

THE PRESENT STATUS OF FRONTIER MISSIONS

■ For some time, it has been well known that many peoples are beyond the reach of the gospel. Yet, only recently, has any precision been brought to bear on their plight. Here the latest advances in this subject are examined.

By Todd Johnson

Ed. note: The global diagrams referred to in this talk appear in various publications or have yet to be published. Diagram 34 was published in the January 1991 issue of the IJFM. Diagram 35 was published in the March 1991 issue of the AD 2000 global monitor. Diagrams 36-38 are still under development and will be published in the future.

What I am going to say today is largely the result of two ongoing studies. First, I have been working with huge amount of data. I'm currently working with David Barrett in Richmond, Virginia on the World Evangelization Database which, for one thing, lists every ethnolinguistic people in the world. There's about eleven thousand five hundred of these. We've been combing over it, updating statistics.

Second, I spent the last six months reading everything I could on the subject of frontier missions—going back to 1974. It was a fascinating experience. I saw the evolution of thought and all sorts of interesting and sometimes divergent directions in works published in those 16 years.

Let me make three points based on these reflections. First, we have to stop narrowing the resources for frontier mission and start seeing what God sees as His resource for frontier mission. We have a tendency to narrow the resources that are available for frontier mission to our denomination, our tradition, our theology, or our way of thinking. I think that's very detrimental to frontier missions.

Second, we need to stop broadening the targets we consider unreached and, instead, work to narrow them down to

genuine unreached peoples. I am shocked by the freedom that has been given to agencies to call just about any people they want "unreached." That shouldn't be the case because it obscures our focus. The definitions are clear enough to steer us away from peoples with large Christian populations to those with few or no Christians.

You can imagine what happens if you put those two tendencies together—narrowing resources and broadening targets. You've suddenly got a much harder job than what you started out with. We have to solve this problem in the next few years or face the effects of the dilution of resources for frontier mission.

Third, we should use the least evangelized peoples as a guide to reach the unreached mini-peoples of the world. This is going to be a fairly technical discussion (half of it I probably don't understand myself) so please bear with me.

Global diagram 34. "The Church's Obedience or Disobedience to Christ's Great Commission with its 2 Minicommissions (I='Evangelize!' and II='Disciple!') and 7 Mandates". I will highlight a couple of points on this diagram. We already have developed the World A, B and C model that you'll find in *Our globe and how to reach it* (New Hope, 1990). This diagram introduces a new wrinkle that is completely compatible with the older model. Remember that World C is the Christian world. World B is the evangelized non-Christian world and World A is the unevangelized world. This can be applied to individuals, to countries, or to peoples. We've applied it in all three ways. You get slightly different

results in each case. Diagram 34 looks at evangelization based on both countries and peoples because we don't define an individual as partially evangelized.

The world can be viewed through the lens of two Minicommissions. The two commissions are "Evangelize!" and "Disciple!" Evangelize involves preaching the gospel to somebody so they hear the message and understand it. Discipling refers to bringing someone to the Lord; to making disciples. Referring to our earlier model, the peoples or countries of World C are both disciplined and evangelized. World B is evangelized but not disciplined. World A has neither been evangelized nor disciplined.

We've assigned percentages to the three Worlds in relation to evangelization and discipleship. When you divide the eleven thousand five hundred peoples into three Worlds, you get four thousand that are less than fifty percent evangelized and are less than seven percent church members (World A). Twenty-seven hundred fall in the middle section here (World B) which is defined as 50-95% evangelized and 7-60% church members. Finally, four thousand eight hundred peoples are ninety-five percent or more evangelized and have church membership over sixty percent (World C).

Global Diagram 35. "Matching up Holistic Resources with Legitimate Targets: Clarifying the Requirements for Finishing the Task of World Evangelization by the Year 2000." On the left is a list of the resources for world evangelization, which includes all traditions and denominations of the Christian Church. Note the comment: "No church is a hundred percent Great Commission

Christian and no church is zero percent Great Commission Christian." On the right the targets over here are divided by the familiar three Worlds distinction that I showed you earlier. Frontier mission has to occur among the peoples of World A—among the unevangelized and undisciplined. If we're using a mini-people model here then this would be the unreached peoples in World A. Below this you are involved in renewal, partnership, proselytization, and other activities in Worlds B and C.

