

Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge

“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.” (Habakkuk 1.5)

by Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch

God's promise to bless all the “families of the earth,” first given to Abraham 4,000 years ago, is becoming a reality at a pace “you would not believe.” Although some may dispute some of the details, the overall trend is indisputable. Biblical faith is growing and spreading to the ends of the earth as never before in history.

The Amazing Progress

One of every ten people on the planet is of the Bible-reading, Bible-believing stream of Christianity. The number of believers in what used to be “mission fields” now surpasses the number of believers in the countries from which missionaries were originally sent. In fact, more missionaries are now sent from non-Western churches than from the traditional mission-sending bases in the West. The Protestant growth rate in Latin America is well over three times the biological growth rate.

It took 18 centuries for dedicated believers to grow from 0% of the world's population to 2.5% in 1900, only 70 years to grow from 2.5% to 5% in 1970, and just the last 30 years to grow from 5% to 11.2% of the world population. Now for the first time in history, there is one believer for every nine people worldwide who aren't believers.

Protestants in China grew from about one million to over 80 million believers in less than 50 years, with

most of that growth occurring in just the last few decades. In the 1980s, Nepal was still a staunch Hindu kingdom with only a small persecuted church. Today there are hundreds of thousands of believers, and churches have been started within each of the more than 100 distinct people groups.

A Tragic Reality

While this amazing progress of the gospel gives much cause for rejoicing, it obscures a tragic reality. How could that be? The fact is that the gospel often expands within a community, but does not normally jump across boundaries between peoples, especially boundaries that are created by hate or prejudice. People can influence their “near neighbors” whose language and culture they understand, but where there is a prejudice boundary, religious faith, which is almost always bound up with many cultural features of the first group, simply does not easily jump to the next group, unless that group desires to adopt the other's culture in preference to its own.

So what does this mean? If all the members of every church in the world were to bring every one of their friends and relatives within the same cultural group to obedient faith in Christ, and they in turn were able to bring all their friends and relatives to Christ and so on, no matter how much time you allow, there would still

be billions who would never come to faith. They would be held at a distance from the gospel by boundaries of prejudice and culture. The church does not readily grow within peoples where relevant churches do not exist. One third of the individuals in the world live within peoples with no church. They are no more spiritually “lost” than your cousin who has never gone to church, but unlike your cousin, there is no church made up of people like themselves with whom they can fellowship.

Thus, while there are still tens of millions who have never heard the name “Jesus” at all, there are hundreds of millions more who may have heard of Jesus, and may even have high regard for Him, but who cannot see a way to become His disciples. Standing before them are barriers ranging from the relatively trivial to the seemingly insurmountable, many of them beyond the demands of the gospel. Cornelius in Acts 10 would have had to cross the barrier of circumcision as an adult—a painful and actually dangerous price to pay for entrance into fellowship with Jewish believers. A Muslim Turk similarly faces huge obstacles if he were to become a “Christian.” All his life he has been told, “To be a Turk is to be a Muslim.” To him, Christianity is the religion of the barbarian “Infidel” Crusaders who brutally ravaged the land and peoples of Turkey, Muslim and

Christian alike. To become a Christian is to become a traitor turning his back on his family, community, and country

To All Nations

We shouldn't really be surprised to see the thrilling advances of the gospel all over the world. That is exactly what Jesus said would take place, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come" (Matthew 24:14). A close look at the end of this verse says a lot about what we should watch and work for at the end of the age. Jesus says that as the missionary task is completed, there will be "a witness to all the nations."

By "witness" Jesus was saying that the "gospel of the kingdom" will be established in open view throughout entire human communities. The gospel of the kingdom is Christ prevailing over evil, liberating people so that they can live obediently free under His mastery and blessing. God wants a persuasive display of that kingdom victory exhibited in every people. What better exhibit of God's kingdom than a community of people who are living under Christ's kingship? That's why we should aim at church planting movements within every people. While not the only way to glorify God, nothing puts Christ's lordship on display like a community of people dedicated to follow Him.

By the phrase "all the nations," Jesus was not referring at all to countries or nation-states. The wording he chose (the Greek word *ethne*) instead points to the ethnicities, the languages and the extended families which constitute the peoples of the earth.

Who are these peoples? Jesus did not provide a list of the peoples. He did not define the idea of peoples with precise detail. What matters most is not that the peoples can be counted,

but that the missionary task will be completed within all the peoples of the earth. We'll know we are finished only when a visible testimony to the gospel of the kingdom—a church planting movement—has been established within every people.

