

Analyzing the Frontier Mission Movement and Unreached People Group Thinking Part V: A Model for Understanding the Missionary Task

by Alan Johnson



In the first three sections of this article I have endeavored to provide an analysis and critique of the missiology of the frontier mission movement and unreached people group thinking. In this process I have attempted to bring two critical points to the forefront. First, the missiology that this movement provides, despite some serious conceptual and presentational weaknesses, is a very powerful paradigm for viewing what I have called missiological and biblical reality. The philosophical and strategic clarity that this paradigm brings to the practice of missions has forever changed the way that we look at the world. It is no longer enough to see a monolithic world of spiritually lost people; instead we are sensitized to the reality of their “peopleness” or “groupness” and the biting fact that after nearly 2000 years of mission history many such groups have never had a chance to hear the gospel. Confronted with the reality of equal lostness and unequal access to the saving message, every missionary and organization must be stirred by the urgency of harvest fields awaiting harvesters.

The second critical point is that as powerful as this paradigm is, it is inadequate to the task of dealing with mission in the whole world. Where its strength lies in helping us to see what was once hidden to our eyes—the peoples—its weakness is that if followed rigidly it can create another equally blind spot, creating major blocks of the “marginally reached.”

What I am arguing for here is the need of a more comprehensive paradigm which is able to embrace the entire world of “peoples” and “people,” inside and outside the 10/40 Window, and affirm the strategic importance of the missionary labors in both reached and unreached cultures. Such a paradigm will grow out of a synthesis of the best thinking that standard missiology and the frontier mission movement has to offer.

The necessity of a new framework comes from a recognition of two major points. The first is that the lens of geo-political units and nation states used in standard evangelical missiology creates a “peoples” blind spot. The result is that peoples who have no existing church planting movement, but who live in nation states where a national church exists among another people, are neglected and unseen.

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The second issue has to do with the potential short-sightedness that can

workers could have been considered counter productive to the ultimate

years for the salvation of a nominal Christian in World C just as earnestly

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exist in the frontier mission movement. With all of the excitement to finish the task and bring back the Lord, no one has addressed the question of what happens after the last group is reached and the Lord does not return right away. Is there a framework for viewing missions that will enable us to respond to a new missiological reality where there is some pioneer penetration of every group? When an emphasis on reaching unreached people groups becomes the sole criteria of valid and strategic mission, clear thinking suffers. Gary Corwin comments, “The moment an agency engages in a ministry to one of the least-reached people of the earth, that people group immediately becomes less needy than other groups; and that agency, in the convoluted logic of the argument, becomes something less than truly ‘pioneer.’”¹ While reachedness is a very useful human construct it does not plumb the depths of what the Spirit wants to do in terms of the transformation of cultures. These two issues along with the need to make missionary work meaningful and strategic in every context suggest the need for a revised framework which can integrate both of the poles represented by standard evangelical missions and the frontier mission movement.

Foundations for a New Model

It is my contention that from the very beginning of the frontier mission movement there have been the seeds for a more comprehensive view of mission. I believe that these seed thoughts have not been emphasized or developed in detail in part for two reasons. First, the frontier mission movement has always seen itself as trying to remedy the huge imbalance that exists in the placement of personnel in the world. Therefore, to focus too much on areas which already had numerous Christians and Christian

goal. Second, as the emphasis on closure by the year 2000 grew, it overshadowed the potential contributions of those working among the already “reached.”

