

# Re-Introducing Frontier People Groups

By **ROBBY BUTLER**

Robby was a senior at Caltech studying Russian to serve God behind the Iron Curtain. Then he learned how God's global purpose had unfolded in recent centuries, and that our generation might finish discipling all nations and welcome Jesus' return. A few months later Robby began serving at Ralph Winter's new strategy center. Robby worked closely with Dr. Winter for 16 years and continues helping Body of Christ see with greater clarity what God has done—and what He is waiting on us to do with Him. Robby.Butler@MultMove.net



In 2016 Southern Baptist researcher Jim Haney wrote:

The mission community has strayed from... our essential goal of... indigenous movements everywhere. ... We have used metrics that do not clearly reveal where such movements are lacking.<sup>1</sup>

Today the Gospel has taken root among 75% of the world's people groups, including one-third of all Unreached People Groups (UPGs)—where a number of movements to Jesus have occurred or are unfolding.

However, the Gospel has yet to even be implanted—and there are no known movements—among the other 25% (2 billion people). This two-thirds of UPGs is now classified as Frontier People Groups (FPGs).

MF introduced FPGs in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The concept and definition have been further clarified, as follows:

## FPGs—still “hidden,” but now among Unreached People Groups

Movements to Jesus are needed in every segment of society and every place where a group of people are isolated from believers they would identify as “like themselves.”

What distinguishes FPGs is the need for pioneer, cross-cultural workers to intentionally implant the Gospel for a movement to start and spread.

A Frontier People Group (FPG) is ... An Unreached People Group (UPG) with virtually **NO followers of Jesus** and **NO known movements to Jesus**, still **needing pioneer cross-cultural workers**.

FPGs are approximated as: **0.1% or fewer Christian Adherents AND NO confirmed, sustained movements.**

Unfortunately, many church sending policies *require* their workers to partner with local churches. This prevents such workers from serving among FPGs. Thus 5,000 FPGs with virtually no followers of Jesus receive just one-third as many international workers as the 2,500 other UPGs.

## How the need for more cross-cultural witness became clear

In the 1970s Ralph Winter observed that:

- The Gospel had spread rapidly in the many *ethne*<sup>3</sup> where pioneer *cross-cultural* workers had implanted the Gospel.
- This rapid spread was through *same-culture* witness within *ethne* where the Gospel had been implanted.
- 60% of the world lived in *ethne* where the Gospel had not yet taken root, and *cross-cultural* workers were still needed.<sup>4</sup>

1 Hitting the Mark: Indigenous Movements Everywhere [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/hitting-the-mark](https://missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/hitting-the-mark).

2 [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/introducing-frontier-people-groups-fpgs](https://missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/introducing-frontier-people-groups-fpgs).

3 *Ethne* are people groups with a generational identity preserved through intermarriage, etc.

4 Hidden Peoples 1980 pie chart

Winter introduced these *ethne* as “Hidden Peoples,” and urged the global Church to prioritize *cross-cultural* witness to them.

## How the *ethne* needing cross-cultural witness became hidden again

Winter later reluctantly agreed to the label “Unreached” for *ethne* with “no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside assistance.”<sup>5</sup> However, while this definition pointed many in the right general direction, it also hid the distinction between:

- *Ethne* still in need of cross-cultural witness to implant the Gospel.
- And *ethne* where the Gospel has taken root and started to spread.

## How is the Gospel implanted in an *ethne*?

Implanting the Gospel in an *ethne* (or any segment of society) starts with discipling one or more of its extended families (while remaining one with their people) to love, listen to and follow Jesus together in seeking God’s blessing for the rest of their “people.”

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In 1982 McGavran recommended:

If only one person decides to follow Jesus, do not baptize him immediately. Say to him, “You and I will work together to lead another five or ten or, God willing, fifty of your people to accept Jesus Christ as Savior so that when you are baptized, you are baptized with them.” Ostracism is very effective against one lone person. But ostracism is weak indeed when exercised against a group of a dozen. And when exercised against two hundred it has practically no force at all.<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Spirit is often confirming with miracles. As a result, new movements are starting among both UPGs and FPGs!

Once a family is disciplined to love, hear and follow Jesus, they can begin modeling and multiplying His kingdom in their relational network. Such same-culture witness can then multiply rapidly into a movement to Jesus.

Historically, cross-cultural workers sent internationally have been the driving force in implanting the Gospel. However, disciples in today’s movements to Jesus are being trained to notice and witness to *all* kinds of lost people—even outside their own group.

As the global Church is praying, proximate<sup>7</sup> disciples are increasingly engaging in cross-cultural witness beyond their own people. The Holy Spirit is often confirming with miracles. As a result, new movements are starting among both UPGs and FPGs!

## Extracting individuals can heighten barriers to the Gospel

Imagine the loss of New Testament witness if:

- The Gadarene demoniac had been allowed to leave his people to follow Jesus (Mark 5).
- The woman in Sychar had joined Jesus’ disciples, and not testified to her village (John 4).

<sup>6</sup> MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/a-church-in-every-people1

<sup>7</sup> Geographically, culturally and/or linguistically near those with whom they are sharing.

<sup>5</sup> JoshuaProject.net/help/definitions

- Philip had led the Ethiopian eunuch to join local believers, and not to return to Ethiopia (Acts 8).

One major issue in cross-cultural witness is families misunderstanding faith in Jesus as betrayal of their family and heritage. This can break apart families and increase barriers. Donald McGavran (and others) have described how this develops in FPGs:

Each convert, as he becomes a Christian, is seen by kin as one who leaves “us” and joins “them.” ... Consequently, his own relatives force him out. [When this happens, Christ’s cause] **wins the individual but loses the family.** [Implanting the Gospel in that ethne then becomes] doubly difficult. “The Christians misled one of our people,” the rest of the group will say. “We’re going to make quite sure that they do not mislead any more of us.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/a-church-in-every-people1see also ucaNews.com/news/rise-of-christianity-is-a-blessing-for-nepal/94502



Photo by International Mission Board

## Conclusion

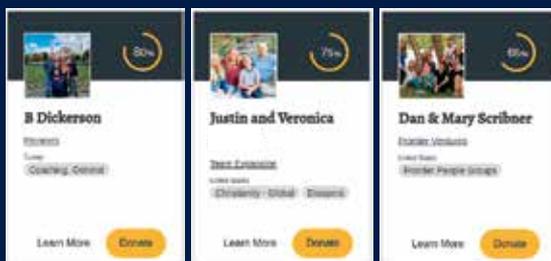
Jesus trained his disciples to stay with just one family in each village (Matt.10, Luke 9,10), and this pattern has proven helpful in *ethne* and other segments of society.

May the Holy Spirit guide us all—with fresh clarity on where and how to implant the Gospel—in praying and collaborating globally and locally to fill every remaining gap in every segment of every *ethne*!

# Find Kingdom Workers among Frontier people groups

- Pray for, support, and collaborate with frontier workers
- Search by people group, language, movement stage, and more
- Currently 27 frontier workers listed
- Anonymous messaging

Are you a frontier worker?  
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[ergatas.org](https://ergatas.org)