Four Different Approaches

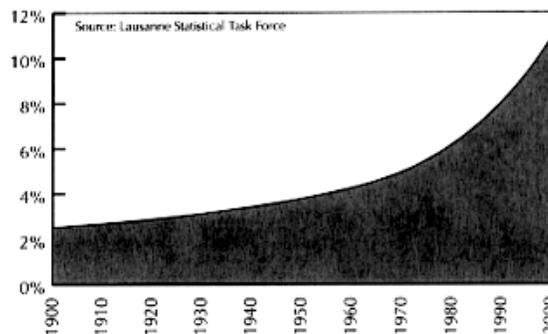
In order to work together strategically, mission leaders have been refining the concept of "people groups" as a rough measure of our progress toward completing the entire task. There are four useful ways of looking

mission task, in the sense that every person has a reasonable opportunity to respond to the gospel.

1) *Blocs of peoples for global perspective and strategy.* *Blocs of peoples are a limited number of summary categories into which we can place peoples in order to analyze them.*

Major Cultural Blocs: We have grouped peoples, particularly "unreached" peoples, along major cultural lines according to the predominant religion within the group. The major cultural blocs of unreached peoples were: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Tribal, Chinese, and Others.¹

Believers as a Percentage of Total World Population in the 20th Century



It took 18 centuries for dedicated believers to grow from 0% of the world's population to 2.5% in 1900, but only 70 years to grow from 2.5% to 5%, and just over the last 30 years to grow from 5% to 11.2%. For the first time in history, there is now one believer for every nine people worldwide who aren't believers.

at the idea of people groups: *Blocs of peoples, ethnolinguistic peoples, socio-peoples, and unimax peoples.* The first two are especially useful for summarizing the total task and developing strategies and partnerships to approach known peoples. The former two are more useful for those who are on the field working to establish churches. Each is of significant value and corresponds to a distinct aspect of strategic thinking. Only one allows us to speak of closure of the essential

This model allows us to summarize the remaining task in relation to the potential mission force.

Affinity Blocs: Patrick Johnstone has suggested another model which combines sets of closely related ethnolinguistic peoples into "people clusters" and further combines people clusters into "affinity blocs" based on language, history, culture, etc. The 12 blocs that comprise the majority of the least evangelized peoples² are: African Sahel, Cushitic, Arab World,

Iranian, Turkic, South Asian, Tibetan, East Asian, South East Asian, Malay, and Eurasian. Combining groups along these lines enables mission organizations to begin exploring ways of establishing strategic partnerships to reach related peoples.³

2) Ethnolinguistic peoples for mission mobilization and preparation. *An ethnolinguistic people is an ethnic or racial group distinguished by its self-identity with traditions of common descent, history, customs, and language.*

The Lax people from the Black Sea region of Turkey, for example, are easily identified by other Turks not only by their distinctive facial features, but also by their unique "romantic" pronunciation of Turkish.

Sometimes what appears initially to be a single ethnolinguistic group turns out, in fact, to be many more.

Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe, began his Bible translation work with the Cakchiquel of Guatemala. The translators who followed him discovered that the Cakchiquel could not be reached with one translation, but needed translations for six distinct dialects. It is likely

that had they produced gospel cassettes rather than written translations, they would have to target even more dialects. Cultural prejudices and differences in speech often make people unwilling to listen to a message spoken by a member of a different group even though it appears the same on the printed page.

Recent cooperative efforts among

mission researchers have produced fairly comprehensive lists of ethnolinguistic peoples. These lists have given a great boost to the cause of frontier mission. Much of the information is being used to make profiles and other relevant information widely available through printed media and the worldwide web.⁴

People blocs and ethnolinguistic lists give us a simple way to identify peoples and make the larger body of Christ aware of their existence and the need to reach them. The ethnolinguistic approach stimulates prayer and initial planning for specific peoples leading to serious strategic efforts to evangelize them.

and better understand the target people. After the initial phase of cultural learning and adaptation, the question remains as to how to begin to establish a church within that people.

Quite often we can effectively evangelize individuals by starting a Bible study or a small prayer group within these specialized groups. The group may be women who wash at the river, taxicab drivers, college students living indoors, or new arrivals in the big city from a particular rural group. There are almost unlimited potential opportunities for this type of group evangelism in our world today. For mission purposes, we can work with sociopeoples for preliminary evangelism as an intermediate bridge to long-range church planting.

