

Is The World Still A Waffle?

BY DAN SCRIBNER

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I stared at the booklet on the desk in utter amazement. It was November 1991. I was sitting in the prayer room in Hudson Taylor Hall on the campus of the U.S. Center for World Mission. My prayer shift was from midnight to 4:00 A.M. It was now 2:30. As I turned the pages of the booklet, I struggled to comprehend what I was seeing.

The booklet was an early list of the largest ethnolinguistic people groups who apparently had little, if any, exposure or response to the gospel: page after page showed the distinct “nations” without any meaningful presence of Jesus Christ in their midst. How could it be that, after nearly 2,000 years, so many people groups were still unreached? Little did I know that booklet would change the next 30 years of my life.

Dr. Ralph Winter’s watershed address at Lausanne ’74 challenged the worldwide mission community to view the world, not primarily as geo-political nations, but as distinct ethnic peoples each needing a unique church-planting effort. A fresh paradigm was birthed.

Mission mobilizers began describing the world as a waffle rather than a pancake. Previously, the view that we could “pour enough syrup on the pancake to fully cover it” meant we simply needed to send enough missionaries, do enough evangelism, plant enough churches and eventually the Great Commission would be fulfilled. But the world really was a waffle with very significant barriers to the spread of the gospel; the sweetness of the gospel did not automatically go everywhere; many pockets of people were untouched after nearly 2,000 years. People group lists and information were needed if the Church were to fully understand the scope of “making disciples of all the nations.”

Since then, several people group lists have emerged, each with unique definitions, purposes and audiences. Except for South Asia, these people group lists are primarily ethnolinguistic, with language being the primary factor in defining a people group. These people group lists have had a significant impact on the missions world. Don’t miss the articles from Asian, African and Latin American voices sharing how people group thinking and information have impacted their ministries. Read how people group data motivated and transformed a mission agency. Another article highlights how people group data is being combined with

other datasets to produce a visual prioritization tool. The first half of this *Mission Frontiers* issue is only a small sampling of how the Lord has used people group information to advance His kingdom.

The world is a *very* different place than it was nearly 50 years ago when the people group paradigm was birthed. Should the missions community still view the world as a waffle? Is traditional ethnolinguistic people group thinking still relevant? There are definite challenges moving forward:

- Urbanization is blurring, if not eliminating, traditional people group boundaries. Is the traditional people group perspective relevant in a megacity?
- Globalization is allowing the free-flow and mixing of ethnicities, ideas, worldviews and cultures.
- There is a growing call for recognition of the greater granularity of dynamic, hybrid people groups in which groupings are not defined by language but by different “glue”. Can current tracking of people groups handle greater complexity?
- Mobility is creating new diaspora dynamics. Is it more helpful to view people groups globally than by country?

When does a diaspora group become a distinct people group from the homeland group?

- Language consolidation is reducing linguistic barriers and movements to Jesus are crossing traditional people group barriers.
- Accurate, updated information is difficult to obtain. How can crowdsourcing and collaboration be leveraged to refine and update people group data?
- Current people group lists and presentations may not be impacting younger generations.
- We see a need for much greater space for Global South researchers and people group data managers to not simply come alongside existing efforts, but also to take the lead and set the agenda, bringing fresh insight and vitality.

The second half of this issue of *Mission Frontiers* gives a glimpse into a few of these challenges. Space limits extensive exploration of all these topics, but hopefully some of these articles will stimulate further dialogue regarding people group information in a changing world.

Is the world still a waffle? Traditional people group lists are still very applicable in parts of the world dominated by formal and informal caste structures and in tribal and rural settings. This includes significant parts of Africa and Asia, where the great majority of Unreached People Groups reside.

At the same time, the traditional waffle barriers are changing. Global trends are creating new social dynamics and changing both the barriers and boundaries by which groups are defined. New hybrid, trans-national and dynamic groupings must be considered for evangelistic purposes, Disciple Making and Church Planting Movements.

Most of the material in this issue is important in shaping our thinking. But be alert for *heart* knowledge as well as *head* knowledge; don't overlook the heart-engaging *Unreached of the Day* prayer section. It has been said that prayer is the "first domino" in reaching the unreached. The *Unreached of the Day* is a simple and practical way to be involved. It is available here

in print and by mobile app, email, podcast and printable PDF at unreachedoftheday.org.

May the Lord stir hearts in prayer rooms in Lagos, Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai, leading to a fresh wave of people group thinking and information-tracking. Regardless of how people groups are defined, the Lamb is worthy of worship from every tribe, tongue, nation and people. *Soli Deo Gloria.* 

