

On Strategies of Closure

Missiology and the Measurement of Engagement: Personal Reflections on Tokyo

by *Kevin S. Higgins*

Introduction

The Consultation and Celebration held in Tokyo in May, 2010 was one of four events held in 2010 to commemorate in various ways the great Edinburgh 1910 conference. In chronological order the four events included gatherings held in Tokyo, Edinburgh, Cape Town, and Boston. Each was conceived with a unique purpose and audience.

Tokyo will very likely prove to be the gathering most directly connected to the vision of “finishing the task.” As such, in addition to numerous workshops and plenary addresses devoted to missional and biblical themes and issues across a broad spectrum of concerns, there was a distinctive focus in Tokyo on coordinating as organizations and churches to achieve “closure” of the missionary task by measuring the extent to which we have reached the unreached and engaged the unengaged. For ease of discussion I will refer generally to this as the closure movement.

In this emphasis on finishing the task, the leadership of Tokyo 2010 was self-consciously standing on the shoulders of prior leaders and movements in the history of the missionary expansion of the church. This great chain was traced again and again in plenary sessions and workshops from Tokyo back through time including (quite selectively): an important gathering in Singapore in 2002 called for by the network of various Centers for World Mission, InterDev, Joshua Project II and others,¹ the AD 2000 movement; Ralph Winter and hidden peoples (subsequently, unreached peoples); Donald McGavran; Edinburgh 1910 and its emphasis on reaching the world in a generation; the great missionary expansion of the 18th and 19th centuries; movements of monks and migrants; Jesus’ final words on reaching all nations; and ultimately back through the Old Testament to Abraham’s calling to be a blessing to all nations.²

The missionary effort to complete the Great Commission has successively reworked its terminology and methodology. One major emphasis has been the collection of data about people groups and the status of evangelization and Christian expansion. Depending upon the researcher or the specific database in

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question, such data may include percentages of exposure to the Gospel, resources or literature available in a people group, the status of church planting, etc.

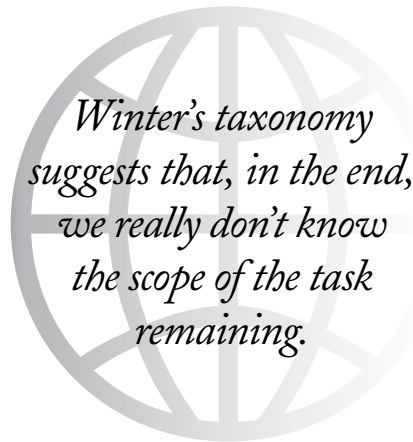
This work of data collection, definition, categorization, communication, and coordination has been immense and has left a lasting legacy for the mission movement to build upon.³ To describe the data, various attempts at definition have been employed to clarify what constitutes an unreached or unengaged people group. The variety in how such terms are employed results in further variety when attempts are made to list which groups are unreached or unengaged.

Of the major attempts at seeking to bring different perspectives on closure together in a synthesized perspective, Ralph Winter's 2002 article, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge" stands out.⁴ Winter discusses four perspectives observed in seeking to define the task of closure relative to understanding which people groups remain unreached. He "slices" the world into 8 Blocs (cultural and affinity, including Muslim, Hindu, etc.), Ethno-linguistic peoples (of which 3,000 are unevangelized), Socio-peoples (described as "peer groups" but clearly larger than the way most might use the term peer, of which 10,000 are unreached), and Unimax peoples.⁵

The last term in the list is defined in the way I had come to understand one of the common definitions of a people group: the largest group of people within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering significant barriers.⁶ Winter says there is an unknown number of such Unimax peoples, a statement which is important to hold in balance as we mission strategists seek to use lists of people groups for the purposes of planning the alignment of personnel and resources for closure. Winter's taxonomy suggests that, in the end, we really don't know the scope of the task remaining.

In Tokyo, there was no attempt to try to come to consensus regarding this variety of definitions and assessments. The reality of the existence of such a variety was acknowledged and maintained. Participants were encouraged to look at and use all of the databases, for example.