Thus, approaching a sociopeople can be strategic in giving a focus for ministry among a specific subset of the larger society as a first step to full-blown church planting. Some types of groups may prove to be especially helpful when establishing churches, while others may hinder the process. Natural leaders and Bible teachers for churches might be discovered by first reaching businessmen or teachers. Some have even managed to be effective

among religious leaders such as Buddhist monks and Muslim mullahs, who are already recognized as spiritual leaders. On the other hand, you could choose the wrong group, such as focusing on children's ministry for initial evangelism within a people, which in nearly every case would be interpreted as a threat to their natural families,

Mission Leaders Agree on Strategic Mission Definitions

In March 1982 a group of mission leaders came together in Chicago for a meeting sponsored by the Lausanne Strategy Working Group. It was designed to help bring clarity and definition to the remaining missionary task. At no time before or since this meeting has as large or as representative a group gathered for two days to focus specifically upon the necessary definitions for a strategy to reach the unreached peoples. Two basic definitions came from this meeting:

- 1. A People Group is "a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these." For evangelistic purposes it is "the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance."*
- 2. An Unreached People Group is "a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people group."*

3) Sociopeoples and preliminary evangelism *A sociopeople is a relatively small association of peers who have an affinity for one another based upon a shared interest, activity, or occupation.*

Once we actually send long-term missionaries to a pioneer mission field, they have to learn a great deal just to be able to live, communicate,

4) *Unimax peoples for people movements to Christ* A unimax people is the maximum sized group sufficiently unified to be the target of a single people movement to Christ, where “unified” refers to the fact that there are no significant barriers of either understanding or acceptance to stop the spread of the gospel.

In 1982, mission leaders hammered out a useful definition for a “people group.” For evangelistic purposes [a people group] is “the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.” (see above)

The term “unreached peoples”⁵ is used widely today to refer to ethnolinguistic peoples, which are based on other criteria and would normally be larger in size than groups as defined in the 1982 definition. To avoid confusion and help clarify the missiological task before us, we can use the term *unimax peoples* to distinguish the kind of group intended by the 1982 definitions.

Jungle tribes and other small, remote peoples are almost always single unimax peoples. Discovering unimax realities within larger ethnolinguistic peoples in complete societies is a bit more challenging.

While language is often a primary means by which a person understands his or her cultural identity, in order to reach all peoples we must consider other factors that keep peoples separate. Religion, class distinctions, education, political and ideological convictions, historical enmity between clans or tubes, customs and behaviors, etc., all have potential to develop strong cultural boundaries within ethnolinguistic clusters of unimax peoples. This fact alone helps to explain the differing numbers for the totals of “unreached peoples.”

For example, India cannot be approached on an ethnolinguistic

basis alone. In addition to over 1600 major languages and dialects, India is further divided by religion, caste and other socio-cultural barriers. A sociological survey in 1991 identified 4,635 peoples in India alone.

Sadly, neighboring groups often hate and fear each other. Thus, in the early stages of evangelism such groups often refuse to become part of the same “people movement” church.

What is needed in every people group is for the gospel to begin moving throughout the group with such compelling, life-giving power that the resulting churches can themselves finish spreading the gospel to every person.

Rivalries between major clans among the Muslim Somali people are so severe that they have almost dragged the entire country into ruin. In the early stages of evangelism and church planting, such simmering hostilities will likely mean that such groups can most effectively be approached with the gospel message separately. The bright hope of the gospel is, of course, that new Christ-following movements in such settings of strife will work for the healing of enmities between peoples.

Indeed, history shows that eventually a host of smaller hostile groups,

once they become Christian, start to coalesce into larger groups. For example, at the time Christianity first began to be adopted in the Scandinavian area, hundreds of mutually hostile tribes inhabited the region. The Norwegian, Swedish and Danish spheres today are the result of widespread reconciliation and consequent unification resulting from the adoption of Christian faith on the part of many smaller, formerly warring groups.

The first three approaches to people group thinking as blocs, as ethnolinguistic peoples, and as sociopeoples are each helpful in understanding and responding to the task to which Christ has commissioned us. Yet they all, in one way or another, point the way toward beginnings. This fourth (unimax) way of looking at peoples has more to do with finishing, not in the sense that there is nothing left to do, but in the sense that the essential first step for the gospel to flourish within a people has been accomplished. The unimax approach to peoples can help us press on toward closure—our corporate finishing of what is completable about Christ’s mission mandate.

The value of the unimax approach lies in the way it identifies boundaries hindering the flow of the gospel, while at the same time firing the ambitions of dedicated Christians to pursue the evangelization of the peoples beyond those boundaries, leaving no small group sealed off within a larger group.

