



Reviewing Our Concepts and Definitions

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The quiet, strong commitment of the “Table 71” participants will undoubtedly push forward the effort of the Church to reach every unreached people group. Of course, any broad effort needs clarity of vision to maintain its focus. Perhaps then, a brief look at some of the concepts and definitions will help us see the context of these and other renewed efforts to reach every people. Does “Table 71” represent a change of direction for the unreached peoples movement? To what degree does “Table 71” help to clarify efforts at outreach?

The core of Ralph Winter’s presentation at Lausanne 1974 was the idea that even if the Church all over the globe were to reach out in evangelism as far as it could, there would still be thousands of people groups without a viable church within their culture. Why? Cultural difference.

That presentation, called “Cross-Cultural Evangelism: the Highest Priority,” opened the eyes of mission leaders to the fact that much mission work was becoming preoccupied with the growing church around them. Winter more than once noted that many missions efforts (and even missions training) looked more like we were trying to “go ye into the world and meddle with the national churches” instead of making sure there are disciple-makers in every biblically-defined nation on earth.

The really amazing thing is that this is still true today. Even with the amazing Church growth since 1974, we still have gaps in large blocs such as the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist worlds. The complexities of the Tribal world and issues like nomadism within all of these spheres highlight the stark reality that we still have significant barriers to cross.

So what is needed? Beyond factors like prayer, faith, and Pauline determination, there is the factor of *strategy*. Like the other factors, strategy is crucial. Unlike the others, without strategy, we can end up setting or even reaching our goals, only to find out they were only part of the picture at best—like leaning your ladder up to a tall building and, when you get to the top, finding out it is leaning on the wrong building.

The ideas reflected in Ralph Winter’s 1974 presentation and subsequent definitions included strategic thinking. A group of mission leaders and strategists met in 1982 and grappled with these issues in depth. They discussed both when a people is a people, when that people is unreached, and what stages will be needed to reach each people—step-by-step.

First, this group indicated its belief that a people group (distinguished from a political nation-state) is key to the biblical method of spreading the message of God’s Kingdom. A **people group** was defined as:

A significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combinations of these.

For evangelistic purposes the idea of people group was further refined to:

The largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church-planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.

An **unreached people group** was defined as:

A people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people group without requiring outside (cross-cultural) assistance.

Another angle from which this can be viewed is that a people group is considered “reached” if it has a viable, indigenous, self-reproducing church movement in its midst. Such a people group has strong churches pastored by their own people using their own language, and these churches are actively evangelizing their own people and planting daughter churches.

Seems clear enough. But the application of such definitions requires that in each context someone on the field knows both the cultural boundaries of the people as well as enough of the situation to know if the church is “owned” by the people themselves. These insights can’t be discerned by those at a distance working with lists and databases alone.

Though the 1982 definitions were disseminated widely, the use of the terms is not (and cannot be) policed. For example, many people have used “unreached” to refer to friends and neighbors near them (and similar to them culturally), when they really mean “unevangelized” or “unsaved.” The AD2000 Movement used additional criteria to refine their mobilization efforts, but they were not changing the 1982 definitions so much as



clarifying how a group got on (or off) their list of unreached peoples. (They emphasized groups less than 2% Evangelical or with less than 5% Christian adherents.)

To attempt to bring additional clarity, Ralph Winter began to emphasize a concept and a word to describe it: “unimax.” Some didn’t like it because it wasn’t a known word, but to me that was part of the beauty: it’s harder to “mess up” an idea if you have to define it every time you use it. So what is this idea?

A **unimax people** is the maximum-sized group sufficiently unified to be the target of a single people movement to Christ. (“Unified” refers to the fact that there are no significant barriers of either understanding or acceptance to stop the spread of the gospel).

Beyond the basic definitions for peoples and unreached peoples, the 1982 huddle also defined the stages for reaching a people. These originally included:

Stage 1 Reported: The people group is reported to be unreached.

Stage 2 Verified: A reliable source verifies that the group meets the qualifications of a people group and that they are unreached.

Stage 3 Evaluated: Research and evaluation is done on the people so that Christians outside the group can decide to reach them.

Stage 4 Selected: A mission agency capable of reaching the group has made the commitment to do so.

Stage 5 Adopted: One, or several, churches or fellowship groups has made the establishment of a strong church among the unreached people group their goal. They agree to support the work with prayers and finances. The mission agency they are partnering with has the needed resources and a team ready (or soon to be ready) to begin the work.

Stage 6 Engaged: The work has begun, and cross-cultural workers are “on site” with the goal of establishing a “viable, indigenous church-planting movement.”

Stage 7 Reached: A strong, indigenous church-planting movement has been established that is of sufficient size and strength to evangelize the rest of the group with no (or very little) outside help.

Later, Stage 2 was merged into Stage 1, and Stage 3 was merged into Stage 4. This was done, in part, because the volume of information available since 1982 enables more to be known about the people sooner.

As mentioned above, this whole process needs solid prayer to back it. That is why there has been a prayer campaign called Adopt-A-People. The goal is to have serious, committed prayer by thousands of individuals and churches all over the world for every people to be reached. “Adoption” can mean more than prayer commitment for some churches, but it cannot mean less.

But Adopt-A-People is not a field strategy; it is not for mission agencies or denominational sending structures to “adopt.” Agencies “select” peoples to which they believe God

is leading them to send missionaries. Then churches connect with them to “adopt” these peoples.

With this historical background in view, it seems helpful for the “Table 71” network (and Dawn) to further clarify what is meant when we say a group is “reached.” Compiling lists of peoples never ends. But it would seem that the problem of getting work started among many of these peoples is much bigger than the question of when they are “reached” and can be removed from a checklist.

It also seems to me that the four steps anticipated in the “Table 71” process are actually very similar to the seven stages agreed upon in 1982:

Step 1 (identified Christian workers and networks target the group) seems parallel with stage 4 above.

Step 2 (churches are being planted) is an explicit statement of results which the “Engaged” Stage 6 above has as a goal, and that the “Reached” Stage 7 above explains more fully.

Step 3 (mobilization of indigenous church planters and workers) is a further fleshing out of the Reached Stage 7 in the 1982 definitions.

Step 4 (self-sustaining, flourishing, reproducing church planting movement) restates much of what was in the original definitions and Stage 7 (Reached).

We should seek to bring “closure” to that part of the task that establishes a church movement in each culture. Matthew 24:14 (whatever the timing is eschatologically) speaks of the gospel being preached as a witness to all peoples. It seemed to those mission leaders in 1982 that the best witness is to establish the living, viable, expanding Body of Christ as a witness in every people. “Closure” does not mean that Christ will return when that task is done. I believe He could return right now. At the same time, let’s strive to see this witness spread to all peoples until He decides when that task—and whatever else He desires to accomplish through us—is done.