A Continuum of Ministry

The “seeds” to which I am referring have to do with an understanding and acceptance of the idea of there being different valid targets for ministry. In Ralph Winter’s Lausanne address his use of the E-0 to E-3 distinctions show clearly that there is the ministry of nurture to believers, the renewal of nominal Christians, near-neighbor evangelism of non-Christians and finally the critical and complex task of cross-cultural evangelism.² Similarly, in the work of David Barrett and Todd Johnson there is recognition of the need for ministry across a seven-point continuum. Knowing that a large number of the countries and peoples of the world are World A, meaning they have very little to no contact with Christianity, is a great challenge to all believers. Johnson and Barrett ask the question, “Where shall we put our resources? Where should the churches’ 300,000 foreign missionaries be asked to work?”³ Their answer is in the seven-fold typology moving from most reached and most exposed to the gospel to the least.⁴ Their point in developing the trichotomy is to show the church that current placement and evangelistic effort is lopsided and unbalanced with most missionaries being engaged in heavily evangelized places. The plea is for more workers in World A, and not fewer anywhere else. They are quick to add that any of the seven levels is an honorable vocation if that is the calling of the Lord. They note, “Our categories Worlds A, B, and C must not be taken as describing anybody’s relative importance in God’s eyes. Individuals in A, B, or C are all equally important to Him. Our God

as for an unevangelized, untargeted [group] in World A.”⁵

Examining the Spiritual Health of a Church Planting Movement

Another foundation of a new model comes from the work of Jon Haley, who suggests that a unified theory of the mission task is needed. Haley points out that the missionary task is usually defined in terms of either need, approach or timing, each of which currently has dichotomous poles of theory.⁶ Need theories are either based on those who are lost everywhere, or those who have had the least opportunity to hear. Approach theories are based on either reaching people groups or urban centers. Timing theories focus on either responsive peoples or creative access, going about the task to the degree God opens the doors.

Haley’s criticism is that all of these theories are situation-driven rather than objective-driven from the mandate of the Great Commission.⁷ He believes that the crux of the matter has to do with the definition of reaching the world with the gospel. He suggests that there has been the failure to distinguish between different levels of reaching, and the failure to keep all of those levels in focus at the same time.⁸ He then proposes four levels and integrates the role of the missionary and the emerging church movement with each one.⁹

- Frontier Mission—the objective is penetration of a culture; cross-cultural missionaries are involved in church planting.
- Critical Mass—missionaries are involved in church planting, leadership training and mobilization so that a strong viable church movement emerges that is able to evangelize its own group and touch its society.
- Real Access—at this point the

church movement takes the lead in seeking to give every person in his/her culture access to the gospel. The missionary works in leadership development and mobilization as needed.

- Real Hearing—the church movement attempts to present the gospel to everyone in his/her culture in an understandable way. Missionaries are no longer needed.

Haley correctly identifies the most difficult concept in his unified theory, trying to quantify and measure when critical mass is reached. In my opinion the strength of his model lies in the way that he handles this point. He wants not only to look at the statistical presence of a church and numbers of church attenders but also the overall health and vibrancy of that movement. He suggests criteria such as percentage of Christians who can and will reach their own people, ownership of the task, sufficient resources to complete the task, how “radioactive” the raw material of the church is in terms of its ability to reproduce, its fervor and the presence of strong leaders. He concludes that when we look at criterion such as these “critical mass will vary from grouping to grouping, depending on social structures, receptivity and so on.”¹⁰

Haley finishes his article by pointing out that the unified theory he is advocating is in harmony with many of the principles of operation of the Discipling a Whole Nation (DAWN) movement. Jim Montgomery explains that DAWN works to mobilize the whole body of Christ in a country to work towards the goal of having an evangelical congregation

for every village and neighborhood of every class, kind and condition of people in the whole country. It is concerned that Jesus Christ become incarnate...in the midst of every small group of people—400 or so to 1000 or more in number—in a whole country including all its people groups.¹¹

This concept of seeking to plant enough congregations so that every person has access both geographically and culturally to a living body of believers is also known as saturation church planting.

