

## Editorial: True Balance in Mission

Since the publication of William Carey's *Enquiry into the obligation of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen* some 200 years ago the Christian public has become increasingly aware of a basic inequity in its world missionary enterprise: those who have the least access to the gospel are also farthest from the priorities and plans of both foreign mission agencies and churches. Over the past two centuries, this "fact" has been brought before Christians in numerous publications and from a diverse range of Christian leadership ranging from laypeople to missiologists to televangelists to popes.

The response of Christians to this message has been mixed—some have considered an emphasis on the unreached as "alarmist" while others have wrestled with the implications. Those who have wrestled for solutions manifested their concern by starting new agencies (e.g. China Inland Mission) or by supporting this type of outreach in the context of their present vocations (e.g. Laymen's Missionary Movement). This has resulted in successive waves since 1792 (in the modern period) of new pioneers working among unreached peoples. If they were then successful, the peoples they penetrated were eventually reached. As one would guess, this eventually leads agencies away from pioneer work. What started as frontier missions quite naturally evolves into mission to reached peoples.

We are at one such moment in history. The vast majority of mission agencies have now been among their peoples for many decades. They have often met with success and, as a result, where they work is no longer an frontier mission field. Thus, agencies who 100 years ago were 95% deployed among unreached peoples now find that 5-10% of their personnel work directly among unreached peoples. That would actually not be much of a problem if there were not 11,000 Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and tribal groups still to be reached.

### *Confusing the confused*

In this context, in more recent history, the Christian press has compounded the problem by highlighting rather trivial

inconsistencies in overall mission research and statistics, all the while overemphasizing differences and underemphasizing the needed action obvious to all. This, in light of the present poor deployment of missionaries, has caused a virtual Gordian knot in relation to really solving the problem of unreached peoples.

### *Excuses are made to be broken*

To make matters worse, instead of seeing the need to return to pioneer missions, many agencies have been emphasizing the needs of more heavily-evangelized peoples, the call of individual missionaries, and the legitimacy of using resources to evangelize Christians of other traditions. To these three we now turn our attention.

### *The needs of heavily-evangelized peoples*

At the heart of this first argument is a fundamental misunderstanding of the unique role of a mission agency—penetrating peoples without a viable indigenous church able to effectively evangelize its own people. This is not to say that agencies can't engage in many other helpful tasks in cross-cultural mission. But it does hold true that only missions are uniquely qualified for the pioneer task. If they do not perform it many peoples are left without hope.

The example of a specialized mission agency such as Wycliffe Bible Translators illustrates this point well. With all their expertise in the field of Bible translation, for which they have invested a huge amount of time, energy and money, what would happen if they slowly began to take on many good tasks unrelated to Bible translation? What if they had a staff of 7,000 and only 100 were working directly in Bible translation? Would this not cause a tremendous shortfall in translation projects? Wouldn't it be the responsibility of the Christian public to hold them to their original charter? After all, many peoples would suddenly have little or no hope of receiving the Word of God in their language.

A parallel scenario is mission

agencies and the frontier missions task. If agencies designed primarily for pioneer missions begin to focus the vast majority of their resources on more heavily evangelized peoples, then those furthest from the gospel will be the losers. The Christian public has the right to ask the agencies why they are neglecting their primary role.

At this point some might be tempted to argue that the problem lies in the realm of definitions. No doubt there are many different understandings of reached and unreached, evangelized and least evangelized, etc. This is the case even when appealing to a single widely-disseminated definition like that decided on by 40 mission leaders in Chicago in March 1982. That single definition has proponents who are just as sure that the Hispanics of Los Angeles are an unreached people as they are about the Baloch of Pakistan and Iran. From the lists of unreached peoples produced in the last several years one wonders if the definition carries any unique meaning at all. But in the end, it is not the definitions that cause confusion, it is the application of these without clear objective and quantifiable guidelines.

Even so, the truth remains that mission executives are aware that there is a vast difference between isolated Muslim or Hindu peoples and Eastern Europeans or nominal Catholics in South America. And with this understanding comes the responsibility to do something about it.

### *The call of individual missionaries*

Many agencies appeal to the individual calls of their missionaries as proof of the proper deployment of their personnel. After all, if all of their missionaries feel called to heavily-Christian peoples, who are they to question God's guidance? But which is the higher authority, an agency's purpose and charter or the direction of its applicants? Returning to our earlier example, what would your advice be to Wycliffe if they received thousands of applications for missionaries who wanted to run day-care centers in the jungle?

### *The legitimacy of targeting other Christians*

consider work among Christians of other traditions as a primary mission task. Since one-third of the world's population falls under this definition, it is no wonder that the agencies' limited resources are sapped by the fact that it is legitimate to direct mission resources at each other.

*Where will proper priorities lead us?*

Under the present circumstances, if the mission industry has managed to target up to 2/3 of the 11,000 unreached peoples, what would a reprioritization of mission among agencies result in? First of all, it is important to realize that targeting peoples or sending a minimal force to work among them is only the beginning of the task. In many cases, a single couple ends up working among one million or more people. This is not the end goal of frontier mission.

Second, it is important to note that the estimate that 2/3 are targeted is derived from examining the larger clusters of peoples. For example, if a few couples work among the 30 million Sundanese of Indonesia is it fair to extrapolate that all the smaller groups (30-60 by one estimate) are targeted as well? Though there is really no place else to start except the clusters, we can think we are much farther than we are if we don't carefully consider this.

The irony is increased if we consider

two peoples, one unreached and the other heavily-Christian. Among the unreached people of one million is one couple. Among the reached people of one million is 300 missionaries. The 300 can all be quite sure of the calling and the agency can justify their presence in any way they like but the fact remains that the pioneer missionaries have been left in a vastly unfair situation.

What we are ultimately looking for is an *adequate and appropriate mission force*, not simply a check by a people on a list of targets. In each case, the needs of the people must be the guiding principle, but in no case, with the existence of 4,000 mission agencies backed by 1.8 billion Christians, should an unreached people have no work among them, or even minimal work, since the goal is for them to be reached, not merely touched.

*An evangelized world apart from a movement?*

Another important fact to consider is that the present global missionary force is entirely adequate to reach all peoples in a relatively short period of time. Nonetheless, there is much debate on how this should take place. Some advocate that all missionaries should pack up and move to unreached peoples (which is not likely or perhaps desirable). Others say that all

missionaries are in the right place if they mobilize the Christians they work among for frontier missions (which is difficult to measure and may not result in new frontier missions structures or personnel). Whatever the case the present opportunity should not be lost and this responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of the world's mission agencies. Now is the time for them to take leadership, not to shirk responsibility by defending present work. The truest gauge of their obedience to the Great Commission is their treatment of the remaining unreached peoples. And while we must rejoice in the success of the past we cannot rest for a minute while these peoples, even if targeted, go without an adequate mission force.

*In the end, true balance in mission*

In missions, true balance can only be achieved if the vast majority of missionaries, Western and non-Western do exactly what they are specially trained to do—reach into peoples not previously penetrated with the gospel. If your agency has under 10% of its missionaries working among unreached peoples perhaps it is time to get out the original charter or examine present goals and advocate a return to the frontiers of the missionary enterprise.