

Reassessing the Frontiers

# Losing Sight of the Frontier Mission Task: What's Gone Wrong with the Demographics?

by R. W. Lewis

I stared in shock at the bar graph. It was on the website of one of the most extensive databases of *unreached people groups* (UPGs) in the world. “How can the Scottish people group,” I thought, “be the largest *unreached but engaged* people group in the world?” I was baffled. A quick search on the Internet revealed that Scotland not only has many churches but also has renewal movements going on within the Church of Scotland and other Protestant denominations. But further down on that same bar graph were the Japanese with far fewer churches. Even farther down were some large Muslim and Hindu people groups with no believers whatsoever and very few missionaries trying to *engage* them.

All of these people groups were in the same category: unreached but engaged—engaged because at least one missionary is working with them. Today people groups with high numbers of Christians are being classified as unreached people groups in some databases, simply because less than 2% of the Christians are in separate evangelical denominations.

The unintended consequences of these kinds of data representations are alarming: unreached peoples groups with no believers among them will not receive the witnesses they need if they are not clearly distinguished from those with thousands of believers already. For example, let's compare the needs of the 46 million French people in France<sup>1</sup> and 45 million Shi'a Muslims in India.<sup>2</sup> Both are categorized as unreached but engaged. But the Shi'a Muslims have few believers, no known fellowships and only a handful of people trying to reach them. Meanwhile, France has 1.2 million Protestants, including 500,000 evangelicals who make up 1% of the population. The country has thousands of evangelical churches (2,263) and a reported average annual evangelical growth rate of 2.4%. Finally, there are some 1500 Protestant (mostly evangelical) foreign missionaries working within its borders.<sup>3</sup> The relative need for help is extremely different but is being lost in current data representations, with the result that many missionaries go to France but very few go to the 300 million Muslims living in South Asian countries.

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Somehow the frontier mission task has become confused and obscured. How did we lose sight of the *frontier people groups*—namely, those that have not yet had any missiological breakthrough with a resulting movement of believers in their people group?

### *Discovering the Frontier Mission Task*

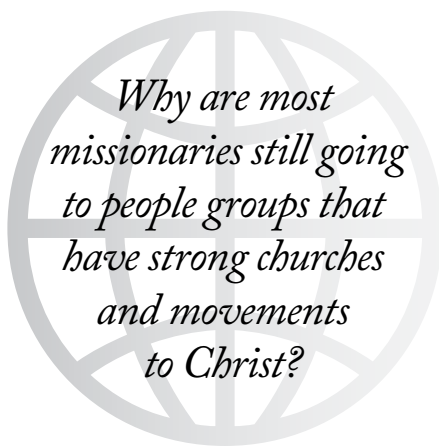
Over four decades ago, demographers at World Vision's MARC and mission scholars at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission (SWM) realized that there remained thousands of cultures without a witness to Christ. One of those SWM professors, my father, the late missiologist Dr. Ralph Winter, chose the term *hidden people groups*<sup>4</sup> to refer to overlooked people groups that had neither any indigenous movement of believers in Christ nor many witnesses coming from other cultures.

Dr. Winter showed the desperate plight of these hidden people groups graphically on the pie chart called "Penetrating the Last Frontiers."<sup>5</sup> As a recent graduate of Caltech, I worked with my father to show the statistics on that pie chart. He wanted to clearly distinguish between those non-Christians who could be reached by Christians in their own culture and the people in hidden people groups, which were *culturally distant non-Christians*—those who were so sufficiently different culturally and linguistically from any Christian church that they could not realistically be assimilated into existing fellowships but needed their own fellowships.

The term *frontier missions* was coined at that time because the word missions was being applied broadly and legitimately to many different mission endeavors. The term frontier missions sought to specify the pioneering or frontier mission task facing those going to people groups "where Christ has not been named . . . not building on another's foundation" (Rom. 15:20). This task was to be distinguished from the very legitimate evangelistic and discipling task of those missionaries

who were trying to help Christians in people groups that already had their own churches—whether or not they were active or in need of revival or reformation.

In the early 80s, the term used for people groups requiring frontier mission efforts was changed to unreached people groups, which meant "people groups without an indigenous church-planting movement." A number of agencies arose (e.g., Joshua Project and Adopt-a-People Clearing House) to try to figure out and illustrate which people groups were unreached people groups so that missionaries could be sent to them. However, as chronicled in David Datema's recent article,<sup>6</sup> this initial definition of UPG was quickly broadened and eventually has led to the confusion I wish to address in this article.



### *The Purpose of Frontier Missions Demographics: Strategic Deployment*

The frontier mission task is to catalyze self-sustaining indigenous movements to Christ in every people group that does not yet have one. I will refer to these people groups as frontier people groups.<sup>7</sup> This task includes identifying and overcoming barriers to that goal.