Counting the Peoples

These often subtle but powerful socio-cultural barriers exist within groups which often appear unified to outside observers. Some have dismissed the usefulness of the unimax concept because socio-cultural prejudice barriers cannot easily be identified or precisely quantified. But even though intangible “prejudice barriers”

cannot be quantified, these factors are not irrelevant. What could be more important than identifying and penetrating every barrier which holds people from following Christ?

The unimax peoples definition was never intended to quantify precisely the total task. Instead, it helps us recognize when the unreached peoples task is finished, and identify where that task is not yet begun.

Approaching Peoples Cautiously

Each of these four approaches to various kinds of peoples has a proper and valuable use. *Blocs* help us sum up the task. The *ethnolinguistic* approach helps us mobilize, *Sociopeoples* help us begin evangelizing. But beware of focusing church planting efforts on *sociopeoples* or *ethnolinguistic peoples* which simply appear on a list. There is often discouragement or, even worse, a deliberate, typically American "people blindness" as workers find that there are many more people groups than they expected to find. The opposite can happen, too. Sometimes the very same people group is listed twice because it is found on both sides of a political boundary. In actuality, it is the same people group. It may only need a single church planting effort bridging the political line. For example, Uzbek groups are reported in 20 countries in addition to those in Uzbekistan.

In contrast, the country of Uzbekistan reports 56 groups within it that do not speak Uzbek, and only one (very large group—15 million strong) that does! It is almost certainly true that this "one" large group represents a number of different groups that need to be reached separately.

Using political boundaries to distinguish people groups is like dropping cookie cutters down on the geographical distribution of a people group, then calling the pieces within

each cutter a different type of dough. Granted, in many cases of extended separation groups do become distinct especially if new migration ceases, but not often antagonistic. In much of the developing world the concept of political separation is quite artificial since borders are often quite permeable.

Consider the challenge of the Kurds. These fiercely independent people are found in a homeland that spans at least five countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan. For the sake of mission strategy, they are certainly not just one people

We know that in every place on earth the key effort is not going to be our wisdom or even our hard work. It will be God's sovereign power breaking down the strongholds of His enemies to bring His glory to the ends of the earth.

group. They are not even just seven groups. In addition to having four major language subgroups, traditional rivalries keep them fighting one another even when you would think they would unite to fight non-Kurds for the sake of a Kurdish homeland.

Missionaries need to be aware of the possibility as in the case of the Kurds, that people are not necessarily unified even if millions are in one country. Yet, smaller populations of

Kurds found in significant numbers in 13 countries outside of the "Kurdistan" home-land are potentially strategic "bridge" populations back to groups in their homeland area. And those who are dislocated from their natural homeland are often more open to the gospel. Once a remote segment of a larger group comes to accept Christ, it may become an effective bridge back to its people in their homeland. Political boundaries do not often limit the spread of the gospel. Of course, all of this "country specific" information can be very useful for planning strategy and forming partnerships for reaching widely scattered members of specific people groups.

The Essential Missionary Task

What is needed in every people group is for the gospel to begin moving throughout the group with such compelling, life-giving power that the resulting churches can themselves finish spreading the gospel to every person. Good but lesser goals may delay or distract us. Evangelism among street vendors or students might lead to discipleship groups for personal growth and even evangelism. But why stop short of anything less than a burgeoning movement of Christ-followers characterized by whole families? Why not expect that God is well able and willing to attract to His Son a substantial movement that will spread rapidly, spontaneously and thoroughly within whole peoples?

The essential missionary task is to establish a *viable indigenous church planting movement that carries the potential to renew whole extended families and transform whole societies*. It is *viable* in that it can grow on its own, *indigenous* meaning that it is not seen as foreign, and a *church planting movement* that continues to reproduce

intergenerational fellowships that are able to evangelize the rest of the people group. Many refer to this achievement of an indigenous church planting movement as a *missiological breakthrough*.

We have done our basic mission job when individuals within the society (even those outside of the church) acknowledge that the movement belongs to their society. Only when this level of cultural adaptation is achieved will the dynamic, life-changing love of Jesus become available to move freely throughout the people group. Donald McGavran referred to these missiological breakthroughs as "people movements to Christ." We can hold this goal as the minimal achievement within every people in order to give a realistic opportunity for everyone in that people group to say "yes" to Jesus Christ without adding cultural barriers to the already steep spiritual demands of the gospel. Only in this way will we be able to give everyone in the world a chance to say "yes" to Christ and His Kingdom. Jesus commissioned us to accomplish nothing less. We should settle for nothing less.

