

Counting up to closure: Some preliminary ideas on a 21st century approach to reaching all peoples

by Todd M. Johnson



By all accounts, a conference on unreached peoples held in 2002 should be celebrating the accomplishment of closure, not still contemplating what it is and how far it might be on the horizon. Throughout the 20th century numerous conferences made overarching claims related to closure. Many of these set the year 2000 as their terminus. Nonetheless, the task of reaching the world's unreached peoples may not only be far from finished, but possibly getting larger. This trend emphasizes the importance of differences between peoples in determining the numbers that remain to be reached.

20th century global plans

In 1895 Robert Arthington suggested that an institute be set up to study the world's tribes and peoples. He felt that an estimate of 100,000 such groups was reasonable. Little happened in response to Arthington's proposal but over the 20th century there were numerous attempts to describe what an evangelized world might look like. In most cases, Christian leaders felt that closure was within reach of a single generation. In other words, access to the gospel for all the world's peoples might be accomplished in less than 30 years. This was certainly John R. Mott's intention in his magnum opus (at age 35 in 1900) *The evangelization of the world in this generation*.

A decade later a more detailed approach to the unfinished task, officially commissioned by the World Missionary Conference in 1910, was Samuel Zwemer's *The unoccupied mission fields of Africa and Asia*. In his book Zwemer not only mapped out the remainder of the unfinished task in detail, he also provided a clear assessment of the opportunities that existed for Christians in his day to bring the gospel to all remaining peoples. Not only were most of the opportunities ignored but his striking depiction of the geographical scope of the task outlined in gold on the cover of his book was forgotten (until 1990 when it was rediscovered as the '10/40 Window').

Nonetheless, the idea of closure was kept before the mission public almost continually throughout the 20th century in the form of confident slogans, plans, and documents. A sampling of these include:

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- 1900 The evangelization of the world in this generation
- 1910 The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world
- 1912 Reaching every home
- 1914 Inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth
- 1929 Each one teach one
- 1930 Bringing Christ to the nations
- 1934 Evangelize to a finish to bring back the king
- 1943 Into all the world
- 1946 Complete Christ's Commission
- 1956 The gospel to every creature
- 1957 Global conquest
- 1959 Two thousand tongues to go
- 1967 Crusade for world revival
- 1974 Let the earth hear his voice
- 1976 Bold Mission Thrust
- 1980 A Church for Every People by the Year 2000
- 1984 Strategy to Every People
- 1986 One million native missionaries
- 1990 Decade of Evangelization
- 1995 A Church for Every People and the Gospel for Every Person by AD 2000

What is shown here is constant attention to the universal application of the Great Commission. Closure received many nuanced interpretations ranging from the extension of God's Kingdom to the deliberate planting of churches among every people.

Listing unreached peoples

At the end of the 20th century a number of lists of unreached peoples emerged. The first lists, published in the late 1960s, were compiled by asking mission agencies to submit names of unreached peoples. By the mid-1980s it was apparent that this approach resulted in lists that included large numbers of already Christian peoples. These were usually added by one Christian denomination that did not recognize the work of another Christian denomination already firmly planted among a particular people. In the 1990s this problem was partially addressed by limiting the lists to groups which were less than 5% Christian. However, these lists were utilized primarily to check off groups that were targeted or engaged, leaving a progressively smaller number of peoples to be checked off. This resulted in a "countdown" mentality in relation to closure. The lists apparently showed that very few groups remained

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to be reached. Some gave the impression that by AD 2000 the number of unreached peoples was below 200. At the same time, the estimate of the number of unreached peoples offered by the U.S. Center for World Mission was 10,000 groups in AD 2000!

Subdivisions of peoples significant

Where does this leave us at the beginning of the 21st century? Whereas the rush to complete church planting among every people by AD 2000 put a strong emphasis on "countdown", most studies of the world's peoples today highlight the importance of subdivisions of peoples. The most visible example is India where caste divides ethnolinguistic peoples into thousands of units. The Anthropological Survey of India has published a series of tomes describing in detail these different castes and tribes. What may be less obvious is how this phenomenon is present in every country of the world. A recent UNESCO publication outlines the existence of over 100 major clans in Somalia. The paper states the importance of recognizing these groups in development plans. A similar phenomenon is taking place in Europe where dying "regional dialects" have been reclassified as languages and are being revived through mandatory elementary education. Each country has its examples of significant divisions well beyond ethnicity or language. At the same time, a new language classification has been published that lists over 13,000 languages and 30,000 dialects taking strategists far beyond the Ethnologue's longstanding estimate of about 6,700 languages in the world.

How many peoples are unreached?

The question for 21st century mission strategists is "what significance do these divisions have on penetrating all peoples with the gospel?" The answer to that question will likely lead to a "counting up" mentality in approaching peoples with the gospel. The reason is built into the concept of "unimax peoples" which empha-

sizes the maximum size of a people in which the gospel can spread before encountering barriers. What the studies mentioned above point to is a world of significant barriers at much lower levels than major ethnic groups and languages. Practically speaking that means as missionaries engage the world's ethnolinguistic peoples in the coming years they will likely have to take these barriers more seriously rather than less seriously. It means that the "Somalis of Somalia" cannot be simply checked off a list because a couple of mission agencies are working among a certain clan. The Somalis may actually be dozens of unimax groups requiring a much more significant missionary force. Unfortunately, this also means that while mission agencies have been neglecting the Somalis for most of the 20th century, they have not been neglecting one unreached people but many.

