

REFLECTIONS ON THE ADOPT-A-PEOPLE CONCEPT AND CLEARINGHOUSE

■ What have we learned about the Adopt-a-People concept in the last decade, and what will it take to make this emphasis effective in the 1990s? The director of the new Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse offers his perspectives at the 1990 meeting of the International Society for Frontier Missiology.

By Darrell R. Dorr

This society has been very instrumental in the development of the Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse. It was at our 1988 meeting in Colorado Springs that the idea of an Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse got more explicit discussion for the first time. It was the following March in 1989 that a group of North American mission executives met at the U. S. Center for World Mission. What came out of that meeting was the formal establishment of the Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse. Then, last year at the 1989 meeting of the Society, the Clearinghouse was a major topic of discussion.

At that point, even six months after the Adopt-a-People symposium, there was no staff for the Clearinghouse. I think that was part of the reason for the sense of urgency that then undergirded the Society's conversations. A couple of months later, I sensed freedom from the Lord to accept an invitation to help the Clearinghouse get off the ground. In January of this year I began operations with a small group of volunteers.

I've been the only full-time person working on the Clearinghouse staff. But our volunteers have been valuable. One is on loan from RBMU International for a few hours each week, and another comes with a background of service with the Missionary Church. Then just next week, the second full-time person—on loan from the Evangelical Free Church—is due to arrive, and he will serve as the database administrator.

My comments to you on the Adopt-a-People topic largely largely spring from my relatively-limited experience during the last year with the Clearinghouse and also from activity at the U. S.

Center for World Mission during the previous nine years. I've gleaned bits and pieces from various jobs.

As we begin, I want to remind you of something that I frequently need to remind myself: the Adopt-a-People idea is conceptually very simple, and much of its appeal lies in that simplicity. To get a church or other fellowship group to adopt an unreached people for prayer, financial support and/or personnel, to adopt that people for long-range attention, and to hang in there until the Lord births an indigenous church movement among that people—that's not so hard to understand, is it?

We would do well not to adorn this basic idea with too much missiological or logistical gingerbread and thereby complicate it unduly for the man in the pew. It is true that there are some very complex logistical dimensions—and I'll give an overview of some of these—but we need to allow the strength of the concept's simplicity come through when we're communicating to the average layman.

Let's look, first of all, at the "micro" level of the Adopt-a-People emphasis—namely, at what happens within the local fellowship. This is not the major focus of the Clearinghouse. Others, such as the Mobilization Division of the U.S. Center for World Mission, give their attention to this area. We need to at least acknowledge a few lessons in this arena before moving on to some of the "macro" dimensions of the Adopt-a-People concept. In these comments and in others I'm going to borrow liberally from my article in the October 1990 issue of the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*.

First of all, it's important to define what we mean when we talk about "adopting" a people. There are a number of ways to do this. There is a technical definition which comes out of the March 1982 meeting sponsored by the Lausanne Strategy Working Group: "A congregation, class or other group of believers has accepted responsibility for prayer and/or financial support of efforts to reach this people group. A church or agency has personnel and adequate resources to move ahead."

While in many cases that's a very adequate explanation, I've found that in other contexts we need to come at the question in other ways. One is by very explicitly making parallels between people group adoption and the adoption of children. There are at least three parallels.

First, there's the recognition of the need for special nurture. Unreached peoples are not in a position right now to get the kind of "parental" nurture that other peoples are receiving. Second, there's the call for a long-term commitment. Adoption is not something you do on a whim.

Third, there's the recognition that parental responsibility changes significantly at a certain point. When children become adults, their parents retain relationships with them and yet release them into a new sphere of freedom and responsibility. The same is true with an adopting church. When an indigenous church movement is birthed among the previously-unreached people, there needs to be a relationship maintained between the adopting church and this people but also the ceding of primary responsibility for the evangelization of that people to the indigenous church

movement. It's helpful to anticipate such a shift from the outset of the relationship.

Then there's another way to define people group adoption—theologically. To adopt an unreached people is, for example, to consciously, deliberately embrace the Father heart of God for that people.

I'm the father of three children. Before I became a father, teaching about the Father heart of God was for me little more than pretty rhetoric. But when I became a father, that dimension came alive for me. One reason is the recognition of the ferocity of protective love that a parent feels for his children. Often, when I've watched my children sleep and thought about my love and concern for them, I've realized that I'm just starting to get a glimpse of how God loves the peoples of the earth. When a church says, "We will adopt this people," it's also saying, "We want to understand more of the Father's yearnings for this people."