In one track of the Tokyo gathering mission leaders were encouraged to commit themselves on behalf of their respective organizations to engage specific people groups over the next three years with focused church planting efforts, and to assist in various other strategic tasks such as cooperating in



the production/distribution of the *Jesus* Film, etc.

Asking Questions... of Myself

My purpose in this essay is to try to bring to the fore some questions about the approach just described. I do so from two self-conscious perspectives.

First, I write as a friend of the "closure" movement. The organization I direct has crafted its own mission statement largely in keeping with objectives that can be traced to the Great Commission as framed by McGavran, Winter, the AD 2000 movement, and the Finishing the Task effort.⁷

As a friend of the closure movement I have embraced in my thinking, for example, the commitment to the emergence of church planting movements as a key indicator of whether a people group is reached or not. As such I have encouraged our organization to use the scale developed by the Southern Baptist research effort (see endnote 2). The scale is represented in Table 1 below.

Much of the criteria in this scale is related to the existence and extent of church planting taking place in a given people group. In our case, we have focused strategically on people groups in the 0 to 2 range for our pioneer efforts, and see 3 and above as more appropriately calling for a mobilization effort.

But such criteria, not only in this particular scale but any similar versions currently in use, presuppose a number of assumptions: what is a church? What is church planting? What constitutes a church planting strategy or plan or even team? What is evangelical Christianity? What is *Christianity* for that matter? I am not suggesting that a scale like this one should provide such definitions, I am

Table 1. Global Status of Evangelical Christianity.

Status Level	Description
0	No evangelical Christians or churches. No access to major evangelical print, audio, visual, or human resources.
1	Less than 2% Evangelical. Some evangelical resources available, but no active church planting within past 2 years.
2	Less than 2% Evangelical. Initial (localized) church planting within past 2 years.
3	Less than 2% Evangelical. Widespread church planting within past 2 years.
4	Greater than or equal to 2% Evangelical
5	Greater than or equal to 5% Evangelical
6	Greater than or equal to 10% Evangelical
7	Unknown

Source: www.imb.org/globalresearch/gemodel.asp

merely pointing out that the answers to the questions I just listed would likely be answered in a variety of ways by leaders of organizations who are totally committed to the closure vision. Clarity on this issue is crucial, for the criteria behind our data will directly affect our measurement of closure.⁸

This leads me to my second frame of reference. I also write as one associated closely with the so-called “insider movement” approach.⁹ I have spent over 20 years in a particular Islamic context and have seen the rise and growth of a movement to Jesus that fosters both an ongoing commitment to remain within the religious community of Islam and to plant and multiply intentional communities of believers in Jesus at the same time. This experience shapes my understanding of how to measure or verify church planting, evangelical Christianity, and thus closure.

These twin convictions have given rise to numerous questions, internally. My questions are birthed from my reflections on certain aspects of the closure movement from the perspective of someone who has witnessed the growth and expansion of a movement to Jesus among Muslims that has not fit the pattern that seems to be assumed by our measurements of whether a people group is engaged or reached.

In fact, for me personally, Tokyo served as the event that for the first time brought both of these sides of my thinking into direct connection in a new and profound way. It was during the time in Tokyo that I first began to ask the questions I raise here. This is just one of the valuable results of the Tokyo event.

Because I am shaped by both the closure movement and the so-called insider approach, I have referred to this sub-section as “asking questions of myself.” These are questions I had not asked prior to Tokyo, which served as the catalyst for seeing these issues as I do now. Having spoken with several others who led the meetings in Tokyo, I know there is sympathy towards what I am raising here. I offer these reflec-

I am raising the wonderful fact that we can assume that God is already engaging and reaching peoples without our strategies.

tions in the spirit of seeking to further understand the mind of Christ and further discern what the Lord of the Harvest is doing in His fields.

