

A Word of Counsel to UPG Initiatives

According to Joshua Project, 41.5 percent of the world's population is unreached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, statistics show an imbalance of Christian workers—despite the great need among unreached people groups (UPGs), most missionaries and funding go to reached areas.

In recent years, these statistics have led to a concerted drive to reach the unreached people groups of the world.

This is all good! Actually, it is fantastic!

But I have a concern with how we go about reaching them. The editor of *Mission Frontiers*, Rick Wood, once wrote:

It is not enough just to send missionaries to every tribe and tongue. **If we bring an incomplete or culture-bound gospel along with an ineffective model of doing discipleship**, then we have failed.¹

I have seen, read, and heard of Western-driven UPG efforts that employ short-term teams and use foreign funding to drive these initiatives. Well-meaning organizations based in the USA invite inexperienced people to sign up and go to the UPGs they serve, under their guidance, for short-term mission trips. Recruiting images show young white people standing among indigenous people—or should I say standing out. These organizations with an UPG emphasis raise money to fund key aspects of their UPG model of mission, such as building training centers, paying local church planter salaries, creating materials and so forth.

This brings me back to Rick Wood's quote, which is worth repeating:

It is not enough just to send missionaries to every tribe and tongue. **If we bring an incomplete or culture-bound gospel along with an ineffective model of doing discipleship**, then we have failed.²

If we want to reach the unreached for many generations—a goal that includes cascading multiplication (disciples to disciples) and generational multiplication (parents to children)—then we need to use models that match our drive.

Once the unreached become reached, they need to be able to pass on a culturally relevant gospel and make disciples from community to community without being dependent on outsiders or giving the impression that foreigners drive Christianity in their context. If the UPG mission effort starts with lots of white people coming and going through STM and foreign funding, we give locals a model that cannot be easily sustained or reproduced based on their own initiative and determination.

The best strategic question I have ever encountered was captured by my friend and mentor, Allen Swanson, in an article he wrote based on his service in Taiwan. The question was originally posed by Sidney J.W. Clark, whom I have quoted repeatedly in some of my recent books (such as *Standing On Our Own Feet* and *Go Light! Go Local!: A Conscientious Approach to Short-term Missions*). Clark raised this question nearly eighty years ago:

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The question as to whether work at any point of its development can still be maintained by the people if it is left by the missionary, forms the best test of the soundness of our mission policies.³

I suggest that all of us adopt this question to help us shape sound cross-cultural mission paradigms.

This is just a friendly word of counsel to those of us who care about UPGs. Let's convert Rick Wood's words and make them our aim: Let's send missionaries to every tribe and tongue. Then, let's plant a holistically reproducible and culturally relevant gospel along with an effective model of doing discipleship for the cultural insiders, in the short-term and over the long-term. 

Notes:

1 2 Rick Wood, Editorial Comment in "Africa: Hope in the Midst of Darkness," *Mission Frontiers*, November–December 2011.

3 Quoted in Allen Swanson, "The Money Problem," *World Encounter: Taiwan – New Strategy for the Seventies*, June 1969, Volume 6.

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UNREACHED