

Who's Unreached in Asia?

Steve Spaulding

In many Asian countries, very large majority groups have very small churches while smaller or medium-sized minorities have a large Christian presence.

Who should be prioritized?

There is a lot of fun in exploding a set of “myths” about any one particular issue. I’ve enjoyed doing this with the whole gamut of “Asia.” Though not specifically Asian by race, I was born here and have lived in Asia for almost 20 years – the first 10 and the last 10 years – of my life.

One particular “myth” about Asia is something I’ve perceived about the whole “unreached people group” movement. I’ve been an enthusiastic party to the unreached people group movement, realizing it was akin to other attempts to move the vast majority of the resources of the mission-body of Christ away from the obvious and “taken care of” to the fringes and segments (which were and often still are completely away from the standard forms of communication) to the people who need to hear this transforming and saving message for the very first time.

However, even though I support the movement, there are a couple of “myths” or “common misperceptions” about unreached peoples that I would like to explode:

1. Often the “least reached” are not simply those without the gospel in their language, but a “majority people” who have a very small church among them and whose “reaching” has been left largely in their own hands to continue onward, as those concerned with the unreached continue to work among ever smaller groups of like qualifications.
2. The discipling of “the nations” is not a matter of simply “giving them a hearing for the gospel” or even of mass planting the church among them so “all who respond have a fair chance of growing in Christ” but rather every ebb and flow of their ethnic and national life is to be permeated with the life, the will and influence of Christ throughout.

To stick for the moment with argument #1, I’ve resided in Asia for the last 10 years and have realized, repeatedly, that in many segments of these societies, the least-reached population is the dominant people group. Now this may depend entirely upon how one looks at the idea of “unreached.”

For example, take the Japanese culture. This group of people is the dominant (virtually the only) cultural group in the Japanese islands, and has been “reached” almost every way you look at it. I was born there and know the difficulty my parents found in seeking to be successful at church planting among the Japanese after the Second World War. This was a land of special opportunity after such a massive defeat and a magnanimous victor in the U.S. But examine Japan today and realize that as mono-ethnic as the islands are, the “church” in Japan still constitutes less than one-half of one-percent of the population. So while the church has reached out to them with the Gospel, are they “reached”?

Almost the exact same story can be told of the Thai church in Thailand. There is a long history of much investment by missionaries from Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., British Isles and more recently Korea, the Philippines, etc. Still, today well under one percent of the population is part of the Church.

In many Asian societies there is a dominant people (dominating religion, politics, economy, education, and the overall demographic flow of the land). Examples include the Viet Kinh of Vietnam, the Japanese of Japan, the Bama/Bamar of Myanmar, the Thai (central and northeast) of Thailand, the Malays of Malaysia, the Bengali of Bangladesh, and the Khmer of Cambodia. Each of these cultures seems to be dominated by one majority

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In a country in Southeast Asia...

	% of national population	% of group in a church	Christian #s from a Tribal Standard	Missing Believers
Majority People Group	86.2%	35%	7,071,750	6,500,000
1st Large Minority	1%	0%	114,774	112,000
2nd Large Minority	1%	4%	86,237	36,371
Tribal Minorities (63 groups)	11%	61%	787,750	0

people, while most also have a significant minority “tribal” population which at some point in their past had a large turning to Christ. When numbers are compared, almost inadvertently, the minority church far outnumbers the majority one, certainly at least by percentages.

I remember going into Burma years ago and asking questions about a fairly carefully enumerated Baptist church (which goes all the way back to Judson’s work). They had well over 6,000 churches at the time, although much of the church was suffering from nominality. But the “Bamar” church, coming ethnically from the majority Bamar people, was under 100 congregations nationwide. Thus the dominant population, which represented almost 60% of the country, had church-wise well under 2% of the Baptist churches in the country. The other 98% were smaller minority peoples.

This is not an isolated case. I recently looked at the figures coming out of one Asian country. There, the majority population is about 86% of the entire country’s numbers. The table (above) gives the breakdown (in percentages) of the overall country situation: population and church sizes of four major groupings. The “Tribal Minorities” include about 63 individual “tribes” which have varying sizes of churches, from zero to well over 50% per group. Overall, though, their total numbers, as a group of about 63 tribes, is still a little over 11% of the entire nation.

Now, looking again at this list, I did some playing with the numbers at the end and decided, what if the percentages of “response to the gospel” were the

same among all four groups? I’m taking the tribal as the standard, as their numbers appear by far the highest. With no change among them, how would the others look? In real numbers, there would be an additional 112,000 among the one large minority, 36,000 among the other and 6.5 million among the majority population group.

That is a bit of a revelation in terms of who is, broadly speaking, “unreached.” Of course there are several dozen groups of “peoples” in the “tribes” of this country, carefully tracked by groups focused there, which have apparently no turning to Christ at this point. Eighteen groups have something of a “none here yet” category among the 60 plus groups. Their aggregate population, of the 18 groups, is 486,142, or about one-half of one percent of the nation’s total.

So here is my question: If a majority people has a church – albeit a small one – should we bypass it in our mission strategy as we seek to reach the one-half million who have had “no chance to hear anything in their heart language” of the Gospel? What kind of prioritization ought we really to put on a small group – most of them less than 10,000 in number, some under 1,000 – when a majority people (with a church of almost half a million believers) is still about half the percent Christian that tribal groups are (35% vs. 61%) and millions upon millions fewer by virtue of their real numbers?

I’ve done similar studies in many other Asian countries, and there are the same stories unfolding in these other places as well. Are others thinking in a similar vein? 



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