

NEW MISSION STRUCTURES FOR CHURCH PLANTING IN RESTRICTED ACCESS NATIONS

■ What changes in the mission industry are suggested by the current transformations on the pallet of world history? Here a model to match the needs of the Muslim world is presented after a decade of experimentation with a continuing commitment to innovation and tailor-made mission.

By Eric Adams and Tim Lewis

The world is rapidly changing, and these changes are having a profound effect on today's mission enterprise. Even as modern missiology identifies more people groups which have little relevant access to the Gospel, it is apparent that many of these same people groups will not be accessible by traditional mission methods. Consider the following facts:

- Today, approximately 70% of the people groups without a church, representing 55% of the world's population, live under governments which restrict and/or are hostile to propagation of the Gospel to non-Christians.
- Militant Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as residual Communism and growing Secularism, actively work to discourage or prevent Christian ministry, evangelization, and even church gatherings in areas where these interests have significant political, social, or cultural influence.
- The vast majority of missionaries still go to "open" countries where many churches already exist. Only 6% of today's missionaries take up residence among people groups in countries or areas that restrict the Church and its activities, or where the Church of Jesus Christ does not exist, or is a tiny minority.
- Only one dollar out of ten thousand of the Church's money goes towards placing missionaries among those "restricted access" nations. That's .01% to reach over half of the world's population

The realities of today's world demand the formulation of new strate-

gies and structures to meet the challenge of those peoples who are culturally isolated from the Gospel. The people themselves are often searching for spiritual truth, yet they live and die in restricted access nations, whose governments are often hostile to anyone doing persuasion evangelism. A few mission agencies today are scrambling to respond to these new realities with creative approaches.

To spur strategic thinking towards effective means to make disciples among these peoples isolated by cultural and political walls, this profile of one innovative mission agency, *Frontiers*, is presented. This profile is offered, not as a definitive model, but rather as some observations of an ongoing experiment in the current missions laboratory. In the mission marketplace of new ideas, it will be evaluated and improved upon, resulting, it is hoped, in seeing the Kingdom move forward into territory often considered off limits by God's Church and mission agencies.

From its inception in 1982, *Frontiers* established a set of core principles which addressed the constraints of working in what were then called "closed countries". These principles are helping the agency to define its mission. Termed "non-negotiables", these tenets are used as the basic template and measuring tool for the *Frontiers* movement as it grows. Briefly, they can be summarized

- The focus of the mission is to work exclusively among Muslims.
- All mission activities must lead to planting churches.
- All missionaries will serve on semi-

autonomous teams.

- On-field coaching will provide necessary accountability and ongoing training for ministry.
- A "grace orientation" must prevail throughout the mission.
- As a "field governed" mission, decisions will be made closest to the action.

Focusing In

The first two of these "non-negotiables" establish the focus of *Frontiers*. Activity is limited strictly to Muslim people groups. Christian history has demonstrated that past efforts to reach the Muslim peoples have been stopped or diverted. Such factors as perceived resistance, open hostility, or the presence of other, more receptive, people groups nearby have undermined the resolve to work among Muslims. The singular focus on this one bloc of peoples, the vast majority of whom are in restricted access nations, increases the chances of sustaining a successful, persevering effort to establish churches among Muslims. This principle of a clear focus and concentration lessens the possibility of the workers being distracted by other agenda. Instead we prefer to encourage these other established agencies to complement our efforts by doing translation projects, radio work and other ministries that can aid church planting efforts but require massive structures that could distract *Frontiers* from its central church planting focus.

In addition, this singular focus fosters a sense of community among the members of *Frontiers*. There are similarities of culture and language, as well as the strategies developed to overcome

common obstacles in planting churches among Muslims. The yearly meetings of the Frontiers church planting team leaders encourages a cross-pollination of ideas, comparisons of successes and failures, evaluation of strategies, and corporate planning for better results in the next year.

The second "non-negotiable" reflects the primary objective of Frontier's work among Muslims: to plant churches. The typical historical pattern of winning scattered individual converts in a Muslim society has rarely produced a continuing witness for Christ in that society.

