

# WHERE ARE THE FRONTIERS?

■ This response to Gary Corwin highlights the differing needs of field workers and mission strategists. The nuances in definitions and our ability to measure what we have defined provide the backdrop for much-needed clarifications in the realm of frontier missions.

By Ted Elder

## Where are the frontiers?

This has become an important question, because we all have been so successful in highlighting the terms "unreached peoples" or "hidden peoples" and the church's responsibility to disciple them. The mission industry has come to a new self awareness in the past few decades. Many agencies, while not disregarding the work they're presently doing, have recognized the need to begin afresh in pioneer work. Potential missionaries, spurred on by the needs among unreached peoples, have come to agencies asking, "Do you work among the unreached?" Financial supporters are coming to those agencies and saying, "Will this money go to support frontier missions?" Agencies, candidate supporters, everyone is interested in Frontier Missions. So, just what is, and what isn't frontier missions?

At Caleb Project our purpose statement is "to mobilize the church to complete world evangelization." We say "complete," because that expresses our desire to see each *ethne* penetrated with a church planting movement. In our few years of ministry, we've had to wrestle with this question of just what are the frontiers and what aren't? I am not going to try to give you a precise definition of "Where are the frontiers?" I think the line is really fuzzy and it's difficult to pin down. I equate the frontiers with those peoples who are unreached. The groups, whether we call them people groups, or mini peoples, or unimax groups, or macro peoples, it's those groups that are unreached. We use the classic definition of unreached referring to a group where "there is no indigenous community of believers with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize (or reach) the rest of its members without outside assistance."

More simply stated an unreached group has no viable indigenous church. That's the frontiers.

Here's the problem. How do you measure whether a church is *viable*? How do you measure whether a church is *indigenous*, or how indigenous it is? It's very difficult, it's not quantifiable. But it doesn't mean our definition is no good. The problem comes in when we try to quantify it.

From a practitioner's perspective, this definition of unreached is very useful, in fact, it's more useful than anything else. If I'm planning to minister cross-culturally, I want to know if there is a church among that people group or not before I get there. Yet from a researcher's or a statistician's perspective, it doesn't help very much to talk about reached or unreached. First you have to determine which group you are examining, and since people define groups different ways, this is a problem. Second, you examine whether they have a viable indigenous church. When Caleb Project does field research, we talk about "reachedness". We investigate how *reached* is a people? That's very subjective so we look at different indicators of reachedness. For example, "receptivity". How do you measure receptivity? If many people are responding then you know they are receptive, but there's not a scale. You can't just count something and know whether a group is *reached* or not.

For field workers, the definition of reached and unreached—the presence of a viable indigenous church—is fine. Yet when we're trying to look at a global level or for those of us in mission agencies who are making macro field decisions, then it is more difficult. We have the same difficulty with the definition of a unimax group, "the

largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement, without encountering barriers of acceptance or understanding". How do you measure that? Again, not very easily, because you don't know where you'll hit those barriers of acceptance or understanding. In our field research, we use that definition, but we can't compare results on a global scale because it's a judgment call. It can only be made by people on the field who are very knowledgeable about that situation. So if you're trying to compile the statistics on a global level, it doesn't work to use that definition, but if you're a practitioner, that's still one of the best definitions.

That's why I appreciate what Barrett and Johnson have done with all of their statistics, because they've enabled us to see the whole task in all of its parts. Yet of necessity, they've had to measure evangelization by whether the message has been presented and by who has responded. That's why they talk in terms of *evangelized*, whether the gospel has been presented and number of *adherents to Christianity*, people who would identify themselves as Christians—which can be measured. If you are measuring, you've have to use factors that can be measured. But I would agree with Gary, we have to look at what those statistics mean. Just because someone checks "Christian" on a census form doesn't mean they are born again. Ninety percent of the people in a country could check "Christian", and that country may still need to be evangelized. We have to assess, or study, the statistics to see what they really mean, but I don't believe it means that the statistics are bogus. We need to use, as Gary has said, our evangelical base to evaluate the data coming from

the statisticians.

Let me clarify the difference between "evangelized" and "reached". Evangelize refers to the task—what missionaries do. We're attempting to measure how we're doing in the task, but our goal isn't to do evangelism. Our goal isn't even disciple making. Our goal is to see peoples reached. Our *task*, what we do, is disciple making. What we pray and hope for is that a people (and ultimately, all peoples) will be reached. That is what we want to measure—whether they're reached, not whether we're doing the work. Our work is a means to our goal.

#### Lessons we've learned

1. *Frontier work must be done.* There is a great need for pioneer work and certainly among this group there is no disagreement about that. The Church is responsible to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth and there are many places where that's not true. That's why we're here.