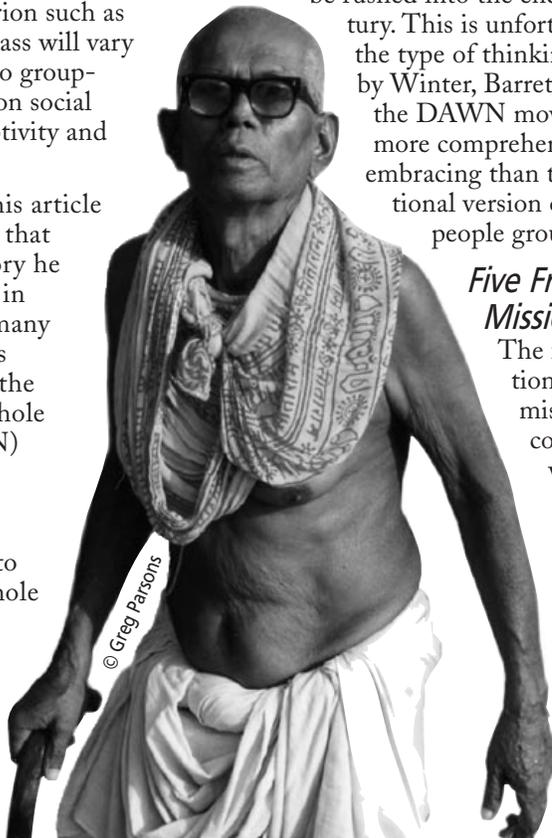
It is interesting to me that saturation church planting is one of the tracks of the AD 2000 Movement and yet the ethos which drives that kind of view of the task is conspicuously muted in the promotional literature dealing with the 10/40 Window and the need to reach the last unreached peoples. I believe that the reason for this has to do with the time-dated emphasis on reaching every group with minimal penetration by the year 2000. The task of planting millions of churches to provide access to people within these cultures is not something that could be rushed into the end of the century. This is unfortunate because the type of thinking represented by Winter, Barrett, Haley and the DAWN movement is far more comprehensive and world embracing than the promotional version of unreached people group thinking.

Five Frontiers of Mission

The final contribution towards a new mission model comes from the work of Stan Nussbaum of Global Mapping International. He has developed a very helpful model of what he calls the mission

matrix that takes into account both knowledge of God and the zeal to serve Him.¹² This matrix is composed of five frontiers of mission, which he believes is a more holistic view. In the matrix God’s ultimate goal is high knowledge and high zeal. Frontier 1 represents no knowledge of God or zeal to serve; these are the unreached peoples. The second Frontier is people who are nominal Christians, who know about God but do not really serve Him. The task here is the renewal of these believers. Nussbaum criticizes the traditional evangelical approach to such groups which is to either ignore them or treat them as unreached. Frontier 3 consists of those with great zeal but little knowledge, such as the house church Christians in China, and independent churches in Africa. Such movements need help in grounding their movements in God’s Word. Frontier 4 extends the scale into negative numbers for both knowledge and zeal and represents those who are anti-Christians. Such groups either have wrong knowledge of the gospel, or oppose everyone who believes, or have both problems. Nussbaum suggests such groups require special strategies to help overcome the negative bias so the gospel can be heard. Frontier 5 consists of evangelical believers who take the Great Commission seriously. The task here is to deepen believers so that they put love in action.

Nussbaum’s work is very helpful in providing a way of thinking about world mission that embraces the entire world and all that God desires to do in it. Taken together the input from Winter, Barrett, Haley and Nussbaum provide three critical foundations for a new paradigm of missions. First, there is the recognition of the necessity and validity of different kinds of mono-cultural and cross-cultural ministry that work towards God’s ultimate purpose. Whether it is framed in terms of Winter’s E-0 to E-3, Nussbaum’s concept of frontiers, Barrett and Johnson’s typology or Haley’s levels, it is clear that important and strategic ministry needs to take place outside of classically unreached groups. Second, there is



recognition of the changing role of the missionary through time as a church movement emerges. Haley’s concept of levels shows clearly that missionary labors must change as the church grows. Thus cross-cultural missionary work is dynamic rather than static and requires a sensitivity to the contextual factors of the people group and the emerging church movement. Third, there is recognition that qualitative factors in the life of the church movement are crucial in assessing viability so that the critical mass stage can be reached. It is not enough to have an initial penetration and then abandon a fledgling movement.

