The Global Status of Evangelical Christianity

A Model for Assessing Priority People Groups

Scott Holste and Jim Haney

*Editor's note: the following article constitutes part 3 in our occasional series on "Which Peoples Need Priority Attention?" Dan Scribner (of Joshua Project) took the lead in part 1 (in our November-December 2004 issue), while Todd Johnson (of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity) took the baton for part 2 (in our January-February 2005 issue). As you read part 3, keep the preceding two in mind, and compare and contrast the recommendations offered. You can find parts 1 and 2 on the **Mission Frontiers** Website (under "Back Issues").*

On May 8, 1845 in Augusta, Georgia Southern Baptists formally constituted their vision:

We, the delegates from the Missionary Societies, Churches and other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination, in various parts of the United States met in Convention, in the city of Augusta, Georgia, for the purpose of carrying into effect, the benevolent institutions of our constituents by organizing a plan for soliciting; combining and directing the energies of the whole denomination in the sacred effort for the propagation of the Gospel.

It shall be the design of this Convention to promote foreign and domestic missions and other important objects connected with the Redeemer's Kingdom and to combine for this purpose such portions of that Baptist denomination of the United States as may desire a general organization for the Christian benevolence which shall fully respect the independence and people's rights of the churches.[1]

> **Our immediate goal is the engagement of all unreached people groups greater than 100,000 in population by the end of 2008.**

The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has a long history of evangelism and church planting around the world. Over the past 160 years we have witnessed significant increases in the numbers of churches mobilized, missionaries appointed, individuals baptized, believers discipled, indigenous churches established, and local leaders trained. With our many Baptist partners and other evangelicals, we have watched with amazement the advance of the Gospel across the nations.

The Ultimate Priority–All People Groups

Despite such progress, we are inexorably drawn to those people groups who have not yet had an adequate opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel. As IMB president Jerry Rankin has asked, "By what criteria should any people be deprived of hearing the gospel?"[2]

Consequently, a primary focus of the International Mission Board is the engagement of these remaining unreached people groups. Our immediate goal is the engagement of all unreached people groups (UPGs) greater than or equal to 100,000 in

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population by the end of 2008. This certainly does not mean that we intend to do this alone. We are encouraged that many others with the same heart are working to "finish the task" of engaging these groups as well as those with populations less than 100,000.

We certainly recognize, along with other writers in this series, that prioritization can be controversial.[3] Prioritization does imply emphasis and no one wants to see his or her people group de-emphasized. With other evangelicals around the world, however, we affirm that there are bountiful resources available for the *whole* harvest of the nations. We believe that God has provided all of the resources necessary to accomplish the mission He has given us. The challenge, however, is the mobilization and appropriate deployment of these resources to ensure that *all* of the world's people groups have adequate opportunities to hear and respond to the Gospel. To address that challenge, it is helpful to identify those people groups requiring additional attention. Thus, our motivation for prioritization is one of *focus*, not *limitation*. Our ultimate goal remains: *all people groups.*

Some Definitions

We also agree with writers in this series that our task is served well by research which examines God's activity among each people.[4] However, before describing our research model and data acquisition process, we should clarify the meaning of some key terms that reflect our understanding of and emphases regarding our task:

People group – "an *ethnolinguistic group* with a common self-identity that is shared by the various members. There are two parts to that word: *ethno* and *linguistic*. Language is a primary and dominant identifying factor of a people group. But there are other factors that determine or are associated with ethnicity. Usually there is a common self-name and a *sense of common identity* of individuals identified with the group. A *common history, customs, family and clan identities*, as well as marriage rules and practices, age-grades and other obligation covenants, and inheritance patterns and rules are some of the common ethnic factors defining or distinguishing a people."[5]

For strategic purposes, a people group is the largest group through which the gospel can flow without encountering significant barriers of understanding.

Unreached people group – a people group whose population is less than 2% evangelical Christian. This definition is consistent with that used in

evangelical circles for many years. [*Editors note: see the editorial commentary on page 5.*] It differs in that it does not exclude those groups with 5% or more "Christian adherents." Unfortunately, there are various "Christian" traditions that neither articulate nor embody a clear, uncompromised understanding of the Gospel. Consequently, it is difficult to argue that the majority of adherents within such traditions really understand the Gospel, really believe it, and are really committed to propagating it.

