

A Strategy for Loving the Peoples of the World as well as our Missionaries

by Stan Yoder

Adopt-A-People is a mission mobilization strategy that is gaining momentum in mission agencies and churches world-wide. What makes this strategy different is its focus. Historically, agencies have focused on countries and churches and focused their attention on missionaries. Adopt-A-People focuses on people groups, or what the Bible refers to as nations, peoples, tribes and languages. (Psalm 67)

For 10 years, my wife and I served as church planting missionaries to the Yalunka people of Sierra Leone, West Africa. Our mission agency, World Partners of The Missionary Church, referred to us, along with all our co-workers, as “Sierra Leone missionaries.” While it was true that we were serving in Sierra Leone, in reality we were working in three distinct mission fields among the Yalunka, Euranko and Thomne peoples in Sierra Leone. This focus on country rather than people affected both our mission policy toward the “Sierra Leone mission field” as well as our mobilization efforts at home. Our personal experience will illustrate what I mean.

Returning to the USA for our scheduled furlough in 1988, we were soon shocked to find out that we could not return to Sierra Leone. My wife, Valli, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Understanding our commitment and calling to missions, our agency assigned us to serve at the U.S. Center for World Mission. Thankfully, our churches continued to pray for and support us in our new ministry role. We were also able to attend one of our supporting churches in California. It did not take long before they asked us to serve on the missions committee.

In one of our first meetings, I asked our mission committee members if any were still praying for the Yalunkas. Their reply was negative. “We are praying for your family and your new ministry at the US Center.” Our family needed all the prayer it could get, yet it is the Yalunkas who are still in darkness. I estimate that over 90% of our supporting churches pray only for us and over a period of time, have forgotten all about the Yalunka people. Why? Because they have focused only on the strategy of World Partners and not the goal of reaching the Yalunka people.

Before we are too hard on our churches, we might ask the people in our own churches some basic questions. For instance can they name all the missionaries that our church supports? Can they name all the countries where their missionaries serve? Finally, can they name the people groups that their missionaries are reaching? I was recently in a church that supports over thirty missionaries and even the mission chairman couldn't name them all without reading from a list in front of her. Do we need a different model for our church mission strategy?

Four Components of Mission

When developing a strategy, we must first realize that God has chosen to work through people like you and me. Secondly, he gives us a vision for what He desires to accomplish through us individually and as congregations. Once we have a vision from God we can see the goal He has in mind for us. Then we develop strategies to reach that goal. For World Partners, it looks like this: Our experience with our supporting churches and from speaking in many

other congregation confirms that the *vision of most individuals and churches goes only as far as the strategy and does not adequately embrace the goal*. We need to ask ourselves: If one of our missionaries came home because of sickness or educational needs for their children and does not return, would we and our church continue to pray for the people we sent them to reach?

We have three teenage sons. One Friday evening they all wanted to go to the mall. That was their goal that night. Since none of them could drive, I became their strategy to get there. The problem was that I didn't feel like going to the mall and since I make all the decisions in my house, their strategy failed. But my boys were smart, they didn't give up on their real goal, they just changed their strategy. They went and talked to their mother instead, who came and talked to me, and it didn't take long before we decided that I would take my sons to the mall! These boys realized that although their first strategy failed, they could still reach their goal by finding one that worked!

For most churches, *the greatest weakness in developing a mission strategy is seeing the sending of missionaries as an end in itself*. The result is that if our strategy fails (i.e. missionaries return), we forget all about the goal! We forget the difficulty of naming all the missionaries we supported, much less the people groups they were trying to reach. That is why at World Partners we have defined the goal not as sending missionaries, or even raising funds, but as the starting of church planting movements among people groups, especially those that are still unreached.

Adopt-A-People Defined

What then does it mean to Adopt-A-People? It means that a church, or a group within a church, works through their chosen and approved mission agency to provide informed, concerned, dedicated prayer and financial support for a specific unreached people group. It means maintaining that commitment until a church planting movement is started that can reach the rest of the people without needing outside cross-cultural help. We are not “adopting” the people group into our congregation, denomination or mission agency. We are praying, giving and serving *to see a people adopted into God’s family*. We know that one day this will be accomplished as every tribe, tongue, people and nation will give glory to God around

His throne. (Rev. 5:9) This is the true meaning of the Adopt-A-People concept and movement.

A people group focus and emphasis especially changes the way a congregation prays for missions. For instance, if you wanted to win your neighbor for Christ would you pray for your neighbor or just for yourself? Most likely you would pray for both asking God to remove the blindness of your unreached neighbor and use you as a strategy to introduce him to Jesus. Many churches pray only for their missionaries because they do not know the needs or even the name of the cross-cultural “neighbor” they have sent them to reach.

Adopting a people group does not mean giving up current prayer and financial support for our missionaries.

We need to remember that they are part of the strategy to accomplish the goal of “a Church for every people and the Gospel for every person.” However, if they must return home, we must pray for others to take their place. In this way we can all begin to love the unreached peoples of the world, as well as the missionaries we send to them.

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