Also on the theological front, to adopt an unreached people is to consciously enter into spiritual warfare with Satan for that people. Now this is exciting, but it also can represent dangerous, uncharted territory. So we need to acknowledge the risks involved.

I think, for example, of my own adult Sunday School class. There are four couples—going on six—who are working among or planning to work among a particular unreached people, so we as a class have adopted this people. One of these couples went out to the mission field, walked right into a spiritual fistfight, and took it on the chin. Now, as they say in boxing, they're down for the count.

That's been a very sobering thing for our class. We recognize that all of us are at risk. We have taken on something we didn't have to, but now—for better or worse—we're involved, and we'd better be ready. We'd better know how to use the weapons of our warfare and care for this one couple at the same time.

Finally, do you know what is the bottom-line, hands-on definition of adopting a people? Within the basic framework we've sketched, it means *whatever the adopting congregation and its partner mission agency make it to mean*. There's room for all kinds of variations. My October 1990 *IJFM* article mentions

a five-point spectrum that Dale Kietzman has suggested.

I think it's helpful to acknowledge a range like that and to specify which functions are or are not being performed in an adoption rather than trying to mandate one particular definition. For one thing, each mission agency is going to insist on defining adoption in different ways, so we might as well acknowledge that now and try to develop a typology or spectrum so that people know that we're talking about a "Level 2" adoption or a "Level 5" or whatever.

Once again, perhaps an example from my own adult Sunday school class will help. We're in the process of trying to decide whether we adopt "our" people primarily in partnership with one agency working among that people or with another. The two agencies have different expectations as to what an adopting church or fellowship does.

As we continue to look here at the "micro" level of the Adopt-a-People emphasis, a second dimension to consider is the "sales pitch" to churches or other fellowship groups.

Here's where we should praise the Lord for the non-residential missionary movement or "unreached people advocates" that Caleb Project and the U.S. Center for World Mission are trying to raise up. Here are people who are trying to sell the adoption concept to churches in a "generic" sense. I'm really looking forward to what will develop in this area. I also think that David Garrison's article in this (October 1990) issue of the *IJFM* is very good. It's really exciting to me to see how there's an increasing depth in the NRM movement, which fits hand-in-glove with the Adopt-a-People concept.

Many people have recognized that written people profiles can be very, very important in making the Adopt-a-People sales pitch. That's one reason that the Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse has come alongside Global Mapping International to take on the job of trying to produce many more standardized people profiles that a range of agencies can use.

Another part of the sales pitch is the explanation of the benefits of adoption for the church. Just as in this conference we're talking about *links* in the frontier mission movement, I think it's important to help churches make links

for themselves between an Adopt-a-People decision and other dimensions of Christian discipleship. We need to put the Adopt-a-People step in context for them.

Now, moving on, once an adoption is made, there's the whole question of sustaining it over the long haul. One mission executive, for example, told me, "Listen, my big question is not how we make the sales pitch but how we keep these adopting churches fueled for prayer and all the rest. How do we sustain their interest and keep them actively involved with us?"

Let's look at some of the ingredients of a successful adoption. One of them is simply encouraging the church at the outset to persevere. Are they going to be able and willing to hang in there? Just as baby boomers need to be accommodated in some ways and also figuratively spanked in others, so churches need to be accommodated in their Adopt-a-People aspirations but also challenged and corrected. Part of that correction is in challenging them to get past a superficial understanding of adoption and encouraging them to hang in there when the going gets rough, as it inevitably will. Encourage them not to bail out just because there aren't exciting breakthroughs to report every three months or six months.

Another ingredient of a successful Adopt-a-People church program in its placement in context. If it's not integrated with other mechanisms and forums within that fellowship, it will die on the vine. Frankly, that's been my experience in my own home church, which made an adoption commitment in 1983 (prior to what my Sunday school class did) but which has not adequately followed through. This is largely because of the absence of integrating mechanisms like monthly mission fellowships. In order to restore that adoption to an operational level, we're going to need to re-create the mechanisms.

Now, let me jump quickly to the "macro" level of the Adopt-a-People emphasis—the functions that need to take place *between* churches and mission agencies. I'll focus on what the Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse has done because that's what is most familiar to me.