The purpose of unreached people group demographics is strategic deployment of missionaries: to mobilize churches and agencies to send workers to the people groups where they are most needed, specifically frontier people groups—unreached people groups

with a) no movements to Christ of their own and b) virtually no laborers to bring them the message.

Yet after forty years, far less than 1% of the global mission workforce is going to these frontier people groups that make up roughly one third of the world's population. The vast majority of missionaries are still going to people groups that already have strong churches and movements to Christ. Why?

I believe the primary cause of disproportionate sending is a lack of clear demographics. The frontier people groups, those which have never had any movement to Christ, are not being distinctly highlighted. Changing the criteria of unreached people groups, such as including all people groups with less than 2% evangelical in this category, has resulted in the inclusion of many people groups with strong national movements to Christ.

Today many maps and charts of unreached people groups do not clearly distinguish between:

1. people groups that have not had any movements to Christ (frontier people groups);
2. people groups that now have sustainable indigenous movements among them, though small, and;
3. people groups with a lot of non-evangelical or even nominal Christians who still need help with renewal and outreach to their own group.

*These three types of people groups need different missiological approaches.* Notice that it is possible to partner with indigenous/national churches in the latter two kinds of people groups, but not in the first kind. Although all three are being classified as unreached, only the frontier people groups (#1) require a cross-cultural effort by any witness, even if that witness is coming from adjacent people groups with believers but distinct cultures and identities.

Since most churches prefer to send people to partner with existing Christians

and church movements, the frontier people groups are inadvertently eliminated from deployment options. The result is that the areas with the most Christians receive the most missionaries: Oceania receives 300 foreign missionaries per million people, Latin America receives 162, Europe 146, North America 113, and Africa 93. However, all of Asia receives on average only 13 foreign missionaries per million people, with India coming in very low at only 7 foreign missionaries per million.<sup>8</sup>

Current UPG demographic databases do not prioritize clearly the people groups with NO existing churches—let alone no believers—with whom to work. So recruitment and deployment of missionaries around the globe is not taking into account this crucial difference. As a result, hundreds of large frontier people groups (who do not currently have sufficient help to catalyze an indigenous movement to Christ in their midst) are being completely overlooked.

This problem shows why we need a new term, one that cannot be stretched more broadly, that would refer *only* to those people groups that have never yet had such an indigenous movement. Because the already-established term, frontier missions, refers to this pioneering task, I believe that frontier people groups is the best term to use for these groups. Having a new term will help us to keep clear the distinctive needs of frontier people groups and the different kinds of problems faced in pioneering work.

### ***Re-Clarifying the Frontier Mission Task: How Demographics Have Changed the Criteria for Success***

Shifting the definition of unreached people groups has also confused the frontier mission task. So, not only are frontier people groups no longer clearly distinguishable, which impacts deployment, but mission strategies have also been inadvertently affected by changing criteria for success.

## ***H***aving a new term will help clarify the distinctive needs of frontier people groups and the different problems faced in pioneering work.

Several problems confusing the frontier task will be discussed in detail below, but here is one quick example: the Scottish people have a long history of indigenous movements to Christ and a high percentage of Protestant adherents, but few separate evangelical denominations. Currently the IMB people groups website<sup>9</sup> does not track the percentage of a people in a given group who consider themselves Christian (whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, etc.), but only the percentage who consider themselves evangelicals. They use *new evangelical churches planted* as a key sign of progress. This means people groups like the Scottish will continue to be classified as unreached people groups even if renewal movements completely transform and fill up their existing churches and denominations with new believers. In order to succeed in getting the Scottish people off the IMB list of unreached people groups, it is painfully apparent that indigenous renewal movements are not sufficient. New separate evangelical churches must be planted.

The Joshua Project is more selective and they have eliminated from their lists of UPGs any people group with more than 5% Christian identification. However, their site also uses the 2% evangelical cutoff, a criterion that lumps frontier people groups, that have had no movements to Christ, together with UPGs that have strong movements to Christ. Again, we are inadvertently losing sight of the frontier mission task.

It has been a mammoth task to develop the brilliant tools needed to track the progress of the gospel among the people groups of the world. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to organizations like Joshua Project, the Southern Baptists (IMB), Finishing the Task, and many others, for paying the price

to develop resources that have helped us refocus the mission movement on reaching every people group on earth. Mission agency leaders, like my husband and me, and mobilization organizations have been very dependent on their data to determine strategic deployment. Having spent the last couple years discussing the need for clearer demographic representations of that task, I have been impressed by the deep commitment of all involved in the frontier mission task. I present now some of the main concerns that have come out during those discussions.

### ***Barriers to Understanding the Frontier Mission Task***

#### ***Problem #1: Confusing the Term Unreached People with Unreached People Groups***

At a recent conference on global missions, one of the speakers said,

There are many areas of Los Angeles where less than 2% of the people are evangelicals. Unreached peoples are all around us.

