# Defining The Frontiers

■ Is it reasonable for the International Society for Frontier Missiology to have been founded with so specific a focus as frontier missions? Certainly. Many societies focus on highly specific things. One of the founders of the ISFM here makes the case for sticking with the founding definitions and the concern for the founding hopes—how much can be done by the year 2000.

## By Ralph D. Winter

I don't think I've ever heard a more sane and valid statement on this subject than what we've just heard (Ted Elder just finished speaking). I appreciate it very, very much. I appreciate also Gary's (earlier) statement, as well, which touches on a number of very key points. I especially remember Ted's statement that "Frontier missions is not the *most* legitimate work in the kingdom." That's something we all need to recall—we do not do well to think of all work as *less* legitimate. But I think we should also recall this in the light of his final, parting statement: "Frontier Missions may be one of the most neglected (kinds of work)." Thus, even if it is not *more legitimate*, it may, in a given situation in history, be *more neglected*. And therefore it would seem to be fully worthy for the emphasis of our Society to be focused on the frontiers. I hope that can be true without anyone feeling our emphasis is heresy!

Can we maintain our highly specific emphasis? Not if we do not maintain our definitions.

Definitions are important. And for me, after a lot of graduate work in linguistics, definitions are especially fascinating. One of the most basic observations is that words are not always faithful to their root meanings, if indeed they even have a root meaning. Some words like "Kodak" were deliberately coined with no root significance at all except that which was applied at the time they were coined. But most words start out with a root meaning and, sooner or late—maybe centuries later—acquire various meanings far afield of their root. At that point, then, a dictionary will faithfully mention more than

one way in which the word has been used and in which the word can be understood, depending on the context.

So it is with the word, *frontiers*. A secular person, or even a local pastor walking through the hotel lobby here, looking at a board that says the subject of our meeting is *The Challenge of the Frontiers* could readily imagine many different subjects for such a meeting. In other words, it may be of no special value to look at the root of a word. It is more likely that the context will need to give the necessary clues of meaning.

In our case here, very briefly, we represent a scholarly society founded in a specific context, for the specific purpose of focusing on a different kind of missiology from that which had come to be the interpretation of the American Society of Missiology—and for much of the rest of the scholarly world. Since I personally was involved in the founding of the American Society of Missiology in 1972, I cannot complain that the word *missiology* in that context did not in the long run measure up to the values and meanings of interest to me. Perhaps I am the one who "moved!"

But, I certainly made very clear the intended agenda of the new group in my original proposal for the society (written during an ASM meeting in 1985, and signed by many who were there). Then, on the basis of that call for the formation of a new society focused on *frontier* missiology, the new group came together in 1986. We formally declared that our purpose was to be the exploration of what it would take to penetrate all of the unreached peoples by the year 2000 and our supporting documents unequivocally focused on

the March '82 definitions (See column 1, page 50, *IJFM*, April 1990).

(Ted very generously attributed to me the *unreached people* definition, but it actually came from that meeting in 1982.)

This, then is the basis upon which people were invited to join this society and its meetings and develop its future. It would appear that no other type of frontier is relevant to this society, and that one of our maintenance tasks will be to try to avoid the blurring or broadening of what is meant by *frontier missiology*.

Fortunately, in the defining of terms in this area at our founding we had a more substantial basis to stand on than we might have had in perhaps any other realm of mission thinking. Our definition of *frontier missiology* is based on the work of the meeting I referred to in March of '82 which was convened by the Lausanne Committee, jointly sponsored by the EFMA, and presided over by Warren Webster and Wade Coggins of the EFMA. My article I've already mentioned is the summary of the results of that meeting in the form of a paper which I myself presented at the Lausanne II meeting in Manila a few months ago. That paper goes on through two or three pages to spade up this entire area as carefully and as dispassionately as I was able to do. Since no more widely representative meeting has ever been held for the purpose of defining any kind of terminology in the world of missions, so far as I know, it is not surprising that the definitions worked out at that time have been widely adopted.

