

The Graying (and Browning) of Frontier Missiology

By **WARRICK FARAH**

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As I write this, I'm sitting on a plane, reflecting on a conference I just attended, which was geared towards engaging unreached and unengaged Muslim people groups. Not my first conference on this important topic. Twenty years ago, I was the youngest in the room. But now, as a middle-aged, overweight man on Rogaine, I'm *still* one of the youngest in the room.

My balding head even has some gray hair now. My wonderful colleagues, who are committed to reaching the unreached, are also all graying. These observations aren't merely about hair color. They reflect what we might call the graying of frontier missiology.¹

Even the majority world unreached peoples advocates in the room are older and grayer. It is indeed thrilling to see so many Muslim background believers (MBBs) in these conversations as well. They will one day outnumber Westerners. The room is not just getting grayer; it is also getting browner, with fewer White people. So, our understanding of the unreached peoples concept needs both intergenerational *and* intercultural analysis.

Anomalies in the Frontier Missiology Discourse

I am still filled with a passion to “reach the unreached.” The telos of the *motus Dei* (Latin for “movement of God”) extends to all peoples. The great I AM is no mere tribal or national deity. The basis for our passion to see Jesus worshiped by ALL *ethne* is biblically clear

and compelling. It should break our collective heart to see this vision minimized in some corners of mission.

But today, where are the younger generations of believers in the unreached people group (UPG) rooms and conversations? Among Western evangelicals, in another 20 years, will there be *any* groups to embrace and champion the concept of unreached peoples? There are exceptions, of course, but these tend to prove the rule.

I'm not attempting to identify all the potential reasons for the apparent lack of buy-in from younger Western Christians. (Theological drift is part of the reason, but that is for another article.) I will also try not to be reductionistic. However, let me offer a couple thoughts.

In the West, Gen Z and Millennials are the most stressed out and anxious generation alive today. They have grown up in a fast-paced digital era characterized by constant connectivity and exposure to social media. This constant online presence can contribute to feelings of comparison, self-doubt,

¹ I believe I first heard this phrase from Brad Gill, editor of *IJFM*.



and FOMO (“fear of missing out”). They also have lived through several significant traumatic global events at key periods in their lives. While Gen X and Boomers want to thrive, Gen Z just wants to survive.

In light of this, let’s look at some of the language employed in frontier missiology:

Finishing the Task | Reaching the Unreached
| Changing the World | Fulfilling the Great
Commission | Saving People from Hell | Mobilizing
for the Frontlines | In the Trenches of Ministry |
Behind Enemy Lines | Storming the Gates of Hell

These slogans appeal to some generations. They provide a sense of responsible, manageable urgency for Boomers and Gen Xers. But for Millennials and Gen Z, the same urgency might simply add to their stress and anxiety. For Gen Z to be told that they need to rescue a mission in decline or to imply that they are responsible for the status of world evangelization seems counterproductive.²

Additionally, we might benefit from more holistic and self-critical perspectives on mission. We have scales for the progress of evangelization, but we might also include scales for the progress of transformation. For example, if we say that Arab Muslims are the least reached and least engaged people cluster in the world, then we might say that American evangelicals are the least-transformed people cluster in the world. Many younger American Christians and Majority World leaders are absolutely disillusioned by the moral and political compromise they see in the American church. To give our lives for the unreached while ignoring the problems “at home” looks like escapism and hypocrisy.

² Daniel Yang, “Beyond Growth and Decline,” *Outreachmagazine.Com* (blog), 2023, outreachmagazine.com/features/73902-beyond-growth-and-decline.html.

