

From Adoption to Engagement

A Local Church Strategy for Moving from Adoption to Engagement of a Mission Team to Reach a People Group

by Steve Moore

The Adopt-A-People movement has been widely successful in raising the awareness of local churches to the needs of unreached peoples. A local church, even a small one, can play a strategic role in reaching a totally unreached people group. However, adopting a people group does not set in motion a chain of events that automatically results in the engagement of an unreached people group by a pioneer mission team.

Far too many local churches have been victimized by a functional disconnection between the adoption process and the practical next steps that must be taken to reach that group. Bulletin announcements that introduce the church to the adopted people group are good. Multi-media presentations that help church members personalize the needs of an unreached people group play an important role in the educational process. But sooner or later the critical mass of support within a local church will face this question: What practical next steps do we take to move beyond adoption to engagement?

Moving Beyond Good Intentions

Several years ago I was invited to speak in the opening weekend of a mission conference of a large and aggressive church. The mission budget goal for the coming year for that church was \$275,000. The conference was being planned by a full time mission pastor. I was deeply impressed with the resolve of this church to touch the nations. Seemingly they had left no stone unturned in their efforts to mobilize the congregation for world evangelization.

During the conference it came to my attention that the church had adopted an unreached people group in Northern India. They presented a high quality multi-media presentation to inform the congregation of their support of radio broadcasts in the language of the

adopted people group. Having worked along side Indian mission agencies with missionaries in that area, I couldn't help but wonder how strategic the radio ministry would be apart from a broader based approach.

Following the conference I contacted an Indian mission leader to inquire about this people group. He assured me that radio ministry is an important component in the process of reaching the unreached of India. But he also believed that few if any of the people in this unreached people group were actually listening to a radio! Good intentions do not automatically translate into good strategy. I later linked the missions pastor of this local church to the leader of an Indian mission agency and together they developed a comprehensive strategy to engage this people group with a pioneer mission team.

A Local Church Model

This experience convinced me to think through the steps a local church could and should take to move beyond adopting a people group, to actual participation in the process that leads toward engagement. I realized that if I were going to challenge churches to adopt unreached people groups, I must be prepared to offer a model from which they could begin to develop a broader based strategy. While it is clear no single definitive approach exists, there is value in outlining a basic process that can serve as a catalyst for churches, thereby serving as an interface between good intentions and strategy.

Accepting Responsibility

The logistical steps associated with this process involve accepting responsibility for unreached peoples by the local church. Often this requires pastors and lay leaders to move beyond denominational and organizational loyalties. Rather than beginning with the missionary we

must begin with the mission. This paradigm shift allows the church to begin with a given people group and work backwards to the missionary team (or teams) that will actually be involved in reaching them. Logistical steps include:

Selecting a People Group: This obvious first step requires careful thought and planning in order to minimize overlap from church to church in adopting the more visible people groups. Churches should be encouraged to prayerfully consider selecting the most needy and least targeted unreached people groups.

Adopting a People Group: Local churches formally accept responsibility for an unreached people group by adopting that people group and registering with the appropriate mission information service such as the Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse.

Identifying the People Group Networker: The People Group Networker serves as an information link bringing together the efforts of all interested parties. Combining the efforts of local churches and mission organizations cultivates the organizational synergy needed to be effective. Training for these non-resident missionaries is vital and has become more accessible by way of written materials and formal instructional programs.

Prayer and Intercession

Recent international prayer mobilization efforts have helped secure prayer as a vital aspect of mission strategy. This focus on prayer as a primary component in the world evangelization "tool box" must be embraced by local churches who are serious about reaching an unreached people group. Foundational steps include:

1. Prayer Movement: Initiating a prayer movement begins as the church personalizes the needs of people within the adopted people group. Additional

steps include setting prayer goals (who will pray and in what format?), obtaining prayer commitments (what are our minimum expectations?) and training prayer workers (what means of support will we provide those making commitments?)

2. Spiritual Mapping: In order to pray effectively this movement will need specific information about the historical, physical and spiritual background of the unreached people group they have adopted. Entry level and in-depth training is now available to assist churches in this process.

3. Prayer Journey: An increasingly recognized component in the prayer movement of a local church is on-site prayer in the form of a Prayer Journey. This form of on-site prayer not only helps pave the way for future church planting efforts, it also establishes a heart-link between key leaders of the local church and the unreached people group. It also prepares the church for important decisions related to the selection of a pioneer mission team that will ultimately take steps to engage this people group.

Research Needed

Important decisions relating to the overall strategy must be based on accurate information. By virtue of the fact that these decisions are related to an unreached people group, the information needed to make these decisions may not be readily accessible. Strategic steps include:

1. Establishment of the Partnership Pathway: The need for a “Partnership Pathway” is based on the premise that we can no longer assume North Americans will always be the primary movers in frontier missions. A practical delivery system must be identified, facilitating the flow of information and resources from the adopting church to the pioneer missions team engaged in the adopted

unreached people group.

2. Research Expeditions: In preparation for launching a pioneer mission team, a Research Expedition may be appropriate to gather detailed information needed to develop a strategic ministry plan. The value of Research Expeditions has been demonstrated by the efforts of organizations like Caleb Project who specialize in preparing teams to gather the information necessary to develop strategies for penetrating unreached peoples. The Research Expedition could serve as an extension of the Prayer Journey and combine members of the local church with members of the pioneer mission team identified in the Partnership Pathway.

3. Engagement Strategy Report: The fruits of the Research Expedition should be compiled into a specific report identifying the agreed upon strategy and the resources needed to execute this plan.

Resources

Ultimately, reaching an unreached people group will require individuals within local churches to share their resources with others in a creative partnership designed to communicate the gospel with individuals in the adopted unreached people group. Specific steps include:

1. Allocation of Resources: Upon completion of the Engagement Strategy Report the local church will be empowered with practical “next steps” that will allow them to meaningfully participate in the engagement of the adopted unreached people group. The local church will need to prioritize global needs and make hard choices related to the allocation of available resources.

2. Expansion of the Network: Recognizing that many adopting churches will not have the resources needed to fully implement the Engagement Strategy Report, it will be critical that other churches interested in the adopted people

group become informed and involved. The effectiveness of the People Group Networker identified in Stage One will play an important role in expanding the network of the adopting local church.

3. Evaluation of Progress: As the Engagement Strategy Report is implemented it will become necessary to continually evaluate the process in consultation with the pioneer mission team engaged with the adopted people group. This dynamic process mandates a hands on approach and goal related accountability. Churches should be aware of the likelihood of modifications in the strategy and not be discouraged when new parts of strategies are needed to help them be more effective.

A Final Word

This model is presented as a viable approach by which a local church can move from adopting a people group to actually participating in the engagement of that people group by a pioneer mission team. This model has been successfully implemented in a local church context but much more work needs to be done in refining and expanding the process. It is my hope that the ideas here presented will stimulate clearer thinking by local churches and missionaries and expand the dialogue on this subject to help us move from adoption to engagement so as to reach the unreached peoples of the world for God’s glory.

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