

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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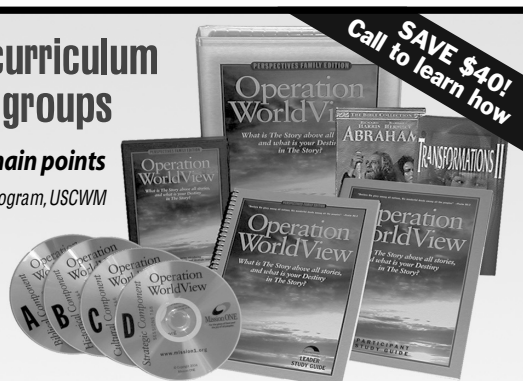
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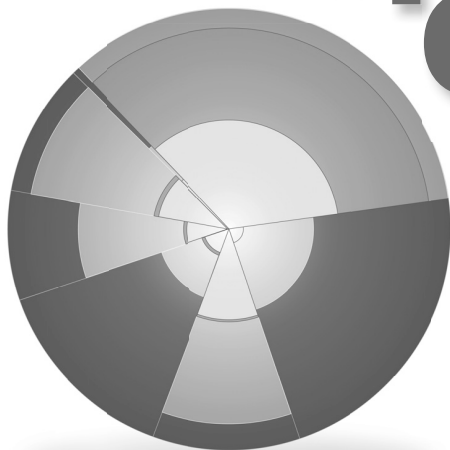


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Do People Groups Still Matter?



A Review in 2010

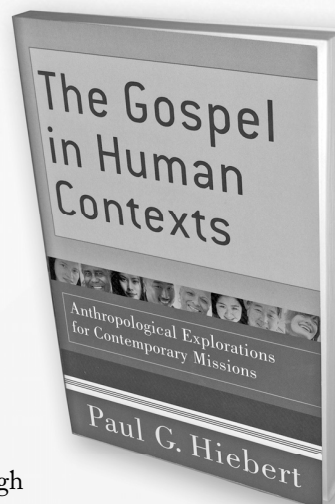
DARRELL DORR

The year 2010 is an appropriate year to step back and re-visit the emphasis on “people groups” that has been foundational for the U.S. Center for World Mission and others in the frontier mission movement since 1974. Therefore, this issue of *Mission Frontiers* is a springboard for a series of reflections and discussions throughout 2010, a series that will be continued by our sister periodical, the *International Journal of Frontier*

Missiology, and by the September 21-23 meetings in Charlotte, North Carolina of the International Society for Frontier Missiology.

One good place to start the discussion is to consider comments by the late Paul Hiebert, comments found on pages 90 and 92 of *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Paul G. Hiebert, BakerAcademic, 2009):

Sociology and social anthropology have had a profound impact on Western missions. Early mission strategies were largely based on a geographical division of the world. But missionaries found deep social divisions within the cultures to which they went, divisions that shaped the people’s response to the gospel more deeply than geography. This led to the Church Growth movement started by Donald McGavran, Alan Tippett and Peter Wagner. McGavran and Tippett demonstrated how social dynamics play a major role in the growth and organization of the church. They introduced concepts such as homogeneous groups, people movements, social receptivity/resistance, and social barriers into mission literature. More recent applications of social theory to missions include the People Group movement that defines some seventeen thousand people groups and seeks to plant churches in each of them (in part through the Adopt-a-People movement).



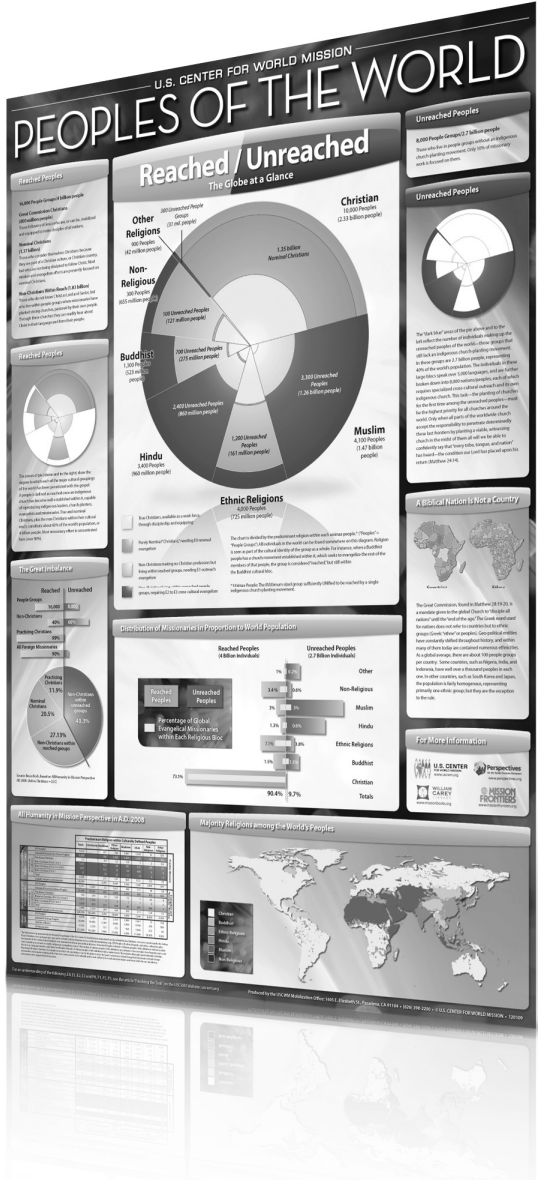
Darrell Dorr is Contributing Editor of Mission Frontiers and an Associate Editor of the Atlas of Global Christianity.

A third limitation [of the Church Growth movement] comes from the early theories of sociology. Initially, social anthropology focused its attention on small societies and examined them as closed systems. Social anthropologists saw societies as harmonious organic wholes. The concept of people groups fits best with such a view of small-scale societies. But peasant and urban societies cannot be cut up into distinct, bounded people groups without seriously distorting the picture. In large-scale societies, individuals participate in many different groups and cultural frames and do not fully identify with any one of them. Associations, institutions and networks are the middle level of social organization in urban societies, and macroinstitutions such as nation-states, businesses and transnational organizations are at the highest level of social systems. Consequently, we cannot really speak of distinct people groups or hope to generate people movements in complex settings.

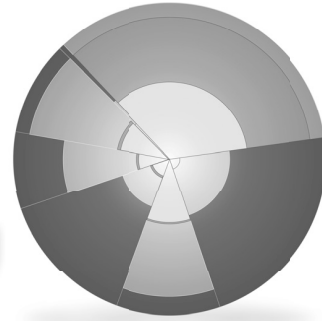
Hiebert's comments prompt a variety of questions:

- Is the concept of people groups applicable primarily to small-scale societies? If so, what examples can be identified?
- Are the concepts of people groups and people movements really inapplicable in “complex settings”, especially in urban societies? Do field realities confirm or contradict Hiebert’s assertion?
- Ray Bakke challenged missionaries to learn how to “exegete a city,” but how can missionaries also learn to “exegete a people” in contexts both urban and rural?
- Is the concept of people groups passé for mission in the twenty-first century? If so, what other concepts of social organization are more appropriate for mission mobilization and field ministry? Do mission mobilizers and field workers need new constructs of people groups, or do they need substitute constructs that more accurately reflect social realities?

The following articles launch our reflections and discussions in 2010. Enjoy what others have to say, and then tell us what *you* think. **f**



Lifting, Pushing, Squeezing and Blending



The Dynamics of Ethnicity and Globalization

BRAD GILL

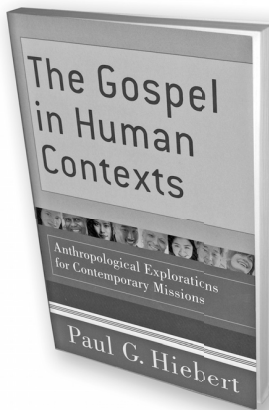
An emphasis on “people groups” has become a common way to map our mission to the world. It was not always so. When Donald McGavran emerged from caste-ridden India in the 1960s, evangelicals were confronted anew with the strategic role of social and cultural boundaries in world evangelization. The persistent individualism at the core of our Western gospel made many nervous at the idea that large, ethnically homogenous peoples could move so quickly and powerfully towards the gospel. The idea of group conversion remained suspect. Then, in 1974, when Ralph Winter used this controversial idea to map a new demography of “unreached” peoples, the idea of “people groups” began to find its place in mission vernacular.

But the concept of people groups has always met with “friendly fire” from missionaries and mission anthropologists who have served among these unreached peoples. Their profound critiques call us to reassess whether the social and cultural boundaries that define people groups will persist in today’s shrinking world. The recent publication of Paul



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Hiebert’s last two books provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for this reassessment.¹ His rich, eclectic and nuanced anthropology probes the way modern social processes impact the distinctive boundaries of peoples across the world. And “people group” thinking is maturing as it absorbs these modern trends.



This topic reminds me of a conversation I had recently on the edge of the Sahara Desert. I rode with the son of a 90-year-old camel driver who had led caravans 11 times across the Sahara to Timbuctou. This son was raised with the same set of skills, but he had learned English amidst the burgeoning tourist industry, and he had recently married a European tourist. He was on his way to Europe, where she awaited. I happened to mention that I had made friends with some from his “Berougi” (people from the desert) years earlier when I worked in a city adjacent to his

region. He immediately seemed uncomfortable and corrected my use of this ethnic term “Berougi.” His people were not just from the desert, but they were exclusively from a prestigious lineage in the desert. He and the “Berougi” were very reluctant to visit these cities where I had worked because of all the prejudice they had experienced there. Forced by the crisis of drought to leave their desert trade, it was easier for them (and for him) to access another part of the globe than to contend with a cultural firewall a few hundred miles away.

