

EDITORIAL RESPONSE: IN PURSUIT OF GOOD COMMUNICATION IN MISSION

By Gary Corwin

It is encouraging as a long-time member of the International Society for Frontier Missiology to see signs of an improving atmosphere for genuine dialogue. Frontier missiology is not a monolithic enterprise, nor the ward of a select few. It is broad enough to embrace all those who care deeply about seeing the Gospel of Jesus Christ penetrate to the least reached peoples of the earth, and it should be able to accommodate meaningful discussion and debate between them.

The *IJFM* editor, Todd Johnson, is to be commended for his April 1992 *IJFM* editorial, "True Balance in Mission." While the present writer believes he is mistaken in a number of his assumptions and conclusions, he has significantly furthered the cause of meaningful dialogue by interacting in a focused way with points of view at variance with his own. The "missiologically correct" thinking which has dominated both the Society and the *Journal* since their inception has left little room for such interplay of ideas in the past, so this apparent change is most welcome.

Mr. Johnson also articulated in a faithful and passionate way concerning the inequities of access—the undeniable truth that, "there is a vast difference between isolated Muslim or Hindu peoples and Eastern Europeans or nominal Catholics in South America. And with this understanding comes the responsibility to do something about it." This is the most basic fact that has kept many involved in the Society, and still reading the *Journal*, in spite of some doubts about the objectivity and fairness of both. The fact is that there is an imbalance in access to the Gospel in the world, and every agency, church, and Christian ought to be very concerned about it, and committed to seeing a global Christian response to it.

Nevertheless, several important assumptions of the "missiologically correct" view now dominant in the print medium are seriously flawed. In addition, there are at least two questions about foundational matters that beg for answers. To these we now turn our attention.

Flawed Assumptions

(1) *That inconsistencies in overall mission research and statistics have been trivial, and that they really do not matter in any case.*

Since it is true that such inconsistencies change neither the ground-level realities nor the response needed to them, it is fair to ask what purpose such research serves. One does not need to be particularly astute to know that the geographical areas dominated by Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism represent the lion's share of the world's unreached peoples. Samuel Zwemer or John ("Praying") Hyde could have told us that instinctively a hundred years ago, as could William Carey a hundred years before that. There really is no point in quantifying the obvious unless doing it reveals something new in a reliable fashion.

The fact that ever more sophisticated statistics and extrapolations are pursued so vigorously and reported so widely, however, raises the inconsistencies to a higher plane of importance. When our statistics are presented in such detail that we leave the false impression that we can accurately count the whiskers on a gnat, we open wide the floodgate to eventual disillusionment for those who take us seriously. Loss of credibility for the entire mission research and mobilization community can follow.

Even some of the most basic statistical offerings, such as the number of unreached peoples in the world, leave the thoughtful reader shaking his head. First there were 17,000. Now there are 11,000. Yet where can one find these people groups even identified by name? Until this year the best list available has been *Ethnologue*, produced by Wycliffe Bible Translators, and it only names about 6,000 ethno-linguistic peoples of any kind, reached or unreached.

June, 1992 has witnessed a marked improvement in this situation with the release by the Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse of a list of 6,000 unreached peoples "identified by bonafide mission agencies." While we applaud this significant accomplishment, logic forces us to ask, "Where are the 11,000?" This seems a particularly reasonable

question when one considers that the 6,000 figure already counts major people groups (e.g. Fulani, Tuaregs, Jews, Arabs) as separate groups in each country in which they reside. Where are the other 5,000 (or more, if, as in the commonly-used 1982 definition of an unreached people, national boundaries are not a criterion)? Would it not be better to talk about identified unreached peoples and forget the speculative round numbers all together? Both the requirements of integrity, and the multiplied use of these numbers by preachers and writers, would certainly seem to argue so.

In one recent example the credibility of the research and mobilization community would seem to have been stretched to the limit when a publication explained the shift from a figure of 17,000 unreached groups to 11,000 as an indication of the remarkable progress that has been made in recent years (see "Unreached People Groups are Being Reached!", *Frontier Fellowship global prayer digest*, Vol. 2, No. 5, May 1992:1). The fact that the shift actually represented a compromise solution to definitional differences between some of the better known researchers is rather conveniently forgotten. In no case are the recently "reached" 6,000 ever named. One has to wonder how much of this kind of thing the mission-minded Christian public will be expected to digest?

(2) *That mission agencies have been untrue to their original charters as "pioneer missions."*

This argument is based on an understatement of the missionary task and a misunderstanding of the role mission agencies have played in it. To be a pioneer is not simply to establish an evangelistic beachhead among an unreached people group. It consists of forming disciples within such a people group into mature missionary-minded churches, who themselves carry on the discipling task of the Great Commission. The task is larger than the "pioneer" evangelism stage.

