



THE INCREDIBLE PROGRESS OF THE FRONTIER MISSION MOVEMENT:

From Edinburgh 1980 to Tokyo 2010

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Although it is difficult to pinpoint exact moments or fixed dates when historical movements begin, it is probably roughly accurate to say that the modern “frontier mission movement” began to gather significant momentum around 40 years ago, in the early 1970s. It is around this time that the first lists of unreached peoples began to be compiled, building on the research conducted by Wycliffe Bible Translators in their pursuit of identifying the world’s “Bibleless” peoples. David Barrett’s comprehensive study of church growth among all the peoples in Africa (introduced at the world’s first frontier mission consultation held in 1972) became a model for research around the world. He later expanded his research to include a global list of 13,000 “ethno-linguistic” peoples, which became the foundation for many people group databases over the next two decades.

The first estimates of the number of unreached peoples were prepared for the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization by Ralph Winter and his colleagues at the Fuller Seminary School of World Mission. Leading up to this conference, the first global survey of unreached peoples was also conducted, involving 2,200 questionnaires sent out around the world to mission organizations and field offices. Six years later, the Edinburgh conference in 1980, following up on the first Edinburgh gathering of 1910, gave a significant boost to the frontier mission movement. Out of Edinburgh 1980 came the Adopt-A-People Campaign (the first inter-mission cooperative effort to reach all peoples) and the AD2000 Movement (the first global network focused on frontier mission). These initiatives resulted in more attention given to unreached peoples around the world, both among

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mission agencies as well as local churches, than any other mission mobilization effort in history. Here at this second Edinburgh consultation, the frontier mission movement finally leaped beyond the realm of missiologists and researchers and into the realm of mission sending agencies that had the capacity to act on the facts unearthed by strategists such as Barrett and Winter.

The result of all this research and mobilization has been nothing short of stellar. The last 40 years have seen more Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus come to know Christ than in all previous centuries combined. Dozens of church-planting movements have been initiated among the world’s major unreached mega-peoples (those over one million in population), where just two decades before the ground had remained untilled for literally centuries.

The first major breakthrough in the Muslim bloc came in South Asia, where at least half a million Muslim-background believers have come to faith. This breakthrough proved the effectiveness of an “insider approach” for winning high-identity Muslims and became a model for many church-planting movements around the world. Next door to South Asia, in Iran, a strong underground church movement continues to emerge with thousands of house fellowships multiplying throughout the country. Surveys in the country indicate that Christian satellite broadcasting in Farsi, which began in the year 2000, is being viewed by well over half the population. Equally impressive are the results of radio and satellite broadcasting throughout the Arab world. One ministry, SAT7, has a regular audience of 8.5 million people. In North Africa, the Berbers are responding to the gospel in massive numbers, with one movement among the Kabyle encompassing several hundred thousand believers.

In the Buddhist world, two significant breakthroughs occurred among the Khmer and the

Mongolians. In Cambodia the church exploded from just a handful of believers 20 years ago to over 400,000 today. In Mongolia, the church grew from a few isolated believers to over 50,000 in 200 established fellowships in the same period.

Among Hindus, we now have extensive data on the status of Christianity in almost every caste group in South Asia, giving us a clearer picture on the unfinished task in this complex region than we have ever possessed. Surveys show increasing progress being made in the middle- and upper-caste groups. Geographically, the latest research reveals a significant Christian presence in over 200,000 villages in India. Additionally, mission researcher David Barrett estimates there are probably 10 million Hindu devotees to Jesus (believers that are exclusively devoted to Jesus but who choose to remain within the Hindu cultural tradition to increase the impact of their witness). Missiologist Ralph Winter predicted that such believers will one day outnumber traditional Christians in South Asia.

In the last decade, missionary deployment among unreached peoples has increased at a rapid pace, effectively doubling the number of missionaries among the least-reached. In 1980, the ratio of missionaries to Muslims was one per million. It is now only one per hundred-thousand. Most of these missionaries are non-Western, many of which are from nearby or related peoples. Although much work remains to be done, the significance of an increasing number of believers among the world's non-Christian peoples cannot be underestimated. What this means is that the cultural distances dividing unreached peoples from the gospel are shrinking. Momentum is gaining. For the first time in history, the very real possibility of reaching all peoples with the gospel in one generation is well within sight.

Vision 2020: What Might We Do Together in the Next Ten Years?

The success of the frontier mission movement demonstrates how pleased God is when we work together in the joint mission he has given us all. He blesses and honors cooperative efforts, and causes them to produce lasting fruit. At Tokyo 2010, mission leaders will gather to assess where we are in the midst of this incredible momentum, and how to build on this progress.

Although we can't predict the future, if world conditions remain stable, it is certainly probable that the next ten years could see disciple-making movements launched in every people group on earth. This would mark an incredible milestone in the history of the Great Commission.

With this possibility in mind, what might a global gathering of mission leaders seek to accomplish in terms of joint planning and cooperation in this coming global decade of harvest? Here are a few areas and issues of interest to mission leaders around the world:

1. The need for field-based infrastructure: How can major international missions work more closely together on the field—regionally, nationally and among related peoples—to ensure the full engagement of all peoples in the next ten years? Will Ralph Winter's proposal for a "Global CoMission" become a reality (a forum for bringing together international missions to take on the remaining unfinished task as a joint project with definitive results)?
2. The need for greater knowledge stewardship: How can we learn from what God is doing and better disseminate the results of research to mission leadership at every level where decisions have to be made—from the people group level to the global level? (For example, over 100 active church-planting movements among frontier people groups are now known in the 10/40 Window region. But due to the speed with which these have taken place, no comprehensive survey and study of these movements has yet taken place. A global forum for frontier mission research and strategy is needed to facilitate this.)
3. The need for better resource sharing: Here is an area which has seen remarkable progress in the last decade. Mission organizations are developing a Kingdom mindset with the resources and tools God has given them, making them available to the entire Body of Christ. But much more can be done to enhance this in multiple areas, from international development, to new technologies, to evangelism and discipleship materials and programs, to personnel sharing, etc.

Of course, this is only the tip of the iceberg of the many areas which can be enhanced through global mission interaction and cooperation. Only the Lord knows fully what will proceed from the various strategic world-level gatherings planned for next year. But one thing is for sure: all of this activity reveals something very significant. The Holy Spirit is moving, and He is uniting His Church around a common vision in a way that we have never seen before in history. As disciples of the One who gave his life to see this day, these are truly the most exciting times to be alive and engaged in this incredible story. f

ATTENTION MISSION LEADERS!

Come join us for this historic gathering.

There is still time to register for Tokyo 2010. May 11-14, 2010. Register today at www.tokyo2010.org/register