This young man represents the massive migrations and dispersions of peoples across the world. In the “push and pull” of this young man’s story, I notice the interface of two social realities: ethnicity and globalization. The mixture of these two contested concepts is a new focus of many mission anthropologists, for together they seem to provide a new way to exegete the complex field of relations in and around people groups. Ethnicity refers to culture, a people’s corporate sense of tradition, of shared value, belief and habit. Globalization, on the other hand, addresses the context of global change, and one’s sense of place in the flow of it all. The convergence leads to the new “glocal” reality, and I could see it in this young camel driver’s story. He carried both an ethnic identity with his people and a new relational link to a globalized world.

Everybody’s trying to get their arms around this idea of globalization. Thomas Friedman calls it that “inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies” that enables us “to reach around the world farther, faster, and cheaper than ever before.”² It flattens our world. Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* suggests it’s a “Post-American World,”

where the processes historically identified with “the rise of the West” now include “the rise of the Rest.”³ The original Western carriers of education, media and technology have been decentralized into initiatives from other parts of the globe. Whatever the definition, globalization gives us a sense that modernity has shifted into overdrive.

So, do the ethnic boundaries of people groups persist, or does globalization rupture and flatten people groups into another social reality? I’d like to exegete four processes or effects of globalization on peoples of the world. They’re tossed around by social scientists, but we see them all the time. They can be highly theoretical, so let me begin with another snapshot.

I can recall my initial idea of the Muslim people group I entered years ago: tribal, noble, a corporate sense of destiny, and a coherent sense of religious tradition. My mental map held for a few weeks before adjustments began. I was rummaging through the old market place one day when I came across an ancient-looking gateway. Over the threshold it said, “Dior Shyukh” (the Houses of the Sheikhs). I

discovered that 60 years earlier this had been the seat of government for the entire tribal confederation. Now it was run-down, forgotten, not even a tourist stop. My wife would tell me that all the women at the public bath knew where judgment was now handed down. They would gossip the latest intrigues from across that mountain town, and inevitably it all fastened on either the new courthouse or city hall. Modern institutions had grafted themselves onto this “people group.” What initially seemed culturally solid, bounded and corporate was actually looser, fragmented and conflicted.

Lifting

First, there is a hint here of what Anthony Giddens calls the “*lifting out*” of local relations.⁴ The global reach of modern systems is pervasive; these systems

begin to subtly redirect the trust persons have traditionally placed in local face-to-face commitments. Making a call on a cell phone, getting water from the kitchen sink, or going to the bank are all actions which imply a realignment of trust towards modern, global systems. Consequently, trust in traditional relations slowly

surrenders its grip to faceless and anonymous global systems. One is gradually lifted out of what was once a more inclusive sense of people group.

Pushing

Second, there’s the “*push down*” effect.⁵

Globalization doesn’t just pull you up and out, it presses down and creates new demand for ethnic autonomy. It makes the boundaries of people groups become more salient. This downward pressure has been a major catalyst in the astounding revival of local ethnic identities in recent decades (which really surprised mainline social science). When the lid comes off, as it did in Yugoslavia with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it exposes the reality of this “push down” effect. The nature of the ethnic explosion between Serbian, Croat and Bosnian Muslim is manifest in similar ways across a swath of nations in recent decades.

I could see this downward pressure in the Kurdish region I visited a couple of years ago. Here’s an entire region of displaced Muslims who had to flee the genocidal onslaught of Saddam Hussein. A



“no-fly zone” granted them security, and they had come out of the hills to reestablish their worlds. Amidst the displacement and fragmentations, there was a resurgence of ethnic identity. Boom-town cities were expanding, with new high-rise buildings everywhere. I noted that one tribal group of 20,000 had relocated and settled together in a suburban area, keeping intact their sense of tribal identity and traditional tribal leadership after 25 years of exile. Their ethnic autonomy isn’t melting down.

Squeezing

Third, globalization can “squeeze sideways.” Amidst the pressure of global systems, a single meaningful aspect of a people’s identity can move laterally and link itself with others who share the same aspect. Economists note this in new economic zones, but by far the most vital aspect of identity that squeezes sideways is religious. The religious core of ethnicity intensifies and moves sideways, galvanizing large religious association. We’ve seen how the recent radical “Islamic jihad” forges together Muslims from all over the globe. What fuels this? It could be that abstract and impersonal global systems

I THINK WE CAN EXPECT
THAT ETHNICITY WILL HAVE
A NEW INTENSITY IN LIGHT
OF GLOBALIZATION.

fail to provide the
psychological reward
that comes with personal
face-to-face ties.
Religion becomes the
means by which people
“re-imbed” themselves
in meaningful relations.

We see the markers of this broad ethno-religious identity almost everywhere. How else can one explain the teenage Muslim girl at our local high school whose head is fully covered, but who wears a halter-top and tight cut-off shorts and who hums to the cadence of a heavy metal Middle Eastern tune on her iPod?

Blending

All these effects contribute to a fourth, “blending” effect, what social scientists call “hybridity”, or “hybridities” since we see it in many forms and combinations.⁶ In mission circles this subject of hybridity began with the observation that large people movements for Christ happened in rural settings, not in urban settings. In the city the *inclusive* categories of family, clan, and tribe were more complicated as people joined, attended or aligned themselves with modern institutions and associations. The religion and culture of people groups is *intersected* by new educational and vocational affiliations. And it’s in the urban environment that people feel the hyper-effects of

global “lifting out,” “pushing down” and “squeezing sideways.” Ethnicity doesn’t necessarily disappear, it just gets compartmentalized as people construct their identities.

So what are we to conclude? Do these effects add up to anything we can calculate or map out? I’m not the one to prognosticate, so I won’t. But on the field, I have found that understanding these processes and effects helps me to better understand the intentions and reactions of Muslim peoples among whom I’ve served. So allow me to venture just three modest observations.

First, I think we can expect that ethnicity will have a new intensity in light of globalization. It will hold, but among many peoples it will hold differently. Ethnicity will be held more deliberately, more defensively, even more defiantly. In the congestion and pressure of globalization, peoples will continue to construct their social boundaries, but even more so. The forces of globalization may continue to be successful in assimilating traditional worlds to modern life. But we should anticipate a kick-back effect, where people recreate a lost ethnicity in reaction to the psychological homelessness of modern life.

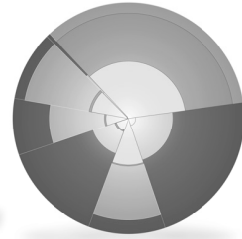
Second, I concur with Robert Priest that it’s not a time to relax our anthropological analyses. On the contrary, more sophisticated tools are needed to inform mission practice.⁷

Third, let’s remember that our motive for sifting and sorting mankind is to honor and obey the God who created every people, “who determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26,27). 🌐

Footnotes

- 1 Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2009
- 2 Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 2005
- 3 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, W.W.Norton, N.Y., 2008
- 4 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Blackwell, U.K. 1990, p. 21
- 5 Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World*, Routledge, N.Y., 2009, p. 13
- 6 Ted C. Lewellen, *The Anthropology of Globalization*, Bergin & Garvey, 2002, p. 98f
- 7 Brian Howell and Edwin Zehner, *Power and Identity in the Global Church*, William Carey Library, 2009, p.185f

Is God Colorblind or Colorful?



The Gospel, Globalization and Ethnicity

MIRIAM ADENEY

Isabell Ides was 101 years old when she died last June. A Makah Indian, a member of a whale-hunting people, she lived in the last house on the last road on the farthest northwest tip of the United States. Isabell was known far and wide because she loved and taught Makah culture and language. Hundreds of people learned to weave baskets under her hands. Several generations learned words in their language from her lips. Young mothers brought her their alder-smoked salmon. After chewing a bit, she could tell whether their wood was too dry. Archaeologists brought her newly excavated 3,000-year-old baskets, and she could identify what the baskets were, how they were made, and how they had been used. "It's like losing a library," an anthropologist said at her funeral.

Isabell also taught Sunday School at the Assembly of God church on the reservation. She attributed her long life to her Christian faith.

Did Isabell's basketry matter to God, as well as her Sunday school teaching? How important was her ethnic heritage in the Kingdom's big picture? This question reverberates as we explore globalization.

Creative Destruction

In the spring of 2001, representatives of 34 nations gathered in Quebec to discuss a free trade agreement that would cover the whole of the Americas. There were many worries. How can there be a level playing field between the US or Canada and Honduras or Bolivia, between some of the richest and some of the poorest

countries on the planet? Won't the small ones be gobbled up? Even Brazil, Latin America's largest economy, was skittish.

Into this discussion, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, dropped the phrase "creative destruction." Yes, he said, more open global trade means some "creative destruction." Businesses will close. Jobs will be lost. "There is no doubt," Greenspan stated, "that this transition to the new high-tech economy, of which rising trade is a part, is proving difficult for a large segment of our work force.... The adjustment process is wrenching to an existing work force made redundant largely through no fault of their own." But such trauma is just part of the price of progress. As is often said, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. You can't garden without pruning. You can't use the computer without pressing the delete button now and then. You cannot train as an athlete without sloughing off bad habits.

Honing, sharpening, weeding out, paring down—these are positive terms. So Greenspan spoke of the "creative destruction" inherent in globalization. But, he added, "History tells us that not only is it unwise to try to hold back innovation, it is also not possible."

Ethnicity is one arena of destruction. In today's global system, local ethnic values are being trampled. Cultural values are more than commodities. They are parts of heritages on which we cannot put a price. Yet, like endangered species, cultural values are being threatened. How should we respond when globalization drowns ethnicity?