2. *There is value in definitions and in distinctions.* In one sense it's true everyone on the planet is in one of two categories: Saved or needing to be saved. Maybe that's the only distinction necessary. All who are saved should share the gospel with all who are not saved. Jesus said, "Go and preach the gospel to all creation." Yet He also said, "Make disciples of all nations." He spoke of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Paul tells of ministering in different cities and peoples (or *ethne*) in different ways. Further definitions help us to delineate just what progress the church has made in helping us to make disciples of all nations. Barrett and Johnson's Worlds A, B, and C help us to see the world in three different chunks. In the same way, Winter's reached and unreached distinction is very helpful.

The task of evangelization is vast, yet it's not uniform. Definitions help us to look at what's left to do. We see those who have heard by radio different from those who have city-wide crusades every year, different from those who have never heard at all. For evangelization purposes, those who have the scriptures in their mother tongue and who are literate are very different from those who are illiterate and who have no Bible. Those kinds of distinctions are helpful.

While all non-Christians or unbelievers are equally damned, they are not equally distant from hearing the Good News of Jesus' victory on the

Cross. In the church's efforts to reach every lost person, it's helpful to distinguish between those who have a good chance of hearing and those who have practically no chance. We don't know who's going to respond, but we, the church, must determine how we go about discipling all the nations. We can't share with everyone at once. We have to decide where to start and how to proceed. By default we will prioritize. Definitions help us make these priority decisions.

Often, after a mission speaker gives a powerful message, the pastor gets up and says, "Isn't that great? You can go home and be a missionary to your non-Christian roommate or to your neighbor." Doesn't that upset you? He's taking all the power out of the definition of missions by saying that every Christian is a missionary. If everyone is a missionary, than no one is. We have to reserve that definition for taking the gospel across cultural boundaries. The same is true of frontier missions—if everything is frontier missions, then nothing is frontier missions. We need to be careful to say "this is frontiers and this is not".

3. *Frontier mission work is not the most legitimate work to be done in the Kingdom.* It follows that frontier missionaries are not more important to God or more valuable to God than those in non-frontier roles. Many individuals and agencies are eager to prove they are doing frontier missions, or they're afraid of being exposed as not doing frontier missions. The answer is not to play down the definition and say "our work is frontier mission". Neither is the answer to play down the importance of making a definition. The answer is to recognize that both roles are very legitimate roles in God's Kingdom.

In a war, who are the most likely ones to receive the medals and become heroes? Usually it's the soldiers on the front line and the commanding officers. Yet are they more important in the military than all others who are not in the limelight? Every soldier, whether fighting on the front lines or working in a MASH unit, cooking at a training camp or recruiting soon to be soldiers, is equally valuable. You can't win a war with soldiers on the front lines only. The war that we're fighting is more than just the frontiers.

Ultimately, Jesus is our commander in chief, Praise God for that! We have but to submit to His instructions—most found in the Bible. Yet to some He gives more specific guidance. To some He

says France, to others He says Kurds. To some He says Christo-pagans in South America, to others He says Muslims in Calcutta. None of these are more important than any other.

Yet often we *are* entrusted with the responsibility to decide. We have 50 new missionaries this year. Do we strengthen our present field or do we open new fields? That's where we have to look at the Word and then look at what God has given us. If God has given your agency the job of reevangelizing Western Europe, then do it! If it's pioneering among Arabs in the Gulf States, do it! Everyone must rejoice in His calling and not try to prove that it's more valid than someone else's.

God definitely isn't calling missionaries only to the frontiers, but He is calling some to the frontiers. Some agencies will work only in the frontiers and others not at all. Most will do both. Of course, most present work where agencies have been successful, is less frontier every year. Some specialized agencies may be called to a type of ministry that's only appropriate among the more reached peoples.

Frontier workers must be quick to acknowledge that their work is not the most legitimate work. This is a lesson we've had to learn at Caleb Project. More than once we've had to learn this. Our calling is to advocate for the least evangelized peoples, but we've caught ourselves many times, with a less than best attitude towards those who do other things. We've had to repent of that. In our zeal for the frontiers, we must be certain to affirm and work in partnership with others assigned by God to different Kingdom work. Non-frontier workers must rejoice in their calling and not seek to broaden the definition of frontiers to include themselves. Each agency or missionary needs to be secure in his own calling. They must not feel more or less valuable or less important to God.

Again, God isn't calling every agency to frontier missions, He's calling the church to it. Everyone doesn't need to do frontier missions, but someone does. Frontier missions is not the only thing to do in missions, but it is something very important and until recently, largely overlooked. ■

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