

Editorial: Are the pioneers enough?

As I wearily scanned the tall, dusty bookshelves in the old church converted into a bookstore in Stillwater, Minnesota, I wondered if I would see the fruit of my labor of the past few hours. Who cares about old books? Why worry about the past when the tyranny of the urgent demands our attention? Then I saw it there on the shelf... "The Past and Prospective Extension of the Gospel by Missions to the Heathen"—the famous Bampton Lectures by Anthony Grant in 1843. After I eagerly bought it and brought it home I read:

The past missionary efforts of the Church, when viewed in reference to the extensive and varied tracts of heathenism that lie before it, can be deemed only as inceptive and experimental. They resemble but the essays of the messengers sent to make trial of the land of promise, to ascertain the character of its natives, and bring back some first-fruits of its produce. A more organized movement, resolute and concentrated action, will be required, to take possession of each portion of the inheritance (p. 263).

And so, here we are today. Yes, there are many more Christians now than in 1843 but with the bulk of the unevangelized world we are still only experimenting. Can we learn from the past that the evangelization of the world will take a much more concerted effort than any one denomination or agency has in mind?

The pioneers

Mission agencies and churches all over the world are talking about the unreached peoples and some are sending personnel to work among them. The movement has come so far that if an agency doesn't have anyone working among unreached peoples they feel left out.

Agencies, east and west, are proud of their pioneers who are working among unreached peoples. And rightly so. (Let's define "pioneers" here as those highly-motivated individualists with such a clear vocation from God that they target an unreached people often with only reluctant support from their agencies). All over the world the commitment and ingenuity, as well as the spiritual acumen, of these pioneer

missionaries is put to the test. By God's grace many succeed in providing a witness to people who previously had no opportunity to know Christ. That is something to rejoice about. Many believe that this shows that unreached peoples are finally being taken seriously. But are these pioneers enough? Let's take a look at one of the toughest blocs of unreached peoples for the answer.

Mathematics and Muslims

"Missionaries are one in a million to Muslims... literally" is one of the slogans the mission agency Frontiers Inc. uses to put the needs of the Muslim world before the Christian public. Let's assume that they mean that there are about 1,000 missionaries working among about 1,000 million Muslims (one billion). Frontiers Inc. currently has 261 missionaries—all working among Muslims. If Frontiers Inc. were to double by next year (which is not likely) then how would the situation improve? There would then be 1.3 missionaries per million Muslims. What if they quadrupled in the next year? There would be 1.8 missionaries per million Muslims. Frontiers would have to *quintuple* for there to even be 2 missionaries per million Muslims.

How does this compare with other situations? If you are a Samoan you receive the free services of 3603 foreign missionaries per million inhabitants of your country of Samoa... literally. (See Global Diagram 43 on page 152). Looking at other countries around the world, there are 788 missionaries per million Bermudans, 1123 per million Namibians, 403 per million Guatemalans, 162 per million Brazilians, and so forth. These are enormously generous self-helpings of the foreign missions pie.

Let's assume that a country like Guatemala has an adequate number of missionaries per million, what would a similar response to Muslims entail? 403,000 missionaries to the Muslim world. Is that even realistic in light of the current efforts put forth? (Just on the side, if there were 403 missionaries per million for all 2.2 billion individuals in 12,000 unreached people groups there would need to be 886,600

missionaries working among them).

An illustration such as this begins to shed light on the inadequate response of the mission agencies and churches to the challenge of unreached peoples. We are currently at a stage when everyone seems to agree that more attention needs to be given to this problem but the sending of actual personnel has been slow. Why is this?

Why are things so good yet so bad?

The day we live in strikes me as a pivotal moment in world evangelization history. Why? Because the church at large is quite well-informed about the peoples that are currently beyond the reach of the gospel. In nearly every publication I read there are at the very least subtle hints of this emphasis. Witness the frontier missions emphasis of John Paul II's "Redemptoris Missio" (now being studied and applied by Catholics worldwide). Or the report from the World Council of Churches in Canberra affirming the right of all peoples to hear the gospel of Christ. Or the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's recent statement of commitment to preach the gospel to "those who have never heard." Or the Baptist General Conference's new list of unreached peoples they plan to work among. Or the global powerhouse plans of Campus Crusade for Christ, the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Convention, and on and on.

If everyone is promising to reach the whole world why do missionaries to Muslims remain at one in a million? That is the vexing question of our day.

