



How People Group Information Impacted a Mission Agency

BY **TIM FREEMAN**

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The world is choking on data, most of which has no eternal impact.

Today, we take data for granted. Forty years ago, it was a different story. One Bethany leader said, as he made his way to the mission field in 1981:

As a young missionary with Bethany International, I was starving for data. Who are the unreached, where are they, are they open to the gospel, how can we gain access to them? I had just graduated from what is now Bethany Global University and was a “wet-behind-the-ears” young leader of a new church-planting team. We read newsletters, read books, wrote letters and made phone calls, seeking information to help guide our direction. Our best data came from missionaries passing through on furlough. We eventually found our place in Asia among an under-reached people group. We may have been one of Bethany's first data-driven teams.

This article is a testimony of how God used data to challenge an organization to engage more than 500 Unreached People Groups with the transforming power of the gospel.

Bethany International was founded more than 75 years ago with the goal of “evangelizing the nations.” Missionaries were trained, sent out and supported. Passion for world evangelization was great. These workers arrived on the field but still needed to figure out what impact they could accomplish once arriving in a country. There was little information about the presence of specific Unreached People Groups.

The power of data regarding the unreached came to life when a new board member showed a map generated from people group data, with South Asia lit up like a Christmas tree. His challenge to us was to focus on the darkest places, what he called “the edges of the kingdom.” These discussions led Bethany to adopt a new mission statement: “take the Church to where it is not and help others do the same.”

The Engage500 Initiative

In 2015 Bethany, as a member of a global consortium of missionary training and sending ministries called GlobeServe, began tracking church-planting engagements

among the unreached. We were encouraged to see we were serving in 269 UPGs. People group information from Joshua Project helped create the initial list.

The goal of Engage500 was to place church-planting teams among 500 Unreached People Groups by 2020—in five years.

At the time this seemed impossible. How could we virtually double the number of UPG engagements in five years, when it had taken at least three decades to get to 269? We had spent much time in prayer and studying the pressing need of the unreached. We knew that God was challenging us to start this amazing journey.

Doubling the number of UPGs engagements required a dedicated team. We appointed Kerry, a missions mobilizer in Mexico, as Bethany's researcher. He combed through people group data sets for each of the 70 countries where GlobeServe schools and missionaries served. We crisscrossed the globe sharing the Engage500 vision. Each time we met with a Hub, we presented UPG data for their country and challenged them to adopt and then engage the unreached. They responded by committing to this Unreached People Group task.

The first two years of the Engage500 program were slow going. However, ministry members became more and more excited about the prospect of engaging the unreached. These unreached peoples were often in close proximity to them (though previously invisible to them). The first year we only added eight new engagements; the second year, 12 more; the third year we saw an amazing jump—83 new UPG engagements were added in just one year across the GlobeServe partner world!

As GlobeServe members began to field teams to the unreached, they fed new understanding from the front lines about Unreached People Groups. Sam, one of our researchers in India, embarked on a three-month journey to catalogue the Unreached People Groups where the graduates of their Hub schools were working. Working closely with a global people group list, we discerned the distinctions between castes, locations and people groups. Our Indian leaders used the resulting data for decision-making. Today a significant percentage of the GlobeServe

engaged people groups are from India.

On May 7, 2020, we confirmed the 503rd engagement among Unreached People Groups, a Muslim UPG in northern India. The number keeps growing—today we are engaging 529 UPGs with almost 100 more in the adoption stage.

The Scale for Effective Engagement

In 2017, we introduced an engagement scale to track and better understand progress towards transformational outcomes and Church Planting Movements. We track adoption, engagement, first disciples, first churches and replication, towards the Church Planting Movement stage in each of these Unreached People Groups. Bethany's work among GlobeServe partners—pursuing and tracking Engage500 and now Disciple Making and Church Planting Movements—is strengthening our own Bethany Global University and Bethany Gateways missionary training and sending. Now our goal is to see 100 movements by the year 2026: again, a God-sized goal where our understanding is consistently refined by good data.

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Data, used well, is transformative. Data is “just data” until it is used to spur God's people to prayer and action. Without data it would have been almost impossible to fulfill Engage500. God used verifiable and timely information to

burden our Bethany/GlobeServe members to pray. Prayer then moved them to action.

The lines between people groups are being blurred. The Engage500 lists at times include people groups found in different parts of the same country, or people groups across national boundaries. These can become hidden peoples, surrounded by believers who are unaware that no one is reaching them. In such a world we need data more than ever. Data about unreached peoples helped crystalize Bethany's mission statement to “take the Church to where it is not”. God used data and people group profiles to burden the hearts of our missionaries to take the difficult step of doing incarnational ministry among the unreached. Data led to burden, burden to prayer, prayer to faith and faith to steps of obedience. God brings the fruit—fruit that remains. 