The Emerging Paradigm: A Comprehensive Framework for Missions

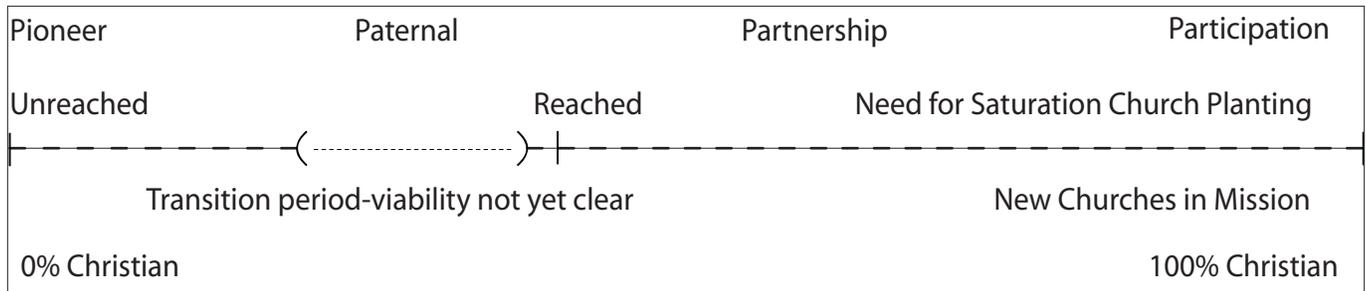
Drawing upon the core contributions of the frontier mission movement and

continuum of the number of Christians in a given culture: zero percent on the far left, all the way up to 100% on the far right, which we know from Scripture is God’s desire, that all be saved. On that line I have indicated an arbitrary point in which that group can be considered reached. My contention is that the state of total unreachedness and reachedness are rather easy to observe. Missionaries may not agree on precise figures for what constitutes reachedness in a given culture, but it is relatively easy to determine when a church movement among a people is strong enough to really carry the work on its own.

2. What is more difficult to perceive is that period of time when a church movement is still quite small and may be approaching “reachedness.” I have indicated this transition period where viability is uncertain with a

the gospel. This then becomes the work of saturation church planting, seeking to plant a living witness within an accessible distance of every person in that culture.

4. What this new framework does for missionary practice is to affirm the value of long-term cross-cultural workers even in cultures that have long since been reached, and bring a radical challenge to reorient the labors of such workers. The affirmation comes because workers who perhaps have helped to successfully “pick the lock” into a new culture can also greatly benefit the emerging church with such skills and insights. Furthermore the presence of missionaries with a passion to reach the people of that culture can be a strong impetus to fan the evangelistic flame that sometimes can become dimmed particularly where an emerging church remains a small minority in its culture. The challenge of radical reorienta-



the insights of the writers in the last section, I now want to try to articulate a paradigm for mission that is comprehensive in its scope, embracing the whole world, and in harmony with the missiological reality we face moving into the 21st century. The first section will examine how this framework acts as a tool for understanding the missionary role, while the second section will look at the implications of the framework as applied by mission agencies.

A New Framework for Understanding the Missionary Role

I can best explain this framework through a simple diagram followed by some expansion of the major concepts.

1. This diagram illustrates the new missiological framework within the context of a single people group. The line represents a

parenthesis.

3. The first important point in this new framework is that I consider the whole idea of “reachedness” to be a moot point in terms of the work of the missionary and the emerging national church movement. Earlier in this article when examining the biblical arguments of the frontier mission movement, I concluded that both sides, those who emphasize lost peoples and those who emphasize very close to one another. They are back to back just looking in different directions, and their essential goals are the same. Since reachedness is just a helpful human construct that enables us to measure how we are doing, it should not become some kind of ultimate goal. Instead the Great Commission and God’s heart would dictate that we attempt to give every person in a culture the chance to hear and respond to an understandable presentation of

tion comes in that long-term cross-cultural workers should stay on the cutting edge of training to reach the lost, training of new leaders, exercising apostolic example as they labor with the emerging church, and most importantly, imparting a vision for reaching the least-reached both near and far for the new movement. Simply because the national church grows and becomes strong is no reason for missionaries to become expensive support personnel or bogged down in administrative tasks. The challenge of laboring shoulder to shoulder in saturation church planting with emerging leaders, modeling evangelistic passion, training a new generation of leaders and bringing a missionary vision, structure and strategy to a church movement is of vital strategic importance.

