Balance in Frontier Missions

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hroughout the history of modern missions the role of the missionary society in establishing churches, nourishing them, and clarifying the remaining task has been the subject of much discussion. In recent years the discussion has focused on the need to identify those who are beyond the reach of existing churches and to develop strategies to present the Gospel to them in a meaningful way. The theme of this conference refers to this concern as "frontier missions."

MANY WAYS TO UNDERSTAND THE UNFINISHED TASK

As background, it is helpful to review some of the ways the church and the missions community have described the task of world outreach in the past. First, *geography* and geographic expressions have often provided an appropriate framework for describing the task. Many Biblical references to the missionary obligation have geographic overtones:

> Acts 1:9: "to the remotest part of the earth" (NASB)
> 2 Corinthians 10:16: "to the regions beyond" (NASB)
> Matthew 28:19: "all the nations" (NASB).

Hymns were written to emphasize these themes at various times during the era of modern missions:

> Salvation, O salvation!
> The joyful sound proclaim
> Till each remotest nation
> Has learnt Messiah's name.
> (taken from "Greenland's Icy Mountains," Regionald Heber)
>
> Convert the national far and high
> the triumphs of the cross record
> The Name of Jesus glorify,
> Till every people call him Lord.
> (James Montgomery, 1823)
>
> Proclaim to every people, tongue, and nation
> that God, in whom they live and move, is Love:
> Tell how he stooped to save his lost creation,
> And died on earth that man might live above.
> ("O Zion Haste," M.A. Thomson, 1870).

These themes have also found expression in the names of mission societies, such as Unevangelized Fields Mission and Regions Beyond Missionary Union. The geographic perspective has understood the term "nations" primarily in the sense of nation-states or political entities. For practical considerations, these kinds of "nations" are of significance in missionary planning because they control the movement of people around the world through, for example, the issuance of passports and visas.

In addition to a geographical framework, we have historically looked at the task in *ethnic* terms, such as tribes and languages. These are practical and Biblical terms which have identified the frontiers of ministry for many missionaries. For example, "A thousand tongues to go" (or "two thousand," or some other figure) has been the rallying cry for translators. Revelation 5:9 says, "... (Thou) didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (NASB). Language learning and cross-cultural understanding are key ingredients in any frontier effort, and language reduction and Bible translation are necessary prerequisites to pioneer evangelism and church-planting in many cases.

Sometimes frontiers have been understood in terms of *religions*. In this day of increasing religious dialogue, this understanding may be less common. Yet religious designations are widely used, especially of work among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

One additional historical glance reminds us that the thrust of modern missions might be characterized, as Ralph Winter has suggested, by *eras*. The first era of coastal penetration witnessed the efforts of European missions (and later those from the United States, Australia and New Zealand) to plant churches primarily in coastal cities in Asia and Africa. An era of inland penetration followed, reflected by the many mission names highlighting a concern for this new "frontier," e.g., China Inland Mission, Africa Inland Mission, Sudan Interior Mission, Heart of Africa Mission.

With all of these advances, other strategists saw that some tribes and language groups were not being touched, and thus began the third, current era of missions. Wycliffe Bible Translators has sought out language groups which have been missed, reduced their languages to writing, and translated Scripture. New Tribes Mission has upheld a similar focus, joined by other agencies with less revealing names.

THE EMPHASIS ON UNREACHED PEOPLES

An extension of this latter emphasis has brought the term "peoples" to prominence. With a variety of modifiers, the terms "peoples", "people groups", "hidden peoples," and "unreached peoples" have been the subject of much discussion and debate during the past decade.

"Homogenous unit," a related sociological term coming out of church growth literature, has entered the discussion and to some extent complicated it. For some critics, a church formed from a homogenous unit (where cultural similarity makes it easy for people of the same "kind" to enter) raises the specter of racism. Others have argued that "nation" or "people," as used in Scripture, should be understood in ethnic or racial terms and should not be used to describe broader sociological groupings.