A great deal of what is called mission is actually attempts to convince Christians to change traditions or denominations. If you go to Brazil to make Catholics into Pentecostals or to make Presbyterians into Baptists—that's proselytization. The main point is if you start narrowing the resources and broadening targets, you soon find yourself including proselytization as a priority task.

This Society, on the other hand, is focused on frontier missions—on unreached peoples. Anything called frontier mission that is not among truly unreached peoples is what I'm calling "pseudo-frontier mission". Calling work among Catholics in Latin America or Lutherans in Finland frontier missions is an example of pseudo-frontier missions. One person in a recent publication said the only people harder to reach than Finns are Muslims. The frontier missions job is large enough in itself but if you start adding everything else in Worlds B and C, then the task becomes near impossible in my estimation.

This is not simply a theory. What many consider frontier missions is not frontier missions at all. If anyone is going to keep a strong hold on these definitions it has to be this Society. There's nobody else meeting this year on this subject. If we don't protect these terms and definitions, there's no one else to do it. I think we need to take a hard line and insist that priority targets for mission be narrowly defined.

A similar mistake is to make unreached peoples out of socio-groups that are already heavily Christian. The radical feminist movement in North America was recently portrayed as a major unreached people target. The poor have been called the largest unreached people in the world. But we know that half of the poor of the world

are heavily evangelized so you can't talk about the poor as a whole as an unreached people.

What we need to do is to focus on the least evangelized, those that are actual in unreached peoples. That's my point here.

Global Diagram 36. "Today's Unfinished Task: Exploring the Relations Between Unevangelized Individuals, Unreached Individuals, and Individuals in Unreached Peoples." I have two different points here I'll highlight. First, I'm illustrating a false view of evangelization which is taken from *World Evangelization* magazine, published right after the meeting in Pattaya in 1980. They said that by the year 2000 only 1.8 billion people would be evangelized because they were only counting Christians as evangelized. They further deduced that 75% of the world's population would be unevangelized. If you follow that kind of reasoning, this task is going to take forever because it is only finished when the whole world is converted. Somebody told me that nobody believes this anymore but I take issue with that. Many agencies and churches side with this view.

Why else would you put a priority on evangelizing a country like Belgium or Guatemala (which are two that appear in recent literature as not very evangelized, even though the percent church membership in each of these is very high)? They must be thinking of evangelization as conversion to an evangelical position. But those who publish this will not tell you *exactly how evangelized or unevangelized* they are—they only say the countries need to be evangelized, or are barely evangelized.

If Guatemala and Belgium are barely evangelized and with majorities of the peoples in them unreached, we are in serious trouble. The global figures we have all been using for unreached peoples are far too low. I've done exercises with this. No matter how you work it out, Guatemala can't have too many unreached peoples or you have to start borrowing from Muslim groups to keep our current global totals. In other words, 2.2 billion individuals in 12,000 unreached peoples is far too low if many heavily Christian peoples are unreached. But if you do revise the global figures based on this, it is probably time to stop talking about evangelizing the world by the year

2000.

This is a diagram involving only individuals now and we have the Worlds A, B and C trichotomy, then we have Patrick Johnstone's dichotomy. He went country by country and thought, "How many people in this country are beyond the reach of the gospel?" Then we have the U. S. Center for World Mission and our Society's, 2.2 billion individuals in 12,000 unreached people groups. Here we are mixing the reached/unreached or evangelized/unevangelized individuals. This diagram shows how they are related. It also shows that an unreached people can contain Christians and evangelized non-Christians but the majority will be unevangelized individuals.

Skipping to *Global Diagram 38. "Unreached Mini-peoples and Least Evangelized Ethnolinguistic Peoples: Looking at Potential Evangelization and Actual Evangelization."* Mini-peoples are what we have over the years referred to as people groups but because there are different types of people groups, we felt it was more helpful to give each a label. Thus in this diagram there are both ethnolinguistic peoples and mini-peoples. Mini-peoples are the type referred to in the March 1982 definition of reached and unreached peoples. The goal according to these definitions is that the church in a mini-people would be viable so that everybody in the group would be able to hear the message and understand it and join a fellowship. A reached mini-people would essentially be one hundred percent "potentially evangelized".

On the other hand, we in Richmond are estimating actual evangelization—how many individuals have adequate knowledge of Christ, Christianity and the gospel. This is an interesting twist because David Barrett's work on percent evangelized has often been misconstrued as potential evangelization. The challenge, as I see it, is to work on the relationship between these two concepts until we are clear at how they support each other. That is necessary because so much more data has been interpreted through the E% lens than through the March 1982 lens.

