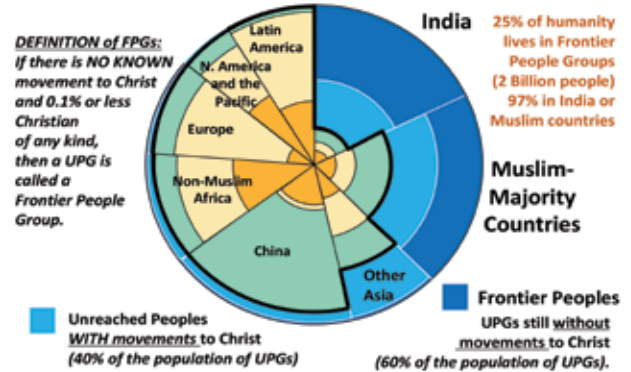
A group is removed from the FPG list when a confirmed indigenous movement of Jesus emerges among them. They remain a UPG until they reach the 2% evangelical threshold, meaning two out of every 100 people in the group are evangelicals. That's a lot of Christians! As a result, people groups will stay unreached for quite a long time after they already have movements to Christ within them.

Strategic Considerations to Reach frontier people groups

The pie chart represents the world today. Committed believers in Christ are shown in dark yellow. Nominal

Christians are presented in light yellow. Almost half of the world's non-believers live in reached people groups (displayed in green). These "reached groups" also have 97% of the mission force! *These non-believers can easily be reached by those around them.*

Location of the Frontier People Groups (2023):

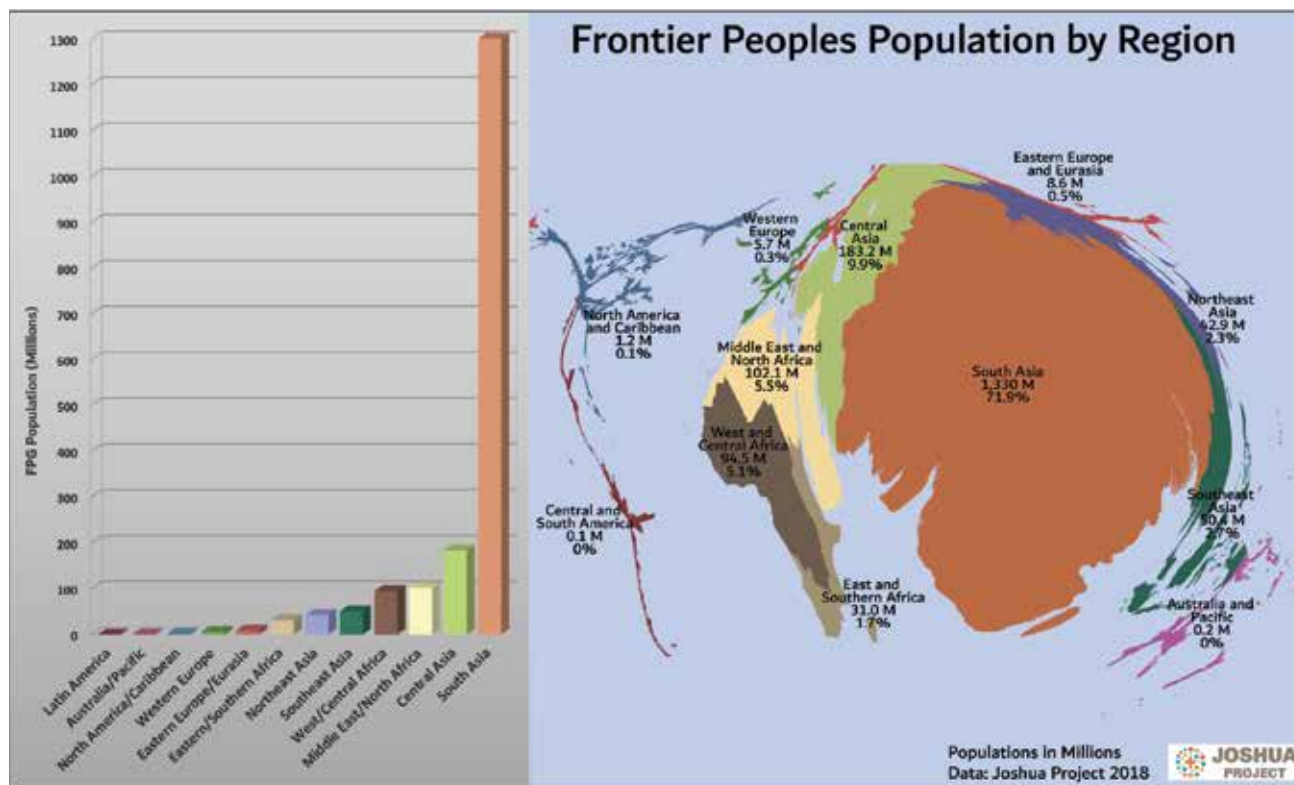


By contrast, the other half of non-believers live in UPGs, having less than 2% evangelicals but only 3% of the world's mission force. However, praise God because nearly 40% of these UPGs now have movements to Christ within them (shown in light blue). This means that 20% of all the world's non-believers live in these UPGs *with* movements.

The other 60% of the UPGs have no known movements to Christ and are called the frontier people groups (shown in dark blue). 30% of all the non-believers live in the FPGs.

