

People groups: beyond the push to reach them lie some contrary opinions.
by Jim Reapsome

No innovation in missionary thinking has so profoundly affected the basic concept of missions since theological education by extension burst on the scene in the 1960s. But in the last decade what might be called the "unreached people groups" strategy has shaken the missions community to the core.

Descriptions of "people movements" to Christ, of course, have long been part of the standard missionary literature; scholars have debated the pros and cons of group conversions. But at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, a new concept made its first modest appearance. In essence, according to this concept, we are not to look at the world in the classic sense of billions of individual lost souls, nor in the traditional Great Commission sense of taking the gospel to the nations, that is, political entities.

After the first tentative "baby steps" at Lausanne, this new missions concept soon became a walking youngster, and then a full grown Olympic runner. That's because some powerful people and institutions decided that this concept was indeed the wave of the future for missionary thought, planning and action. In so doing, they inadvertently gave the impression that the old traditional way of doing missionry work had left some serious gaps around the world.

The prime movers and shakers were, and continue to be, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE), World Vision, through its Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center (MARC), and the U.S. Center (USC) for World Missions.

Some of the leaders of the LCWE and MARC work hand-in-glove. Their most effective selling piece and teaching tool, which has been widely influential among churches and schools, is the book, *~That Everyone May Hear~*, now out in a third revision, and the accompanying audiovisual adaptation in two parts. LCWE and MARC have also initiated conferences and study task forces, spearheaded by Peter Wagner and Edward Dayton.

Equally effective has been the speaking, writing, and publishing of Ralph Winter, who founded the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena specifically to further this missionary emphasis. Winter put his toe into the water at Lausanne. From there, he took a monumental high dive and bought an entire college campus in Pasadena, California, where he has assembled a staff dedicated to researching and promoting the idea of evangelizing unreached people groups.

Winter has been invited more than anyone else to explain the approach. He goes to local churches and to scholarly gatherings; he goes to conventions of missions executives. In 1980, he was a prominent leader of an international study group at Edinburgh, Scotland, while the Lausanne followers went to Pattaya, Thailand. At both places, however, their basic agenda was the same.

There is no sign of diminishing influence. Local churches and young people interested in missionary careers eagerly follow the "unreached peoples" theme. Sending agencies face hard questions from constituents about whether or not they are indeed aiming at unreached peoples. Ralph Winter's "Unreached Peoples of the World" chart became the yardstick by which recruiting, planning, and sending are measured.

Some mission agencies started new research departments. Some signed up with Winter's Frontier Fellowship. Some published articles in their house organs saying, in effect, that they were still committed to pioneer evangelism and would leave no stone unturned to find unreached people.

But other mission agencies wondered what all the fuss was about anyway. For years, they have been quietly ferreting out obscure tribes, first to put their language in writing, and then to give them the Bible, and finally to convert them. Wycliffe Bible Translators, New Tribes Mission, and Gospel Recordings, for example. But Wycliffe talked about "tongues to go" and New Tribes Mission talked about "tribes" in the jungles. Those terms, although they don't precisely fit the new theory, are more simple to grasp.

In this article, we want to look at basic "unreached people groups" definitions: What is a people group? What is an ~unreached~ people group? Then we have to consider the difficulties in identifying and counting unreached people groups. In each of the three major sections critiques are given by representative scholars and mission agency leaders, from both the United States and overseas. First, then, what is a people group?

[What is a people group?]

Actually, it took the various parties almost 10 years to agree on what a "people group" is. In 1982, at a Chicago summit, they got together and hammered out this definition: A "people group" is "a significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization, this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance."

Now you can see why "tongues" and "tribes" won't do. The new notion is a broad sociological concept. It goes beyond the Great Commission's "nations," which is now stretched by "common affinity" to include, not only groups distinguished by language, religion, or ethnic background, but also groups distinguished by where they live and what they do, or any mixture of these.