A Short Story

First, it might be helpful to say a bit more about my context. For the past twenty years I have been in a position to observe the growth of a movement to Jesus that has intentionally remained within the fabric of Islamic culture and practice. The movement does not describe itself as a Christian movement. However, at the same time movement leadership intentionally focus on obedience to biblical teaching and truth and a deepening discipleship as followers of Jesus. Forms of fellowship for believers have emerged, and there has been intentional expansion of the movement both within the original people group in which it was birthed, and beyond that people group to peoples of other languages and in other countries. Regular training for leaders takes place, based upon understanding and applying the Bible in daily life and in addressing theological and cultural questions that arise.

At one point, nearly fifteen years ago, using one of the lists of remaining unreached peoples, we identified a people group in our country that was on the list. I will call them the “Jedi.” I invited churches to adopt the Jedi and we began to pray for a strategy. We surveyed the people group with the help of believers from a geographically and culturally-near people. We listed possible approaches, and enlisted prayer.

About two years into that process, and well before we had been able to launch any of the possible plans or strategies conceived from our survey work, I was at a gathering of leaders from the emerging movement. There were new leaders present and I was getting to know them. It so “happened” that two of these leaders were Jedi, the people for whom we had

been praying. These two leaders had become believers and had joined our monthly leader training events, but without any launch of our plans or strategies.

And Some Observations

This is not to say there was no strategic value to what was happening. As I discussed further how this had all come about I realized several important things:

First, though we were seeing the Jedi as a distinct people for the purpose of our planning and strategizing, and though they had a distinct language, they saw themselves as part of another people group, and were seen as such by others around them.¹⁰ As such, our already existing way of working with that larger group had folded naturally into reaching the smaller. This illustrates the process by which experience “in context” shapes prior thinking and assumptions.¹¹

Second, the decision to “focus” on this people group, or to “engage” them, was a distinct decision from my etic (outside) perspective, but was not so from an emic (inside) point of view. It happened naturally, via lines of relationship. As a result they were in fact engaged, and church planting was beginning, before we knew it was happening. All of us in the closure movement would agree that our lists of unreached and unengaged peoples are our best understanding of field reality based on available, reported information. I am not raising that exact point in this illustration. Instead I am raising the wonderful fact that we can assume that God is already engaging and reaching peoples without our strategies and beyond what we think the reach of our personnel might be. Again, this is a point upon which I find wide agreement in the closure movement.

The third observation I would make is the place in which I think our prior conceptions will shape what we find in the field. Since the closure criteria revolve so

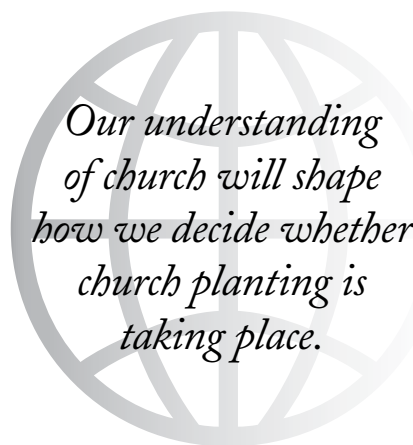
much around church planting, then our understanding of church will shape how we decide whether church planting is in fact taking place, or not.

In our case, as the movement was beginning and growing, I and others sat with key leaders to study the scriptures, seeking to understand and apply biblical teaching about “church” to the movement: How do we know when a church is planted? What do such churches do when they meet? When and where do churches meet, or when and where does church happen? These are thorny issues for many. Our movement developed a few criteria, based finally in Acts 2:42ff. Based on our study we concluded that healthy churches are committed to ongoing learning from the Bible, to regular fellowship/being together, to some expression of breaking bread (including meals and some form of the Lord’s Supper), and prayer. Based on Acts 14:21ff we also agreed that it was key to assure our movement that, indeed, we had trained leaders.