In trying to reach Muslims, Frontiers has focused on a strategy of harvest, or "closure": Its teams are not content to simply win individual converts. They are resolved to persevere in the obedience of faith until God establishes His Church among each people group. The "Church" these teams seek would be vital, viable fellowships of indigenous, Muslim convert believers, obedient to the Lord Jesus. These fellowships would have the spiritual resources, not only to withstand the inevitable persecution, but also to effectively evangelize their own people. Individual converts do not bring closure to the task of communicating the Gospel cross-culturally to a people, but establishing churches who are determined to evangelize their own people does. This goal of reproductive churches is essential for working in restricted access nations, as the presence of expatriates among a people cannot be guaranteed indefinitely. These churches of Muslim converts must be equipped to stand on their own and operate effectively and independently within their own culture and society.

Teams: The Basic Building Block

To complete its mission, the structure of the Frontiers movement is broken down into three parts: the Sending Bases, the International Council, and the Field Teams. The Sending Bases recruit missionaries and intercessors and develop the support base to keep the church planting teams operating on the field. The International Council, and its staff, the International Headquarters, coordinate the overall movement.

The third structure, the Field Teams, is the primary vehicle within Frontiers to penetrate Muslim people groups in

restricted access countries with church planting activities. Because the team structure is the key element through which the overall objective of the organization is accomplished, the whole of the Frontiers movement is organized around this fundamental unit.

Each team forms around a leader with a vision and a strategy for penetrating a particular Muslim people group, or segment of a Muslim city. Each team has a Memo Of Understanding (MOU) written by the Team Leader for his field. This MOU sets goals and expectations for that team's ministry and life on the field, within the larger context of the six non-negotiables described above. Because each team has a unique leader and MOU, many different field models are created, with their unique adaptations to the field context and "personality" of the team.

The teams are diverse, forming around different financial, lifestyle, strategic and/or organizational styles defined by the field requirements, the leader's vision and strategies, and the make-up of the individuals on the team. This structure makes it simpler to incorporate teams seconded from Third World missions, like Latin Americans, who may have a team language other than English, and radically different team ethos and entry strategies.

As an organization, Frontiers seeks to be a non-judgmental community that affirms this diversity of lifestyle and philosophy of ministry among the teams, while maintaining a unity of focus and common goals and agreement on foundational Christian doctrines and authority of Scripture. This emphasis reflects the "non-negotiable" of being a "grace oriented" fellowship.

Frontiers has granted the Team Leader extensive autonomy and authority for his field out of the conviction that decisions pertaining to church planting among Muslims should be made as close to the field of activity as possible. While affirming this relationship of semi-autonomy, Frontiers also requires that each Team Leader maintain a strong accountability relationship with the International Headquarters.

This balance of semi-autonomy and accountability in the teams is a central strength of the Frontiers organizational structure. Semi-autonomy allows the

teams the freedom to creatively pursue their goal of church planting among their target people with the most appropriate means at their disposal, and make rapid strategic planning as field situations change. At the same time, accountability ensures adherence to the overall goals of Frontiers and maintains requisite standards of ethical, moral, theological and legal conduct, and encourages inter-team communication, maintenance of positive relationships with workers from other agencies, and ongoing training on key issues affecting church planting in a Muslim context.

Because the majority of Muslim people groups targeted by Frontiers teams are in restricted access nations, which allow few or no missionary visas, almost all Frontiers missionaries must develop "entry strategies". These strategies allow the missionaries to enter the country and gain residency among their target people. "Entry strategies" range from renewable tourist visas to long term residency visas based on professional skills, a development project, or an entrepreneurial business. Most "restricted access" countries contain thousands of foreigners working in many capacities. Entering in one of these "secular" capacities does not require signing any document about not practicing or sharing one's religious faith. The semi-autonomous team structure enables each team to work out their entry strategies to fit both their own gifting and the specific parameters of the people they are attempting to reach. The resulting "fit" of the team with the needs of the situation promotes greater goal ownership and longevity on the field—especially difficult to maintain in limited-access countries.

Once individual team members gain residency on the field, their church planting efforts are coordinated by the Team Leader and his MOU. Under his leadership, the team structure provides on-site accountability, encouragement, assistance, training, resources, and spiritual community for individual team members as they engage in church planting activities. Because each team member has different ministry gifts, a team effort allows a fuller expression of the Body of Christ among a Muslim people, and demonstrates some of the dynamics of Christian community.