Evangelical Christian - a person who believes that Jesus Christ is the sole source of salvation through faith in Him, has personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the inspired Word of God as the only basis for faith and Christian living, and is committed to Biblical preaching and evangelism that brings others to faith in Jesus Christ.

Evangelical Church – a church characterized by these beliefs.

Engagement – a people group is engaged when an evangelical church-planting strategy is underway. While Christians are involved in many significant ministries (e.g. radio broadcasts, literature distribution, relief and development, evangelism, discipleship, etc.), we believe that the gathering of believers and establishing of churches is the key to establishing an effective, on-going, evangelizing, discipling, nurturing and ministering presence among any given people group.

The Global Status of Evangelical Christianity Model

Our model for describing the progress of the Gospel among the world's people groups is called the Global Status of Evangelical Christianity Model. It considers:

1. The extent to which a people group is evangelical Christian.

2. Accessibility to the Gospel.

3. Evangelical church planting–whether localized or widespread church planting has occurred within the past two years.

As noted in Table 1, levels 0 – 3 are *unreached*. All four of these levels describe people groups in which evangelical Christians comprise less than 2% of the population. Level 0 describes a relatively small subset of unreached people groups for which there are no evangelical resources available whatsoever. Level 1 people groups have some resources available, but

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have had no new church plants within the past two years. We call Levels 0 and 1 people groups, *Last Frontier people groups*. Levels 2 and 3 people groups are also unreached, but have had localized or widespread church plants within the past two years. As the percentage of evangelical Christians within a people group rises to 2% and greater, the status of

Table 1: Global Status of Evangelical Christianity Model

Status	Description
0	No evangelical Christians or churches. No access to major evangelical print, audio, visual, or human resources.
1	Less than 2% Evangelical. Some evangelical resources available, but no active church planting within the past 2 years.
2	Less than 2% Evangelical. Initial (localized) church planting within past 2 years.
3	Less than 2% Evangelical. Widespread church planting within the past 2 years.
4	Greater than or equal to 2% Evangelical
5	Greater than or equal to 5% Evangelical
6	Greater than or equal to 10% Evangelical
7	Unknown

Last Frontier brackets Status 0–1. *Unreached* brackets Status 2–3.

that people group progresses from levels 4 – 6.

Data Acquisition

For many years, IMB missionaries have reported on various missions-related activities through annual reports. Over time, these reports grew to include numerous reporting categories. In 2000, the International Mission Board chose to limit the number of reporting categories, focusing on those which measure the effectiveness and health of our church planting efforts. Today, these and other related measures are called *Church Planting Progress Indicators* (CPPI).

To effectively monitor the CPPI, a software pro-

gram was developed and distributed to the field. IMB missionaries, national Baptist partners, other evangelicals, and other field researchers are the sources of CPPI data. Each of the IMB's eleven administrative regions has a regional research coordinator who is responsible for maintaining updated information for all overseas entities (people groups, urban centers, and other strategic population segments). This information includes:

- Entity Name
- Languages (Coded to the Registry of Languages[6] provided by SIL)
- Religions
- Locations (Coded to the Registry of Geographic Divisions provided by GMI)
- Universal People Group Link (Coded to the Registry of Peoples provided by IMB)
- Engagement Status (Baptist, Others, Not Engaged)
- Population
- Evangelical Believers
- Evangelical Congregations
- Evangelical Church Planting Activity
- Evangelical Resources (both human and ministry resources)
- Team Progress
- Baptist Work Statistics
- Supplemental Information (Origin Information, Assimilation Status, Education and Orality)

A robust, real-time reporting solution enables personnel to enter research and then run reports to verify that the data in the system reflects the reality of their field. The IMB's Global Research Department runs these same reports and others to monitor and analyze field progress. Recognizing that data quality is a function of data usage, reports are regularly distributed to IMB leadership, strategists in other evangelical organizations, churches and the public. Such widespread dissemination and use of these reports generates considerable feedback and discussion, resulting in an increasingly accurate picture of field reality.