Miriam Adeney is a professor at Seattle Pacific University. Since 2002, she has taught short courses in 14 countries in Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East and North America. She is the author of four books and over 150 articles. This article is excerpted by permission, from an article by the same name in the fourth edition of the Perspectives Reader (William Carey Library, 2009).

A Place in the Story

What is God's view of ethnicity? God created us in his image, endowed us with creativity, and set us in a world of possibilities and challenges. Applying our God-given creativity, we have developed the cultures of the world.

In the beginning, God affirmed that it was not good for humans to be alone. Humans were made to live in communities of meaning. So God gave his blessing to cultural areas such as the family, the state, work, worship, arts, education, and even festivals. He gave attention to laws which preserved a balanced ecology, ordered social relations, provided for sanitation, and protected the rights of the weak, the blind, the deaf, widows, orphans, foreigners, the poor, and debtors.

He affirmed the physical world, out of which material culture is developed. He delighted in the very soil and rivers that He gave his people. It was

IS IT ANY SURPRISE IF
OUR CREATOR PROGRAMS
US WITH THE CAPACITY
TO CREATE AN AMAZING
KALEIDOSCOPE OF CULTURES
TO ENRICH HIS WORLD?

“a land which the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year” (Deut. 11:12)

In the picture language of the Old Testament,

God gave people oil to make their faces shine, wine to make their hearts glad, friends like iron to sharpen them, wives like fruitful vines, and children like arrows shot out of their bows. Economic, social, and artistic patterns combine to make up a culture. This is the context within which we live. It is where we were designed to live. Global systems may immerse us in virtual realities—media, packaged music, the stock market, sports scores, and news flashes—in which great tragedies are juxtaposed with beer ads. Yet if we are absorbed in the global or virtual level, we miss out on the real rhythms of nature and society. Seed time and harvest, and the health of our soil, trees, and water. Friendship, courtship, marriage, parenting, aging, and dying. Creation, use, maintenance, and repair. There are rhythms to living in God's world. These are expressed locally, through specific cultural patterns. Knowing these helps us know ourselves, our potentialities and our limits, and the resources and sequences that weave the fabric for happy choices. They cannot be known at the abstract, global level. Disciplining a child, for example, is not virtual. Being fired from a job is not a media experience. Having a baby is not a game. Coping with cancer is not abstract.

... Our Creator delights in colors. He generates smells, from onion to rose. He shapes every fresh snowflake. He births billions of unique personalities. Is it any surprise if he programs us with the capacity to create an amazing kaleidoscope of cultures to enrich his world?

Cultures contain sin and must be judged, as we will discuss in the following section. But ethnic pride is not automatically sin. It is like the joy parents feel at their child's graduation. Your child marches across the platform. Your chest hammers with pride. This is not pride at the expense of your neighbor, whose face also glows as his child graduates. No, your heart swells because you know your child's stories. The sorrows he has suffered. And the gifts that have blossomed in him like flowers opening to the sun. You yourself have cried and laughed and given away years of your life in the shaping of some of those stories.

At its best, ethnicity is an expansion of this good family pride. Ethnicity is a sense of identification with people who share a culture and a history, with its suffering and successes, heroes and martyrs. Like membership in the family, ethnicity is not earned. It is a birthright, received whether you want it or not.

Human beings were created to live in community. In today's world, we still feel that need. “Even when our material needs are met, still our motivation... emotional resilience... and moral strength... must come from somewhere, from some vision of public purpose anchored in a compelling image of social reality,” according to anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Being a world citizen is too vague to provide this motivation and strength, says Geertz. World citizenship makes the common person feel insignificant. Even national citizenship may breed apathy. But when you are a member of an ethnic group, you have celebrations which give zest, values which give a cognitive framework, action patterns which give direction to your days, and associational ties which root you in a human context. You have a place in time in the universe, a base for the conviction that you are part of the continuity of life flowing from the past and pulsing on into the future. You are in the story.

When Ethnicity Becomes an Idol

God ordained culture. But customs that glorify God are not the only reality that we observe around us. Instead of loveliness, harmonious creativity, and admirable authority, we often see fragmentation, alienation, lust, corruption, selfishness, injustice and violence cultivated by our culture. No part remains pure. Science tends to serve militarism or hedonism,

ETHNICITY IS NOT BAD IN ITSELF. WHEN WE EXALT IT AS THOUGH IT WERE THE HIGHEST GOOD, HOWEVER, ETHNICITY BECOMES EVIL.

ignoring morals. Art often becomes worship without God. Mass media is full of verbal prostitutes. Businessmen pull shady deals. Politicians fill their own pockets. Workers do shoddy work. Husbands deceive their wives. Wives manipulate their husbands. Children ignore their parents as persons.

We are not only created in God's image. We are also sinners. Because we have cut ourselves off from God, the cultures we create reek with evil. We are called, then, not only to rejoice in the patterns of wisdom, beauty, and kindness in our culture, but also to confront and judge the patterns of idolatry and exploitation.

Sometimes ethnicity is turned into an idol. Like other idols of modern society—money, sex, and power, for example—ethnicity is not bad in itself. When we exalt it as though it were the highest good, however, ethnicity becomes evil. Racism, feuds, wars, and “ethnic cleansing” result. When ethnicity becomes an idol, it must be confronted and judged.

Implications for Mission

Ethnicity counters the dehumanizing bent of globalization. Even at its best, economic globalization tends to treat cultural values as commodities. Ethnicity reminds us to keep faith with our grandparents and with our human communities. It is a vital counterbalance. What does ethnicity mean for mission? We will suggest four applications.

1. Affirm the Local

First, mission should affirm local cultures. We do not do this uncritically. Working with and under local Christians, we judge patterns of idolatry and exploitation, as explained above. Yet we love the local culture. We receive it as a gift of God. And while we live in that place, we adapt gladly to those dimensions of local values that are wholesome....

We patronize local businessmen and businesswomen. We encourage local artists, musicians, and writers, rather than routinely importing foreign books or translating them.

We stay in locally owned hotels and homes. We learn from the lore of local herbalists. We safeguard local forests. We gain skills in local sports and games. We make efforts to be present at local parties and funerals. We empathize with local social reformers. If we are missionaries, we discipline our thoughts so that we are not preoccupied with our

homeland's cultural patterns. Specific heritages matter. Even the 20th century epic *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) affirms the local. Columnist Mike Hickerson observes:

The Lord of the Rings suggests that God's victory on Earth (or Middle-Earth) is incomplete unless and until the victory fills the “small places.”... The final battle between good and evil is not some gigantic historic battle—like the destruction of the Death Star—but rather a small fight, followed by a small reconstruction of a very small place. The Good News fills every valley. ... In their return to the Shire, the Hobbits continued their mission to its proper conclusion. Without their humble work among their own humble folk, evil would have retained a stronghold in Middle-Earth. The global is important, and so too is the local.

In missionary training programs, this emphasis must be made. There is a tendency for missionaries from dominant cultures to assert their ethnic heritage as though it were God's pattern for everybody. Western missionaries do this. Chinese and Korean missionaries do it in Central and Southeast Asia. Latinos do it in indigenous communities....

2. Be Pilgrims

Many people have several ethnic identities. Consider this situation: On the west coast of America, earlier generations of Asians were prevented by law from marrying Caucasians. Quite a few Filipino immigrants married Native Americans. Picture three adult children in such a family today. One identifies primarily as a Filipino, the second as a Native American, and the third as an American. But all three switch identities from time to time.

Furthermore, cultures change continually. In the process, new identity combinations emerge. The renowned Wing Luke Museum is re-opening this week in my home city, Seattle, Washington. Reportedly it is the only pan-Asian-Pacific-American museum in the USA. What is an Asian-Pacific-American? “Not a race, ethnic group, or nationality,” according to Jack Broom in the *Seattle Times*. “It's a census category that historically combined people from more than 40 countries making up a vast portion of the globe, stretching from Tahiti to Pakistan, Japan to Indonesia, Hawaii to India.”

Fourteen percent of my county's population is Asian Pacific American. In spite of the *Seattle Times'*

disclaimer, this is a significant ethnic category, a measurable group with enough identity to support a noted museum. In a nesting hierarchy of ethnic identities, it constitutes one level. The *Times* article goes on to say that the high numbers “reflect the Northwest’s perch on the Pacific Rim.”

Multiple identities are not unusual. Spanish speakers in the USA grew by 50% from 1980 to 1990. They now make up 30% of the population of New York City. Most speak English as well. In the same decade, the number of Chinese speakers in the U.S. increased by 98%. Four-fifths of these people continue to prefer speaking Chinese at home even though most speak English.

At the core, ethnic identity rests on self-ascription as a member of a shared culture, a shared community, a shared heritage. In a multiethnic society, you may not see much difference between the economic, social, and worldview patterns of people whose parents came from different countries. They may shop at the same stores and make jokes about the same sports events.

What matters is not the depth of observable difference but the depth of the identification with distinctive communities. A people’s history, for example, is their private property. The Jews have their history. The Chinese have their history. African-Americans have their history. Nobody can take this from them. It is their heritage. When the history involves suffering, and when heroes have arisen in the midst of that suffering, communal ties are even stronger.

Heritage matters, but a lot of people have more than one, and are at various points on an identity continuum. Some balance several identities. People may not put this into words, or even into conscious thought. But they know when they feel uncomfortable, when they feel crammed into inappropriate categories, into boxes that don’t fit. It is important to respect the way people identify themselves at any particular time; however, doing so may scramble our categories or lists of people groups. Individuals from the same ancestry—even siblings—may choose to identify differently.