Intergenerational and Intercultural Re-posturing

So, the UPG discourse needs to re-theologize some of our posturing: not the concept but the language or framework we use to discuss it. This may help not only with mobilization but even with clarifying the UPG concept itself. Leslie Newbiggin was prescient in this regard:

I find it strange that conferences about mission and evangelism are often pervaded... by a kind of anxiety and guilt—as though it were a program that we have a responsibility to carry out and about which we’ve not been very successful. Isn’t it remarkable that according to the New Testament the whole thing begins with an enormous explosion of joy? The disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple praising God! It seems to me, the resurrection of Jesus was a kind of nuclear explosion which sent out a radioactive cloud, not lethal, but life-giving, and the mission of the church is simply the continuing communication of that joy—joy in the Lord.³

Instead of an urgency of responsibility, perhaps we need an urgency of joy and love. Or instead of urgency, we can speak of an apostolic calmness or a non-anxious resolve.

Bible Project’s visual commentary on Genesis 1 points out that in contrast to the Babylonian and Egyptian creation myths, we have an all-powerful Royal Artist creating the cosmos—not from violence, but in order and peace and harmony.⁴ This kind of language matches the narrative aspirations of both Gen Z and the cultural values of much of Asia and Africa.

And through faith in Christ, the “new creation” is breaking into the present, including the “glory and honor of the nations” (Rev 21:26 NIV). Through our love and unity, the world will know (John 13:35). Jesus says, “I am making everything new” (Rev 21:5). He is healing “the nations” (Rev 22:2).

³ Leslie Newbiggin, *Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003), 121.

⁴ Jon Collins and Tim Mackie, “Understand God’s Creation Story | Genesis 1 Commentary Video,” Bible Project, 2020, bibleproject.com/explore/video/genesis-1/.

In light of this, we might brainstorm a few shifts that need to take place in our framework. I am not married to these proposals; they are simply suggestions hoping that others may offer improvements!

1. *From Closure Missiology to Holistic Disciple Making.* In the NT, the future coming of King Jesus inspires ethical considerations like integrity and justice, not simply a warning to complete our missional requirements. The Great Commission was a brilliant metaphor in its day, probably originating in the 1600s and popularized by Hudson Taylor two centuries later. But as Chris Wright summarizes, “The Great Commission is an expanding and self-replicating task, not a ticking clock for the end times.”⁵
2. *From Pathology to Inclusivity.* Jay Matenga remarks that mission is often framed as a people living in a state of pathology: they are broken, and we have the solution.⁶ Unconsciously, this implies a superior/inferior dynamic between “us” and “them.” Instead, a giftive⁷ mission metaphor creates hospitable space for people to explore being “grafted in” (Rom 11:25) to the covenantal people of God in Christ. In this way, planting people-specific churches is not seen as exclusive but inclusive in nature.
3. *From Missional to Movemental.* The missional conversation has transpired over the past 25 years in North America when the church has simultaneously lost 40 million members. Perhaps the best form of a missional church is a movemental church that multiplies in unexpected places.⁸
4. *From Unreached to Emerging.* The term “emerging” may be a more positive and dynamic term compared to “unreached.” It suggests that

5 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 35.

6 “The Wellbeing Imperative,” *Jay's World* (blog), 2023, jaymatenga.com/wellbeing-imperative/.

7 Frances S. Adeney and Terry Muck, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 328.

8 Wes Watkins, “From Missio Dei to Motus Dei: The Recovery of Movement,” *Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS)* (blog), 2024, abtslebanon.org/2024/05/23/from-missio-dei-to-motus-dei-the-recovery-of-movement.

these peoples are in the process of God's sovereign activity rather than being static and neglected. It also implies potential and progress, which may equip others for more hopeful and proactive approaches to catalyzing movements.

Our Collective Challenge

At the moment of writing this, my 19-year-old son is in North Africa on a short-term trip. The ideas in this short article were field-tested with him and his peers as a way to retool our framework for mission to peoples who have precious few believers and local churches. By using biblical concepts that focus on hospitality, joy, healing, life, justice, and equipping, it might be possible to appeal to the aspirations and values of Millennials, Gen Z, and Majority World MBBs while providing a positive and less stressful framework for the *motus Dei*, which is to redeem the nations back to Jesus. In him, a sacrificial adventure of joy awaits. ❏

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