

## Response to Detlef Bloecher's *How Shall They Believe?*

by Todd M. Johnson

Detlef Bloecher has provided the missions community with an invaluable service by unpacking and interpreting one of the most comprehensive and careful surveys of missionaries ever done (ReMAP II). The trends that he has uncovered in this short article are no doubt inspiring, and it is proper to share in his enthusiasm about the changes in deployment of missionaries in the past 15 years. Nonetheless, a few caveats are worth exploring.

Whereas the definition of least reached or unreached peoples has been clear since the early 1980s, there have been numerous difficulties in actually measuring this phenomenon. Bloecher rightly identifies the problem in that some measurements have placed largely Christian peoples as a major component of unreached peoples (e.g. Norwegians as an unreached people). To try to minimize this tendency Bloecher utilizes a measurement of peoples less than 1% evangelical in his survey. This is problematic in three ways: first it presumes that there is a consistent understanding among his respondents of how many evangelicals there are in a people group. In practice, simple measurements of evangelicals diverge widely, especially if the research is conducted by different denominations. Thus, the distinction between less than 1% evangelical and less than 2% evangelical can be insignificant. Second, without objective measures of evan-

gelicals by people group, there is no reliable global assessment of peoples by % evangelical on which to determine which peoples are least reached. Third, % evangelical has never been used (by itself) to define least reached or unreached because it mixes largely Christian peoples with Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist peoples. The Joshua Project measurement avoids this by designating least reached peoples as less than 2% evangelical AND less than 5% Christian (not based on church attendance). The IMB's new approach to use only % evangelical as a guide to the least reached has yet to be independently assessed but will likely run into problems of targeting largely Christian peoples.

In this sense then Bloecher's analysis is more indicative of perceptions related to the unfinished task than it is of the actual deployment of missionaries among the least reached.

The studies done 15 years ago vetted information collected by mission agencies against more precise measures of unreached peoples (e.g. no Christian peoples were included). This same approach would be required today to produce a more nuanced comparison of missionary deployment in 1990 and 2005. One trend to watch out for is the resurgent tendency of Independent evangelicals (the fastest growing segment of evangelicalism) to target nominally Christian peoples as "least reached." In addition, Figure 1 reveals that Koreans, with one of the most robust new mission initiatives, appear to dedicate relatively few of their resources toward the least reached.

These caveats aside, Bloecher's analysis is unquestionably heartening. He clearly uncovers a global groundswell in Christian missions, one where the mission movement has become increasingly decentralized and simultaneously increased its attention on Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and non-Christian religions. He also provides cogent analysis that compares and contrasts the missionary contribution of Christians from various countries. Frontier missions advocates should look forward to more research results from the WEA ReMAP II study.

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## Response to Todd Johnson by Detlef Bloecher

I appreciate Todd Johnson's fair and thoughtful analysis of my report. Below are five areas Todd commented on that I would like to highlight:

(1) Todd has rightly hinted at the limitations of numerical research, practical application of definitions and the uncertainty of statistical numbers in missiology. Numbers sound great but include several assumptions.

(2) The ReMAP II study was designed to survey the organizational structures of mission agencies which included data about personnel deployment. This was the main emphasis, and the data about deployment vis-a-vis the least reached is an interesting by-product worthy of

further research. For this reason the definitions of personnel deployment were not as sharply cut and specific as it might have been in a study on “least reached peoples.” (We had to be very strict in order to keep the number of questions below 100, throwing out a number of interesting details).

(3) The definition “1% of evangelical believers” was not my decision but that of the whole research team of 20 country coordinators, including a number of professional researchers like Barbara Griffin, Rob Hay, Vanessa Hung, Jonathan Lewis, Valerie Lim, etc.

(4) Todd gives the example of “Norwegians as an unreached people”. This is the least convincing example, as Norway and Finland are the countries with the highest percentages of Evangelicals in Europe (Norway: 9.2%). But what about the Czech Republic or Belgium, where a large fraction is still considered as Christian but has no clue about the Gospel.

(5) I accept Todd Johnson’s criticism of the definition, but I have the impression it applies to any other definition, too, e.g. 2% Evangelical AND 5% Christian or “no viable indigenous community of believing Christians with an adequate potential to evangelise their own people.”

Todd’s objection 1 (divergent opinions/data between researchers) applies to any definition, likewise Todd’s second objection (no reliable global assessment of peoples by % evangelical), too—although I think that Patrick Johnstone’s numbers are widely used today.

And when you reject objective criteria like “percentage of evangelicals” and/or “church attendance” then, I am afraid, you are left with more or less subjective criteria, even more open to personal bias and limited views of a few individual cases (e.g., under which circumstances will the existence of a few number of lively churches qualify for “potential to evangelise their own people”). How do you define “Christian”? Etc. If you ask three denominational leaders of a country their views will probably differ very much.

Therefore, Todd’s third objection will be critical to all practical definitions and all studies other than local level.

I like Todd’s commentary. It is fair and highlights the complications in any type of international/global studies. It is very important that we keep these issues in mind when interpreting any kind of numbers.

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### Editor’s Note

**I** feel I must point out the inherent difficulties when researchers (any researchers) employ percentages (any percentages) in their attempt to arrive at a more researchable definition for Unreached Peoples.

1. It is understandable that the clear-cut theory is hard to deal with practically —“the largest group in which the Gospel can expand as a church planting movement without

encountering barriers of understanding of acceptance.” Certainty is only available once the group has been penetrated and indeed barriers show up. Governments don’t report such barriers. Linguistics does not reveal “acceptance.” Okay. I can excuse practical researchers for wanting something more reportable.

2. However, to resort to “percentages” of a population is an exceedingly unwise and unfortunate alternative, even if “reportable date” and “available data” may most often be available only in such terms. Why? Because 1% believers in a group of 2,500 is only 25, while even 1% believers in a group of 40 million is four hundred thousand believers! Call them both Unreached?

3. So? In all cases where the WEA employs 1% or the Southern Baptists employ 2%, it is perfectly possible to calculate 1% of what, or 2% or what. You always have, in addition to the percentage, the total size of the group. Since the key issue in Unreached Peoples is not the size of the beachhead, but the authenticity, the viability of the beachhead, why not as an alternative to the basic theory ask “Are there at least five indigenous congregations or at least 1,000 indigenous believers? Point: once a viable seed has been planted it does not matter how big the field. The seed is there. You don’t now need so many more outside anthropologically trained missionaries, you now need more inside evangelists. This is the major shift in strategy. Percentage is very nearly irrelevant by comparison to absolute numbers. **IJFM**