But during this exercise we did not specify anything like a description of the *form* any of the above functions should take in order to be church. Our focus was on functions we found in scripture, not on specific forms that must be taken as universal carriers of those functions. “Churches” in our movement might meet at any time, any day, and with any number of people. While such churches generally grew out of already existing social networks, they might be a nuclear or extended family, or a group of families, or a group of non-related individuals with or without a prior friendship or connection already in existence. They might meet weekly, but they might meet less or more frequently.

My sense is that the forms of church and fellowship that are taking shape in this movement would not fit the criteria most would look for in order to determine whether a people group was reached or not. I do not think anyone in the closure movement is suggesting a specific polity (much less denomi-

national form) for “church.” In fact, I have sensed a genuine flexibility in the viewpoints that are brought to the table. But some of the models presented at Tokyo 2010 in the track devoted to closure were built around measuring the extent of church planting by collecting data for churches such as meeting location, numbers of members, names and addresses of pastors, etc. I do not see anything wrong with seeking such data, and in some contexts this may well be quite appropriate and helpful. In the context of our movement it would not only be impossible, but also an attempt



to measure things we would not see as essential to “church” and thus not actually informative as to the extent of a church planting effort.

This brief window into my background and ministry might help explain the questions I am now posing as I try to understand what finishing the task might look like and how it might be understood when we take such movements into account.¹² My questions are many! I have already posed several, relative to the understanding of church. But in applying all of this to the closure movement and measurement of engagement and extent to which a people group is reached, I will limit myself to what I see as the two major questions.

What does this mean for determining whether a people group is *engaged* or not?

I gave just one example in one country for one people group, but it is a story

repeated in other people groups in our region. One nexus of questions this raises for me is how such realities on the ground should shape how I think about measuring and promoting engagement. To rephrase the question, in the example I gave, at which point was the people group I use in the example “engaged?”

Typically, I have viewed “engagement” the way I am sure most of my colleagues in the wider mission movement have done. I have assumed that engaging a people group meant that an organization or church intentionally selected such a people group as a focus for strategy and evangelization. My colleagues and I would include western and non-western mission and church structures in our understanding. But now I am asking myself and by extension the wider missions movement:

“If followers of Jesus within Islam, or Buddhism, or Hinduism are reaching a people group by sharing the gospel and developing appropriate forms of fellowship for believers, is that people now engaged?”¹³

I am more and more convinced that those of us in the closure movement should find a way to take such movements to Jesus into account as we evaluate what God might be doing to bring the nations to Himself. How should we do so? I will suggest a few thoughts at the end of this essay.

What does this mean for determining whether a people group is *reached* or not?

I mentioned above that our own organization uses the database and criteria developed by the International Mission Board.

As we saw above, the database uses a scale of 0 to 7 to measure the extent a people group is reached or unreached. The higher the number the more a people group is considered reached. Among the criteria used there, we mentioned that church planting is key.¹⁴

But how do we measure that, in light of the example I gave above? One organization I know sets the standard

as a gathering of believers that includes at least three family heads. Another says ten families. Both are helpful in setting a measurement, neither could (or does) claim to be biblical, strictly speaking.

Some may be tempted to suggest that we should simply claim the words of Jesus as our measure, “where two are three are gathered together in My Name...” Tempting as that may be, He was not in fact seeking to define church, per se, in that verse but rather the function of discipline within what we call church.

The movements I am most familiar with do multiply and encourage expressions of koinonia among disciples. If these are growing in number, then would we not want to say that the progress of church planting is also growing in that people group?

Of course, the answer to that will depend largely on the perception, and especially ecclesiology, of the person answering.¹⁵ As I said earlier regarding engagement, I am more and more convinced that those of us in the closure movement should find a way to take such movements to Jesus into account as we evaluate what God might be doing to bring the nations to Himself. How should we do so?

I promised before that I would suggest a few thoughts at the end of this essay about how we in the closure movement might keep movements such as I have described on our radar as we seek to assess which people groups are engaged and reached. I turn to that now by way of conclusion.

Our Posture in Discerning Engagement

Before presuming to outline suggestions for others in the closure movement I want to go on record regarding my appreciation for this movement:

I stand on the shoulders of previous and current leaders who are focused on finishing the task.