Monthly updates of many of these reports are available from *www.imb.org/globalresearch* and *www.peoplegroups.org*. Feedback is welcomed and needed. A link is included on *www.peoplegroups.org* for those with well-sourced information. When such information is received, we create an ad hoc research group that reviews the information and provides us with a working decision. The research group normally is comprised of the individual submitting the information, an IMB staff researcher, the regional research coordinator responsible for that region, and other

evangelical researchers or field personnel that might have relevant information.

The November 2005 Global Status of Evangelical Christianity Report

Because of publishing deadlines, the following information is excerpted from the November 2005 GSEC report. The current and complete monthly report package can be downloaded at *www.peoplegroups.org*.

Table 2: Global Status of Christianity—Status Level by People Groups and Population (November 2005)

Status Level	People Groups		Population	
0	141	1.3%	7,669,234	0.1%
1	5,769	51.2%	1,630,665,849	25.0%
2	536	4.8%	1,724,955,708	26.4%
3	28	0.2%	279,213,173	4.3%
4	924	8.2%	610,998,134	9.4%
5	1,138	10.1%	1,591,459,386	24.4%
6	1,850	16.4%	311,022,438	4.8%
7	875	7.8%	377,951,964	5.8%
Total	11,261		6,533,935,886	

Table 2 summarizes the status of the world's people groups.

The following may be gleaned from this summary:

- More than half of the world's population[7] is found in Unreached people groups (Levels 0 — 3)

- More than half of the world's people groups are Last Frontier people groups (Levels 0 — 1).

- More than a quarter of the world's population is found in Last Frontier people groups (Levels 0 — 1).

- Although 5,769 Last Frontier people groups have evangelical resources available to them, no recent evangelical church planting is taking place among them. They continue to remain less than 2% evangelical Christian with no new churches in the past two years. (Level 1)

Undoubtedly, the availability of evangelical resources is an important factor in reaching a people group, but the last bulleted observation above clearly demonstrates that there are many people groups that have no active church planting underway *despite* the fact that resources are available. Why? The fact that a resource is available does not mean that it is being used or being used effectively. For example, a Bible translation may exist in the heart language of a given

people group, but no one is distributing it. Perhaps the translation is rather old and no one really understands it anymore. Perhaps the vast majority of the people group is primarily non-literate communicators. They couldn't read the Bible, even if a current translation of it was placed in their hands. Missionaries may even be serving among a people group, but they may not use their ministry to proclaim God's word and invite people to know Christ as Savior. If so, does this people group actually have access to the Gospel?

Clearly, an overemphasis on the "availability" of resources (as an indicator of progress) is problematic. For this reason, while we recognize resource availability as a factor in our model and as an important component of our strategies, we do not give it significant weight as a measure of progress. More significant for us is whether or not church planting is actually taking place and whether or not people are coming to saving faith in Christ. Thus, progress is measured as people groups move from Levels 0 and 1 to levels 2, 3 4, and beyond. For this to occur, evangelical Christians must effectively engage these unreached people groups.

The Global Status of Evangelical Christianity map displays the status of each people group in their country and habitat. Unlike previous maps, this map only portrays the status of people groups in places where people actually live. Status indications on the map correspond to the categories in Table 1. A poster-size version of this map will be available to the public from the Missions Atlas Project in the spring of 2006 at *www.worldmap.org*.

According to the November 2005 report, there are approximately 6,500 unreached people groups in the world. As noted earlier, a goal of the International Mission Board is to ensure the engagement of those unreached people groups with populations exceeding 100,000. Table 3 notes a total of 1,995 such groups. Of these, only 645 are currently unengaged. These are people groups who need priority attention.

