

# People Groups 50 Years Later?

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

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Dear Reader,

In 1974, when Ralph Winter introduced the concept of what would become known as “unreached peoples” (he used “hidden people”), it would have been impossible to gauge the impact this concept would have on mission thinking and strategy.

Almost 50 years later we can look back and see how profoundly a few simple insights can shape a whole movement.

Today most Christian mission organizations and most missiologists wrestle with Winter’s insight: that there are “peoples” in which there are churches planted and growing and multiplying in sufficient capacity to continue to reach more of “their own”, and there are peoples for which that is not the case.

That insight catalyzed shifts in where organizations sought to place personnel, whole movements to pray for unreached peoples, and also shifts in strategies for planting and multiplying churches.

The thinking began to dig into all sorts of themes and topics related to how to define what is meant by a “people group”. Most (not all) will accept readily that in the phrase “all the nations,” (e.g., in Matthew 28), Jesus was not referring to *countries*. Many would then add that Jesus meant the ethnicities and languages which constitute the peoples of the earth. Later, questions about other types of “identity” which shape how people determine “who are we” and “who are they” have added to the complexity of the understanding of reached and unreached in the way I phrased it above. Religion in all its varieties (whether religion is even the right word), social identities, the impact of location and thus migration and immigration, and so on, all raise questions about the boundaries of what we mean when we say “this is a people group”.

One of the eventual definitions posited by Ralph Winter was what he termed the “unimax” definition, namely, the largest group within which the Good News can flow as a Church Planting Movement before encountering significant barriers of acceptance or understanding. Thus, a Uni (“unified”) Max (“largest”) People Group is what he suggested be the strategic focus of frontier mission.

Simply stated: identify the barriers, innovate ways to overcome the barriers, and thus reach all unimax peoples.

Of course, the unimax definition is entirely based on the reality that those barriers will only be reliably discovered by a movement itself as it grows to the point where it reaches a “wall” that cannot be explained only by willful rejection of the good news, but which appears on close inspection to be due to barriers that are *not* intrinsic to the message itself.

This edition of *Mission Frontiers* is a product of, and a contribution to, a conversation about all these issues that stretch back to multiple writings and multiple intentional conferences and working groups.

May you benefit from these pages.

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