In addition, because each team is unique, much of the member care and

member training is conducted on the field within the team context. While some more traditional pre-field candidate training and psychological assessment is done before departure, this is kept to a very basic level. Ongoing, specific felt needs for training and individual member care are provided as much as possible within the field context, often resulting in deeper and better implemented changes at the point a person is motivated to learn and grow.

This field team model is also sensitive to today's missionary candidate. Those of the "Baby Boom" generation require more emotional care and support, and a stronger sense of belonging and community than prior missionary generations. Using a team structure which functions as a "small committed community" provides the kind of intense caring and support which this generation needs to survive and thrive on the field. It fosters a higher degree of commitment to the task and co-workers. Studies indicate this generation is less likely to make a long term commitment to anyone other than their own nuclear family or a few close relationships. Long term commitments to organizations are rare. However, since a great deal of sacrifice and perseverance is necessary to work in "closed" country situations, strong commitments to other individuals on the team can provide the necessary motivation to keep going.

Frontiers therefore has a program of "FIELD COACHING", made up of individuals who are available to assist in on-site training, problem solving, and pastoral care. They advise teams and the Team Leader in such areas as missiology, spiritual life, entry strategies, language and culture acquisition, and team dynamics. In addition, these "coaches" encourage and provide tools to allow the team leader and team members to upgrade their skills in interpersonal relationships, communication, family life, and other key areas that contribute to their effectiveness on the field.

In order to encourage a diversity of approaches and strategies to be tested in each people group, Frontiers allows for and even encourages more than one

team to operate within a given people group. Thus, in the event of the expulsion of one team, another can carry on the work, allowing continuity. In addition, this allows for German, Korean, or Latin teams, for example, to operate in their mother language in the team context. Multiple teams on a field can communicate with each other frequently and share insights as well as difficulties.

Structuring a mission around semi-autonomous teams can work against the organization as a whole. Separate teams, each with their own style of leadership and unique MOU, result in there being no single standard for the teams in such diverse areas as security

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procedures, philosophy and policy in finance, personnel recruitment, training, or church planting strategy and communications. This obviously complicates the administrative role of the Sending Bases in the different home countries as well as the International Headquarters.

Still, these disadvantages of developing semi-autonomous teams are considered worth the extra effort demanded. The majority of the organization's decisions are made as close as possible to the area of activity. This encourages creativity in approaching the task, leadership development, entrepreneurial zeal, a greater willingness to risk, as well as better team ownership and morale in what is often an oppressive and hostile environment. Because the Muslim world is often volatile, the ability to quickly adapt the operations of the local team to changing field conditions is extremely valuable.

Organizational Architecture

Normal forms of communication and

reporting to and from other countries are often unworkable under hostile regimes. Frontiers must deal with the geographical and political diversity of the Muslim peoples around the world, relative isolation of the teams, and their significant need to keep information from adversaries of Christ's Kingdom (Matt. 7:6, 10:16). These challenges require creative approaches to administration and management of the movement. Critical links must be maintained between the field teams, the international headquarters, the sending countries, and the sending churches to ensure the crucial supply lines of prayer, personnel, ideas and finances necessary to see the church planting efforts are adequate.

The Sending Bases and the International Council (and its staff, the International Headquarters) are the two other key structures. Frontiers has established these solely to support the field teams in their church planting efforts. The Sending Bases help to form the teams and continue to generate personnel and funds for their church planting activities. The General Director appoints the Team Leaders and the Field Director oversees them.

Mission efforts to the Muslim world need to be international in scope, drawing prayer, personnel and financial resources from different countries. Several countries are restrict Americans more than other nationalities. In Frontiers, each Sending Base in a specific country serves members of Frontier's teams who have been sent out from churches of that country. Each Sending Base has responsibility of not only mobilizing and maintaining spiritual, personnel, and financial resources for its teams, but also maintaining relationships with the sending churches and other mission agencies in that country. These Sending Base Directors are responsible to the International Council through its staff, the International Headquarters. Presently, Frontiers has eight sending bases. The International Headquarters is responsible for establishing new Sending Bases to increase the flow of resources and personnel to the Muslim areas.

