



What Does It Mean to Effectively 'Engage' A People?



Jeff Liverman

By God's grace tremendous strides have been taken in recent years to make the gospel understandable within people groups who, until only recently, had yet to hear the Good News at all. However, among huge swaths of humanity there are no followers of Christ. Despite our best efforts, many have yet to hear the Good News presented to them in meaningful ways even once!

So which groups are still beyond the reach of an effective gospel witness? Surely there must be some way to codify who these peoples are *and* accurately assess if messengers are positioned to present the gospel in the most fruitful way.

Recently, for example, more than 20 African, Latin, Asian and Western mission agencies have chosen to partner in an effort to "see all Muslim peoples engaged by 2025." A fundamental task of this partnership is to clarify which peoples are still without an effective gospel witness, or, to put it another way, which unreached peoples are still not "engaged." But what does this mean? How do we know when engagement has happened? Which people groups are or aren't engaged?

In 1985 Edward Dayton published an article in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* titled "Reaching Unreached Peoples: Guidelines and Definitions for Those Concerned with World Evangelization." Dayton reported on six stages of identification and evangelization that had been noted at a significant conference in 1982. [Editor's note: see commentary on page 4.] Stages 1-5 deal primarily with the task of seeing the task before us and mobilizing workers to begin working in these newly-identified fields. Stage 6 reads: "Engaged: Initial field work has begun with the intent of planting an evangelizing, culturally indigenous church." Bravo! This early definition helped us envision the initial baby steps necessary to achieve the goal of world evangelization.

Jeff Liverman has lived and worked among Muslims for more than 20 years. He is currently the Director of Strategy Coordination at the International Office of Frontiers.

Today we have very helpful lists measuring a variety of mission activities (including church planting). Nonetheless, such activity, if it is to be fruitful, must be based on a fundamentally sound initial step of engagement. Thus I suggest the need to update and expand what it means to "engage" an unreached people group.

As we look at engagement, we need to address the *quality* of mission activity among a people. Therefore, we aren't looking simply for any effort that contains "evangelistic activity," but for strategic activity which will most likely produce "fruit that remains." So perhaps the term should be "*effective* engagement", or at least it should be understood that this is what we are pursuing.

Thus, in the codification process we are concerned primarily about two things: 1) distinguishing which groups have or haven't heard from the preacher (per Romans 10), and 2) casting that distinction in such a way as to increase the likelihood of the recipient society hearing and receiving the gospel as indeed Good News for them. It should be noted that the question of effective engagement doesn't encompass the full cycle of how church planting (for example) is accomplished, but it does seek to establish a minimum benchmark which will help set the stage whereby church planting (and, ultimately, church planting movements) can thrive.

I suggest that four essential elements constitute effective engagement:

1. apostolic effort in residence;
2. commitment to work in the local language and culture;
3. commitment to long-term ministry;
4. sowing in a manner consistent with the goal of seeing a church-planting movement (CPM) emerge.

To amplify:

1. Apostolic effort in residence

Taking the gospel from where it is to where it isn't is the essence of the apostolic task. This may be

accomplished through any number of means: by teams or individuals; by westerners or by missionaries from the Two-Thirds world; and/or by catalyzing people groups which live in proximity to the unengaged group. The main thing in this criterion is that apostles are in residence among those to whom their efforts are focused. Thus the short-term (or what Ralph Winter calls “amateur” or “drive-by”) workers who blitz in – and within a few months are out again – do not sufficiently meet this criterion.

Exciting new strategies to bring the Good News to the unreached are being developed every day. The efficacy of these new strategies must be analyzed at the point where impartation of the Gospel takes place, not merely on our activity prior to that point. Not until the last step is accomplished (that is, the

arrival on the field of those who will minister among a given people) should we consider this criterion to have been met.

2. Commitment to work in the local language and culture

Essential to the task of sharing the gospel is the question of effective communication. Central to this decisive factor is the conviction that the gospel *must* be translated into the recipient culture. Lamin Sanneh notes, “Translatability is the source of the success of Christianity across cultures” (*Translating the Message*). This requires the significant commitment and work necessary to acculturate oneself and one’s message to whatever degree possible (without falling into syncretism) in order to

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All Four Items Necessary in Every Engagement?