What is the identity of the refugee immigrant? The bi-racial child? The Navaho who wonders whether home is the reservation or the city? The cosmopolitans and the youth who buy and wear goods from everywhere and who read, listen to, and watch media from everywhere? Who are their people? Are they destined to be global nomads?

Wherever they are, the gospel offers them a home. God doesn’t stereotype us. He meets us each as

the exceptions that we are, with our multiple and overlapping identities, our unique pilgrimages, our individual quirks. God doesn’t slot us into pigeonholes. Whether we have permanently lost our community, or are temporarily adrift, or have patched together bits of several heritages, God welcomes us into his people. The gospel offers us a home beyond the structures of this world.

Local cultures are gifts of God, but they are never enough. Yes, like Jeremiah, we “seek the welfare of the city” where we find ourselves (Jer 29:7, NASB). Yet, like Abraham, we know that this is not our final resting place. We remain pilgrims, seeking the city “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:8-10, KJV).

3. Build Bridges

In 1964, when he was 14, Zia entered a school for the blind in Afghanistan. He became a joyful Christian. Over the next years, he learned to speak the Dari, Pushtu, Arabic, English, German, Russian, and Urdu languages, and to read these languages where Braille script was available. During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, Zia was put in charge of the school for the blind. Later, because he would not join the Communist Party, he was thrown into prison. He escaped to Pakistan in the disguise of a blind beggar, which was his actual state.

In Pakistan, because Zia was translating the Old Testament, he was offered a scholarship to go to the United States to study Hebrew. He declined the opportunity. Why? He was too busy ministering locally. Although he didn’t think he had time to extract himself to learn Hebrew, he did learn Urdu as his seventh language in order to reach Pakistanis. Eventually he was martyred.

Zia represents the millions of Christian witnesses over the centuries who have discovered that the gospel links us with the globe. We begin locally, but we do not stop there.

Today the world desperately needs people like Zia. Economic and technological globalization connect us at superficial levels. Societies must have people who can make deeper connections. Thomas Friedman explores this idea in his powerful book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, where the Lexus represents the global economy and the olive tree represents local traditions. Clifford Geertz writes about the tension between epochalism and essentialism, between the need to be part of the contemporary epoch versus the need to maintain our essential identities, to know who we are. Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Networked Society* argues that although a networked globe means an integration of power, this happens on

a level increasingly divorced from our personal lives. He calls it “structural schizophrenia” and warns, “Unless cultural, political, and physical bridges are deliberately built...we may be heading toward life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet.”

Who can build bridges? What movement spans nations, races, genders, *ethne*, rich and poor, illiterates and Ph.D.’s? It is an awesome thing to realize that there are scarcely any people more suitably poised to connect interculturally than the church universal.

When civil ties break down, it is often believers who can lead societies across bridges of reconciliation, reaching out to clasp hands with brothers and sisters on the other side. Our loyalties do not stop at the edges of our culture. We are pilgrims. We can step out into the margins. Indeed, that has always been the Christian mandate. Abraham was called to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). David sang, “May all the peoples praise you, O God” (Ps 67:3,5). Paul was propelled by a passion for the unreached peoples (Rom 15:20-21). John vibrated with a vision of peoples and tribes and kindreds and nations gathered together around the throne of God at the end of time (Rev 4-5).

Making cross-cultural connections has been our mandate from the beginning. Our involvement in globalization is rooted not in economics but in God’s love for his world. We cannot be isolationists, content in our cocoons. The love of God compels us to step outside our boundaries. Where there is conflict, we step out as peacemakers. Where the gospel is not known, we step out as witnesses. Global connections also make it possible for us to step out to serve the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide more swiftly and comprehensively than ever before.

To whom much has been given, from them much is required. Are we building bridges?

4. Nurture Ethnic Churches

Finally, we must consider distinct ethnic churches in our own communities. Some people ask: “If 11:00 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America, aren’t ethnic churches racist? Certainly they foster evangelism and fellowship. But just because something succeeds doesn’t make it right. The devil has lots of success, too.”

How can we answer? In this chapter, we have laid the foundation for arguing that ethnic churches are justified not only for pragmatic reasons—because

they work—but also because they are rooted in the doctrine of creation. In God’s image, expressing God-given creativity, people have developed different cultures. These cultures offer complementary glimpses of beauty and truth, and complementary critiques of evil.

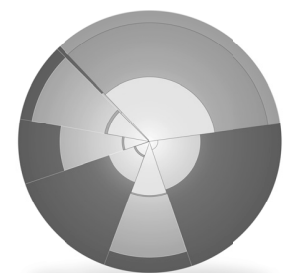
Every church must welcome people of every race and culture. Some people flourish in multicultural churches. Others treasure their own tradition. For them, culture remains important in worship. They pray in their heart language, with meaningful gestures, ululations, and prostrations. Their culture will affect the way they do evangelism, discipling, teaching, administration, counseling, finances, youth work, leader training, discipline, curriculum development, relief, development, and advocacy. Their theologians complement other cultures’ understanding of the Bible.

Separate congregations are not bad. What is bad is a lack of love. This lack of love is too often found in churches in which the majority of the members are from the subculture at the top of the power hierarchy. Wealthier, more powerful churches do have special obligations....

In this context, ethnic churches have great value. Like a mosaic, like a kaleidoscope, the whole spectrum of cultures—and ethnic churches—enriches God’s world. Just as strong, healthy families are the building blocks for strong healthy communities, so strong ethnic churches can be the building blocks for strong multicultural fellowships. It is when we learn commitment and cooperation at home that we are prepared to practice those skills at large.

Ethnic churches are a good place to begin global mission work too. We can partner with international Christians who live in our own cities—students, businessmen, temporary visitors, refugees, immigrants. Many represent relatively “unreached” peoples. Many regularly return to their homeland to help dig wells, set up clinics, teach in Bible schools, publish hymnbooks and training textbooks, etc. We can pray with them, help them grow to maturity as Christ’s disciples, and reach out together to their peoples.

When ethnicity is treasured as a gift but not worshiped as an idol, God’s world is blessed, and we enjoy a foretaste of heaven. Let us keep that vision before us. 🌐



Further Responses to Paul Hiebert

BRUCE GRAHAM, DUANE FRASIER, OMID, RALPH WINTER AND BRUCE KOCH, AND STEVE HAWTHORNE



Bruce Graham

Bruce Graham is an Associate Editor of the Perspectives Reader. He is a member of the Frontier Mission Fellowship and has served in South Asia in a variety of roles.

The concept of people groups, and the dynamic of people movements, as a focus and goal of frontier mission effort brought to light ethnic realities that needed increasing sensitivity in the last 30 years in fulfilling the Great Commission. This focus well served North American mission mobilization efforts that desired a simple, clear, “manageable”, measurable strategy for “completing” the Great Commission. It has launched new efforts and programs with a people group focus. Yet “field strategy” perspectives, and growing understanding of field realities, reveal that Paul Hiebert’s reflections have a lot of truth.

From a field perspective, there are many contexts in our world where “people group” boundaries are not clear, particularly in an increasingly urban and globalized world. Our definitions of a people and an unreached people assumed that evangelistic work had already begun among a people before discernible boundaries could be discerned. Other, more strategic factors were necessary in guiding the beginnings of the work.

In most field contexts, work develops through relational networks, or through recognition of a problem enslaving particular peoples. These networks or problems vary according to context and in some situations may cross “people group” boundaries. Recognizing and working within these relational networks, confronting these problems, has more strategic value than trying to focus on a

particular people group once you’ve “arrived” on the field. Paul’s work in Ephesus turned the whole city “upside down”. It had ramifications among many relational networks and peoples that might not have been discernible or a focus of concern initially.

A “maturing” unreached peoples movement ought to grow and deepen its awareness of the kind of gospel (or “Christianity”) we’re called to bring among these peoples. How do we proclaim and live out a gospel of Christ’s Kingdom? This will keep us from transplanting and proselytizing peoples into a gospel of “Western Christianity, church, religious ritual or program” which comes across as “bad news” for many non-western peoples. May this core issue bring new awareness and sensitivity to a new generation of workers going among unreached peoples. It’s a challenge far beyond the movement, concept, definitions or strategy. It draws people into a Story that restores identity, relational networks, communities and peoples in all their ethnic diversity as they find their place in a Kingdom of Jesus which has power to overcome all earthly kingdoms. Every people finds good news in this Story!



Duane Frasier

Duane Frasier serves with Joshua Project (www.joshuaproject.net), a ministry of the U.S. Center for World Mission.

Throughout mission history there has been a progression in our strategy to complete the Great Commission. Taking up the call from Acts 1:8, the church has advanced the message geographically in ripples to the ends of the earth. *Geography* has always figured into mission strategy. The Church has largely understood the need to

communicate the message to each of the world's many *languages* mentioned in Revelation 7:9, and great strides have been made to identify and produce stories and materials in these languages. Every individual uses at least one language to communicate in a given situation.

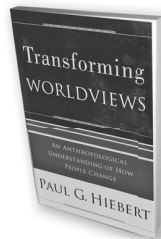
From passages such as Joshua 4:24 we have realized that God's heart is for the world's *peoples*. Overlapping efforts to identify, categorize and present ethnic realities have produced a solid, if imperfect, understanding of the diversity of ethnicity and the consequent need for diversity in focus and ministry. Every individual hearkens from at least one ethnic background.

Observe that each of these realities, in succession, is increasingly difficult to understand and quantify. The number of countries is dwarfed by the number of languages spoken, which in turn gives place to the greater number of people groups worldwide. It is difficult enough to get organizations and international bodies to agree on what constitutes an "official" country, to say nothing about achieving consensus as to what makes up a language as uniquely distinct. And delving into what defines or distinguishes a people with its "barriers of understanding or acceptance" to message or messenger often brings bewilderment.