In light of this I've included stages in reaching of the mini-people. These aren't original to me. At the bottom is an example of some ethnolinguistic

peoples—how they look at the different stages of evangelization themselves.

One of our greatest problems in frontier missions is the success enjoyed by missionaries and nationals because once you're successful then it's hard to get out and go somewhere else. That may be a single-sentence summary of the present status of mission. Missions has been so successful that we're now bogged down in reached peoples. We need a whole new wave of missionaries to go into unreached peoples.

Global Diagram 37. "Relations between Ethnolinguistic Peoples and Mini-peoples: Exploring the Differences and Similarities Between Different Types of People Groups." Ethnolinguistic peoples can often be divided into several mini-peoples. Much of the time you can't deduce this until evangelization is quite advanced. We know of several ethnolinguistic peoples that have mini-peoples within them but we can't list them all yet. We have a list of ethnolinguistic peoples and we are confident that the least evangelized of these will provide signposts to the unreached mini-peoples.

A World A Map

We've also been working on a map. Many of us have emphasized that frontier missions is not a geographical entity—you find unreached peoples all over the world. We've been working on a map and discovered, somewhat to our amazement, that you can actually draw a line around about ninety-five percent of the task. Most missionaries work outside of that line. This map illustrates the strategic importance of the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Tribal, and non-Han Chinese blocs of unreached peoples.

This simple strategy has been overlooked and downplayed in the last two decades. Instead, the EFMA in 1979 took 5,908 peoples that were mainly contiguous to present mission fields. This overlooks the major blocs of unreached peoples that are not contiguous to present work. This is also the reason we now can map a huge area that contains most of the unreached peoples and very few missionaries. The bulk of the job is not contiguous to present agencies except for certain agencies like SIM International. Their

work is contiguous to the bottom half of our outline of World A.

We can further examine this problem by asking a simple question, "Where are all missionaries that should be trapped in Iraq and Kuwait right now?" They're not there. Now why aren't they there? After all these years, didn't we know that Iraq was a significant target in frontier missions? The line I drew on the map contains all 170 least evangelized megapeoples listed in the October 1990 *IJFM*. Each of these has been overlooked by traditional and non-traditional missions. We have to take these targets seriously. I'm not arguing that there aren't small pockets of unreached peoples other places but ninety five percent of the task is in this boundary.

Question: Shouldn't we talk about peoples within countries rather than just countries?

The country is there and it has boundaries. It has certain numbers of groups in it that are unreached and it's helpful to give a country approach because it constrains you to control your estimates. As we asked earlier, "how

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many unreached peoples are there in Guatemala? How many groups and how many individuals are in those groups." Surely it's not very many. It can't be very many because if it's too many then the global totals would go up. We're not saying there aren't *any* in Guatemala. We're just saying there aren't as many in Guatemala as there are in Central Asia.

We're trying to provide signposts. Countries are not the best signposts. On the other hand, we know there's a big difference between what has to be done in India and what has to be done in Colombia. There's a big difference—a huge difference that should say something about deployment to mission agencies. If mission agencies were serious about unreached peoples,

they would have many missionaries in the least evangelized countries.

Conclusion

I'm trying to present some of the preliminary conclusions of wrestling with data and the historical development of frontier missions. The most important is a better identification of the targets with which this Society is primarily concerned. There's a lot more "people group thinking" today than 20 years ago. That is a positive development that has come out of much hard work and much prayer. Now I think we need to focus more carefully on the actual targets of frontier missions as defined by the 1982 definition. A lot of quantification work has not been done in that area yet because it's so difficult and because even getting an initial list of the peoples is very difficult. In a parallel development, David Barrett and Patrick Johnstone have put a lot of work in on the ethnolinguistic level. I think that is going to provide a signpost for unreached mini-peoples.

That's my main point. We are getting far enough along in the research to see what needs to be done more clearly. This shows a geographical reality in frontier missions. We're pushing this concept because the mission force is so poorly deployed inside this boundary. We are trying to draw some kind of identifiable boundary so that we can help agencies know where the least evangelized

peoples are located. We're not denying that a good part of mission will remain to be renewal mission, domestic mission, discipleship, and all kinds of other things. We're simply highlighting what is left in the realm of frontier mission.

This Society has an obligation to the mission industry and the church at large to remain focused on precisely that task. ■

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