Keep in mind that the basic motivation for so dividing up people is to devise unique, specific, successful ways of reaching them with the gospel and starting churches. It is according to this premise that the traditional academic way of defining "people" according to standard ethnolinguistic characteristics doesn't fill the bill. This is also why the most recent and exhaustive published list of peoples, ~World Christian Encyclopedia~, by David Barrett (Oxford University Press) is seen as deficient. It is not deficient according to Barrett's definitions, but his categories aren't suited for fine-tuning an evangelistic strategy aimed at very small groups of people.

To understand the MARC/LCWE/USC approach, look at the examples of "people groups" cited in ~That Everyone May Hear:~ "Urdu-speaking Muslim farmers of the Punjab; Cantonese-speaking Chinese refugees from Vietnam in France; Welsh working-class miners; Tamil-speaking Indian workers on Malaysian rubber plantations; white, swinging singles in North American apartments."

However, a decade after its introduction at Lausanne, and the subsequent refinements and extensive publicity, the basic unreached people groups theory still leaves a lot of questions in the minds of missions leaders and scholars. In fact, there are many major criticisms of it, which we now summarize:

1. "People group" begs a simple, clear, usable definition. Says Westminster Seminary's missiologist Harvie Conn: "If you have a definition of 'peoplehood' that sees the group as more than simply ethnic, you could have each person in the world in forty to infinity groups. As a technical instrument, it becomes so loose that it creates as many problems as it solves."

2. Sociology is determinative. Europe's leading evangelical missiologist, Peter Beyerhaus, succinctly says: "Each 'people' can, of course, be subdivided several times according to various categories. Therefore, it all depends upon our sociological perspectives, how we make the divisions." Adds Warren Webster, general director of the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society: "The use of sociological definitions tends to cloud and confuse the picture when employed on a global scale."

3. It's too subjective, impractical, and artificial. For example, says Terry Hulbert, dean of Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions: "Parts of a tribe may be rural, urban, Islamic, and so on. Which factor is the dominant one? Location, religion, rank or role in society?"

To show the weakness in the theory, Hulbert cites the case of "all the nurses in St. Louis" who are listed as an unreached people group. Hulbert admits they have a common profession, but he asks: "Is that the dominant factor that constitutes them as a people group sociologically, or for purposes of evangelism?" He points out that these nurses may have other affinity factors, for example, family, neighborhood, age or ethnic background that may far outweigh the fact that they are nurses.

The author of the widely-used volume for intercessory prayer, ~Operation World~, Patrick Johnstone, a British scholar and researcher, objects to "the artificial compartmentalization of people into such groups, without relating them to the very real and complex world in which we live." The theory, he says, leads to the "open-ended proliferation of people groups into as many subgroups as a researcher can find. High-rise dwellers in Singapore are an example of a people group for which it is impossible to have a valid church-planting strategy."

Along the same lines, Wilson Chow, dean of the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong, says that factory workers in Hong Kong could be subdivided into those who work in textiles and electronics, for example. Or the refugees in Hong Kong could be subdivided on the basis of their language.

D. John Richard, executive secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, makes the same point with regard to his country. He says, "It is quite possible that a single person may belong to two or three groups. We have Tamil coolie laborers serving in road construction work as well as in building construction. There are also other Tamils working as domestic helpers."

4. It's unscientific. One of evangelicalism's foremost missiologists, George Peters, says we must admit that "no exact scientific lines exist" for defining a people group. He adds: "Therefore, arbitrariness, convenience, and practical reasons (at times, perhaps, propaganda motives) enter and determine us to set up our own standards to delineate people into groupings."

5. It creates credibility problems. The director of the widely-used training institution, Missionary Internship, John Robinson, says that people can "play" with the people group concept because the categories are so elastic. Therefore, he fears a "serious credibility problem" and the "undermining

of morale" in world mission, in using the people group concept as a yardstick of the extent to which the job of worldwide evangelization has or has not been completed.

6. It distorts field realities. The vice-president of overseas ministries, Mennonite Board of Mission, Wilbert Shenk, believes that the people group approach "bases our thinking and action toward rural primal peoples, whereas the dominant phenomenon in this generation is urbanization worldwide."