5. Over the top of the diagram I have included the terms used by Ralph Winter (originally proposed by Harold Fuller of

SIM) to describe the four stages of mission: the pioneering stage when initial church planting takes place, the paternal stage where the missionary is still in the lead as the national church begins to grow, the partnering stage where the missionary and the national church work together, and the participation stage where missionaries participate in the vision of the national church. I have included those terms here to show that the new paradigm embraces a dynamic and not static view of the missionary role. Even more than that, in this new paradigm, those terms are not just seen as happening in a sequence, although there is a sense in which they are sequential, but rather they are re-happening all of the time. They become the driving spirit for the work of the missionary. For instance in a strong existing church planting movement, the missionary who keeps in mind the dynamic of these four stages, will always be looking for ways to lead fresh pioneering initiatives to the least-reached both inside and outside that particular group. This pioneering may take the form of working together with Christians of that culture, and it may represent their own first forays into cross-cultural mission, but the pioneering spirit remains as the driving force of the missionary. The stages are recreated as new outreaches and mission ventures are initiated. In this new framework the missionary carries in his heart a local and global perspective, so that everything done locally has an impact on God's global purpose to see all peoples reached. This means that current missionaries, no matter where they are located, can play a strategic role both for that single people group and those who are least-reached in the world.

The New Framework and Mission Agencies: Implications for Strategy and Practice

In the previous section I developed the new framework for mission from the viewpoint of a missionary working among a single people group. This section will look at some key points of the paradigm on a more global scale from the viewpoint of mission agencies.

1. If the premise that "reached" is not the terminal point of mission

is accepted, this opens the door for a radical reorientation of missionary labor in all cultures whether they have been viewed as reached or unreached by the frontier mission movement. Applied to mission agencies on a broader scale this means that no agency should be made to feel guilty or second-class for its chosen fields of labor and commitments. Agencies that have arisen specifically to do pioneer work among truly unreached peoples should not feel guilty for not being involved in all of the kinds of activities that standard mission agencies cover. Similarly, agencies which have long standing relationships with national churches and a broad coverage with their personnel in what have been termed reached peoples, should not feel guilty that they are not able to penetrate every last unreached people group.

2. The new framework embraces both peoples and people and believes that strategic labor to reach both can be done in any type of people group no matter what stage of reachedness they are at, when the frontier mission perspective becomes the orientation for all of their labors. This means that agencies of all stripes can forsake "either/or" thinking, and begin to move into a "both/and" mode that accepts the tensions between the poles of reached/unreached and peoples/people.
3. A large part of what made the frontier mission movement necessary was the fact that successful mission work carries inherent within itself the seeds of people-blindness and the temptation to become caught up in maintaining what has been started. In this new paradigm it is the continual role of mission agency leadership to fight this natural spiritual entropy that leads us away from that pioneering passion to reach the least-reached. This means that every agency needs to continually work to see that all mission staff labor operates upon three focal points:
 - What are we currently doing personally and as a mission in this culture to reach those who have never heard who are both geographically and culturally near or far?
 - What are we doing to disciple this people to the very edges of the society and to plant the church so that every person has

an opportunity to be confronted with a relevant witness of the gospel?

- What are we doing to bring the national church organization we work with to full participation in world mission and to reached the least-reached?

Ralph Winter's warning that missionaries should not be doing what nationals can be doing applies just as strongly in this new model. The missionary should be bringing the special cross-cultural skills learned to bear upon doing better, more effective evangelism and in training for doing cross-cultural mission.