Jim Haney

In our help manual, distributed to all IMB field personnel, we include the following statement:

Engagement is about church-planting. Specifically, engagement is about implementing church-planting strategy among each unique global entity. ... An entity is engaged when the implementation of church-planting strategy is underway. ... Finally, engagement is not adoption, provision of materials or media, focusing on a people through a prayer emphasis or the implementation of an advocacy strategy, although these are critical to church-planting.

Although we affirm many of the components of the working definition that Jeff indicates for Frontiers, we do not see these four items as necessary in every engagement. Let me take them in turn:

1. *apostolic effort in residence*

Those who bring the witness must not stop short of church-planting, but do they have to be resident within the people group they are engaging? Would this not rule out the non-residential missionary approach to engagement? It may well be possible and desirable that trainers are not resident within a people group but will train trainers from outside, especially if those sent are from the same affinity bloc or people cluster as the people group engaged.

2. *commitment to work in the local language and culture*
Again, Jeff’s assumption appears to be that the actual engagement will be done by those from outside the

culture and language area. However, cannot engagement sometimes result if someone becomes a believer outside of his language and culture but then returns to engage his own people?

3. *commitment to long-term ministry*

Our research shows that long-term ministry is necessary if one expects to significantly impact a people group with the gospel. Short-term workers need to plug in to the ongoing ministry of a long-term network of field workers. With the emphasis these days on virtual churches, strategy-coordinator churches, or engaging churches (such as those involved in initiatives like Finishing the Task, PEACE Plan, etc.) and in light of a long history of adopting people groups, it is surprising how even the best plans never actually get to “engagement.” Frontiers is committed to engagement, and the only reason to get engaged is because marriage is imminent. Frontiers missionaries – and others I commend – are in it for the long haul.

4. *sowing in a manner consistent with the goal of seeing a church-planting movement (CPM) emerge*

Yes, and there are many pitfalls to sowing that are not consistent with this goal. CPMs have their own metrics, and it is a different world than church growth. Missionaries consider “optimal” time for church-planting – how long does it take to plant reproducible churches without encountering many of the pitfalls that one finds where attaching for too long creates dependency? To get to a CPM, you have to do CPM things. Having accessed 13 CPMs, our department has learned a lot, and foremost among them is Jeff’s point – you increase your chances of getting to a CPM by holding missionaries accountable for those things that get to a CPM. 🌐

Jim Haney is director of the Global Research Department of the International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention.

make the gospel understandable and attractive in the recipient culture. Thus, as early as possible, concrete steps must be taken to deeply absorb and work in the local language and culture.

3. Commitment to long-term ministry

The apostolic effort must persevere for as long as it takes in order to see the Gospel understood by at least a remnant in the recipient society. All too often our desire for quick results causes us to neglect the deep and demanding long-term relationships necessary to build the kind of trust essential to effective ministry. Too many have drawn the target around what they have been able to achieve in a few years before moving on. Instead we should determine to minister in ways which follow “most fruitful practices,” especially perseverance over the long haul.

4. Sowing in a manner consistent with the goal of seeing a church-planting movement (CPM) emerge

Clearly this criterion suggests that an evaluation of means must occur. Here we’re looking for the employment of methodology which takes into consideration cultural sensitivities, linguistic peculiarities and political realities. Furthermore, as Dr. David Garrison has noted, “wide sowing” must occur if we

are going to see CPMs emerge. There is no single tried-and-true method which meets this criterion, but we should take note of methods which have borne fruit and others which have led to minimal or disastrous results.

So where do we go from here?

The future of effective mission must involve the implementation of innovative strategies such as the strategic use of the Internet and other technologies, the mobilizing of itinerant evangelists, and the utilization of “commuters.” But, with each successive wave of creativity and innovation, the fundamentals of effective mission should not be lost in the excitement and ambiguity of the “next best thing.”

In order to effectively catalyze new sending movements and guide the next generation to bring the Gospel to the remaining unreached peoples of the world, we must clearly and cogently measure our activity as we move toward “finishing the task.” My hope is that mission agencies, churches, teams and individuals will focus resources on peoples identified as still lacking even the most basic and fundamental elements of mission attention.

May God grant us the wisdom and compassion to more fully understand what remains of the task before us and what steps must be taken to see the Great Commission accomplished in our generation. 🌐



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