

# In Pursuit of Good Communications in Frontier Missions

■ Frontier missiology and flawed assumptions. Gary Corwin, director of research at SIM, believes that a certain segment of frontier missions holds to seriously flawed assumptions. He addressed this issue in an editorial response in the last issue of the *Journal* (Volume 9:4 October 1992). Here the former editor responds in pursuit of clear communications.

By Todd M. Johnson

I would like to thank Gary Corwin for taking the time to put his thoughts on paper and share them with us. I've had the added luxury of a couple of extended phone conversations with Corwin on these subjects as well as the exchange of a few notes. I agree with him that this dialogue is very helpful and I'm glad we can continue it here.

I'll get right to the point and say that I have already had an opportunity to express my basic convictions in a number of *IJFM* editorials as well as in other publications. I will then reflect briefly on Corwin's four "flawed assumptions" and his two basic questions.

First, no doubt statistics published and communicated on missions have caused some confusion. Those of us who are responsible in either case will do well to listen carefully to our audiences to make sure they understand what we are saying. None of us wants to mislead, deceive, or confuse others, even unintentionally. At the same time, we do not want to abandon the research needed to provide foundations in the world evangelization task. In most other disciplines, multi-volume encyclopedias and scores of books and journals are dedicated to analysis and communication. We don't have this yet but we need it, and we must support and encourage it as a missiological society.

Regarding Corwin's second and third flawed assumptions, I believe that mission agencies do face a crisis of missions today. Yet I look to the agencies to take hold of the opportunities, to overcome the obstacles, and to solve the difficult problems related to frontier missions. But, when deployment studies of most agencies show less than 5% of their missionaries work directly on this problem, I don't know whether to get angry or to weep. Agencies must lead, not follow.

Let me clarify to say that my concern is first for breadth, i.e., that all peoples are accounted for. But I am just as committed to depth, i.e., that all peoples are thoroughly evangelized, that all may hear and be disciplined, that many come

to Christ and grow in Him to the greatest extent possible. Both closure and depth because all peoples have to be dealt with and the missiological breakthrough to the birth of the viable movement must take place in each one of these. My starting point is that resources for this task currently exist to accomplish closure by AD 2000. The mission agencies must lead us in both breadth and depth or it may never occur.

Fourth, the crux of the matter is the mistake we make in defining unreached peoples using theological benchmarks. Unreached peoples are not defined purely along theological lines—that is to say as "peoples without a church movement of a particular theological persuasion." Instead they are defined missiologically as peoples yet unpenetrated with a Christian movement able to reach to the fringes. Strictly speaking then, it is not the task of frontier missions to ask, "But are they really good Christians?" That task, though a perfectly legitimate one, is left to other types of mission, evangelism, and church renewal.

As we know, there are plenty of peoples in the world that have a Christian movement we as evangelicals consider deficient. Right now there are cross-cultural missionaries helping nominal Christians to be renewed within their own denomination. Others are helping Catholics to become Methodists, Pentecostals to become non-Pentecostals, non-Pentecostals to become Pentecostals, Eastern Orthodox to become Protestant Evangelicals, Presbyterians to become Baptists, and on and on, but none of these are frontier missions. Bad Christians do need to become good Christians, but this is not the work of frontier missions. The business of turning one kind of Christian into another Christian, even a better one, is simply not the business of frontier missions.

Instead, since the earliest days of the frontier mission movement, it has been my understanding that frontier missions work is directed at Muslims, Hin-

dus, Buddhists, and animists, not at Catholics, Orthodox, Pentecostals, Protestants, and Independents. Frontier missions takes place on the frontier between Christianity and other religions and not on the frontier between one kind of Christianity and another.

This is made abundantly clear by the pie chart published over the years by the USCWM. It clearly supports this fact since one finds all the world's nominal Christians categorized under reached peoples. Therefore we shouldn't quote the global estimate of 11,000 unreached peoples in one breath and speak of Eastern European or any other Christian peoples in the next breath as being unreached. An interpretation of the 1982 definition that allows for and includes unreached Christian peoples would increase the number of unreached peoples by thousands. Indeed, this has happened. Thousands of Christian peoples have been given unreached status by a number of agencies over the years. However, if we keep to a stricter definition on what is truly unreached these groups cannot be a part of our lists, nor become part of frontier mission efforts. [Ed. note: A people group according to the 1982 meeting was defined as a group that perceives themselves to have common affinity for one another within which the gospel can spread as a church movement without barriers of understanding or acceptance. An unreached group was defined as "a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people."]

I believe that using a theological benchmark on Christian peoples is a wrong interpretation of the 1982 definition. This definition was never meant to be held like a measuring stick over existing Christian peoples. In my judgment, to do so is a giant step backwards because these peoples are not in the same position missiologically as non-Christian unreached peoples. Again, I'm not interested in defending non-evangelical expressions of Christianity,

but I will defend a concept of frontier missions that stays on the cutting edge of gospel advance to the unreached peoples of the world.

It is crucial that we make these distinctions very clear to the frontier missions constituency as we mobilize and gear up for reaching all peoples by AD 2000. The 1982 definition, on which this Society is built, must be interpreted in more careful detail and distinctions so we can get past misunderstandings about which peoples are reached and unreached. I feel that up until now this Society has tolerated all sorts of extreme interpretations of what reached and unreached peoples are.

For this reason I propose that this Society develop, discuss, and adopt a clear expanded statement on what frontier missions is and what it is not and how closure goals can be reached by the year 2000. I propose that over the next year a small committee could work on this statement and mail it out to participants before next year's meeting where it could be discussed, approved and disseminated. I think such a statement would answer Corwin's questions, as well as mine, as well as those of many others who, having read all the literature on the subject, still can't make out its implications.

This statement will also save us from rehashing the same tired questions again and again. I fear that without such a statement we will run the risk of a frontier missions movement that has lost its cutting edge—confusing reached peoples with unreached ones and failing to focus our limited resources on the peoples of the world who are truly unreached. To answer Corwin's concern: Yes, we should have a strong statement of faith. It should be biblical, evangelical, and Reformation-based, but, to repeat, I do not believe that our doctrinal statement should be used as a benchmark to measure whether a given group is reached or unreached. That has been clearly defined in our frontier missiology for which this Society has a distinct emphasis and responsibility. ■

*Todd Johnson is the former editor of the IJFM. He, his wife Tricia and their family reside in Richmond, Virginia.*

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