

"Homogeneous Networks": A Label That Promotes Good Evangelistic Strategies in Cities

by Timothy Monsma

In 1974 Ralph Winter presented to the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization a new perspective on the missionary task. Using some key words recorded in the Great Commission of Acts 1:8—Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth—as categories for classification, Winter spoke of E-1, E-2 and E-3 evangelism. E-1 evangelism addresses those of the same culture, E-2 those of a similar culture, while E-3 addresses those of a very different culture (Douglas 1975: 213-225). Winter went on to point out that there are many ethnic and sociological groups in the world for whom E-2 and E-3 evangelism is necessary because there is no one within their culture to carry out E-1 evangelism.

The question naturally arose: Who are these groups that need E-2 and E-3 evangelism? They came to be known as "unreached people groups," and concerned agencies began drawing up lists. Notable among these lists are the Unreached Peoples series published by MARC (a division of World Vision), and the recently published Peoplesfile Index from the Global Mapping Project.

A listing is very helpful for assessing progress in world evangelization and determining where new efforts ought to be launched. It is also a useful guide to mission agencies as they deploy new recruits or veteran missionaries whose work in a given area has been completed.

But there is a problem. For some time it has been recognized that many individuals can be assigned to more than one people group. If by "people groups" one means only ethnic groups, this is not a critical problem. Ethnicity, even for those who have mixed ancestry, is rather easy to determine. David Barrett and others have chosen to take this route. The policy of equating people groups with ethnic groups is to be recommended from the point of view of its simplicity. It is true to the word of our Lord, who said, "And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (ethnic groups), and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

But simplicity can also paper over many vital distinctions. If ethnic groups were the only groups to consider, all Japan and all Korea would constitute one group each. Instinctively we sense that there must be additional categories into which the millions of people living in these two great countries can be meaningfully divided. Some day persons "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9) will be gathered before God's throne. This passage suggests that groups other than ethnic groups need to hear and respond to the gospel before this present age is terminated. Ralph Winter's estimate that there may yet be

16,750 unreached groups in our world (Conn 1984:51) is credible if certain sociological groups are included in the count.

It makes sense to include in our lists of peoples those sociological groupings that call for significant adjustments in the way the gospel is presented, and for whom separate congregations are desirable because of cultural distinctions. If, for example, in the city of Tokyo, it were found that the worldview and lifestyle of shopkeepers varied greatly from the worldview and lifestyle of corporate executives, we might wish to assign these individuals to two different sociological groupings and count them as two in our master tally. Religious differences might also be important. People of Arab descent living in Saudi Arabia and Syria might be assigned to different groups if the sects of Islam to which they adhere suggest totally different strategies for evangelism and church-planting.

If this is the case, how far ought we to go in dividing humanity into categories and subcategories? Winter has suggested that the number of categories we use will have a natural limit if we attempt to assign each person on earth to only one group. That group will be the group in terms of which he or she can best be reached by the gospel: "For every person in the world there is only one people-oriented approach that, to the best of our knowledge, is the best way to reach that particular person. That way no one will be counted twice" (Conn 1984:51).

THE NEED FOR AN EVANGELISTIC STRATEGY

While that is a good scheme for assessing the progress of the gospel and determining the deployment of missionaries, Harley Schreck of World Vision has rightly pointed out that it does not cover all the bases from the point of view of evangelistic strategy. This is especially true in cities, where people become involved in interlocking relationships at different strata.

When general assessments have been made and workers have been deployed, how does the missionary approach people with a message that speaks to them where they are? Is there a mechanism for understanding the web of relationships in which the average urbanite in every part of the world is involved?

Anthropologists speak of subcultures as subdivisions of the larger culture or society of which people are part. On occasion missionaries have also spoken of subcultures, but this term is not entirely helpful because a person is normally assigned to one subculture. Urban missionaries have observed that many people are members of several subcultures at once. But if the "subcultures" overlap, are they really subcultures?

There can be no doubt that the groups we have in mind overlap one another. They generally fall into five categories: relatives, work mates (including school mates),

neighbors, play mates, and co-religionists. An urbanite does not necessarily work with relatives. His relatives and work mates might not live in his neighborhood. He or she might go to the movies or a soccer match with still another group of friends. And for those who take their religion seriously, religious expression sometimes brings them into close contact with people whom they would otherwise not know. While the groups overlap, the categories remain discrete.

IS "PEOPLE GROUP" AN APPROPRIATE TERM?

These are realities that urban evangelists and pastors must take into account as they work with converts and potential converts. It has been suggested (Shreck and Barrett 1987) that all these various groupings ought to be called people groups. Thus "people groups" becomes an overlapping label; the same person might be counted several times as one attempts to describe the people groups in a given city. But this is confusing. The same term-"people group"-is used both to assess the progress of the gospel in the world and to help describe the nitty-gritty communication problems faced by individual evangelists at the local level. If anthropologists distinguish cultures from subcultures, do we not need an intermediate term that describes the evangelistic task, pointing to a group smaller in number than that designated by "people group" but larger than the individual?