In April 1982 David Barrett's magnif-

icent *World Christian Encyclopedia* came off the press and amazingly the '82 definitions actually made it, although without reference to the Lausanne meeting in March, and in company with alternate meanings to the key phrase "unreached peoples," (which had been defined earlier in 1976 in a different way, 20% *practicing* Christian, referring back to the 1974 basis of 20 percent *professing* Christian). The '81 edition of *Perspectives of the World Christian Movement* naturally also carries the second 20 percent definition, albeit the accompanying *Study Guide* has since '82 corrected it. The Frontier Peoples Committee of the IFMA adopted the March '82 definitions and so did the Statistical Task Force of the LCWE later, and apparently Caleb Project, as we have just heard. We thus have three very illustrious organizations joining with our society in these basic definitions.

To give the actual "flavor" of what was meant, let me take the true example of the Oromo of East Africa. At the time I heard this story there were 100 Oromo tribal people right in the middle of Portland, Oregon. Although there were no Christians among them, they are not an unreached group for the simple reason that their group has benefited from the classical missionary task of penetration whereby (what I refer to as) "a missiological breakthrough" has taken place.

That is, there is now a viable indigenous evangelizing church movement within the Oromo group as a whole. Thus, even though this one group of 100 people, geographically separated, has not a single Christian in its midst. In this particular case, would it not be folly strategically, in terms of *mission* strategy, to treat this group as an unreached group and attempt to start from scratch, learn the language, decipher their cultural world view, in order somehow to make sense to them about the love of Christ? As a matter of actual fact, not to worry, there are over a thousand Oromo a little further north in Seattle with 10 congregations and pastors and a translated Bible and they are sending down evangelists every Sunday to reach their own people in Portland! And, there are tens of

thousands of Christian Oromo back in Ethiopia. The task, note, is simply no longer a strictly missionary concern, but an evangelistic concern. That is, no one has to learn the language. No one has to start from scratch—unless they fail to trace the larger group and discover the thousands of Christians there.

I am not suggesting that a missionary organization doesn't ever do follow-through evangelism in a case like this. It just means that that kind of work is not the unique function of a mission agency. Mission agencies can do other things, but they must not abandon the one thing they are uniquely capable of doing without leaving a vacuum that no other organi-

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zation normally attempts to fulfill.

In this particular case, the mission agency which is working with Oromo in Ethiopia could well be the instrumentality through which Oromo believers from there could be sent to continue the work of evangelism among Oromo in the United States. Note, however, the nature of this kind of on-going evangelism is radically different from the uniquely mission activity which made the first beachhead, presumably in East Africa.

I use this real example to show both how simple and yet how technical the March '82 definition actually is. It does not relate to countries or to geography. It does not employ any measurement of degrees of evangelization. It focuses our attention on those societies/peoples which clearly do not yet have a viable church.

In my remaining moments, I'll try to sketch a couple of parallel situations where founding definitions have become broadened and have seriously confused the picture being discussed. The Lausanne Covenant, for example, has evolved from being a statement of

faith to becoming an agenda for LCWE action and discussion. (I just came back a few days ago from the Budapest meeting of the Lausanne Committee.) The Lausanne Covenant covers a lot of stuff—good stuff. It represents all that the people attending the Lausanne meeting *believed*.. It was not intended to confine itself to the task that was the specialized concern of the LCWE. The *Covenant* is much broader than *world evangelization*. It does not describe the founding purpose of the Committee. It characterizes the larger convictions of those doing world evangelization, defending them, hopefully, against accusations of heresy or of narrowness or whatever—you know the oft-repeated accusations: "if you are preaching the gospel that means that you don't believe in social action!" I had a long talk with Ron Sider recently. At the very end of the conversation I remember saying, "Well, Ron, I'm not saying that social *action* is unimportant or invalid. I'm trying to resist the implication of many social action enthusiasts that *proclamation* is invalid.

Now, that is our problem with the Lausanne Covenant. Its use has been broadened so that a *statement of faith* has become an *operational definition* of a new and very broad definition of evangelization—hardly distinguishable from that of the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

The word "mission," of course, had already been broadened earlier. And that's why the LCWE resorted to the word "evangelism," which LCWE leaders thought could be less likely misunderstood.