First of all, the policy of the Clearinghouse is that the primary—but by no

means only—mode of people group adoption by a church should be via one or more sending agencies. Generally speaking, a church shouldn't adopt a people group on its own, independent of a relationship with a sending agency. That's not an assumption that's universally shared. Even churches who are receptive to such a policy tend, in the first flush of enthusiasm, to rush past it.

Another Clearinghouse policy is an exclusive focus on the adoption of *unreached* peoples. Our title doesn't carry an explicit reference to unreached peoples, but that's where the emphasis is, and an emphasis on unreached *mini-peoples* at that. I agree with Todd Johnson and others that in many instances the best way to approach unreached minipeoples—both from a strategic and a mobilization perspective—will be via the larger ethnolinguistic peoples of which they're part. Often we just don't know enough about the component minipeoples of a megapeople. But ultimately, in the Clearinghouse, we're trying to work our way down to the so-called "unimax" or minipeople level for adoption.

Another basic policy of the Clearinghouse is that we're recruiting only evangelical Protestant agencies to be participants. Earlier today Todd Johnson encouraged us to *widen* the spectrum of our resources and *narrow* the target of our frontier mission efforts. So why would the Clearinghouse recruit only evangelical Protestant agencies?

My answer: for practical as well as theological reasons. It's tough enough to get evangelical Protestant agencies to work together, and many of them would not work together in a Clearinghouse if the boundaries were any broader.

Another guideline has been that the inner circle of data for the Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse is what these agencies themselves tell us they are doing or planning to do in work among unreached peoples and in serving churches in the Adopt-a-People arena. They submit to a specified range of disciplines and receive specific benefits in return.

In addition, the plan is for their field data, with their permission, to be submitted to others for independent verification. The concern here is that the

Clearinghouse not become an indiscriminate extension of the PR departments of these participating agencies. In some of the early data we've received, for example, I've had some doubts that some of the peoples being reported are either separate peoples or are unreached according to the consensus definitions hammered out in March 1982. So, for the sake of truth in advertising and integrity in the sight of the general public, there does need to be a data verification process. That's where I think that research institutes at the U. S. Center for World Mission, other centers for world mission, and the work that Todd Johnson, David Barrett and Patrick Johnstone are doing can really help us.

Speaking of the 1982 definitions, the Clearinghouse is leaning pretty heavily on these. They emphasize minipeoples and seven specific stages in reaching a people. However, I very much appreciate how friendly critics have helped us look at these definitions and consider that they may not be specific or measurable enough and still too subject to subjective and inconsistent

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evaluations. I'm open to suggestions for improvement!

One other area to mention is information security, which comes up very quickly when you get into this kind of data-sharing. I'm asked, "If I share this data with you for the purpose of promoting our work to churches who want to adopt these peoples, how do I know that you will share it in a sensitive and appropriate way and that you won't divulge more than you should?"

Well, we're still learning, and here is where I'm very grateful to be part of the Global Mapping Users Group, which has been developing an information-sharing handbook. It develops guidelines whereby two or more agencies can develop specific bilateral agreements to govern the sharing of in-

formation. (That handbook, Lord willing, will be unveiled in November at the "Dallas '90" meeting on research and information management.) The Clearinghouse will build on these guidelines in order to tag and safeguard data that should not be shared in certain contexts. That's going to be a special challenge.

I'm going to move on quickly to four major contributions of the Adopt-a-People emphasis to the frontier mission movement. First, I think the Adopt-a-People emphasis creates for us a much better bridge between research/scholarship and mobilization.

Research and scholarship on unreached peoples does need to be very careful and deliberate. I think we should be grateful that David Barrett, for one, has been a real champion in emphasizing this point, whether or not you agree with all his assumptions, terms, or conclusions. We do need to be careful and deliberate for the sake of integrity and effectiveness.

On the other hand, research can become too abstract and stratospheric. A lot of our discussions here would go way over the head of the average man in the pew, not because of his lack of intelligence but because of our lack of practicality. The Adopt-a-People emphasis can help us to put the cookies on a lower shelf.

A second major contribution of the Adopt-a-People emphasis is that it helps us in our aspirations for "countdown" and "closure". Many of us have long talked about and yearned for—as part of the rallying cry for "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000"—the mechanisms where we could count peoples off as reached, one by one, until closure is achieved. The Adopt-a-People mechanisms can get us a lot closer to that.