Each of these foci – *geography, language and ethnicity* – is a biblical way to measure the spread of the gospel. Each has enjoyed its heyday in popular mission efforts. And each has had one or several key proponents calling us to identify and fill in gaps in the reach of the gospel.

Interestingly, none of the three perspectives can be described as "mission complete." The globe has been circumnavigated by God's messengers, but there remain untouched areas geographically. The annual discovery of previously unknown languages elongates the noble task of getting the message into all the world's tongues. And by no means has the gospel reached all the earth's "peoples," regardless of how they are defined.

There are a number of realities to be reckoned with in the mission to reach all peoples. Issues such as migration, urbanization and globalization, loss of cultural identity and new ways of social networking will help us to avoid oversimplification in regard to any strategy. The Body of Christ needs to move forward in its mission with unity and humility to ensure that we do not create islands of strategy and emphasis. One ministry may take a language-



based approach. Another may concentrate on a specific region of the world. But the overarching purpose is to ensure that we get the gospel to all peoples.

This is why the people group movement is so important and why streams of other kinds of strategy feed into that movement. 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 movement has been informed by other movements and should give rise to further movements. But it cannot be abandoned and must not be perceived as obsolete, for it is a central point for additional strategies, and it is thoroughly biblical.

Omid

Omid is a pseudonym for an expatriate researcher working in South Asia and providing Joshua Project with data on people groups in South Asia.

What one wants to achieve in an urban situation, or any situation, influences the details one looks at within the ethnic and social diversity one confronts. My comments focus on South Asia in particular, and on South Asian migrants to some extent.

Probably no attention will be paid to social distinctives if you want to get 20 people together in a church setting. Even in a church of 200, there may be little to no regard for the communities (people groups) from which individuals come. But if you want a people movement (assuming this goal is not mere rhetoric), much attention must be given to communities and their inter-relations.

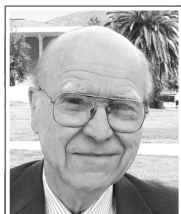
Yes, in an urban environment ethnic and social boundaries are more fluid and porous, but the core values and beliefs of people may still be intact, similar to those of their parents, grandparents, and other ancestors. The real issue is perspective and strategy: if you are looking for ethnic and social distinctives, you see them, and if you are looking for the breakdown and merging of distinctives, that is what you see.

Let's attempt to view things from the standpoint of people on the receiving end of mission and ministry. In the 2001 census for the Municipality of Kathmandu, around 662,000 of 672,000 people

recorded their caste / people group. Individuals knew their caste and tribe, allowing it to be recorded. Typically in an Indian city, 99% of those of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe status are able to supply their community / people group / caste / tribe name when asked. This is true in both urban and rural settings.

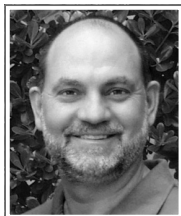
The starting point, I would assume, is “What is the community the people themselves consider they belong to?”, bearing in mind the initial answer may be the answer they think we want. But after two years of living among them and being trusted by relationship, we may find that their answers are more detailed. There is too much of classifying people by what we think they are, rather than who they perceive themselves to be. That is arrogance on our part, not a respect of people as people, who are living as members of communities.

Let us start with the social distinctives people make and with how they perceive themselves. The significance of the distinctives may vary from locality to locality. What is accepted in one locality may not be valid even a street away. If the distinctives seem unimportant in one location, wonderful, but it would be a failure of thinking to assume it is so everywhere.



Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch

Ralph Winter founded the U.S. Center for World Mission and served as a co-editor of the Perspectives Reader. Bruce Koch is an Associate Editor of the Perspectives Reader. The following is excerpted, by permission, from an article by Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task,” in the fourth edition of the Perspectives Reader (William Carey Library, 2009).



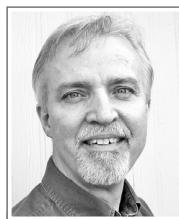
Each of [the four main] approaches to various kinds of peoples has a proper and valuable use. *Blocs* help us sum up the task. The *ethnolinguistic* approach helps us mobilize. *Sociopeoples* help us begin evangelizing. Beware of taking ethnolinguistic lists too seriously, however. They are a good place to begin strategizing church planting efforts, but cross-cultural workers should be prepared for surprising discoveries when confronted by the cultural realities on the field....

As history unfolds and global migration increases, more and more people groups are being dispersed throughout the entire globe. Dealing with this

phenomenon is now called “diaspora missiology.” Not many agencies take note of the strategic value of reaching the more accessible fragments of these “global peoples.” The new Global Network of Mission Structures (www.gnms.net) is intended to help agencies do just that.

Another reason to be cautious when applying people group thinking is the reality that powerful forces such as urbanization, migration, assimilation and globalization are changing the composition and identity of people groups all the time. The complexities of the world’s peoples cannot be neatly reduced to distinct, non-overlapping, bounded sets of individuals with permanent impermeable boundaries. Members of any community have complex relationships and may have multiple identities and allegiances. Those identities and allegiances are subject to change over time.

People group thinking is a strategic awareness that is of particular value when individuals have a strong group identity and their everyday life is strongly determined by a specific shared culture.



Steve Hawthorne

Steve Hawthorne is a co-editor of the Perspectives Reader and the director of WayMakers.

“Is the people group approach passé in that it seems to reflect a simplistic, dated, non-dynamic idea of people

groups no longer found in our urbanized, globalized world?” Doing mission by focusing on people groups has become more firmly established than ever. Two things help put Hiebert’s comments in context.

1. People groups: simplistic as promoted, richly complex as practiced

If we can speak of a “People Group movement” as Hiebert does, as a development of the Church Growth movement, we have to recognize two aspects to it. It is indeed a complex and long-lived movement. For decades we have seen a somewhat interconnected global network of mobilizers and field missionaries with passionate public exponents, recognized leaders, numerous publications, seasoned practitioners, critics, conferences, policy statements, programs and more, all of which emphasize people-specific church-planting among ethnolinguistic groups as a desired outcome of mission. In the excerpts in question, it was not Hiebert’s purpose to offer an exhaustive description of this movement. If he had done so, he would have distinguished what I call *promoters* from *practitioners*.

First, consider the people group *promoters*. By this I mean the publications and voices promoting the idea of reaching every people group, using a list of people groups, always aimed at a popular or general audience. Despite the asterisks and exceptions that accompany such lists, there is the abiding misunderstanding that such lists are intended to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Critics have always been able to forage through the lists and slogans to find rash statements in order to assemble a flammable “straw man” argument, claiming that the entire people group approach is based on a static, bygone, simplistic understanding of people groups.

There are also what we can refer to as *practitioners*. These are the thousands who have been working in the midst of populations distant from, or distrusting of, any existing churches. It is naive to think that these practitioners are naive about the boundaries and complexities of the peoples they serve. Anyone who stays on beyond a short-term becomes aware of the intricacy of social distinctions, the complexity of urban migrations and associations, and the fluidity of the constantly morphing, dying and multiplying ethnic identities. The practitioners have sustained the people group movement by steady reports of people groups as they really are. Their reports of migrating, inter-marrying, multi-lingual, ever-shifting people groups have seasoned the understanding of the boundaries and beauties of particular peoples.

Despite the occasional anecdote of a disappointed novice, who somehow can't locate the people group his church adopted, the thousands of human years of mission labor in the last three decades have demonstrated the value of focusing on people groups. If focusing on people groups *as they actually are* were not a valuable way of mission, the entire approach would have been forgotten long ago.

2. Recognizing social complexity may blur identities and boundaries but actually highlights the importance of people-specific ministry.

Even Hiebert's later writings support a nuanced understanding of societal groups and the validity of planting churches focused on particular people groups. In *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*, published in 1995, Hiebert devotes entire chapters to understanding peasant and urban societies and how to plant churches amidst those societies. Regarding peasant societies, he says, “If we plant a church in one group, people from other groups may not be willing or permitted to attend. Consequently, to effectively evangelize a village we may initially need to plant separate churches in the different

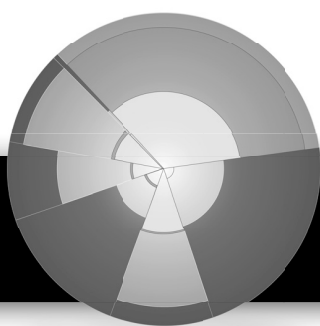
communities. Social distances are as important as geographic ones. People may live a few yards from each other but socially be a hundred miles apart” (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 239).

“Ahah!” we may hear from a critic of people-specific mission efforts, “He says such things about how things go in a ‘village,’ but everything changes in the city.” But peasant societies, as defined by Hiebert, are not small, closed-system social structures. He groups peasant as well as urban societies as “large-scale societies which cannot be cut up into distinct, bounded people groups without seriously distorting the picture.”

Urban societies, far from being homogenized by forces of globalization, in Hiebert's teaching were always complex variegated realities, with an intricate overlay and interplay of associations, networks, neighborhoods, lineages, tribal enclaves, languages, social strata, migrations and political pressures. Planting churches in urban settings, in Hiebert's view, requires careful attention to all of these dynamics. Each of the steadily changing subsets of people is deserving of particular focus. When it comes to church planting, there is often a place for multi-ethnic churches. But even multi-ethnic churches flourish best when the distinctive ethnicities that constitute them are recognized and even celebrated. But often Hiebert says, “City churches tend to serve their own kind of people. Who reaches out to groups of people who have no churches? Unless the church intentionally plants new congregations among unreached people groups and neighborhoods, they will not hear the gospel” (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 341).