I do not presume to think that what I will say has never been thought of or taken

W*e all come to such issues ... with a mixture of vital biblical insight and also inescapable presuppositions.*

into consideration by individuals or other leaders within the closure movement.

I have already indicated my dual allegiance to both the closure movement and the paradigm of mission that rejoices in movements to Jesus within non-Christian religious traditions. As such, I personally would be happy to include such movements in any measurement of church planting progress or engagement. However, I know that there is nothing approaching consensus on this point, and that this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. Therefore, addressing others in the closure movement, I would like to suggest the following ways that we might keep such movements in view without requiring that all my colleagues share my exact point of view.

First, I would like to suggest a posture that I will call “*Gamaliel-Open*.” A famous passage in Acts portrays Gamaliel, while in apparent opposition to the new Jesus movement taking place among his fellow Jews, recommended that his colleagues take a longer view and wait to see what happened, not in compromise of their convictions, but in the awareness that God might be doing something which they would not want to be found opposing should it turn out to be of God. The implications for the closure movement should be clear enough: keeping abreast and aware of the existence and status of such movements as I have described, and doing so with a mindset that allows the possibility of their validity without feeling pressed to express conviction thereof, seems to be a realistic and practical step.

Second, this would need to be done with another posture, committed with utmost seriousness to remaining “*Security-Closed*.” Regardless of what one thinks about the type of movement I have described, there are real human

lives at stake and at risk. Therefore, while I do suggest that various networks that meet to seek to follow up and further the closure movement encourage and foster open discussion about what might be happening in and through such movements among the least reached and unengaged on our various lists, I balance that with a counter call: that the information thus shared and discussed remain within the confines of such meetings, safe and secure.

Third, I would encourage us all to remain committed to speak the truth, but as “*Grace-Tongued*” men and women. This echoes much of what I presented in my own Tokyo address¹⁶ relative to the ongoing dialogue in the mission world about contextualization, Jesus movements, etc. Speaking the truth does not preclude but rather requires speaking in love.

Finally, acknowledging that I myself am in constant need of biblical re-tuning and re-adjustment, I would suggest that those of us in the closure movement also embrace fully the hallmarks of the Reformation, including a passion to be continuously “*Biblically-Reformed*.”

We all come to such issues as our understanding of church with a mixture of vital biblical insight and also inescapable presuppositions due to our different denominational heritage. I include in this heritage not only the polities or expressions of church we have embraced, but also those we have rejected. This process of rejection often in turn shapes what we later embrace, and vice versa. None of us think or believe or become disciples or study the scriptures in a vacuum. We are all shaped by our past and present contexts as we seek to live biblically, and (we pray!) our past and our present also become shaped as we encounter the Bible ever more deeply.

But this much can be said with utmost surety: none of us has a corner on all

that the Bible says, and this includes what it says about the church and being the church. As such, if we measure the status of a people group's being reached or not reached based upon the status of church planting, then it seems we would be wise to be humbly open to correction by the Lord of the church as we try to assess and discern what He might be doing, even when it does not coincide with our expectations.

Conclusion

Not every gathering of every closure movement network of leaders and organizations and churches can or will give over large portions of their meeting time to reopen biblical discussions of church. But the values and assumptions outlined above might at least help form our hearts as we engage each other and partner together to complete the task.

At the very least, it would seem safe to assume we can join together in praying for the attitude of Gamaliel, the holiness that will enable us to speak with grace-filled tongues, a commitment to giving each other safe and secure places to share what we see God doing, and a desire for His Spirit to continuously reform us in the light of His Word. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See the brief discussion of this event and its focus in Greg Parsons' editorial comments in *IJFM* 19:4 (2002), p. 5.

² See for example, McGavran's seminal article in the 1982 version of *Perspectives*. McGavran, Donald, "A Church in Every People," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Chapter 64; William Carey Library, 1982. Also, see Samuel Wilson's discussion in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, "Peoples, People Groups," page 746 (edited by Moreau, Netland, Van Engen).