Lingering distribution problems

The Indian Missions Association pin code survey of Indian workers in 1997 highlights how far into the future closure may be. Out of 28,000 pin codes (zip codes in the USA) Christian workers were only present in about 8,000—predominantly those pin codes already with significant Christian presence. Furthermore, despite the existence of over 3,000 Hindu castes, the number significantly penetrated by Christians is still well under 300. Additionally, very little attention has been given to India's 122 million Muslims. The true task of closure has to take seriously caste, religion, and geography. In none of these cases are Christians properly positioned to "finish the task."

Despite all the confidence and energy that emerged from global plans in the 20th century, the global deployment of missionaries in AD 2000 tragically revealed that the vast majority continued to work among peoples that already had a strong Christian presence. This has to be contrasted with the fact that by AD 2000 there was enough evangelism in the world for every person on earth to hear a one-

hour presentation of the gospel 155 times a year. That is almost once every other day all year long!

A surprising finding

Despite the relative lack of Christian engagement with non-Christians in the 20th century, there was an increasing tendency to label non-Christians as “resistant”. This offered a quick and easy explanation for why more conversions had not occurred among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. But is it accurate to label neglected or unengaged peoples as “resistant”? A remarkable counter-intuitive finding emerged in the World Christian Encyclopedia survey: the least-evangelized peoples were shown to be the most responsive. This fact was developed by contrasting the annual baptism rate among each of the world’s peoples with the number of hours of evangelism invested in that people. Consistently, those with the least efforts showed significantly higher response rates (per capita). This finding is in harmony both with the biblical idea of God’s initiative among all peoples (even prior to missionary efforts) and the eschatological expectation of God’s community gathered from all peoples. If Christian workers are directed more towards the least-evangelized in the future, the great harvest field may be the former “resistant belt”.

Closure in a new light

If we are to complete the task, twenty-first century mission must be radically different from 20th century mission. The mission force will soon be largely non-Western, strategic planning is likely to be more decentralized, and attention on peoples may become more nuanced—counting up instead of counting down. This may paradoxically lead us to a more satisfying closure than what was envisioned for AD 2000. Nothing is lost if the approach taken is biblical and leads to a more thorough penetration of all the world’s peoples with the gospel of Jesus Christ. **IJFM**

Centers for World Mission: Echos from Singapore 1988

by Darrell Dorr

Editor’s note: This set of documents was included to serve as a historical reference for those participating in the *Global Centers for World Mission* track of the Singapore ‘02 consultation.

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Bridging the Gaps:

A Global Network of Centers for World Mission Accelerates the Completion of the Great Commission

A center for world mission is a strange beast that defies simple description. It’s not a think tank, but it conducts strategic research. It’s not a foundation, but it mobilizes resources necessary for the completion of world evangelization. It’s not a school, but it provides innovative training. And it’s not a bookstore, but it distributes literature and other materials that Christians really need if they are to know and do all that God expects.

By one count, 40 such centers have sprung up in various countries in the past few years, some in isolation, others with the active encouragement of older centers. Increasingly, these organizations have begun to work together to bridge many of the gaps in what David Barrett, the editor of the World Christian Encyclopedia, has identified as an exploding “global evangelization movement.”

This fledgling network of centers for world mission received a big boost November 1-5, when 33 representatives of 12 centers and five other organizations gathered at Singapore’s Metropolitan YMCA to compare notes on their respective ministries and to plan for the network’s future. The huddle was hosted by the Singapore Centre for Evangelism and Missions (SCEM) and jointly convened by SCEM’s acting executive director, Michael Jaffarian, and the U.S. Center’s communications director, Darrell Dorr.

Deliberations at “CentreCon”

The Singapore consultation—dubbed “CentreCon” for short—built on a foundational agreement prepared by a smaller group in the same city two years ago. The 1986 “Singapore Statement on the Global Network of Centres for World Mission” defines a center for world mission as an “interdenominational, inter-mission organisation working in a support role for the cause of World Evangelisation and especially for the reaching of the unreached peoples.”

The November 1988 consultation featured working sessions on such topics as planning mobilization conferences, overseeing mission study programs (such as the Perspectives course developed at the U.S. Center), acquiring and distributing media resources, and developing mission media networks. Since many centers for world mission are heavily involved in mission research, additional sessions were given to coordinating field research, developing guidelines for sharing research data, and establishing permanent national research functions in conjunction with Global Mapping International. Global Mapping conducted a more in-depth workshop November 7-10 in the same location, acquainting center representatives and other mission leaders with GMI’s database, mapping, and data communications tools.

Links to Other Ministries

But how do centers for world mission relate to other ministries in the “global evangelization movement”? Dorr noted that centers for world mission have served and can continue to serve as “implementing agents ready for any good work that might otherwise fall in the cracks between more conventional and less adaptable structures.”

The Singapore Statement includes the aspiration that centers work in harmony with the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Dorr added that other global mission move-