

What Next

KEVIN HIGGINS, PhD, is General Director of Frontier Ventures (FV). He is married to Susan, is the grateful father of Rachel, Sarah, and Emma, and grandfather of Henry and Eliza.



Let me begin by saying this is my final column for *Mission Frontiers*! I will be stepping down as the General Director of Frontier Ventures at the end of June 2023, after 6 years as part of FV and WCIU.

In the year 2017, I came from leading a different organization and joined Frontier Ventures (originally, the US Center for World Mission) to be part of our leadership group, becoming General Director in 2019. Of course, prior to coming here, I had been aware of the more famous elements of the thinking of our founder, Ralph Winter. One of the most famous of Dr. Winter's contributions to frontier missiology is the theme of this edition of *MF*: mobilization.

Background

Even before coming here, I began to study Dr. Winter's thinking more thoroughly, and one of the most notable aspects of his mind was the way in which he was continuously and actively reassessing his views, including his thoughts about barriers and mobilization.

Lausanne 1974

We will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Lausanne movement in 2024. At the original event, Dr. Winter was invited by Dr. Graham to speak about cross-cultural evangelism as "the highest priority." Much of the paper explained the so-called "E" scale, and focused on "E-3" as the highest priority. "E" represented "evangelism" and "3" represented the most significant cultural distance that would need to be negotiated for evangelism to be effective or possible. The presentation included statistics (and even more statistics were provided in his rejoinders to those who gave responses to his paper).

While numbers and data were presented to help define the reality of the scope of need, the main thrust was to paint clearly and starkly what would be needed for any sort of progress. And this served in large part as one of the major sources

of inspiration for the mobilization movement: *the effort to shift the way mission agencies determined the allocations of personnel and resources to give great priority to what came to be known as unreached peoples.*

Dr. Winter's thesis was not without its detractors! I won't rehearse the nearly 50 years of ongoing debate, discovery, and development of his ideas and the initiatives that arose because of them. Suffice it to say that the development of databases to track UPGs (including our own Joshua Project), efforts to educate normal Christians (such as the Perspectives movement), prayer for UPGs (such as our own Global Prayer Digest), as well as publications and new organizations all arose as a result of a spark in 1974. That spark was actually ignited prior, but seemed to catch flame then.

And we are still talking about mobilization today, as this *MF* edition attests. I mentioned that Dr. Winter's thinking kept progressing, and that is true of his thinking about our theme.

2005: Dr. Winter Looks Back (and Forward)

In 2005, Winter wrote an article entitled "12 Frontiers of Perspective."¹ Almost exactly 30 years after the Lausanne paper, his thinking had matured, deepened, and changed. In this paper, he looked back and described his thinking, but he also looked forward. Of the 12 frontiers Winter discussed, I will focus on his comments about mobilization in particular.

In 2005, Winter restated his discovery of the Genesis 12 purpose of God to bless all people of the earth, a discovery of not just that text but of God's purposes

¹ First published in Ralph D. Winter, *Frontiers in Mission: Discovering and Surmounting Barriers to the Missio Dei*. Third Edition. Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2005, 28–40.

for all peoples as a—or—the—unifying theme of the Bible. Tracing the peoples theme through the Bible, and comparing that to the data about “people groups” is, in part, what gave rise to the focus in FV and in other organizations on “peoples”: reached, unreached, engaged, unengaged, lists, descriptions, prayer movements, etc.

In the FV world, our flagship programs and projects such as Perspectives, Joshua Project, Global Prayer Digest, much of what we publish in *Mission Frontiers* and *IJFM*, and a number of the titles in William Carey Publishing, have all been shaped by people-group thinking, flowing directly and indirectly from the missiological implications of the promise to Abraham.

But then, astonishingly, in 2005 Winter went on to say:

“But, of course, to recognize that all these peoples can be reached fairly readily now may have reduced that frontier to just sort of a need for further encouragement... we have our arms around the intermediate task of the unreached peoples. This is a manageable task...”²

In many ways, by that time his thinking had shifted to other frontiers.

Note his two comments: “just sort of a need for further encouragement” and “we have our arms around the intermediate task.”

He was not saying that the day of mobilization was over, but clearly he DID suggest it was well in hand.

Discouragement? Or not?

I recently noticed a trend. When the first attempts to describe the need for mobilization were presented, several decades ago, the rough numbers were that about 1 in 20 workers sent as missionaries ended up among pioneer settings, unreached peoples. The same was roughly true for finances, 1 in 20 dollars. I used those stats, as did many, as a way to fuel motivation, in essence saying, “Look, all we need to do is move the needle, get more balance,” etc.

² How can he say that in 2005? Because by then the fruit of the missiological revolution set off by that fresh discovery of Genesis 12, had already significantly changed the world of mission: there was a growing number of agencies beginning to focus exclusively on the unreached, networks of agencies collaborating to engage every people on the list, and multiple lists. Even agencies that had not adopted “reaching the unreached” as their primary focus, had to account for the idea in their thinking.

A few years ago, I saw updated statistics: roughly the same. And more recently again: roughly the same. After decades of mobilization, the needle did not move with respect to the percentages of workers and finances serving among the unreached. That could be discouraging. But I do not think it is, for several reasons.

What I've Seen Encourages Me

In my own experience in the field, I have seen a very different, organic, and almost natural development as new movements to Jesus find ways to both grow among their own people AND to cross cultural borders into others. They are mobilizing, and doing so without charts, databases, prayer movements, courses, or personnel dedicated to the mobilization role. I am not saying those things should not be done, but it should encourage us in the face of much that could be discouraging. It should encourage us that as movements multiply, they may well carry within them the DNA of the ongoing multiplication of movements among more UPGs.

There are Good Seeds in Good Soil

While the percentages and ratios have not changed, and while it is also true that among those who do get to the least reached there are some who likely should not have been sent. It is true that among otherwise godly and wonderful people working among the unreached there are some who are less than fully equipped. *The fact is that there are some who are gifted, called, shaped, and formed who have been used by God to catalyze movements which are catalyzing other movements organically, almost naturally.*

Mobilization is Not Lord of the Harvest

We know Who is! This does not mean, of course, that there is no need to listen and respond and say “yes” to whatever role or invitation Jesus brings to you and I. But thankfully, He does not depend upon us either.

Next

I began by saying this is my last column and that I will step down as General Director the end of June. Next? My wife Susan and I do not know yet. But I do know that we will continue to listen, seek to say yes, and are eager to serve Him in the world He has created among the peoples of the world He so dearly loves. ❏