The Missiological Breakthrough

The word "closure" refers simply to the idea of finishing. In the 1970s, the Lord began to open the eyes of many to the fact that the irreducibly essential mission task of a breakthrough in every people group was a completable task. At the time, over half of the world's population lived within unreached people groups. Even so, a small group of mission activists had the faith to believe that if a movement could be mobilized to focus attention on the unreached peoples, which for a time were called "hidden peoples," then the essential mission task could be completed within a few decades. In faith, they coined the

watchword "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000" to capture the essence of the completable nature of the mission mandate. While no one ever predicted that it would be completed by the end of the year 2000, they were confident that it was possible. The watchword succeeded in igniting the hearts of countless thousands with a passion for seeing Christ honored, worshiped and obeyed within every people. God was at work in similar ways among others in order to birth the now global movement focused on the unreached peoples challenge. Today we are seeing the fulfillment of vision that only a few dared to dream just two decades ago.

It is unreasonable to even talk of evangelizing every person, since day by day hundreds of thousands of children grow into the age of accountability. By contrast, the idea of "A Church for Every People" is one possible and reasonable approximation of what the Great Commission may mean, and it is a completable task. We know of no better interpretation of what it means to fulfill Jesus' mandate to have a "witness" among every people or in other words to "disciple all the nations" (Matt 24:14; 28:19,20).

We can confidently speak of closure to this unreached peoples mission. There were an estimated 17,000 unreached peoples in 1976. Today there are an estimated 10,000 unreached peoples (unimax peoples), and a dynamic global movement now exists that is committed to establishing "a church for every people."

But how measurable is the presence of a "viable indigenous church planting movement"? It might perhaps be better to say "verifiable" than "measurable." We don't normally say a woman is partially pregnant, or that a person is partially infected by AIDS. Rather, in such cases we "verify" the presence or absence of a condition.

In the case of reaching unimax

peoples, there can be only three possibilities: (1) definitely reached, (2) definitely unreached, and (3) doubtfully reached. Logically we expect to focus our highest priority energies on those that are in doubt or definitely unreached. Just as in the case of asking, how many unreached peoples are there, we cannot very well evaluate whether a group has truly had a missiological breakthrough from a distance or from sources that are not concerned with such things.

We can make some well informed guesses about presence or absence of a church movement from quantifiable data. But what if an ethnolinguistic people is actually a cluster of unimax peoples and one of them is experiencing a church planting explosion, other groups in the cluster have little or nothing happening? The presence of those unreached unimax groups in the same cluster, may dilute or even vigorously oppose the movement in the group that is ablaze for God. Secondly, the growth of the church in the one may divert missionary attention from the needs of the other.

More Than Closure

What God will do is always more than what He has given us to do. He has given us a clear and simple thing to finish: to see that Christ is worshiped and followed in every people. That is the essential missionary task. This we must do with utmost focus and passion until it is finished. But there is still more to be done. The missiological breakthrough is just the beginning of all that God intends to do within every people. God will continue to fulfill His promise to undo the works of Satan and bring forth the blessing of Abraham to all peoples.

How did Jesus teach His disciples to pray? "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done one earth as it is in heaven." Our concept of God's desire to reach all peoples and persons is obviously

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part of His desire for His Kingdom to come on earth. Other verses say that He looks toward the time when all the nations of the world will declare His glory (Isa 66:19).

Thus, we look confidently forward to the time when “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). Surely God seeks to vanquish the “rulers of the darkness of this earth” (Eph 6:12).

Fairly soon there may not be a single “kingdom of this world” where His name is not glorified. A spiritual breakthrough into every people is a precursor to making the gospel available to every person on earth. Satan holds whole peoples in bondage. We can’t wrestle a single soul out of his hand without challenging his authority in that particular people group. In each group where no real breakthrough has yet occurred, there will be a “power encounter” between the armies of God and the powers of darkness. Conquering the “kingdoms of this world” requires an invasion of God’s glory within each people.

The apostle Paul was sent to the non-Jewish peoples specifically “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:17-18). Is it possible that we have become so tied up with our measurements of evangelism, social reform, and economic growth that we have forgotten that God is primarily in the business of expanding the reign of His Kingdom and conquering Satan?

That this is primarily a spiritual battle, certainly does not mean we can set aside careful planning and training for evangelism and pioneer penetration, and just sit back and pray that God will go out and do His thing. Paul said,

“We fight not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

We know that it is also our fight, not just His, and that we are joining Him in His battle against the Evil One. We know that in every place on earth the key effort is not going to be our wisdom or even our hard work. It will be all of that plus His sovereign power breaking down the strongholds of His enemies to bring His glory to the ends of the earth.