7. It's theologically dangerous. Former missionary and now anthropologist at Emmanuel School of Religion, Charles Taber, explains the theological problem with the people group concept this way: "Because the concept is so empty, it is ready to be, and in fact is, filled with everyone's ideological agenda, especially 'race.'" He warns that the concept "legitimizes racism and racially segregated churches."

At the same time, critics of the unreached people groups concept as developed and promoted by the Lausanne Committee's Strategy Working Group, MARC, and the U.S. Center, do make serious positive attempts to solve some of the issues they raise. Their basic thrust is to use "people group" in a much broader way. It's more manageable, realistic, and useful than the elastic, subjective "common affinity" approach.

Among their modifications are these:

1. The group shares a common worldview and value system. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School's David Hesselgrave defines a people group as "a homogeneous grouping of people, who by virtue of kinship, linguistic and cultural ties, tend to share a common worldview and value system, and are inclined to make important decisions by consensus."

2. The group must have a self-perception of affinity, not one imposed by outsiders. Terry Hulbert: "The sociological group must be of a size large enough to perceive themselves to have a common affinity with one another." He emphasizes that the criteria for membership in a people group involves self-perception, because the identification of a group by outsiders is indirect and imprecise.

3. Primary loyalty within the group is decisive. This is how Patrick Johnstone looks at the matter: "A people group should be described in terms of its loyalty. For a primary loyalty--largely an ethnolinguistic concept--a church-planting strategy is needed. Such a loyalty would describe what the people are and who they see themselves to be. All secondary and tertiary loyalties--largely a sociological concept--involve an element of impermanence or choice: employment, place of residence, means of travel, clubs joined, etc. These present evangelistic opportunities for which a multitude of good methods may be exploited."

4. The group has a feeling of belonging to one another. After noting that the group shares a "complex of stable relationships," George Peters goes beyond the usual social, economic, and religious factors to highlight the "feelings of belongingness and at-home-ness," or a sense of "we and they."

One gets the impression from the LCWE/MARC/U.S.Center leaders that criticisms and differences should not stand in the way of reaching the unreached. Their goal is simply to devise a research tool and get on with the job.

The director of MARC, Samuel Wilson, admits there could be an indefinite number of people groups, but that doesn't bother him. He says the root issue is, "Where does a church need to be planted?" Anyway, "In practice, " he says, "the number of evangelistic approaches is finite."

The chairman of the Lausanne Committee's Strategy Working Group, Edward Dayton, accepts the fact that all of the different ideas can't be put together. But he pleads for recognition of the fact that no one evangelistic strategy can be used to reach every group. Therefore, to him, the unreached people groups approach is justified.

And Ralph Winter would prefer to talk about "the one group that is most significant when it come to planting the church within it."

[What is an unreached people group?]

The second major definition to be considered is, What is an ~unreached~ people group? The unreached people groups movement has also struggled with how to determine whether or not a given group is indeed unreached. Reading the early ~unreached peoples~ directories, some missions leaders were amazed to find tribes included that had not only been evangelized long ago, but now had flourishing churches.

However, the severest criticism was aimed at the first LCWE/MARC definition: A group was unreached if it had less than 20 percent practicing Christians. That drew a lot of fire because it was arbitrary--why not 20 or 15 percent?--and because "practicing Christian" could mean different things to different people.

So after much debate, correspondence, and a number of meetings, an unreached people group was defined as: "a people among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside (cross-cultural) assistance."

Of course, this definition is also loose enough to admit a wide variety of interpretations, but at least the controversial 20 percent figure is gone. Comments on the definition from a number of leading mission thinkers reveal a number of concerns:

1. Unreachedness does not depend on whether or not the group can evangelize itself. Warren Webster says that we must recognize that a group can be at least minimally reached with the gospel, whether or not it has the resources without outside assistance.
2. Not having the Bible is a crucial factor. Wilbert Shenk observes: "A people group may be considered unreached by Christian witness when it has had no meaningful contact with Christians, so that the Scriptures are not available to it and a Christian fellowship has not emerged."