One of the cardinal principles of urban ministry is to shape ministry around the realities of always unique and ever-changing urban settings. It is commonplace among urban mission circles to speak of “exegeting” a city. Hiebert himself didn't use the language of exegesis with respect to cities, but he steadily called for “relevant research” of all the different “populations, ethnic communities, class differences” and more (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 341). Among urban mission practitioners, a large part of any “exegesis” of a city is to be profoundly aware of the diverse groups and the dynamics which form them. How is this not in a basic way the people group approach?

Instead of debunking the people group approach, in this instance Hiebert serves as a constructive critic of the people group approach. As he did throughout his career, he helps us to dynamically define people groups and to deal with the theological complexities of people-specific churches. 🌐



Taking This Conversation Forward:

“Reassessing the Frontiers” at ISFM 2010

BRAD GILL

Global mission gatherings can jump-start new directions for a global Church, and the world-level consultations planned for 2010 have all the potential to do so. As we look back, we can see that the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization sprouted two new directions from two separate critiques of evangelical mission. For more than 30 years these two streams have run parallel, only incidentally fusing their emphases at intermittent global gatherings. Regular readers of *Mission Frontiers* are conversant with the first stream that has emphasized people groups and especially “unreached peoples,” as revisited in this issue of *MF*. That stream grew from Ralph Winter’s introduction of the idea of cultural distance into the challenge of evangelizing the world.

The second stream grew from a plethora of prophetic voices among churches in the non-Western world. It called for a more comprehensive gospel, the yeast of the Kingdom, one that can transform

societies, bless the poor and the destitute, and liberate the oppressed

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of the world. This “transformational” mission has generated its own mission organizations, educational institutions and missiological societies over three decades. Its emphasis was front-and-center at the recent Urbana student mission conference, an indication that it is capturing the minds and hearts of a new student generation.

A third reality, globalization, quite outside the control of mission agendas, has run parallel to both these streams of mission. Global mission gatherings in 2010 are scrambling to reassess the impact of global systems on their mission endeavors. Their periscopes will struggle to break the surface of this ocean of change. Appreciating 100 years of mission since Edinburgh 1910 is one thing, but assessing the phenomenal changes since 1974 will be breathtaking.

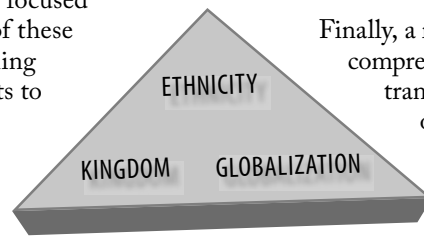
These three topics are the backdrop for the (admittedly immodest) agenda for this year’s gathering of the North American chapter of

the International Society for Frontier Missiology (ISFM). Under the theme “Reassessing the Frontiers: Ethnicity, Globalization and the Kingdom of God,” the ISFM will examine the intersection and potential integration

of these three topics: unreached peoples (ethnicity), transformation (the Kingdom), and globalization. ISFM 2010 will take place in Charlotte, North Carolina September 21-23, preceding the North American Mission Leaders Conference September 23-25 in the same city.

Keynote sessions at ISFM 2010 will examine how globalization has caused religious resurgence across the world. In the past decade, the ISFM and its journal (the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*) have focused much on the borderlands of these religious civilizations, shining the spotlight on movements to Christ behind increasingly radioactive frontiers, in what are now popularly known as “insider” movements. At ISFM 2010 Todd Johnson (co-editor of the *Atlas of Global Christianity* and director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity) will bring a sweeping analysis of how globalization impacts these religious frontiers, often creating either firewalls or new thresholds between world religions. Other mission voices will respond from the Buddhist world (Kang-San Tan, formerly OMF research desk, now Redcliffe College) as well as from other religious traditions.

As this issue of *Mission Frontiers* intimates, the most pressing question at ISFM 2010 may be the impact of globalization on “people groups.” Robert Priest (professor at Trinity School of Intercultural Studies) will survey the development of our anthropological lenses on “people groups,” refining our grasp of the contextual complexity of peoples amidst global change. Other sessions will respond and expand on both the increasing “hybridities” and the ethnic explosiveness which impact the boundaries of caste, tribe and people.



Amidst the global pressure of multiculturalism there are renewed calls in the global Church for culturally-hybrid congregations and the melting down of differences. Hence ISFM 2010 will offer sessions to re-examine the biblical foundations of ethnicity and cultural difference, addressing whether a “higher” biblical view of the local church requires a blending of cultures. Indigenous mission voices from the “First Nations,” ranging from Oceania to Africa, will respond on the role of ethnic revitalization in their Christian identity.

Finally, a rising generation is calling for a more comprehensive “Kingdom mission” that transforms the evil injustices and inequities of global society. Bruce Graham (Frontier Mission Fellowship) will address the subject of the “Gospel of the Kingdom” from his two decades of biblical training among the indigenous mission efforts of India. Can we reconcile the beauty of ethnic identity with the Kingdom transformation of identity? Can a “Kingdom Mission” open up new and creative breakthroughs for service across difficult frontiers? And what is the Kingdom story from which we draw our sense of mission? Responses to this Kingdom dynamic will come from younger leaders and campus ministries in touch with this emerging generation.

Look for more details on ISFM 2010 in the next two issues of *Mission Frontiers*, but for now I encourage many MF readers to put September 21-23 (Charlotte, NC) on your calendars. In coming weeks further details and registration guidelines will be posted to the Website of the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (www.ijfm.org). 🌐



Who Am I? Who Are We? And Does It Matter?

DAVE DATEMA, GENERAL DIRECTOR, FRONTIER MISSION FELLOWSHIP

If the U.S. Center for World Mission is known for anything, it is the concept of reaching unreached people groups. We have been one of the champions of people group thinking, and our very identity is wound up in it. As a result, it would be quite natural for us to be defensive about people group critiques. We could become “intellectual tyrants” who believe too strongly in the ideas that have shaped us. It is hard to top Tolstoy’s observation:

I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept even the simplest and most obvious truth if it would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have delighted in explaining to colleagues, proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabric of their lives.

Profound words! Intellectual pride can easily get in the way of clear thinking. Who likes to admit that he is wrong when his professional credibility is on the line? So this is a trap we must avoid. I hope you’ve seen a balanced and fair response from our writers on the people group critique. I find the discussion invigorating because it prompts us to continue to push our understanding deeper and deeper. There is a continuous need to reassess what we “know” based on the rapid increase of information and new knowledge out there. In fact, you could say that mission history is, in part, the record of new ideas and insights that shape and reshape mission practice. The unreached peoples concept was in this sense nothing new; it was simply one in a long string of new ideas that changed the way we think about and practice mission. More new ideas have since been championed on various fronts, and

more will inevitably mold our thinking in the future. That being said, some ideas are more profound and more lasting than others. In my opinion, the ideas that last the longest, that separate themselves from mere fads, are the ones that most closely reflect reality. For 35 years now, the people group concept has been widely accepted as an idea that accurately reflects the reality that a person’s greatest allegiance is to the social/cultural/religious community into which (s)he is born.

Is this still a present reality? Are we making too much of people group identity? Are we transposing a framework/categorization onto a reality that no longer fits? It is true that people groups have never been, nor are today, monolithic structures. It seems obvious today that there is great segmentation within people groups, and not just those in urban settings. Yet ethnic realities remain very strong. I would propose that both are true: in some cases ethnic identity remains curiously strong and in others quite malleable.

I find it interesting that many who read this magazine, and are therefore sincerely interested in this topic, are the same people whose own ethnicity is significantly diluted. I’m referring to your typical white American. While our forefathers kept ethnic lines “pure” for awhile after immigrating to America, it only took a few generations for people to start marrying outside those lines (as is presently happening with more recent immigrants), with the result that many of us describe our ethnic heritage using fractions. I myself am half Dutch with the other half some combination of Irish, Scotch and English. While there are some “full-blooded” Americans out there that represent only one ethnic strain, most are a combination of several.

Ethnic rigidity was not strong enough to overcome geographic isolation. Eventually, ethnicity was diluted and the people group identity was changed to the extent that many of us of Dutch descent do not speak a lick of Dutch, know nothing of Dutch history and culture, and would be just as clueless on a trip to the Netherlands as we would on a trip to Africa. So while there is still a strong Dutch heritage, it is largely a veneer that provides good jokes but not a lot of substance. We may have some wooden shoes on the mantle or some windmill spoons in the kitchen, but our “Dutchness” is largely decorative, not formative.

Yet, on the other hand, some people groups seem strong enough to remain intact amidst the forces of geographic isolation. Witness the many Muslim populations in Europe. Even after several decades now, they appear to demonstrate a resilience of people group identity.

Many of us embody the very feature that calls into question people group thinking. We exemplify the fact that people group realities do change, sometimes quite drastically, to the extent that a new people group is formed. There are now several barriers of both understanding and acceptance that separate me from my relatives in the Netherlands. Like it or not, I have become part of a separate people group. When one thinks of the recent and current immigration that is taking place all around the world, it is easy to see why questions are being raised about people group thinking. How many new people groups are in the process of being formed as we speak? And yet for others this is strikingly not the new reality; for these, ethnic distinction and boundaries are safeguarded. As with so many issues in mission, context will reveal varying realities. This discussion is just beginning. 🌐

TOKYO 2010'S NEW TECHNOLOGY VISION:

Building Global Networking Platforms
to Finish the Task



DAVID TAYLOR

Imagine a place where intercessors, adopting churches, Christian businesses, mission agencies and funding partners can form global alliances to reach the world's remaining unreached and unengaged peoples. Or imagine a forum where experts in technology can hear from field missionaries what their needs are and custom-design solutions for them. Or a database where Christian professionals can find tentmaking opportunities in the 10/40 Window. Or a resource directory where

MISSIONOLOGISTS HAVE
DESCRIBED GLOBAL MISSION
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TO EVERYWHERE.

mission agencies can see what other organizations have developed across the world to address common problems.