4. Agencies should work with existing personnel to see that they are involved in strategic ministries rather than just in support roles. A Pentecostal passion to reach the lost needs to inform all labor. Pentecostals who verbally say they believe in the leading of the Holy Spirit fall prey to criticism when mission staff among strong national church movements labor primarily in administrative and support roles that could easily be filled by nationals rather than setting an evangelistic example to reach the least-reached segments of that society, training new leaders and bring a missionary vision to the church.
5. In this new framework, the mission agencies use the current database of least-reached peoples to analyze their current work and seek to mobilize their mission teams and the national church entities they are in partnership with to penetrate truly unreached groups that are within reach. Many times we have existing church movements and mission efforts literally right next to a people group that is totally cut off from the gospel. Our natural tendency toward people-blindness means that we can look right over these God-given opportunities. By prayerfully considering the current data on the least-reached, mission agencies can prepare themselves to hear the voice of the Spirit to find ways to touch these groups.
6. In the new framework, agencies need to take seriously the issue of imbalance in personnel. As I have noted above, quoting Ralph Winter, redeployment and sending all new staff to the unreached are not the answers. But the fact is the majority of existing person-

nel are among groups that do have existing church movements. We know too much today in terms of hard data to be complacent about this issue. It is time for agencies to fast and pray over these lists of the least-reached, and it is time for new potential personnel to be confronted with the hard facts of the spiritual need in our world. The successful promotion of our existing work often means that new candidates have been exposed to these fields of labor. In keeping with God's heart to reach the lost, it is imperative that mission agencies allow for new candidates to be exposed to the data so that the Spirit can work with that information in their hearts.¹³ A framework that embraces both peoples and people will be sensitive to the sovereign calling of the Spirit in people's lives, and the timing that the Spirit brings. At the same time, this new framework will help us to humbly recognize that perhaps we have not always understood the cry of the Holy Spirit to reach those in the least-reached places, areas of difficult access, severe resistance and often grinding poverty.

7. Finally, agencies need to view themselves as service agents to their constituents. Agencies have expertise to offer in cross-cultural mission. The trend towards hands-on involvement and the corresponding amateurization of mission that it leads to cannot be controlled but it can be influenced at the training level. Penetrating new cultures and working to plant churches as widely as possible is not a work to be undertaken lightly. It cannot be accomplished by a kind of brief foray into a new place with a sincerity of heart but lack of expertise and longevity. Agencies have long-term experience and can play a vital role in shaping the new energy being released by the challenge of the last mission frontiers.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this brief review of the frontier mission movement and suggestions towards a more comprehensive framework of mission will stimulate discussion among mission leaders and agencies as to how we can better respond to the call of the Spirit to reach both lost people and the lost peoples of our world. There

is no more serious and urgent matter than the prayerful contemplation of how we can be faithful to the Great Commission that our Lord left with us. As we move into the 21st century with the rich history of the modern missionary movement, our Pentecostal heritage and the insights of frontier mission thinking behind us, it is incumbent upon every missionary and mission agency to renew our personal and corporate commitment to bring the Good News in word and deed to every human society on earth. **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹Corwin, "Sociology and Missiology," 24.
- ²Ralph Winter, "The Highest Priority," 229.
- ³Todd Johnson and David Barrett eds., *Ad 2000 Global Monitor* 33(July 1993): 2.
- ⁴Ibid. Their terminology is as follows: World C (Christians) 7 - Great Commission Christians, providing nurture, pastoral care and support; 6 - non-practicing church members; 5 - nominal Christians. World B (evangelized non-Christians) 4 - heavily evangelized non-Christians; 3 - partially evangelized non-Christians. World A (unevangelized non-Christians) 2 - unreached non-Christians; 1 - untargeted non-Christians.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Jon Haley, "Seeing the Big Picture: A Unified Theory of Our Task," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1996): 424-425.
- ⁷Ibid., 425-426.
- ⁸Ibid., 426.
- ⁹Ibid., 426-429.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 429.
- ¹¹Jim Montgomery, *DAWN 2000: 7 Million Churches to Go* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1989), 12.
- ¹²Stan Nussbaum, "The Five Frontiers of Mission," *GMI Info* (Winter/Spring 1999): 1.
- ¹³I think that an important area for further study would be to examine the theological, historical and practical role that information plays in discerning the

leading of the Spirit, particularly in terms of a calling to involvement in ministry and mission.

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140 Analyzing the Frontier Mission Movement and Unreached People Thinking

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