"Pioneer" is a positive and powerful term in mission communication, so that

suggestions that any agency has left its pioneer charter can not be taken lightly. Confusion arises because "pioneer" in missiological parlance is used to refer both to outreach among unreached people groups, as well as to the first stage in the church-planting cycle. The latter leads from initial evangelistic contact (the "pioneer" stage) to the ultimate goal of new interdependent outreach (the "partner" stage). Although genuine loss of outreach vision does sometimes occur, even among mission agencies, the generalized concerns expressed on this point seem to blur the distinction.

For the majority of mission agencies trying to do their job well, taking the accusation seriously and to its logical conclusion would present something of a Catch-22 situation. The moment an agency engages in a ministry to one of the least reached peoples of the earth, that people group immediately becomes less needy than other groups; and that agency, in the convoluted logic of the argument, becomes something less than truly "pioneer."

For some agencies the accusation leveled is really based on disagreement concerning the worthiness of their ministry target. Missions established over the last century and more with the express purpose of outreach to the christo-pagan millions of South America, for example, have certainly been true to their charters, even if some in the frontier mobilization establishment would not consider it a worthy effort.

It is exceedingly unfortunate in discussions about the global missionary task over the last decade that the overwhelming tendency has been to draw its boundaries based on what has been done among a people, rather than on what remains to be done. As a result, a check-list mentality dominates which has an overwhelming bias toward being able to describe certain tasks as completed and certain people groups as reached, whether or not they really are.

That theological, cultural, sociological, and other factors threaten the very survival of many churches is not even considered relevant. False gospels, syncretism, and Biblical illiteracy are not taken seriously as long as people call themselves "Christian."

Rather than focusing on the spectrum of tasks which making disciples entails, and rejoicing in the de-

ployment of God's servants in performing those tasks, the constant rejoinder is an accusation of improper deployment. The fact is that with rare exceptions we do not need less missionaries where they are. We simply need more where they are not!

(3) *That the least reached peoples of the earth remain so because of the indifference or misguided priorities of mission agencies.*

This assertion has been a regular refrain from the editorial columns and in the world evangelization charts featured in the *IJFM*. The fallacy of the argument can be seen at least at two points.

First, with regard to the indifference argument, David Garrison's helpful article "A New Model for Missions" (*IJFM*, April 1992) begins with an excellent summary of why the least reached remain that way. He rightly points out the hidden nature of many of these peoples, the anti-missionary governments or cultures which dominate their context, and the fact that they typically occupy the least hospitable places on earth. While these obstacles are no excuse for not pursuing these peoples with all our energy, they do point up the obvious error in attributing their state to indifference by mission agencies.

The second point that needs to be made is that there is no shortage of agencies and strategies focused on the least reached areas. There is a serious shortage of laborers. The problem is that physically tougher situations or creative access requirements mean that only a limited number of people both qualify and volunteer, and there simply are not enough of them coming forward, particularly from the Western countries.

Rather than berating the agencies for their poor deployment, it would be far more constructive if the frontier mobilization community would direct its energies at assisting the agencies develop the required vision and commitment in the churches, where the real Gordian knot lies.

4) *That quantifying the task apart from theologically and missiologically sound definitions is useful.*

The real crux of this issue is over where the boundaries of legitimate mission lie. Many in the frontier mobilization community assert that it does not include those of other Christian tradi-

tions, end of discussion. The kind of bedrock theological issues that gave birth to the Reformation and Protestantism, and that ultimately constitute the distinctives of Evangelical faith do not seem to matter to them.

Others of us cannot accept that. We believe that justification by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ is not an option. It is the essence of Biblical Christianity and the only hope of human beings lost eternally in their sins.

While we believe most in the frontier mobilization community would share the same belief personally, their seeming abdication of it as an operational philosophy renders that belief meaningless in missiological and research terms. As a result, much of the research forthcoming is of little use.

Two Unanswered But Foundational Questions

(1) Does the frontier mobilization community (as defined by the ISFM, *IJFM*, and related groups) have a defining faith commitment? Does it have some minimum statement of faith which clarifies even the difference between reached and unreached individuals? If so, what is it?

(2) Does the message that unreached peoples hear really matter, or is it only important to the frontier research and mobilization community that they receive evangelistic priority by some "Christian" group, however un-Biblical or cultic that may be?

Conclusion or Beginning?

The observations and questions presented in this piece are offered in the sincere hope that meaningful dialogue on the issues may be continued. Some might suggest that such dialogue is a waste of time and that we just need to "get on with it." While we do need to get on with it, these issues cannot be ignored. Taking the Gospel to the least reached of the world as soon as possible is a paramount responsibility. The responsibility for understanding and communicating clearly about the nature and scope of that task is no less paramount.

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