Frontiers is eager to do joint ventures

with a variety of denominations, churches, and other agencies to further the establishment of churches in the Muslim world. These joint ventures have ranged from traditional personnel seconding arrangements to partnership with local churches or agencies which also function as a Sending Base. *More than one* Sending Base may exist in a given country if the situation requires it. Establishing multiple Sending Bases in a country might be appropriate to increase the volume of resources to the field or to specialize in relating to key constituencies or subcultures within that country, or specific entry strategies.

The basic vision of *Frontiers*, as well as its foundational structure, coordination, expansion, focus and overall strategy are monitored and stimulated by the International Council and its staff, the International Headquarters. The International Council, which meets once a year, is the highest governing body of *Frontiers*. The International Council consists of the Team Leaders presently engaged in church planting ministries on Muslim fields plus the General Director and the Field Director. The International Council has the power to review activities, and give overall direction to all areas of the movement.

The International Headquarters operates throughout the year in Southern England, ensuring that the intents of the International Council are carried out within the Sending Bases and Field teams. The International Cooperative Agreement is the document which links the International Council, International Headquarters, Sending Bases and field teams together, and defines how *Frontiers* functions.

Therefore, corporately, the Team Leaders govern the movement, ensuring that the movement's direction, organization, activities, and policies best reflect the needs of the church planting efforts on the fields. Individually, the Team Leaders are accountable to the International Headquarters for their lead-

ership of team members and their church planting activities. Each Team Leader submits monthly reports of his team's activities and progress towards established goals. In addition, each Team Leader requests and/or responds to coaching by veteran leaders sent out from the International Headquarters. *Frontiers* is perhaps unique in promising the church planting teams a visiting coach (or inviting field personnel to headquarters) up to every 60 days if need be. Most of these mature church leaders are non-*Frontiers*, insuring against isolation or stagnancy. It is hoped that this provision will establish an effective field government and peer review system. In turn, this system should serve to keep the focus of church planting among Muslim peoples at the top of its organizational agenda—resisting distractions away from its mandate.

The State Of The Experiment

Frontiers is only just completing its first decade, so the experiment is still in progress. As the International Headquarters continues to establish Sending Bases across the world, much of its attention is focused on seeing these sending bases established, and the pipelines of resources to the fields opened. This has resulted in the International Headquarters taking a predominantly reactive approach to field problems. As the Sending Base network stabilizes, the International Headquarters hopefully will be able to take a more proactive attitude to the evangelism and church planting issues of the church planting teams in Muslim countries.

Though the semi-autonomous team is one of the central strengths of the *Frontiers* structure, it is also its most vulnerable point. Young, relatively inexperienced leaders are granted significant responsibility and authority to engage in their task of church planting among Muslim peoples. Leadership re-

sponsibilities, in addition to learning language(s), making disciples and working their own secular jobs to maintain residency in the country have, at times, proven to be overly stressful for Team Leaders. Finding the right balance of authority over and servanthood to team members (who are often peers of the Team Leader) has also produced significant strain. The role and experiences of Team Leaders are therefore constantly being re-evaluated. Lessons learned are incorporated into prefield training and coaching visits for new and ongoing Team Leaders.

Though it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions about the methods and structure of *Frontiers*, there are several indicators which show that the movement is going in a productive direction. Presently, *Frontiers* has 38 teams on the field or in formation, with 281 missionaries in residency among Muslim people groups, primarily in restricted access nations. In addition, there are 19 more teams in various stages of formation and preparation to penetrate unreached Muslim peoples where there is now no church.

These 281 missionaries are in daily contact with Muslims, building networks of trust relationships along which the Gospel can travel. Through these relationships, many Muslims have entered the Kingdom in obedience to the Lord Jesus. On some fields, *Frontiers* teams have seen some of these individuals coalesce into small groups which hopefully will become full-fledged congregations with their own elders. These indicators, as well as the rapidly changing conditions of today's Islamic world, may well be pointing towards a major work of God among Muslims. Indeed, it may finally be *Their Turn*. ■

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