If you keep imagining along those lines, you will probably find yourself in a place

that mission strategists are calling the "Last Mile Calling" (LMC) project, an online collaborative Web application that will be launched at the Tokyo 2010 Global Mission Consultation May 11-14. Unlike other global networking initiatives of the past, which have been primarily envisioned and resourced by Westerners, this one comes from the non-Western world, including the funding and programming.

In networking parlance, the "last mile" is the technical name given to the final stretch that completes a communications network. It is often the most difficult and complicated of networking tasks, involving the largest number of connections. With Tokyo 2010's LMC platform this means just one

thing: building the "last mile" connections between the global Body of Christ and the least-reached peoples of the world.

Missiologists have described global mission in the 21st century as being from everywhere to everywhere. The LMC will be a reflection of that reality, enabling adopting churches in Latin America to connect with adopting churches in Korea that can partner with local ministries in India to reach an unengaged group in Uttar Pradesh. Or the LMC will empower intercessors around the world to join with a group of on-site indigenous prayer teams entering into new territory for the Kingdom among an unengaged group in Iran. Or the LMC will connect a Christian software company in India with investors in Singapore to start a Kingdom company among a least-reached people group in China.

To facilitate this kind of strategic networking to finish the task, the LMC project has developed a special listing of the world's remaining least-reached people groups, drawn from the three principal global databases of people groups (the World Christian Database, the International Mission Board database, and the USCWM's Joshua Project database). Presently the LMC list consists of about 4,800 peoples with the least access to the gospel, of which about 57% are unengaged with no ongoing church-planting activity. The current list can be viewed at www.fmresearch.info. It will be constantly reviewed and updated, and feedback is sought to improve the accuracy of the data.

A Global Mapping Initiative

In addition to the Last Mile Calling, another important project and tool that will be introduced at Tokyo 2010 is a Global Church Planting Database system. This tool will enable national Web sites to be built in local languages, showing the progress of church planting in every village, town and city and using a central mapping server. Thanks to the diligent work of Campus Crusade for Christ,

David Taylor is the research director of the Global Network of Mission Structures, one of the primary sponsoring groups of the Tokyo 2010 Global Mission Consultation. For more information on how you can participate in this gathering, visit www.tokyo2010.org.

this global database now includes demographic information on over three million communities in which 99% of humanity resides.

Additionally, this system will enable a strategy coordinator to download demographic data on a particular people group that will show every place where this group resides geographically. This data can then be loaded into an offline mapping program called ep3 (every place, every person, every people) being developed by Mission Aviation Fellowship, where ministry progress can be securely tracked. When new communities of this group are discovered, they can be added to the offline map and dataset, which can then be uploaded back to the global demographic database.

The ultimate objective is to enable every people group to have its own church-planting movement strategy in place with a team of indigenous leaders committed to seeing every person in every community of their people group have access to the gospel and to a disciple-making fellowship. With the combination of the Global Church Planting Database and the ep3 mapping program, such CPM strategy teams will have a significant tool in their hands for planning, analysis and mobilization. Most importantly, this simple system designed with one particular purpose will take the power of mapping directly into the hands of practitioners without requiring any kind of training in cartography or the use of expensive, sophisticated mapping software.

But all this is just the beginning of what can be done with new technologies now emerging. Increasingly, a growing coalition of programmers and engineers are telling the global mission community: "Tell us what you need and we'll build it." The Technology and Mission Task Force, which will be launched at Tokyo 2010, intends to facilitate communication between these two parts of the Body of Christ. The hope is that this will lead to new innovations that can be useful to missionaries around the world facing similar challenges.

In the days when the tabernacle was being built in the Old Testament, God anointed two men "with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of craft" to help get the job done (Ex. 31:2-3). Could today's believing engineers and computer programmers be the modern-day equivalent of such men? Chosen to help build the house of God made up of all peoples? Very likely so, and may their tribe greatly increase! If you are such a person, feel free to contact us and we will plug you into this growing network (tokyo2010@uscwm.org). !

Top 30 Unengaged Mega-Peoples in the LMC Project

These groups are not known to be engaged by anyone, anywhere in the world with a long-term church-planting strategy and commitment.

| Base Country | People Group | Global | Major Religion |
|--------------|--------------------|------------|-----------------|
| Pakistan | Eastern Pathan | 14,849,789 | Islam |
| India | Khandelwal | 5,905,880 | Hinduism |
| India | Lunia | 5,324,430 | Hinduism |
| India | Bahna | 3,790,996 | Ethnic Religion |
| India | Bagdi | 3,627,470 | Ethnic Religion |
| India | Bhar | 3,307,570 | Hinduism |
| India | Pod | 3,042,089 | Ethnic Religion |
| Sudan | Gaaliin | 2,638,958 | Islam |
| Syria | Arab, North Syrian | 2,151,167 | Islam |
| India | Kaikolar | 2,027,001 | Hinduism |
| Iran | Afghan Persian | 2,000,000 | Islam |
| India | Bharbhunja | 1,953,431 | Hinduism |
| India | Halwai | 1,920,333 | Hinduism |
| India | Kanet | 1,870,179 | Hinduism |
| Ethiopia | Beni Shangul | 1,779,732 | Islam |
| Libya | Arab, Cyrenaican | 1,673,130 | Islam |
| Turkey | Zaza, Northern | 1,515,000 | Islam |
| Turkey | Zaza, Southern | 1,515,000 | Islam |
| India | Rathia | 1,468,763 | Hinduism |
| Sudan | Guhayna | 1,377,198 | Islam |
| China | Pingdi Yao | 1,323,217 | Ethnic Religion |
| Eritrea | Tigre | 1,273,854 | Islam |
| Madagascar | Antesaka | 1,262,821 | Ethnic Religion |
| India | Daroga | 1,220,725 | Hinduism |
| Sudan | Katcha-Kadugli | 1,195,093 | Islam |
| Syria | Shiites | 1,195,093 | Islam |
| Iran | Afshari | 1,136,000 | Islam |
| China | Zhuang, Guibian | 1,109,017 | Ethnic Religion |
| India | Taga | 1,103,191 | Hinduism |
| Indonesia | Kangean | 1,100,000 | Islam |

Anticipating the Seventh Edition of OPERATION WORLD

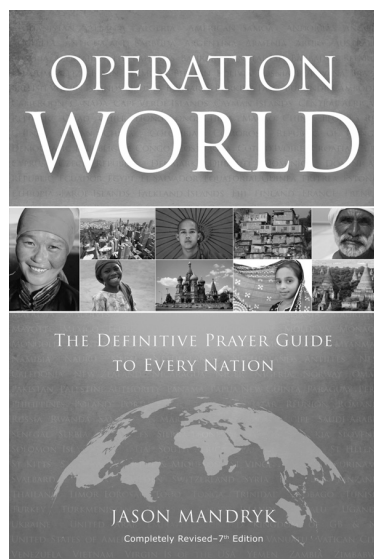
Having worked alongside Patrick Johnstone for years on *Operation World*, Jason Mandryk knew the challenges of compiling its latest edition after Patrick retired. Jason was “stepping into big shoes.”

“Since 1974, as many as 2½ million copies of *Operation World* have been sold in all language editions,” Jason said. Furthermore, God has used *Operation World* to touch millions of additional people because of its use in small and large groups, congregations and conferences. Missionaries, mission-minded congregations and pastors throughout the world have used this prayer handbook to spread a passion to reach the nations – and the task is not yet finished!

Although interest in missions and the Great Commission is growing in unprecedented ways in the non-Western, Majority world, material that aids mission-minded Christians in understanding and praying for the nations is limited, even in English. That’s why *Operation World* continues to be the first resource to which many people turn. This reality challenges Jason and his team to maintain the high standards of accuracy that Patrick established.

“Today there is more readily accessible information than ever before,” he said. “Our challenge is no longer solely trying to find information; it is to separate accurate information from the dross, to sift through the massive volume of noise to get to the signal.”

Thus the *Operation World* team collaborates with thousands of people worldwide, including expatriate missionaries and indigenous Christian leaders. “Expat missionaries provide external perspective



to issues that is informative and helpful,” Jason stated. “We also cherish input from the national believers, who bring an insider’s perspective regarding which issues need to be prayed for. This helps to keep our prayer points relevant and strategic. As these different perspectives come together, we get closer to achieving an accurate picture of what’s happening throughout the world.”

Although *Operation World* covers statistical issues from an evangelical, missions-minded perspective, Jason quickly added, “The purpose of this effort is not simply to compile a body of knowledge but to spur people on to prayer and mission. Our

inevitably imperfect and incomplete data can still accomplish that goal. The nature of why *Operation World* has been able to accomplish what it does is as much about the relationships that have formed as it is about the statistics.

“Today communication is much easier, and most Christian workers have a more collaborative mentality. Thousands of people from nearly every country are involved in *Operation World*. The sheer amount of collaboration occurring for this latest edition was many times more than what we were able to achieve in the past.”