Jesus gave us a clear mandate by His unique authority to “disciple all the peoples.” of the world. We can and must go all out to obey Him. Certainly we should take our evangelistic measurements seriously, but not as ultimate parameters of God’s plan. We must press forward, knowing that He may evaluate things by measures we cannot fully comprehend. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

All of this cannot entirely be brought together into a single human plan; yet, it calls upon every planning effort, all creative approaches, and all the sacrifice we can muster. We know that all our measurements—of peoples and persons—are merely objective goals. It is more important that we are with Him and He be with us, that we be acting in obedience as He leads us in our heavenly calling to bless all the peoples of the earth.

Looking at the Task Graphically

Although the world is large and complex, there exist helpful methods of quantifying progress toward closure of the essential mission task. Modern researchers are now able to collect, manage and summarize vast amounts of data with the use of computers. We owe a great deal to those who have attempted to trace the hand of God as

He continues His pursuit of all peoples.⁶ All of our global charts and graphs to date have been dependent on the research of others as well as our own estimates where additional estimates have been needed. However, no database can ever do more than approximate the dynamic reality of the world.

When looking at the charts in this article, you need to understand how we are using the predominant religion within a group as a cultural feature to tag the group as a whole. This does not mean that every person in the group is a member of that religion. Thus, you can have a Muslim group that is “reached” if there is a church movement within it even though the group is still predominantly Muslim.

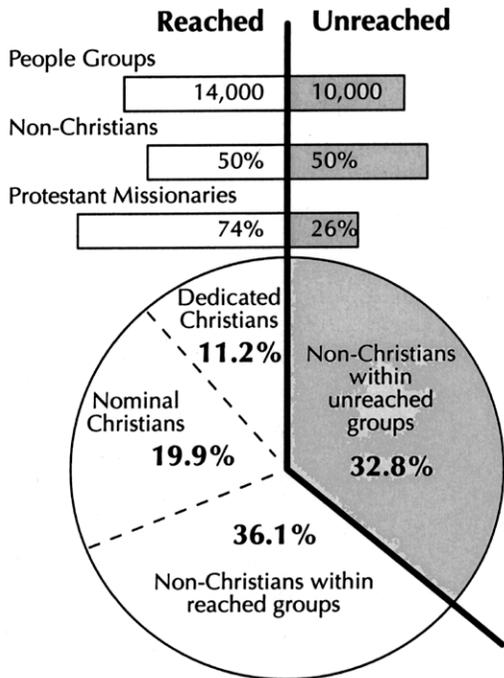
All of the charts in this chapter, except those on the “protestant Mission Force,” are derived from the numbers on the “All Humanity in Mission Perspective” chart (page 521).

The Great Imbalance

Looking at “The Globe at a Glance” (p. 520), you can readily see that the bulk of the *individuals who live within unreached groups* (white) are within the Muslim, Tribal, Hindu, and Buddhist blocs. We need to continue to send well trained and insightful missionaries to these challenging peoples. There have been some very encouraging people movements within a limited number of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim groups. These three blocs are often seen as the most resistant, but we are learning that when a people seems “resistant” it may only mean our approach has been defective. Half of those living within unreached peoples are in the Muslim bloc which is a bloc that has very favorable attitudes toward Jesus Christ.

Only an estimated 10,000 of the global *foreign mission force*⁷ are working within the 10,000 unreached

The Great Imbalance



Sources: David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson,⁶ Patrick Johnstone⁸

groups, while 41 times that number of foreign missionaries continue to work within people groups already reached. What an imbalance! Even if you include the foreign missionaries working with Christians within the entire major cultural blocs, reached and unreached (see chart below and page 522), it is still a glaring fact that most foreign missionaries work within peoples which are predominantly Christian.

Patrick Johnstone analyzed the data in *Operation World '93* to approximate distribution of the Protestant Mission Force⁸ (see page 522). While this is a more positive picture than we have ever seen before, it still shows a great imbalance in that only 26 percent of the "Protestant" mission effort is going to the two-thirds of the world that is predominantly non-Christian. It will take the best efforts of the best the Church has to offer if we are to complete the task of frontier mission any time soon.

After nearly 2000 years, 10,000

unimax peoples encompassing 2 billion people still live beyond the reach of any local church.

