

Slide Rule Missiology in an Age of Globalization

When I arrived at Fuller Seminary in the mid-70s, I noticed something surprising: the missionaries at the School of World Mission carried slide rules. The personal computer would soon arrive, but until then this nifty little mechanical ruler would calculate growth rates of church movements across the world. Missiologically very progressive in its day, it gave the school a bit of a nerdy ethos. Quantifying church growth was a new way to track responsiveness among peoples, one that indicated where your mission might want to shift more of its personnel and resources.

This focus on measurement, combined with his anthropological and historical acumen, ultimately led Ralph Winter (the slide rule personified) to promote a statistical breakdown of the world's unreached peoples. Although his initial 1974 assessment has continued to be updated and reinterpreted, demographers of mission have attempted to keep this same unreached emphasis before the church with even more graphic precision.

But, when it comes to statistics, the way we interpret the data is crucial. Quantitative analysis is only as good as the definitions we use to filter the data. Over the past year and a half, R. W. Lewis has been discussing with mission demographers the definitions they use to count unreached peoples. Her article (p. 5) argues that something is missing in some of our definitions, and that this something has grave consequences for how we understand the frontier mission task. She offers a comprehensive rationale for rethinking our statistical understanding of the unreached and suggests a re-labeling of her own: "frontier peoples."

Numbers aren't everything. Some at the ground level of more recent movements to Christ recognize the shortcomings of mere quantification. Kevin Higgins argues for qualitative criteria that have biblical warrant and have been field-tested (p. 21). He boils it down to four characteristics that will ensure the growth of such movements.

Ken Chan's assessment of the Bible translation issues in the minority languages of China (p. 29) alerts us to the complexities of multilingualism, pluralism and urbanization today. Translation strategies for minorities must take into account the "dotted lines" around peoples, lines once considered more solid. If the global migration of peoples shows us anything, it's that traditional boundaries of identity are porous. As "peoples" interact with new languages and cultures in new settings, their

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sense of ethnic “groupness” expands. But rather than melt down in the heat of globalization, an ethnicity will likely become more elastic—stretching across a continuum of identities, cultures, and languages with remarkable hybridity and dexterity. In other cases, the opposite will occur: it will become more rigid, defensive, and xenophobic, stiff-arming assimilation and accommodation. The subtleties of that continuum are a bit too elusive for quantitative analysis; more thorough qualitative research is needed.

Chan's comments about translation and minority languages remind me of the profound insights found in Willie James Jennings' recent book, *The Christian Imagination*.¹ While Jennings focuses on Africa and on the origins of racial imagination in the colonial project, we can apply his theological and historical study to all that Chan claims is happening on the frontiers of China. Jennings contends that any focus on translation can be too narrow, hiding the crucial reality that Chan is actually studying in his article: the *joining* of peoples.² The mapping out of minority peoples can make Bible

translation a simple bridge between two distinct groups, but Jennings would applaud Chan's effort to broaden the issues. We must be aware of the concurrent flows, influences, distortions, tragedies, frustrations and confusion that accompany the joining of peoples. These dynamics complicate translation strategy or any attempt at a missiological breakthrough. And they add a realistic fuzziness to the boundaries of unreached people groups.

Our understanding of unreached peoples must draw upon the insights of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The deductive reasoning behind a slide rule approach to mapping unreached peoples will fall short of perceiving all the phenomena that surround these peoples and their contexts. As migration and mixing accelerate in this globalizing age, we must embark on a journey³ to discover the full and relevant dynamics surrounding unreached peoples.

Any reassessment of unreached peoples stands on the shoulders of thrilling kingdom advance. Gene Daniels and John Becker summarize the recent

Vision 5:9 conference in Thailand (p. 39). More than one thousand seasoned field personnel met this past October to celebrate and confer on future ministry in the Muslim world. Over half of the participants were from the Global South (and a quarter from Muslim backgrounds). Our reassessment of unreached Muslim peoples stands to gain from the perceptions emerging from these global workers.

Put the ISFM 2018 conference (in conjunction with the EMS 2018 National Conference) on your calendar—October 12–14, 2018. Keep tabs on registration and the program at emsweb.org.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, 154–161.

³ Richard L. Starcher, Leanne M. Dzubinski and Jamie N. Sanchez, “Rigorous Missiological Research Using Qualitative Inquiry,” in *Missiology* Vol. 46, Issue 1 (2018): 50–66.

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- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate “A Church for Every People.”

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go, yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.