A Reality Check

People—particularly in the Western World—are fixated on instant culture and up-to-the-minute information. However, the very nature of good research and information means that any statistic in print or on a monitor is already outdated. And there are places, areas, and regions of the world where it is difficult to obtain any information. “We don’t

pretend to have up-to-the-minute statistics,” Jason said. “We attempt to trace the movement of God’s harvest force and his work among the nations through the years up to the current day. Reaching and discipling the peoples of the world is not achieved overnight, accomplished during a ten-day mission trip, or even during a ten-year period of missionary service. It

requires generations to achieve. *Operation World* is just a small part of that. We try to take a ‘snapshot’ in each period of time to measure progress and see where we are at currently. In our research and within the unfolding of God’s big plan for humanity, we necessarily must maintain a long-term view.”

Since the previous update of *Operation World* in 2001, the world has changed dramatically, signaling the need for a new edition. “It is a frustration that we can only produce a volume every few years,” Jason said. “Since 2001, God has been doing amazing things. For example, hundreds of previously unengaged people groups now have believing communities in their midst. We’ve seen the growth of the mission-sending movement from just about every corner of the Majority world and the emergence of a truly global evangelicalism.”

God Calls—and Provides Affirmation

When asked about the sheer amount of work involved in compiling *Operation World*, Jason replied, “I’m grateful that God has called me into a ministry that is an ideal combination of the temperament, skills and gifts that he has given me. I feel like I am really in the right place—a place where he is using me. It is a privilege that every day I am able to hear and read about how God is at work, using his church to bring every nation into a saving knowledge of and relationship with himself.”

While visiting a ministry to street children in Ukraine, Jason still faced a time of questioning. “I saw a man on the frontlines, loving and reaching out to throwaway street kids who had never experienced Jesus’ love. I thought, *What good am I really doing? In my normal ministry, I sit in a comfortable office and crunch numbers and write prayer points. Compared to someone like this who serves on the leading edge, I’m*



Jason Mandryk

doing nothing. During a subsequent conversation with this fellow, I found out that God had called him into his ministry to street children through *Operation World*. When he saw that prayer point, God touched his heart and called him to Ukraine. That’s when I realized that although I am not on those frontlines in the same way that he is, the calling God gave me

nonetheless is impacting the frontlines. That really encouraged me.”

Almost everywhere he goes, Jason comes into contact with people who are, or have been, missionaries serving in their field as a result of using *Operation World* to pray. “I’m continually interacting,” he said, “with people who tell me, ‘I became a missionary here because of praying through *Operation World*.’ Country by country, agency by agency, region by region, I hear this testimony again and again.”

Jason has recognized something else about his calling and its impact. “In contrast to some of the amazing interceding saints I have encountered who have been filling up the bowls of prayer faithfully for years, I have been met with a conviction that I could be a much more prayerful person. Despite this, I don’t feel obligated to be the world’s most committed intercessor in order to deliver an excellent version of *Operation World*. God calls us all to a greater life of prayerfulness, yet I think he has clearly gifted some people in prayer. He has also gifted people in the *Operation World* team, including me, to serve as a resource to the global Church. Yet one cannot help but pray daily for issues related to the Great Commission when you are constantly engaging with such information. God really does hear our prayers and answers them in ways that are at times mysterious to us but no less powerful or profound. On a weekly basis, I encounter people using *Operation World* who have gone out to serve as answers to their own prayers.” 🌐

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RAISING LOCAL RESOURCES

Large Churches and Short-Term Teams

GLENN SCHWARTZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WORLD MISSION ASSOCIATES

There are days, after nearly thirty years of my current ministry, when I wonder who is listening to what we are saying about healthy sustainability for mission churches around the world. And then I get an e-mail that gives me a burst of inspiration. The following came from a mission executive who has a burden for what he sees happening:

I wish to applaud you for all of your efforts in raising the issue of dependency in the missions enterprise Although I believe that most mission organizations contributed to dependency for far too many years, I think the problem has been exponentially increased due to the approach many large churches have taken to missions in the past decade. It is their attitude of arrogance - due to ignorance of the missiological issues involved - that contributes to the problem. In addition, it is the incredible number of short-term teams they send and their high dollar projects that have caused greater problems than even those caused by mission agencies and long-term missionaries. I find that many in the missions world often do not even want to think about the issue of dependency because having to deal with it would greatly impact their projects and programs which involve a lot of dollars.

These are strong words regarding the current church and mission scene, but he graphically describes what I have observed for years. Why is it that so often that the larger our churches become, the less they seem to pay attention to the cultural lessons learned by missionaries and mission agencies over the years? It is far too easy to say, "We will do things our way. After all,

we have the people, the programs and the financial resources to make things happen - on our terms and schedule." Of course, this attitude fails to consider the long-term implications of the dependency seeds that are being sown.

You and I are living in a day when the trend is toward more short-term engagement that often does not (or cannot) include adequate time for language and culture studies. Little wonder that there are costly and inappropriate projects spread far and wide in the mission world. It forces one to think seriously about the cost of "doing missions" in a short-term way when the long-term results include prolonged dependency. Although it is expensive to send long-term missionaries from one country to another, consider the cost of short-term missions that may have little or no long-term mission impact.

But I can hear someone saying that short-term missions might have positive implications that may not be immediately recognized. This reminds me a bit of an experience I had in Central Africa in the 1960s when we were debating the effectiveness of some mission programs. One older missionary became defensive about what he was hearing and said something to this effect: "It is as if we toss a pebble in the pond and the ripples go out, and we may never see how far they go." The one leading the discussion quickly agreed with what the missionary said but added this: "You are right about the ripples going out, but that is not what we are talking about here today. We are concerned about tossing the pebble and missing the pond."

Let me hasten to add that not all large churches ignore training for short-term workers. Some have devised rigorous training programs before sending out teams. This may include reading books on cross-cultural ministry along with mentoring each candidate. Such churches also do a commendable job of debriefing the participants upon their return. May their kind increase!

I simply wish to remind leaders in churches, large and small, that the missionary enterprise by its nature is a cross-cultural effort. It requires humility, a teachable spirit and cultural sensitivity if we hope to "bear fruit that will last" (John 15:16 NIV). Otherwise, we may leave behind a situation that someone else, some day, will need to correct after the short-term team has gone home.

In my book *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* I have an entire chapter (18) on short-term missions. I call that chapter "Maximizing the Benefits of Short-Term Missions." I attempt to show that I believe in short-term missions - having been a two-year volunteer myself in the 1960s in Africa. But what I am calling for today is a generous infusion of humility and cross-cultural sensitivity - the kind that most get by good training while only a very few seem to come by it naturally. 🌐

I welcome response by e-mail at glennschwartz@wmausa.org.

**When Charity Destroys Dignity* is available by ordering online at www.wmausa.org.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS



The “Prayer and Care” Mission and Missionaries

GREG H. PARSONS, GENERAL DIRECTOR, U.S. CENTER FOR WORLD MISSION

You’ve seen it. After a church service, people come down to the front of the church for prayer.

For some churches, this is a weekly pattern. Others designate a room where people can go for prayer. And churches want to be sure they pray for their missionaries when they are visiting (and, of course, when they are away!).

All this is to the good. I am all for prayer. I’ve seen some of what God can do through prayer. I realize I have much to learn about prayer.

But I thought recently: what would a new Christian think the church is all about by observing this kind of pattern? Imagine that you are in the church and see this happen week-by-week. You would be impressed that the church really *cares* for its people. In a time of need, you would go down front yourself.

A church wants its people to know that it cares for and serves the hurting. But does such a concern imply that the church is mainly about, well, ... *us* and our needs?

A by-product, in many churches, is that the *missions* conferences are really *missionary* conferences. The church wants to help the missionaries feel loved, which is OK. But missionaries have shared with me that, while they are grateful for the prayer and care, they really would like someone to *know* and *care* about their actual *work*. While we hope missionaries thrive in the midst of difficulty, they often do not sense that their support teams are in serious partnership with the work itself. That impacts their effectiveness.

Unfortunately, missionaries don’t always do a great job at effectively communicating about their work. But I wonder at times if they aren’t motivated to communicate effectively, in part, because they wonder if anyone is carefully listening.

Certainly there are elements of a healthy church that focus on its members. We are to grow in accountability in our local fellowships. We are to be devoted to the Word of God as the foundation for all truth. We’d all agree that the church is to be reaching out, sharing the love of God in Christ



with those around them. But sometimes we *look* and *act* like our main concern is ourselves.

It might be wise for each church to think again about this: What is the church in its local expression? What is its core purpose? What is it that we are trying to do when we talk about “planting” a church here or “over there?”

First, it is helpful to get out of our minds that “church” is a building or a meeting. Ephesians 3:10 suggests that the Church must be a vessel to demonstrate God’s wisdom.

Yes, leaders such as elders, pastors and teachers are to care for the flock, but look again at how the Bible describes their intended care. 1 Peter 5:1-4 talks more about oversight and leadership, emphasizing that the elders should “not lord it over” those they serve, and that they should “be examples to the flock.” Care here seems to constitute admonition and exhortation in addition to encouragement. In Acts 20:28, as Paul is about to depart, he instructs the elders to “Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock,” but the context clarifies that Paul has been

announcing the whole purposes of God to this flock, and he also warns them about wolves who will come to devour.

People are praying about a wide range of concerns when they “go up front” at the end of church services. But let’s work and pray so that more believers will “go up to the altar” (at church or in their closets), imitate Acts 4:24-30, and pray for boldness in the midst of persecution and suffering, both for themselves and for their missionaries whose work they increasingly understand.

That would greatly encourage and empower missionaries—and the rest of us—to press on in the battle! Remember James 4:2b, “You do not have because you do not ask.” As John Piper put it, “Prayer causes things to happen that would not happen if you did not pray.” (You can find a link to a video quote of John Piper on my Facebook page; let me know you saw reference to this link in *MF* when you ask me to “friend” you.) **f**