Thus, I feel we need to take care that we do not try to re-lay the foundations of the Society for Frontier Missiology with a broader meaning of the *frontiers* and, judging by the two papers preceding me, I don't think that's a danger. If it were we would have to found still another society which would have a clear-cut purpose to gather around. In this vein, it is worth noting that the *reaching* of a people is not the same thing as *evangelizing* a people—if for the latter you use David Barrett's evangelization index. Also, to speak of "reaching a country" or "reaching a city,"—using those phrases—to my

knowledge is to venture out into undefined territory. The Bible speaks of what we need to do for all of the *peoples* of the world. Measurements which talk about degrees of evangelization of *cities* and *countries* and even of *peoples* may not necessarily give us all the information we need if our concern is whether the unique work of a mission agency has been accomplished—the goal of "a viable indigenous evangelizing church movement." We can make good use of these other measures without letting them confuse the well-defined basis our society has already carefully laid.

I understand Barrett is right now elaborating an evangelism index for *peoples*, just as he has done for *countries*. This extension to *peoples* will reduce confusion and advance our ability to quantify the remaining task. Getting information on peoples is more difficult than on countries, which are the more common locus of research.

We need to glance at the larger canvas of missiological definitions. A recent book by David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, is a *tour de force* of the whole field. It has a lengthy section on the meaning of the word *evangelization*. Bosch dispassionately and objectively traces the different ways the word is used. He doesn't have the time or space, apparently, to go into the dynamics behind it which, historically considered, would display a downhill erosion. He does not note the politics: the mainline denominations can more easily raise money for evangelism than for other things, so, *evangelism* must be redefined to include the other things. First the word *mission* was broadened, so people decided to use *evangelization*. That has been broadened, so we'll have to use something else. Call it *frontier* something?

Thus, there is a well-established pattern in history of church people who are interested in *all kinds of things* being irritated by narrow gauge focuses on certain *specific things*. It's almost as if you can have a meeting on the subject of missions only if there are a lot of non-mission people present. You can have a meeting of doctors or dentists, but you can't have a meeting of frontier mission people without being sure there is a

healthy section of the agenda on "many other things" in order to prove that you do believe in "many other things."

Bosch's book unfortunately must have gone to press a few minutes too late to take into account the Papal Encyclical which was promulgated December 5, 1990, *Mission of the Redeemer: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*. There in that document, more clearly and more effectively than anywhere else I know, the writer of that document determinedly defended the narrow, classical meaning of the word *mission*, and boldly distinguished "specific missionary work" from either, 1), the assistance of believing, growing, evangelizing Christian communities, or, 2), the "re-evangelization" that is necessary where "entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith."

Virtually all of our great missionary societies have started out in pioneer fields, reaching unreached peoples. Their success must not be held against them. Congregations that get interested in unreached peoples don't need to stop supporting the great societies which have made numerous breakthroughs to peoples now no longer in the unreached category. We must simply make sure that pioneer work is still on the heart of every missionary, and that they make sure that the solid contacts they sustain with substantial Third World church movements are characterized by the impartation of true missionary vision, unreached peoples vision.

SIM is readily able to tell its donors that its workers in Nigeria have helped to create an indigenous missionary structure which their "national" church is supporting and promoting. The preparation of national churches for

missions is still mission work! But if the final completion of the task is lost in the shuffle, if all a mission agency ends up doing is nurturing a church movement whose vision is merely to survive, then mission donors' earnest questions about the completion of the task may become hard to answer, and agency defensiveness will become increasingly evident.

In conclusion, let us go back to the locksmith illustration. We must not say that the work of the locksmith is more holy than the work of the those who merely turn doorknobs or enter a door and work on something else. The locksmith has a unique skill which needs to be distinguished so that it can be used where it is really needed. In fact, counting "peoples" is not what we are really doing. Wycliffe, for instance is not really counting languages so much as the number of translation projects still needed—e.g. how many different printed New Testaments are necessary. Thus, unreached peoples are not what we are numbering so much as the remaining number of necessary technical missionary breakthroughs—e.g. how much true missionary work is still necessary.

Ted Elder's statement bears repeating here: "Frontier Missions is not the most legitimate work in the Kingdom...but it may be the most neglected."

I'll simply close quickly because so many wonderful things have already been said and I really appreciate the two people who preceded me. ■

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