³ A detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. For a helpful summary, the abridged version of Paul Eshleman's plenary address in Tokyo found in the most recent edition of *Mission Frontiers* is a succinct discussion (*Mission Frontiers*, July-August 2010, pages 10-11). Some of the major web-based lists of people groups being consulted in the closure effort include: www.finsihingthetask.com; The Global Status of Evangelical Christianity,

a research effort of the International Mission Board, which can be found at <http://www.imb.org/globalresearch/sge.asp>; and the Joshua Project, at <http://www.joshua-project.net>. The statistics in each differ in varying ways since the compilers employ different criteria for measurement.

⁴ In *IJFM*, 19:4, 2002, pages 15ff.

⁵ *Ibid.* Winter provides a helpful chart for summary on page 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ The mission statement I refer to is as follows: "The mission of GLOBAL TEAMS is to equip and send teams of missionaries from many nations to multiply disciples of Jesus within cultures least aware of the Gospel."

⁸ The very term "measurement" implies a clearly articulated standard of reference. On this point Winter's 2002 article offers a helpful perspective once again, though I suspect some will find its vagueness difficult to apply. Winter seeks to articulate a difference between measurability and verifiability. He rejects the former and encourages us to think in terms of the latter. He uses the example of AIDS, implying that we are not able to measure, and do not seek to measure, "how much AIDS" a person has, but we can verify that they have it. Implication: we can not measure how reached a people group is, but we can verify whether or not they are. Winter, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge," *IJFM* 19:4 (2002), p. 21.

⁹ In fact, many of us would like to see the missions community move away from the term "insider movement" as it does not connote accurately what we are seeking to describe. Instead we are seeking to use language such as "movements to Jesus within Islam (or Buddhism, etc.)", or "biblically faithful movements to Jesus within Hinduism (etc.)."

¹⁰ Going back to Winter's taxonomy, referenced earlier, we were actually experiencing a very different reality. The Jedi would be defined by outsiders such as ourselves as an ethno-linguistic group, within which (according to Winter's model) we would expect to see further distinctions such as sociopeoples and even unimax groups that would require more segmentation in approach. In fact what we found was that the Jedi identified with a larger ethno-linguistic group and saw themselves related to that group in terms more akin to what Winter called a unimax group. The segmentation followed a *larger* rather than a *smaller* link.

¹¹ As a note, everyone I have dialogued with in other organizations committed to finishing the task would certainly

endorse the idea that field experience and information trumps prior working assumptions. I am just relating my particular case, not suggesting that the closure movement would not agree or are not also committed to this point.

¹² I know that some readers will take the view that my questions are moot since such movements are not, in their view, valid or at least not completely valid expressions of the Gospel or the expansion of the Kingdom. I cannot in the space of this article try to address such questions, as important as they are.

¹³ Proponents of the so-called insider movement approach have been misunderstood as if we were advocating some sort of individualistic expression of the Gospel. In fact, every such movement I have witnessed personally or have seen described by others has developed very clear forms of *koinonia* among believers.

¹⁴ There are also a number of theological assumptions underlying the data. For example, people groups in which the majority of people are Roman Catholic and Orthodox tend to be considered unreached, since the index measures the extent of *evangelical* Christianity.

¹⁵ Elsewhere I have suggested using the description of functions found in Acts 14:21 to 28 as a grid for understanding the core functions of church: evangelizing, discipleship, ongoing encouragement, appointment of leaders, and remaining relationally connected to a wider network of churches. However, I also tried to be clear that such functions could take a wide range of formal expression, including forms found in other religious traditions. Higgins, Kevin, *Identity, Integrity, and Insider Movements: A brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent's Critique of C-5 Thinking*, *IJFM* 23:6 (Fall 2006).

¹⁶ For a summary of my address, see *Mission Frontiers*, July-August 2010, pages 12-13.