A BETTER TERM

The term "homogeneous networks" is a term well-suited to our needs. It represents conscious acknowledgment of recent missiological thought as well as contemporary sociological/anthropological discussions. McGavran defined "homogeneous units" in *How Churches Grow* in 1959 and *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970. He repeated his definition in 1980: "The homogeneous unit is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common." Peter Wagner elaborated on homogeneous units in *Our Kind Of People* (1979), and the first Lausanne Occasional Paper (Lausanne Committee 1978) reported on the Pasadena Consultation on the Homogeneous Unit Principle.

McGavran used the term partly because it was a flexible term: "The homogeneous unit is an elastic concept, its meaning depending on the context in which it is used" (1980:96). He is willing to apply the term to sub-units of a tribe: "These may be clans of lineages, language or dialect groups, or political or geographical units" (1980:96). From the start, therefore, the term "homogeneous" was sometimes used in the literature to refer to sub-units of specific ethnic groups. The history of the term suggests its resuscitation now that we are giving new attention to the evangelistic task in cities.

At the same time, social science has recently called our attention to another facet of urban life that bears strongly on evangelistic opportunity. McGavran highlighted this facet as early as 1965, when he spoke of a "web of human relationships." Urban anthropologists and sociologists have strengthened our understanding of such webs. These social scientists prefer the term "networks" and have described this phenomenon in many different volumes.

We are told that these networks operate not only among relatives, but among neighbors, work mates, playmates, and other groups. Eames and Goode comment that the city can be described as a "network of networks" (1977:242). Especially in nations where very little government assistance is available, networks of relationships help people find employment, clothing, shelter, food, health care, and much more.

For example, a family new to the city may stay with relatives (their primary network) when they first arrive. These relatives may also help the breadwinner to find work. The women in the network introduce the women who are newcomers to city ways, and their sociability often prevents the newcomer from becoming overly homesick. Later, when sickness strikes, a work mate tells the father where to get medical help. He may also invite him to some sporting event or tell him where to find housing at a reasonable price.

Combining insights from missiology and social science, we arrive at the term "homogeneous networks." Homogeneous networks are people joined to one another by (usually) several webs of common interests and mutually beneficial relationships. These networks are called homogeneous because their members have something important in common (such as mutual ancestors, marriage ties, common work, or common disabilities). They are to be distinguished from stratified networks in which the master-servant, employer-employee, or teacher-student relationship tends to predominate. The members of homogeneous networks are sufficiently alike to allow them to trust each other's judgment. New ideas pass freely from one person to another.

Groups can be visualized one by one. Networks are more elusive, especially when one considers that the same person can be a member of several networks at once. Yet this elusive and universal dimension of urban life must be grasped by one who, like the apostle Paul, wishes to be all things to all men so that he may by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:22).

SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS

Precious opportunities for evangelism have often been lost in the city because the evangelist did not make use of existing networks. While Paul did not use the term "network," he was certainly aware of the networks of his day and made

frequent use of them. He capitalized on the networks represented in his background-Roman citizenship, tutelage under Gamaliel, life among the Pharisees, and knowledge of Aramaic and Greek.

The spread of the gospel in the city often follows network lines. In 1955 McGavran wrote of bridges over which the gospel passes from one ethnic group to another. In the city the networks can become the bridges over which the gospel passes from one extended family, ethnic group, or neighborhood to another.

In a survey conducted by the Institute of American Church Growth, 75 to 90 percent of respondents said that they came to Christ and His Church through the influence of friends or relatives (Arn and Arn 1982:43). In *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Arn and Arn 1982), the authors give several examples of how this takes place.

I have observed a similar spread of the gospel among the Tiv people of Nigeria, both in rural areas and in the city. Networks of relatives are universal, but it is especially in the city that networks of work mates, play mates, and neighbors become prominent. When Christians begin to energize the existing networks with love and Christian compassion, striking results often follow. The expansion of Christianity in the twentieth century has often followed network lines, whether Christians have been consciously aware of it or not.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul encourages Christians to develop new network ties in the community of believers. They are to care for each other as the parts of the human body care for one another. Christians who promote this "network of fellow believers," while retaining participation in their other networks, are lights in a dark world, and they will attract others to the Light of lights.

We need to retain the people group concept as a way to assess the progress of the gospel and determine where more missionaries ought to be deployed. At the same time, especially in the exploding cities of our world, we need a new conceptual tool for knowing how to reach the various groups on our list. Analysis in terms of homogeneous networks provides the best strategy not only for urban evangelism, but also for shepherding the various peoples who come to Christ in a metropolitan environment.

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