The Great Momentum

While talking about billions of people might seem overwhelming, astounding progress continues to be made. In 1974, we were stunned by the revelation that three out of four of the non-Christians in the world were beyond the reach of same-culture evangelism. Today, only one out of every two non-Christians is beyond reach! An easy-to-remember new insight which you can easily see in the chart on page 519 is that you can divide the world up into meaningful thirds. One third of the world would at least claim to be Christian; another third are

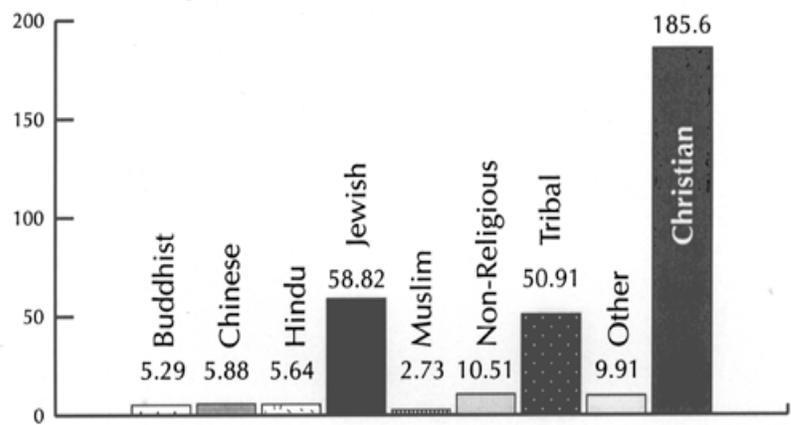
non-Christians that live within reached peoples; the final third are non-Christians within unreached peoples. Again this is significant progress; in 1974 approximately half of the world's population was beyond the reach of the church. In fact, for the first time in history there are fewer non-Christians within unreached groups than there are within reached groups! As missionar-

ies succeed in establishing church movements in more unreached peoples, that is exactly what you would expect to happen.

We are in the final era of missions. For the first time in history it is possible to see the end of the tunnel when there will be a church movement within the language and social structure of every people group on earth; powerful face to face evangelism taking over in all peoples. God is moving throughout His global body to fulfill His promise to the nations in ways that we could not possibly have imagined 20 years ago. Thousands of new missionary recruits are no longer coming just from the West, but also from Asia, Africa and Latin America—fruits of missionary movements—wholeheartedly embracing the Great Commission. More so than ever before it is a global, cooperative movement. We have to be prepared for new partnerships new insights, and new approaches by non-Western mission structures. At the same time we need to recognize that the Western missionary story is a reservoir of mission experience that can serve the emerging missions.

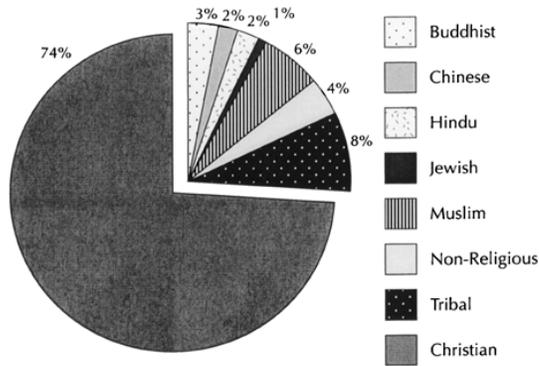
The job is large, but relatively small for the enormous body of believers around the world. There are approximately 670 churches in the

Number of Foreign Missionaries per Million in Major Cultural Blocs



Source: Todd M. Johnson⁶

Distribution of Protestant Mission Force Within the Major Cultural Blocs

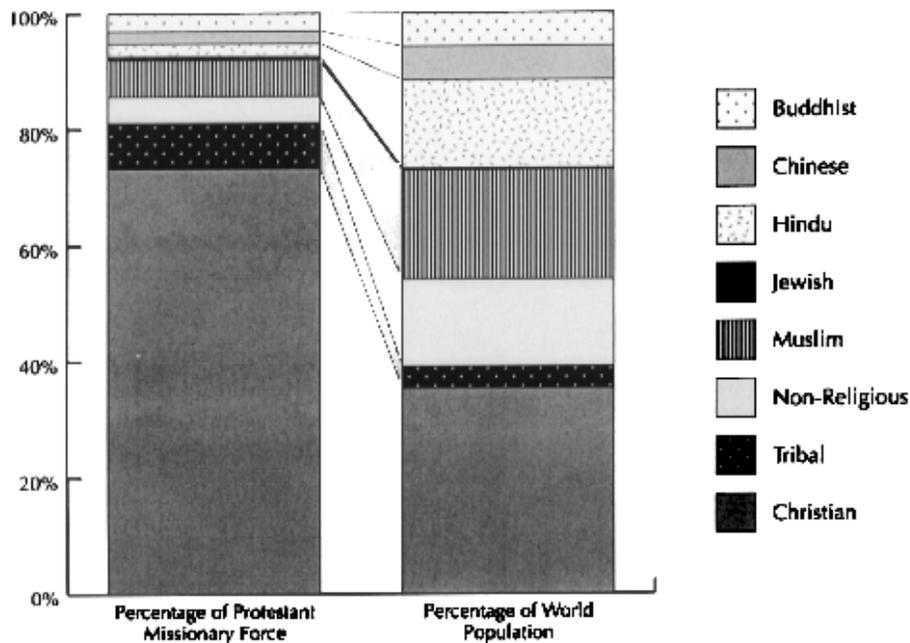


Only one out of every four missionaries is working in a pioneer frontier ministry among non-Christian peoples of the major religious blocs.