Of course, this is central to the historic purposes of Wycliffe Bible Translators. Executive vice-president Frank Robbins notes: "Our concern is with what we call Bibleless groups. Many of the

Bibleless groups are also unreached people groups, but some of them have been long missionized and have churches. They are just crippled churches for lack of the Scriptures."

3. Unreachedness has to do with groups who have never heard. Allen Starling, field coordinator of Gospel Recordings, says that we must look for groups of people "who are isolated from hearing the gospel message by a cultural, political, geographical, or language barrier."

Ronald Blue, chairman of the Department of World Missions at Dallas Theological Seminary, works with a similar thrust: "An unreached people group is a group that has no viable, continuing witness within that unit of society. In other words, unless someone is sent to penetrate that group of people with the gospel, they will remain in spiritual darkness."

David Hesselgrave says a group may be considered unreached if it "has not had a culturally meaningful hearing of the biblical gospel and has not had knowledge of, or access to, a Christian source of that message."

4. There are degrees of unreachedness. Typical of this approach is that of Richard Sollis, chairman of the Research Planning Department of New Tribes Mission. He gives their very precise working definition, which gives four ways of describing a tribe. (1) A tribe with no believers and no missionary work--the classic unreached people group. (2) A tribe with few, if any, believers and no evangelical missionary work being done. (3) A tribe with few, if any, believers and where the only evangelical work being done is by missionaries or others with limited objectives which do not include active evangelism and church planting; e.g., some missionary linguists or translators. (4) A tribe where there is an existing church, but where the existing church is "incapsulated" and not demonstrating its potential for reaching the rest of the tribe.

[How many unreached people groups are there?]

The third basic question is, How many unreached people groups are there? The unreached people group movement has not been content to rest with definitions. Given the typical American propensity for a technological, statistical approach to problem-solving, which in the case of missionary work means cracking closed countries and millions of peoples with the gospel, and given the time, money, and equipment for research, there are major efforts underway to identify, count, and catalog both people groups and unreached groups.

Meanwhile, Ralph Winter and the U. S. Center people began trumpeting that there were 16,750 unreached people groups in the world. The number became a challenge, almost like the old Student Volunteer Movement slogan: "The evangelization of the world in this generation." The Center did not and does not have a list of these groups, although it does have extensive "people files" and is doing much research.

Nevertheless, "16,750" has become the movement's touchstone, and the figure is quoted as gospel in missionary literature and sermons and conferences all over the world. Winter does not explain how he arrived at his total; the people at LCWE and MARC say it's an estimate. The estimate is not far off the mark, if you want the number of the world's unreached individuals to equal the number of people in unreached ethnolinguistic groups. On the other hand, if the world has at least 100,000 identifiable people groups, which is not inconceivable given the elastic definition of what constitutes a people group, then 16,750 falls short.

It's at the point of counting and sloganeering that missions leaders begin to tear their hair. They fear that the new drive for evangelizing overlooked and neglected pockets of people, and the new research going into more effective ways to communicate the gospel to them, may get derailed because of foggy, bizarre numbers. The public already is using 16,750 as a checklist to see how well missionaries are doing. This worries missions executives, professors, and pastors.

Where are the unreached people groups? Just prior to the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974, the Missions Advanced Research and Communications Center, Pasadena, California, began to produce ~Status of Christianity Profiles~ on a number of countries. By the time of the congress, MARC had produced 53 ~Status of Christianity Profiles~ on countries and major states of the world, and an ~Unreached Peoples Directory~ listing 424 specific unreached people groups.

The effort to locate unreached people groups was also a major reason for Ralph Winter's founding of the U. S. Center for World Mission in 1977. He popularized the concept of "hidden peoples." This he expanded to the concept of "frontier missions." In 1980, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization convened the Consultation on World Evangelization at Pattaya, Thailand. The research of MARC and the Strategy Working Group of the LCWE was published in a book by Edward Dayton and David Fraser. ~Planning Strategies for World Evangelization~, which has gone through six editions and has now been replaced by ~That Everyone May Hear--A Workbook~.