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Table 3: Unreached People Group Engagement (100,000 and Larger Population)

Continental	IMB Engaged	GCC Engaged Only	Unengaged	Unknown Engagement	Total People Groups
Europe	76	107	32	0	215
Asia and Oceania	217	363	421	7	1,008
Africa and the Middle East	248	283	184	6	721
The Americas	37	5	8	1	51
Totals	578	758	645	14	1,995

Table 4: Global Status of Evangelical Christianity

Country	Total People Groups	Total Population	Total Unengaged Unreached People Groups (100,000 and Higher)	Total Unengaged Unreached People Populations (100,000 and Higher)	% UUPG (100,000 and Higher) of Total People Groups	% UUPG (100,000 and Higher) of Total Group Populations
India	1,109	1,118,410,676	310	385,406,173	28%	34.5%
Sudan	241	44,053,547	35	15,016,832	14.5%	34.1%
China	437	1,337,397,878	21	11,701,440	4.8%	0.9%
Ethiopia	123	64,602,738	17	10,238,338	13.8%	15.8%
Saudi Arabia	29	21,754,820	13	13,659,089	44.8%	62.8%
Indonesia	692	204,636,623	12	2,939,538	1.7%	1.4%
Pakistan	86	179,681,852	12	11,505,305	14.0%	6.4%
France	107	53,177,752	11	3,817,730	10.3%	7.2%
Nepal	115	27,612,073	10	3,834,997	8.7%	13.9%
Turkey	48	68,805,675	10	9,357,701	20.8%	13.6%
Congo, DR	221	65,678,099	9	2,488,404	4.1%	3.8%
Algeria	37	44,312,723	8	3,271,768	21.6%	7.4%
Chad	158	8,965,339	8	1,136,754	5.1%	12.7%
Libya	28	10,138,226	8	3,201,822	28.6%	31.6%
Laos	138	5,231,352	7	1,047,838	5.1%	20.0%
United Arab Emirates	32	2,892,822	7	1,131,987	21.9%	39.1%
Germany	79	84,968,567	6	1,762,887	7.6%	2.1%
Kuwait	22	2,240,026	6	1,075,150	27.3%	48.0%
Eritrea	16	4,373,418	5	2,031,129	31.3%	46.4%
Iran	78	71,375,461	5	1,169,607	6.4%	1.6%
Iraq	35	26,872,296	5	9,792,912	14.3%	36.4%
Mozambique	50	19,604,157	5	1,714,852	10.0%	8.7%
Argentina	50	35,987,284	4	1,450,000	8.0%	4.0%
Bhutan	26	2,360,194	4	587,358	15.4%	24.9%
Kazakhstan	49	24,630,032	4	954,000	8.2%	3.9%
Malaysia	156	26,637,997	4	842,179	2.6%	3.2%
Myanmar	137	53,953,056	4	552,000	2.9%	1.0%
Nigeria	455	134,179,367	4	1,152,820	0.9%	0.9%
Syria	26	19,857,570	4	3,760,034	15.4%	18.9%
Uzbekistan	52	25,952,222	4	1,500,583	7.7%	5.8%
Afghanistan	48	27,756,997,	3	850,068	6.3%	3.1%
Bangladesh	49	144,167,284	3	2,739,765	6.1%	1.9%
Brazil	268	173,405,7083	3	595,000	1.1%	0.3%
Egypt	27	76,449,913	3	1,728,212	11.1%	2.3%
Ghana	96	20,677,611	3	404,610	3.1%	2.0%
Italy	51	54,491,291	3	647,822	5.9%	1.2%
Lebanon	11	4,459,486	3	1,369,009	27.3%	30.7%
Morocco	18	32,885,608	3	953,509	16.7%	2.9%
Oman	30	2,974,216	3	908,468	10.0%	30.5%
Russia	73	159,138,693	3	2,450,300	4.1%	1.5%
Tanzania	137	39,338,991	3	573,460	2.2%	1.5%
United Kingdom	80	57,912,951	3	645,000	3.8%	1.1%
Yemen	18	18,085,076	3	852,043	16.7%	4.7%
Bahrain	12	726,969	2	542,237	16.7%	74.6%
Côte d'Ivoire	83	16,853,318	2	2,024,445	2.4%	12.0%
Jordan	17	6,874,420	2	994,101	11.8%	14.5%
Liberia	32	3,553,244	2	379,174	6.3%	10.7%
Philippines	160	77,544,978	2	1,506,632	1.3%	1.9%
Sierra Leone	27	6,552,300	2	528,735	7.4%	8.1%
Somalia	11	9,145,677	2	2,145,673	18.2%	23.5%
Switzerland	21	7,968,340	2	1,087,120	9.5%	13.6%
Tunisia	11	10,951,103	2	449,411	18.2%	4.1%