These two charts represent an inclusive view of the Protestant Mission Force. They include foreign missionaries, missionaries working within their own countries (both cross-culturally and in near cultures) bi-vocational missionaries, and home and staff who are classified as missionaries who support field missionaries. The breakdown was a preliminary assessment based on several days of analysis done specifically for this article.

Source: Patrick Johnstone⁸

Distribution of Protestant Mission Force Relative to the Size of the Major Cultural Blocs



world for every remaining unreached unimax people group! We need only a small percentage of dedicated believers to be mobilized and equipped. Judging the remaining task by the potential work force makes it quite small and within reach by comparison to the forbidding prospect faced by our forefathers.

Notice how much more doable the mission task seems when we focus on the size of the potential mission force and on penetrating people groups. Instead of talking of evangelizing 2 billion individuals, we can talk of beginning in approximately 3000 ethnolinguistic peoples and then finishing in maybe as few as 10,000 unimax peoples. Within a very short time all of the 3000 "least evangelized" ethnolinguistic groups will be targeted and engaged by some mission-sending structure in the world. It is already true for more than half of them!

Identifying and penetrating the remaining unreached unimax peoples—the great challenge of "discipling all the nations"—still lies before us. God will reveal the glory of His kingdom among all peoples. We are within range of finishing the task with more momentum than ever before in history. Be a part of it—"Declare His glory among the nations!"

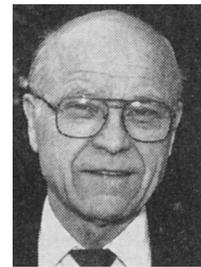
End Notes

1. For the charts in this chapter, the Non-Religious and Jewish categories have been added for the sake of using data as categorized in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* although the Jewish category is not always graphed if too small to be seen.
2. "Evangelized" is based on David B. Barrett's "Index of Evangelization" and does not yet have a published definition.
3. To learn more about the usefulness of these groupings see his marvelous book, *The Church is Bigger Than You Think*. Christian Focus Publications, WEC, WCL, 1981.

4. Just search for "unreached people profiles" and you're off and surfing.
5. The AD 2000 Movement refers to groups that are less than 2% Evangelical or 5% Christian adherents.
6. In the past, we have relied on a variety of expert sources for our figures and estimates for our "All Humanity in Mission Perspective" chart. We are now using information supplied by Todd M. Johnson of the World Evangelization Research Center. Todd is familiar with the unimax principle and is a caretaker of the data underlying the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (David B. Barrett, Ed.) His table reflects Todd's interpretation of missiologically significant groups within larger ethnolinguistic peoples and gives estimates of the numbers based upon analyzing statistical clues and making adjustments where necessary. No attempt has been made to adjust the estimates to make them more in line with previous estimates. If you were to compare with previous charts, you would notice that some of the numbers for unimax groups within a bloc have gone up instead of down. In fact, the overall number of estimated unimax groups has increased back to our earlier published estimate of 10,000 from several years ago. This can be attributed to a change in source and methodology. Other changes from previous versions of this chart: 11 the Jews and non-Religious/Atheist categories have been added, 21 because of the inclusion of the non-Religious/Atheist category, the Chinese bloc was split between that category and the Chinese folk bloc.
7. The global foreign mission force includes all kinds of Christians (Protestants, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, etc.).
8. The graphs for the Protestant Mission Force were generated from data derived from Appendix 3, Protestant Missionary Force found in the 1993 edition of *Operation World*. The country figures were analyzed based on Patrick Johnstone's extensive knowl-

edge of mission work around the world. The separation of the cross-cultural work force into the different religious blocks was a preliminary analysis done specifically for this volume. Missionaries in church development ministries within non-Christian peoples are not included in the pioneer categories. Our thanks to Patrick Johnstone and his assistant Jason Mandryk for their willing hearts and expedient labor.

[Editor's Note: This article is a reprint from the newly revised and world famous *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, A Reader*, 1999. William Carey Library. Permission granted.]



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