The most widely available lists of unreached people groups are those published by David C. Cook Company, Elgin, Illinois. These annual directories were begun in 1979 and were also published in 1980, 1981, and 1982. The 1983 edition, entitled, ~Reaching the Unreached: A Status Report~, was published by MARC. The forthcoming ~Mission Handbook~ of North American cross-cultural agencies will include the number of people groups each agency is attempting to reach. Meanwhile, MARC has sent out a survey to be published in ~Unreached Peoples '84~, which will report and evaluate what is being done.

Samuel Wilson explains the rationale for MARC's work: "We are interested in planning strategies for evangelization. While we see the motivational merit to some finite number that could be used to motivate the church to her task, the fact is that we believe the job is only 'doable' as small groups are defined which are tractable to the definition and carrying out of a Spirit-led plan to plant the church. The exact number, therefore, holds small interest for us. Barrett (see below) means only ethnolinguistic groupings, and Winter has never offered anything but an estimate of the numbers or groups that might exist."

In his ~World Christian Encyclopedia~ (Oxford University Press, 1982) David Barrett lists the peoples of the world according to five races, 13 geographical races, seven colors, 71 ethnolinguistic families, 7,010 distinct languages, 432 major peoples, and 8,990 constituent peoples, subpeoples and additional ethnic groups. In addition to statistical analysis, this work includes an index of peoples and languages.

Barrett concludes that there are "some 2,000 distinct ethnolinguistic groups or cultures who are still in varying degrees unevangelized, which on our definition means with populations of whom less than 60 percent have been evangelized.... On our definition, the only people groups who can correctly be called unreached are the one thousand or so whose populations are each less than 20 percent evangelized." He further narrows this figure to 636 people groups that have "no

numerically significant evangelizing church" and are located "in countries with only a miniscule Christian presence." These groups may be found in the encyclopedia's various tables.

The most widely disseminated reference point for the location of unreached people groups is, "Unreached Peoples of the World, 1983," a chart published by the U.S. Center for World Mission. It lumps the unreached peoples into nine major groupings: tribal, Muslim, Hindu, Han Chinese, Buddhists, other African, other Asian, other Western, and U.S.A./Canada. According to this estimate, there are 23,300 peoples in the world and of this number 16,750 may be considered as unreached.

The U.S. Center's figure of 16,750 unreached people groups has become widely quoted and accepted, not because it is a precise listing, but rather because it symbolizes a statistical concept that many find useful. However, it is too simplistic and confusing to be of much value in planning missionary work. The whole attempt at counting unreached people groups raises serious questions in the minds of both scholars and strategists. Their concerns may be summarized in this way: the data is both inaccurate and incomplete. A number of analysts explain why.

Says Richard Sollis of New Tribes Mission: "With reference to data currently being entered in unreached peoples data bases, it is not difficult to find inaccuracies. However, the problem is not so much one of incorrectness as it is one of incompleteness. Two major types of data that would be very helpful are: (1) more detailed information as to the quantity and quality of current evangelical or gospel penetration of the people group, and (2) detailed, regularly updated information on each country explaining if, and specifically how, new missionaries or mission boards can gain entrance to the given country to the unreached people groups. Until a data base developed by the evangelicals in each country is rather extensively developed, I question whether a truly adequate, comprehensive, and accurate international data base can be developed."

The compiler of ~Operation World~, Patrick Johnstone, explains how complicated the current approach is: "The MARC unreached people annuals have been useful to focus our attention on the need to think in terms of biblical peoples, but fall short on motivating people to do anything, because of confusing and incomplete data. The total of all people groups in a country is hardly ever 100 percent, and no clear mention is made of Christians living among them, or Christian missions already seeking to reach them. Ralph Winter's figure of 16,7850 hidden peoples is based on the sociological breakdown, but he clearly is distancing himself from the definition on which these figures are based. Using David Barrett's narrower ethnolinguistic definition, there could be 9,000 to 10,000 people groups in the world. But if we use the 'people within a nation' concept, the number will be much higher, depending on cutoff size used, i.e., would ten Zimbabwean Venda people in the United States constitute a people group?"