Does this mean that we stop doing what we are doing to focus our attention on these 645 groups? If we did so, a number of groups that are currently engaged no longer would be. What we must do is mobilize the vast resources that already exist, enlisting evangelical Christians and churches everywhere to join in the challenge of addressing these groups as well as some 2,700 unengaged, unreached people groups with populations less than 100,000. Toward this end, the International Mission Board, Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth with a Mission, Wycliffe, DAWN Ministries, Walk through the Bible, and others have made these least-reached people groups a priority. *(See the "Finishing the Task" article which follows.)*

Table 4 provides a listing of countries where there is more than one unengaged, unreached people group (UUPG) with populations of 100,000 or greater. The obvious priority country on the list is India with 310 UUPGs. This one country alone accounts for nearly half of the total number of UUPGs in the world today and more than half of the total population of UUPGs.

The occurrence of France on the list is illustrative of the needed transition from measuring evangelization to measuring evangelical Christianity. In 1996, the IMB's Status of Global Evangelization model characterized much of France as evangelized. No doubt this characterization was accurate; after all France has many resources in French and has been the focus of historical church planting and evangelism efforts. However, as a whole the country – regardless of resources and activity – remains less than 2% evangelical Christian to this day! Whatever prioritization model one uses, **one must consider the results of evangelization** and not simply the process of evangelization or the number of people exposed to some gospel presentation.

A complete listing of Unengaged Unreached People Groups equal to or greater than 100,000 and a complete listing of people groups may be found on the web at *www.peoplegroups.org/Downloads.aspx*. The GSEC number on these listings corresponds to the descriptions found in Table 1. Both listings are updated monthly.

Conclusion

We look forward to the day that the number of unengaged, unreached people groups will fall to zero, regardless of population size. It is certainly a challenge; yet, we are confident that it *will* happen. Evangelical churches in North America and around the world are reclaiming their role in missions. Believers are praying, giving, and going in record numbers. Local churches in difficult circumstances

are taking seriously the challenge of reaching their Jerusalem and extending themselves to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Who would have thought just a few years ago that some of the great harvests in history would come out of countries in the 10/40 Window? Yet, today there are people groups in that part of the world where churches are starting an average of two or more churches per year *each*. Not only is God moving in the world today . . . He's moving quickly. What a privilege to be part of the adventure!

"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev 7:9-10, NASB). ⊕

Whatever prioritization model one uses, one must consider the results of evangelization.

End Notes

[1] Delegates from the Missionary Societies, Churches and other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination. May 8, 1845. Preamble and Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention. Augusta, GA: Southern Baptist Convention.

[2] In J. Rankin's *To the Ends of the Earth: Churches Fulfilling the Great Commission* (2005). Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, pp. 49-50.

[3] Dan Scribner. November-December 2004. A Model for Determining the Most Needy Unreached or Least-Reached Peoples. *Mission Frontiers* [online]. Pasadena, CA: United States Center for World Mission, p. 6.

[4] Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing. January-February 2005. Which Peoples Need Priority Attention? *Mission Frontiers* [online]. Pasadena, CA: United States Center for World Mission, p. 9.

[5] Orville Boyd Jenkins, Ph.D. What is a People Group? Online at *peoplegroups.org*.

[6] The three registries referenced in these points refer to registries provided by the Harvest Information System. *(www.harvestinformationsystem.info/)*

[7] Unlike some approaches to people group data that artificially force people group populations to conform to country-level census data, we allow field researchers to report the population of individual people groups as their research supports. Thus, the sum of people group populations for a country or for the world may or may not precisely match population estimates based on country-level data. As a point of comparison, the November 2005 estimate of the world's population is approximately 6.45 billion. The November 2005 GSEC estimate summed by individual people groups totals 6.53 billion, a difference of just over 1%.