In March 1982 a group of North American strategists met in Chicago to discuss the terminology, seeking to find common ground in understanding and communicating the people group concept as a way to look at the contemporary frontier of missions. A consensus definition was developed for the expression "people group":

> "a significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance" (Dayton 1985:32-33).

Another definition was agreed upon for "unreached people":

> "A people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside (cross-cultural) assistance" (Dayton 1985:33).

By this usage, each person is a part of a number of groups, and by this calculation the number of "people groups" is almost infinite. To think of a separate church for each such group (for example, teachers in a given locality) is not practical and probably not desirable.

Despite considerable confusion and debate, I believe the concept of identifying unreached people groups as a way to understand current frontiers is valid. In the broadest sense, penetrating people groups may be an evangelistic strategy. All churches should be looking for ways to effectively witness to special groups such as teachers, nurses, or taxi drivers. To some extent, such groups exist within local churches. One church may have large numbers of teachers because Christian teachers have brought their colleagues to the Lord.

The call to identify and penetrate unreached people groups has shown that frontiers are close at hand as well as far away. It has heightened awareness that the Great Commission has *not* been completed. At the same time, it has provided a way to recover hope that the task *can* be completed, since the goal of establishing a viable church within each people group is an aspiration which can be readily grasped and reasonably embraced.

COUNT THE COST!

However, a shallow understanding of the task of penetrating an unreached people group often lies at the heart of the apparent dilemma about distribution of personnel and other resources among frontier missions

and other possible ministries. For example, it is possible for a local church to glibly talk about "adopting" an unreached people group instead of continuing the "maintenance" kind of support to which its members are accustomed. "Let's send a team of six and get a church going," they may say.

Consider some of the tasks which will be required: Scripture translation, discipling, training of leadership, meeting physical needs, and a host of others. History tells us that in many cases it requires one or two generations of loving witness to see the beginnings of a church, and another to see a trained, viable church which can truly reach its kinsmen on its own. When a church or mission considers assuming the task of reaching a people group, it is extremely important to count the cost before embarking on the endeavor. Jesus reminded his disciples that those undertaking an enterprise should count the cost in order to avoid disappointment and confusion later.

There must be a thorough analysis of ministries which will be needed to do a credible job. The needs will vary because of a number of circumstances, but necessary personnel will probably include linguists, church planters, medical staff, educational workers, and technical assistants. Are we ready for the long-range commitment which might be required? Can one local church alone muster all the skills and resources needed? Mission societies can be helpful at this point by working together with churches to find additional resources.

WHO SHOULD REACH THIS PEOPLE?

A second important issue is the need to identify the most appropriate entity to reach a certain people group. A church or mission may pick a people out of a directory and simply start out to reach it, whereas research might reveal that a national church or mission working adjacent to the group has personnel who already know the language and have some contacts. The nearby church or mission may even be preparing a team to go to the unreached group. It is necessary to carefully investigate the options before making a long-distance decision which might overlook some important factors. We should consider whether helping an existing nearby church to form a mission society might not ultimately accomplish the task more effectively. Today scores of "emerging missions" have been formed and are effectively reaching people groups in their region as well as in other parts of the world.

Carefully placed resources may stimulate missionary vision in existing churches around the world and, in the end, be multiplied manyfold in reaching people groups. The investment of new resources and new ideas could lead to a major leap forward. National churches which are struggling could be helped with discipleship training, enabling them to better reach peoples near them and eventually at greater distance. The encouragement of close-knit fellowship among churches, missions, and other para-church organizations can produce a dynamic energy which will spill over to the unreached. It is very important, for example, to support the World Evangelical Fellowship and its national and regional affiliates.

Both for strategy development and for purposes of communicating missions vision, we must emphasize frontiers. In doing so, we must not abruptly or carelessly abandon existing programs which are vital to the health of the church and which serve to stimulate new resources needed to reach the world for Christ. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we must find the proper balance between pressing to the frontiers and sustaining other vital and legitimate responsibilities.

Author's address:

REFERENCE

Dayton, Edward R. "Reaching Unreached Peoples: Guidelines and Definitions for Those Concerned with World Evangelization," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1985, pp. 31-38.