

People Groups

and the Nigeria Evangelical Missions Association

BY
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The Nigeria Evangelical Missions Association (NEMA) is the umbrella body of the Nigeria missions movement. It was established in 1982 to foster the work of world evangelization by providing a common platform through networking, empowering and mobilizing. At inception NEMA was comprised of six missions organizations but has since grown to a national network with 150 member agencies and 15,000 missionaries serving in 197 countries.

Beginnings

NEMA has always been keen about people group information. Six years after her establishment, the association published *The Final Harvest*, the proceedings of the International Consultation on Missions hosted in Jos, Nigeria August 11–15th, 1985. Included in that compendium is a list of identified unreached peoples in Nigeria. That marked a significant attempt at projecting the remaining task in Nigeria at that time, and it turned out to provide remarkable direction for missions engagement as well as focus for existing missions structures. A review of this research list in the first quarter of 2021 shows that 65% of the 72 identified unreached peoples in 1985 were no longer on the Nigerian UPG list. Moreover, 85% of the delisted UPGs have contributed to the sending force of the Nigerian missions movement.

Journeying through AD 2020 and Beyond

Thereafter, NEMA gave even more prominence to mobilizing the Nigerian Church to frontier missions. Coinciding with the countdown to AD 2000, another attempt was made at updating the people group list through the NEMA Searchlight Project, giving special attention to unreached and unengaged peoples. However, in 2005, the association's vision-casting took a new dimension in response to worldwide attention on the 10/40 Window. The leadership of NEMA took a

bold step by taking responsibility for 34 mostly Islamic countries in the left side of the Window, with the dream of meeting the Chinese missions effort coming on the Silk Road from the right side of the window.

This initiative became known as Vision 5015 – mobilizing 50,000 partners from the Nigerian Church and training, sending and supporting 15,000 workers to these 34 countries. At the end of the target year review conducted in 2020, 4,000 Nigerian missionaries had been placed in 31 of the 34 countries.

Delisting Nigeria from Unengaged Peoples List

As the Association pursued Vision 5015, a significant twist came into the process. The leadership became very concerned that Nigeria, with her evangelical strength of about 55 million and Christian populace of over 100 million, still had unengaged people groups. This led to another intensive effort of people group information in 2017. At the end of the exercise, seven unengaged peoples were discovered among 73 unreached peoples, all located in the north of Nigeria. This discovery culminated in another very strategic consultation, named “Go North”, in the same year. It would only take 11 months for Nigeria to be delisted from countries with unengaged groups, and four years later the number of unreached peoples was reduced to 45.

Impact and Lessons Learned

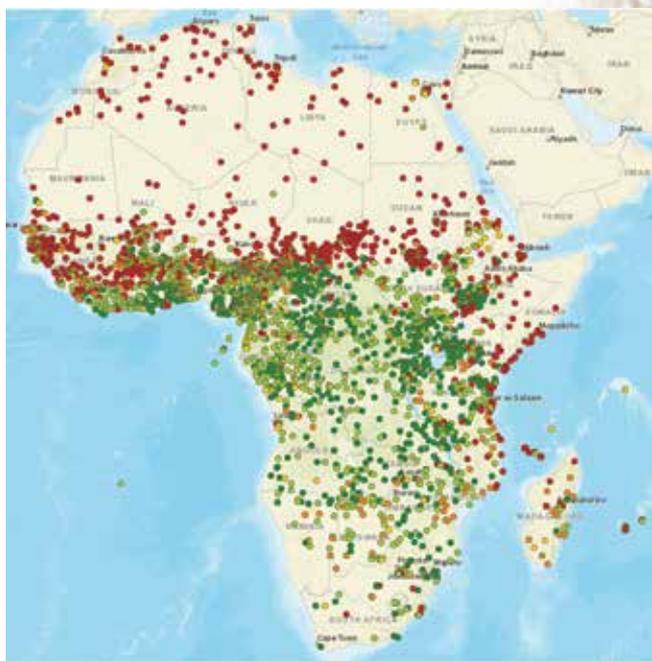
Mobilizing the Nigerian Church has been successful using people group information, for Nigerians (and other Africans) are sensitive to people group realities. A random sampling of 50 church leaders indicates that 87% were effectively mobilized for missions based on people group information available to them. Moreover, our mobilization drives have relied heavily on people group information for desirable responses.

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To date, there has been much dependence on Western efforts, and while these have been commendable, they have also revealed gaps and limitations. We have had to deal with issues of people group misrepresentation and insensitivity to cultural values and worldviews, leading to contention and occasional rejection of such data. The way forward will be a very healthy synergy among all research stakeholders, with deference given to the grassroots, national networks.

Moreover, in a polarized context such as ours, it may be helpful to present people group information from the perspective of the host peoples themselves. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to rely on secondary sources for information gathering; we need a strict policy to ensure that primary sources receive priority. Where possible, respected and confirmed leaders of such people groups should be contacted to secure endorsement of whatever information is being released to the public domain.

People group information is a means to an end; therefore, strategy delineation should be kept clearly in view as data are gathered. In the same vein, training in information-gathering and equipping the Church and missions organizations in utilizing data is vital. Just as cultural sensitivity and intelligence is emphasized in cross-cultural mobilization, training and engagement, the same is required for gathering and utilizing people group information. 



There are over 3,700 people groups in Africa.