Amazing Facts about FPGs

- 97% of the FPGs (by population) live in either India or Muslim-majority countries (shown in dark blue), including Pakistan and Bangladesh. 70% of FPGs are in South Asia; 50% are in India alone.
- Over half of FPGs are Muslim groups. That's 1 billion people. Nearly half are Hindu groups. Less than 3 percent of them are Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, ethnic tribal groups, etc.
- Almost half of the entire population of the FPGs are in just the 31–35 largest FPGs (each over 10 million in size). A prayer guide for these groups is available at Go31.org and a prayer app at blessfrontierpeoples.org. Also, see joshuaproject.net/frontier.



- 80% of the population of all FPGs are in the fewer-than-300 groups with over a million people. These groups are mapped and sorted by country, language, religion, etc. at joshuaproject.net/frontier/interactive. You can click on a circle or name to see a group's complete profile and sort lists by multiple categories (FPG Muslim groups in India that speak Tamil, etc.).

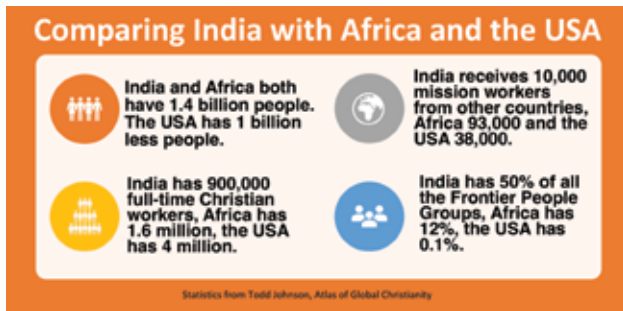
Why Does India Have Half of the Remaining FPGs?

India has sometimes been called the “graveyard of missionaries.” Still, India has consistently received a tiny fraction of the outreach that other countries receive. Why? Because people view it as a country when, in fact, it's more like a continent, with thousands of distinct language groups and multiple states larger than most countries. In India, barely 2–3% of the population is Christian, and those Christians tend to be in specific areas, people groups, and languages.

Compare India with Africa and the USA:

- 1) India has as many people as the entire continent of Africa (1.4 billion) and over 1 billion more people than the United States.
- 2) India receives 10,000 missionaries from other countries. Africa receives 93,000 mission workers! And with 1 billion fewer people, the United States receives 38,000 mission workers. In fact, the United States receives more foreign missionaries than any single country in the world!
- 3) India has 50% of all FPGs. Africa has 12%, mostly in the north. The United States has 0.1% of FPGs.
- 4) India has 900,000 full-time Christian workers. That seems a lot. But Africa has twice as many (1.68 million) and the United States has more than four times as many: 4 million full-time Christian workers (with one billion fewer people).
- 5) India is unique among the world's countries in that most of its people groups are not localized but are spread throughout the country, defined by their roles or jobs in society. Traditionally, outcastes (Dalits) do the dirty jobs. Other Backward Castes do the manual labor (600 million), and the upper castes do business, military, and non-manual labor. Brahmins have priestly and leadership roles.
- 6) Unfortunately, Christianity is associated with the outcastes of Indian society, making Christians another Dalit caste in others' eyes. Virtually all

mission workers sent to India, and national Indian missionaries as well, work with outcaste groups that are at least partially Christian already.



Strategy Proposal: Focus on the 300 Largest FPGs

What will happen by focusing on starting self-propagating indigenous movements to Christ in the largest 300 FPGs (80% of the FPG population)? We'll see a significant trickle-down effect as they influence the smaller groups associated with them. The Yadavs, for example, are a group of 40 million people, but eight other Yadav groups are larger than a million. This pattern is true throughout the whole list of FPGs. Each large FPG has related smaller groups.

Eight Proposed Keys to Breakthrough in FPGs

The 2023 consultation proposed eight things necessary for breakthroughs in these FPGs, which increasingly require new means of access and sustainability for local or global workers. They include:

- 1) prayer by the global prayer networks and adoptions for the 300 largest FPGs
- 2) the use of media technology and the internet
- 3) mobilization of local and global laborers

- 4) disciple making movement methodology and existing movement leaders crossing cultures
- 5) blessing the families and the communities
- 6) entrepreneurship
- 7) blessing the Jesus movements God is raising up within resistant communities that are avoiding association with Christendom
- 8) using diaspora communities as bridges back to the mega-sized FPGs

The consultation hoped that bringing leaders together from each of these key areas would develop synergy, propelling focus on the 300 largest FPGs. The consultation participants were asked to consider what new structures or training might be needed to catalyze breakthroughs in these large groups. Task forces on prayer, movements, technology, and structures were formed. These topics are highlighted in other articles in this issue of *Mission Frontiers*.

Conclusion

We are closer than ever before to taking the good news to all the peoples of the earth. However, we face new challenges as the world rapidly changes due to the internet and increasing political surveillance and control. A great blessing today is that the global Church, having spread to over half of the world, is excited to participate in blessing the world's families, bringing the last people groups to God's feast.

We are like Jonathan and his armor-bearer, simply going up to see what God might do. We're not many. We're not great. We're not smart, but God will help us. And so, we might as well go up and see what God will do. 🏰

