

EDITORIAL COMMENT



Reaching Peoples: Still the Foundation of Mission Strategy

RICK WOOD, EDITOR, *MISSION FRONTIERS*

Dear Reader,

In 1974, Dr. Ralph Winter changed the course of mission history and world history with his address to the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, where he revealed that we would never complete the task of world evangelization if we continued with the same strategies and methods. Dr. Winter clarified that the global Church had not adequately understood the vast and diverse ethnic realities of the world, with the great majority of mission resources concentrated in areas where the gospel had been available for many years while great swaths of humanity were left untouched. A dramatic course correction was needed. In his address, he reiterated the biblical mandate to reach every tribe and tongue and thus catalyzed what has been called the “unreached peoples movement.”

For over 35 years this movement has been one of the most powerful mission movements in history, touching the lives of millions who were previously locked away in unreached peoples with little or no access to the gospel. In 1974, more than 60% of the world’s population lived within unreached people groups; today, that has been cut to 40%. That is tremendous progress in such a relatively short period of time. The people group focus has proven to be a powerful strategy in world evangelization.

While Dr. Winter deserves much credit for his historic accomplishments, he would have been the first to admit that he was standing on the shoulders of giants like Donald McGavran and Cameron Townsend. Years earlier these men clarified the need to focus on peoples. In his book, *The Bridges of God*, McGavran described how the gospel naturally spreads along the lines of family

and community relationships within people groups. It is along these relational “bridges” that large numbers of people can and do come to Christ in people movements. Maintaining those “bridges” as we develop and apply our mission strategies is essential if we are to see people movements to Christ take place with the resulting transformation of both individual lives and societies.

David Garrison, who has served in a variety of roles with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, has done a great job of documenting other types of church-planting movements among unreached peoples where large numbers of people have come to Christ and large numbers of churches have been rapidly established. Based on this research, Garrison has described in his writings what practices can help these movements develop as well as what can hinder them. By going to www.churchplantingmovements.com you can download a free copy of his 1999 booklet and purchase a copy of his latest book, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World*. He has shown conclusively that the people group approach has been a powerful strategy to enable large numbers of people to come to Christ.

However, today a number of respected mission leaders have begun to question the validity of the people group approach for our time. We hear statements like, “Been there, done that, time to move on” or “The people group approach may work in rural settings, but it is no longer applicable in large cities with the forces of urbanization and globalization negating the previous influences of ethnicity.” Others have been so brash as to call the people group emphasis a “racist missiology.”

In this issue we explore the impact of migration, urbanization and globalization

on approaches to reaching people groups. What happens to ethnic identities and loyalties when people move to large cities? Do they dissipate or intensify? Are lists of unreached peoples passé? Do we need to develop new strategies or adjust the people group strategy to new realities? These are critical questions to explore if we are to apply the most effective strategies of mission outreach to a rapidly changing world. See the series of articles starting on page 6.

As we look at the people group approach, here are some principles that I believe should be considered foundational to the development of future mission strategies.

Reaching Peoples Is Biblical

The people group strategy is not something that Ralph Winter or others just thought up one day, for (as any student in the *Perspectives* course soon discovers) the emphasis on people groups is rooted firmly in Scripture. From God’s promise to bless all peoples in the Abrahamic Covenant to the celebration in Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 over the fulfillment of that promise, the strategy to reach all peoples comes from the heart of God. Whatever our differences in how we delineate people groups or in our applications of people group thinking, we see clearly in Scripture that it is God’s sovereign plan that the gospel and His glory be revealed in every pocket of humanity.

It Is All About Providing Access

Nowhere in Scripture are we promised that every person will be saved, and it should not be our goal or expectation to get everyone saved. In world mission the goal is to provide every person on earth with *access* to the gospel by discipling all peoples so that each person may have the *opportunity* to choose to follow Christ or not. This involves a process

of discovering and overcoming every barrier to understanding and acceptance that keeps people from having access to the gospel. Geographically, we need millions of new churches to be planted so that every person is within reach of an indigenous church that can speak his language and communicate the gospel in a way that is culturally appropriate and meaningful. Relationally, we must explore the depths of the ethnic, cultural and social networks that constitute people's lives and penetrate as many as necessary in order to initiate a movement to Christ within these groups.

The People Group Approach Is the Starting Point for Every Strategy

I like what Duane Frasier says in his comments on page 17, "An emphasis on unreached peoples is primary not because it is the end-all strategy but because it is one of the beginning strategies. In incarnational mission we must arrive at a geographical location, communicate in the heart language and reach peoples within natural circles of cultural affinity. Sure, there are deep and complex considerations to be taken

into account. But we still have to arrive, communicate and reach." The people group approach and the lists of people groups is the starting point by which we can "get there and get started" with the process of exploration, discovery and penetration of every barrier to the gospel. It is the only way that we can find out what is really going on and develop strategies to move forward.

Reaching Every People Requires Long-Term Commitments

While short-term mission efforts may have a role in mobilizing people with a vision for world evangelization, it is not possible for people on a short-term visit to make a long-term impact. When someone gets to the geographical location of an unreached people group, it will take time and concerted effort to discover and understand the complex networks of ethnic and social identities through which the gospel may become indigenous and spread naturally. If we are to provide access to the gospel to every person, then we must recruit, train and deploy thousands of new *long-term* missionaries to the unreached

peoples so that the process of reaching each people can begin.

We Are Aiming at a Moving Target

Our first list of peoples in Genesis 11 records just 70. Now, according to Joshua Project, the world is home to 9,802 peoples-across-countries, of which 4,074 are listed as unreached. Over time languages and cultures continue to change and adapt. Some languages become extinct and new dialects develop. With the influences of migration, urbanization and globalization, the pace of natural change will grow more rapid. To stay on top of this change and develop effective strategies, we need to be astute students of the world and its changing cultural realities. We will need to grow in our willingness to work together, share information and develop and apply new strategies as the need becomes apparent. God has greatly used the people group approach in marvelous ways over the last 35 years. He has promised Abraham and us that He will seek the blessing of all peoples. It is our task to adapt the approach to a changing world. 

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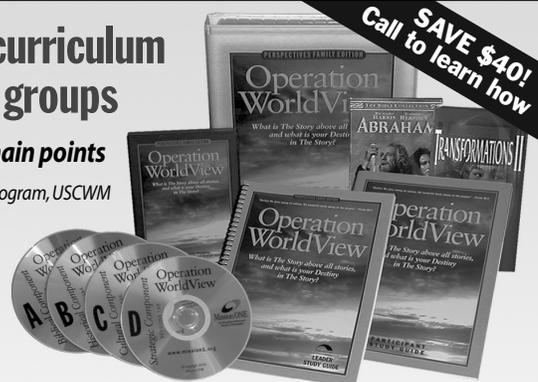
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