Getting accurate data from the field, according to the unreached people group movement's sociological approach, is virtually impossible, says Wilson W. Chow. Speaking from first-hand experience in Hong Kong, he observes: "Although on paper the various geographical movements, directions and locations have been analyzed and discovered, it is very difficult in actuality to locate specific people groups that are unreached. It is difficult enough locating people groups. For example, the illegal immigrants of mainland China now living in Hong Kong are classified as a people group, but their actual location is difficult to trace, since they are so scattered among Hong Kong society. This is understandable, due to their illegal presence in the colony, unlike the

Vietnamese who can easily be located, since they are detained in refugee camps established by the government.

"The various sources of information are not entirely adequate or accurate, for the following reasons: (1) societies are constantly changing, therefore, it is difficult to publish up-to-date material that parallels the changes; (2) all methodology, including computer data, is dependent on and operates from the West; (3) the data is acceptable in theory, on the basis of strategy, but the real situation reflects a far more intricate and complex field of observation. The factors are not as visible as the data presents."

Sifting through the pros and cons of the new movement, one notes a certain feeling of unease about approaching the task of world evangelization that remains to be done according to rather narrow social definitions and arbitrary boundaries of what constitutes an unreached people group. A certain amount of confusion is bound to ensue when different proponents use different terminology and different figures. However, the more basic concern that emerges is that of the validity of a Western technological and sociological approach to world evangelization. This concern was pointedly expressed by two veterans of long years of missionary work, Philip Hogan, executive director of the Division of Foreign Missions of the Assemblies of God, and Wesley Duewel, who now heads a new thrust in evangelism of OMS International.

Hogan says the best answers come from church leaders themselves, not from American computers. "The whole hidden peoples and unreached peoples puzzle and the research that has followed it is far more for North American and Western consumption than it is for the churches and the leaders in the third or developing world.

"For instance, our work in Nigeria is very strong, fast-growing, and well-led. They have 300,000 members, are totally indigenous, and are sending out their own missionaries by the score. The names we place on some of these groups and the information we publish strikes them as being just another attempt by us Americans to use our computers and pour out information. They know all about their groups that live in their territory long before we ever publish anything about them." Duewel says his misgivings are from the methods used by promoters of the unreached people group movement, because efforts to reach the unreached should be determined on the field. He explains: "Anything which urges reaching the unreached thrills me. But the methods used by the protagonists have greatly disturbed me. Strategic warfare for Christ and against Satan is best guided by those God is using in leadership in the battle out on the front lines, not by people thousands of miles away trying to decide on the basis of theory and incomplete information what should be done. To me, the important questions are: How many unreached are you reaching? How much church planting are you really involved in? What percentage of your people are personally involved in evangelism or church planting? And how can we pinpoint prayer in the special areas where the Spirit is working or where Satan is fighting?"

Right now, it is clear that considerable enthusiasm in missions circles has been generated by the Strategy Working Group of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, by World Vision's Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center, and by the U.S. Center for World Mission. Mission agencies and missionaries have been forced to look at the world's peoples in a whole new perspective. This has stimulated an enormous amount of rethinking about basic strategies. Some missions are moving away from the traditional "station" approach to a "people team" approach. Some are subordinating all ministries to that of planting churches within specific

cultures. The new approach serves to motivate and mobilize both national churches and new missionaries.

The "unreached people groups" movement has helped to sensitize the church not only to the need of completing the Great Commission, but also the possibility of doing it. However, on the level of missionary education and missionary strategy by specific schools and agencies, there are serious questions being raised that must be faced, about both the wisdom and the practical value of the unreached people groups approach to world evangelization. But despite their raising of questions about definitions and statistics, critics want to be counted as positive participants in the overall advancement of the gospel and the church worldwide.