We've talked here about the need to reason backwards from our goal. If indeed "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000" is substantively the major goal that this society and others can agree upon, we need to incrementally work backwards from that goal, identifying the intermediate objectives to be accomplished.

Certainly one of those intermediate objectives is that each of the unreached peoples would be adopted by a certain

point. One suggestion in the past has been that each be adopted by 1991 so that each could be engaged by 1995 and then possibly reached by AD 2000. Now the adoption goal is shifting to 1993. But if we're going to be serious about any of our AD 2000 rhetoric, we must do much more specific thinking along these lines. We must, together, think through how each people can be identified, selected, adopted, engaged and finally reached, and not be afraid to assign deadlines or jobs.

This leads me to a third way in which the Adopt-a-People emphasis helps us: it provides a prompt for more explicit discussion about role definition, about who is doing or should do what, about overlaps and gaps.

I have seen evidence in some instances of what I would call the "Balkanization" of the frontier mission movement. What I mean by that is the tendency for people to unilaterally determine their niches. By contrast, the Adopt-a-People emphasis helps us to talk more to each other in identifying respective roles in this movement.

There is beginning to be—and there needs to be more—discussion of role definition between those of us who are working on the "macro" level. For example, the Adopt-a-People Clearinghouse has been talking with Todd Johnson and David Barrett in Richmond, Global Mapping and MARC in southern California, Patrick Johnstone in England, and others. Often these discussions can be awkward or painful, but they're necessary.

The Adopt-a-People emphasis is also prompting more discussion as to which reached peoples are in the best position to be on the front line of approaching which unreached peoples. Now *there's* a whole set of questions that are only now beginning to be discussed. The jury is still out on the extent to which, for example, North American churches will be willing to adopt Nigerian peoples via Brazilian agencies—if indeed it appears that Brazilian missionaries are the best people to be on that particular front line.

Finally, apart from role definition,

the Adopt-a-People emphasis can be—within ministries and between ministries—the kind of integrating, synergizing, synthesizing force to help us as a movement to really click.

We've had a parable of sorts on this topic at the U. S. Center for World Mission. In our attempt to raise the funds to pay off the campus mortgage during the "Last \$1000" campaign, we had to reason backwards from our goal of convincing 8000 people to each pledge \$1000. We had to pull together, harness our energies, and make sure that each department's efforts were interlocked like we never had before. It was a difficult experience but also a very beautiful one. We had to hang together, or we were going to hang separately!

In the two years since that successful campaign concluded, we've tried to sort out how we can re-create that kind of synergy. What substitutes for a

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daunting financial deadline? The leading candidate in my mind has been the Adopt-a-People emphasis, and I think that it can serve as such within and between many other ministries.

Before I conclude, I would point out that we've got at least two major windows of opportunity in the Adopt-a-People area in the weeks and months ahead. First, there is the AD 2000 milestone. Is our rhetoric keyed to the calendar when we talk about a church for every people by the year 2000? Are we indeed reasoning backwards specifically and trying to identify together what such a goal will require if we are serious about achieving it?

I find it curious that I'm hearing less and less explicit discussion about "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000." That goal was embedded in the early discussions of this society, but the emphasis is slowly fading. I don't

know if that betrays an admission that we know that we're losing our window of opportunity, or whether that decline is just inadvertent, but I think we need to talk about it.

A second window is the receptivity of the evangelical public. Their patience and receptivity is not unlimited. They've heard us talking about Adopt-a-People, and "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000," for at least ten years. They need to see evidence that we are serious and specific in trying to make that happen.

But how serious, specific, and ambitious *are* we prepared to be? How committed to success are we? Here's where this fellow A. T. Pierson has been so challenging to me. I really appreciate the work that Todd Johnson has gone to in the last year or so to excavate a lot of what this man had to say to us 100 years ago. Pierson's exhortations have often come to me like a voice from the past when I've sat at my desk over the last nine months.

What I remember most is that Pierson looked around him and was simply stunned by the stark contrast between the grand ambitions and specific plans of unregenerate man and the relatively tepid aspirations and plans of the mission community of his day. I encourage you to go back to recent issues of the *IJFM*, remind yourself of Pierson's insights, and apply these insights to our own discussions of Adopt-a-People. What a jolt!

May the Lord Jesus find each of us to be worthy stewards of what He has placed in our hands. To whom much is given, much is required. And may He knit our hearts together, that we may learn to submit to one another and lean on one another as we exert ourselves on behalf of unreached peoples.