The myth of future deployment

Perhaps we are hiding behind the promise of changing the deployment of missionaries in the future. Nearly everyone I talk to in the mission world is uncomfortable with the term "redeployment" (because it challenges too many vested interests) but is quite happy to talk about sending a few new missionaries to unreached peoples. Unfortunately the demand for missionaries to Christian peoples is so great that sprinkling a few missionaries among the unreached doesn't significantly alter the overall deployment of an agency. Often then,

the promise of future deployment to the unreached, in the end promotes status quo.

Workable solutions?

Or perhaps agencies are overestimating their own ability to respond to this challenge? In several organizations I've observed an initial plan is drawn up based on the overall need of unreached peoples. Then the administrators go to work trying to come up with "workable solutions" in the present context of the mission. Translated that means: "We already have most of our missionaries working among Christians. Those Christians need and are demanding more and more of our resources so we need to remain balanced in our approach to frontier missions." As we have shown (see Global Diagram 42 in the July 1991 *IJFM*) that "balance" usually means that the vast majority of resources end up going only to heavily-Christian peoples. Most agencies are lucky to have 3-4% of their resources deployed among unreached peoples.

What about the past?

Another question to consider is "Has the ratio of missionaries to unreached peoples increased appreciably in the last two decades?" This is a difficult question given the fact that data gathering in the 1960s and 70s did not focus on where the resources were being used. But we know it is true that God has always had his pioneers in difficult and least-evangelized peoples. The stories I have heard from Wycliffe, SIM, WEC, Assemblies of God, Presbyterians, Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, etc. tell me that long before the term "unreached peoples" came into vogue a large number of pioneers worked among Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and tribal peoples. The most striking evidence for this is the gradually shrinking number of unreached peoples. In other words, pioneers have been steadily taking chunks out of the unevangelized world for the last one hundred years (and, of course, well before that, all the way back even to the Twelve Apostles in AD 30).

More trouble finding them

Another problem evidenced by what I see in the world's 1,000 foreign mission

publications is that most agencies that commit personnel for work among unreached peoples make significant mistakes in identifying the peoples. In many cases the peoples they choose are heavily Christian but don't happen to be their brand of Christianity. Up until now there has been no accountability in this area. As a result, many peoples that are considered part of the "countdown" have already been counted and have long been indisputably reached.

The new pioneers

Others argue that the Third World missions movement is going to solve the problem of unreached peoples. I was recently looking through a list of the peoples the Indian Evangelical Mission (IEM, a major sending body run by nationals in India) works among. I was impressed to see that nearly all of these peoples were barely evangelized and had very few other missionaries working among them. But is this typical of the Third World mission agencies and churches? At a closer look, most are heavily deployed among other Christians, just as Western agencies are. They also have pioneers among unreached peoples but the same challenge awaits them as with Western agencies.

Others look for a new paradigm

Some feel that the missions paradigm of unreached peoples served well in the 70s and 80s but a new paradigm is needed to take us into the 90s. Yet, was it ever true that unreached peoples thinking reached the level of a paradigm? And how can it be time to shift to something new if the number of unreached people groups is still up around 12,000?

Is the glass half full or 99/100 empty?

Some people are uncomfortable with this kind of talk? Why not rejoice with everyone else that there are many frontier missionaries out there—many doing an excellent job. The ultimate test is when the unevangelized are no longer so and the unreached peoples are reached. This is related to the pioneers but there is not necessarily a direct relationship. We don't consider a people reached when a small team takes up residence among them. That is why we must insist on resources *adequate* for evangelizing and reaching,

not simply brave volunteers among select peoples.

Pioneers and the year 2000

Is it then enough for the church to rely only on the pioneers? No! In fact, it does an injustice to pioneers not to supplement their work with adequate numbers of workers for the unevangelized. My hope is that the pastors, teachers, evangelists, missionaries, and laypeople, who are all in a position to bring about change, would do so while there is still time. All that many would have to do is to speak a word of encouragement to those in their care to look beyond the Christian world to the unreached peoples. Their love and concern, transformed into frontier missions by action, is all that is required for "A Church for Every People by the year 2000." Let's pray together that we all respond to the Lord so that all can hear in the shortest time possible.

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Update on Global Diagram 42 (see IJFM, July 1991)

Our "sharing globe" on WEC International was based on what statistics they have published in their official handbook *Praying always, 1990 & 1991*. Shortly after the July *IJFM* went to press we received unpublished information from them on the deployment of their missionaries in World A. Although their locations are not made public, the mission agrees that totals can be given. We therefore publish the revised globe below (figures on left are numbers of missionaries).

Global Diagram 42 analyzed the situation defining World A by countries. The next stage is to analyze with World A defined by peoples. Look for this here soon.