All people who do not know God through Jesus Christ are equally lost and in need of a witness and can be considered unreached by the gospel. There are a lot of unreached people all around us, even in many of our churches. However, unsaved people do not belong to an unreached people group if they are part of a people group with vibrant churches that can help reach them. Maybe no church or missionary is reaching out to them, but they are still not part of an unreached people group.

In his 1984 article, “Unreached Peoples: What Are They and Where Are They?” Dr. Ralph Winter stated that,

Unreachedness is . . . not defined on the basis of whether there are any Christians, or whether there are any

missionaries working among them. It is defined on the basis of whether or not *in that culture* there is a viable, culturally relevant, witnessing church movement.<sup>10</sup> (emphasis mine)

Some people claim such a distinction is unbiblical. But Paul himself makes this distinction in the book of Romans, though it is sometimes lost in English translations. Paul says of himself, “Paul . . . called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God” (Rom. 1:1) adding sometimes “not by the will of man” (Gal. 1:1) making clear that his calling is directly from God. He goes on to clarify “we received grace and apostleship from Jesus Christ our Lord to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles . . .” (Rom. 1:5). In the Greek this phrase, *pasin tois ethnesin*, means “all of the ethnic groups.” It is not referring to all the lost or all unsaved people. In Romans 15, Paul explains that he will be passing through Rome on his way to people groups that have still not heard the message, saying, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20). He asserts “now there is no more place for me to work in these regions” (v. 23), presumably not because everyone had been saved, but because there had been established enough of a culturally-relevant Greek movement to Christ in the regions he had passed through that his apostolic work was done there. He wants to move on to frontier mission areas.

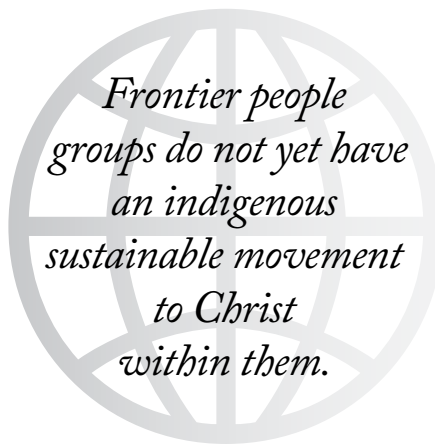
The frontier missions task is to continue to push the kingdom forward at its edges, into the UPGs that are truly frontier people groups, where Christ has never been preached. Like Paul, many workers will have to leave behind places where there are already movements of indigenous believers, and move on to places where they will not be building on foundations laid by others.

Since unreached people are completely different from unreached people groups, it will help to have the term

frontier people groups to uniquely mean ethnically distinct people groups that do not yet have an indigenous sustainable movement to Christ within them. The demographers do not make this mistake, but it is becoming increasingly common in American churches. So the way we present our data must not obscure this distinction.

#### *How UPG Demographics Confuse Unreached People with Unreached People Groups*

1. Special interest people groups *are being added on to lists as completely new UPGs*. Blind people, deaf people, or other similar groups are being added to some lists as brand new people groups—even though



they are spread across multiple languages and cultures. Joshua Project lists ten to fifteen million deaf people in India, but they belong to multiple religions and castes, so should they be listed as a distinct people group that can or should be reached separately from their families? I’m not so sure. Yes, they need specialized training and education in order to communicate with others and most likely a specialized evangelistic outreach. But, should deaf people have their own churches separate from those of their families? The deaf in any country are unreached people with special needs, but not, in my opinion, a distinct unreached

people group that cannot continue to function as part of the people group identity of their hearing family and friends.<sup>11</sup>

2. *Pockets of people groups who have become political refugees or economic migrants (diaspora people) are being added onto lists as new UPGs*. Global trade and difficult conditions have caused many families to move to another country. Increasingly, these new small communities of diaspora people are getting added on as new unreached people groups, sometimes even when these groups are as small as fifty people. As long as they maintain their ties with their families in their homelands, these representatives of unreached people groups are not really a new UPG.<sup>12</sup>

If a movement to Christ happens in a *homeland people group* it is very likely to spread to connected diaspora people. However, winning people in diaspora communities does not usually impact the same people groups back home, who view them as traitors.<sup>13</sup> So adding on small diaspora communities as “new” UPGs diverts attention from the core missiological problem of starting an indigenous movement that impacts the bulk of the population of that people group. Therefore, diaspora communities that continue to identify with their homeland should be tracked as part of those core people groups, not as new UPG groups. The Kazakhs, then, would show up as one people group with twenty-seven diaspora locations, for example, instead of twenty-seven distinct UPGs.

These types of unhelpful additions to lists of unreached people groups in our databases confuse unreached people with unreached people groups and greatly increase the perceived remaining task. They lead to erroneous conclusions and presentations. For example, some

mobilization presentations say that the USA has the most UPGs of any country in the world, after India. While the USA might have more *representatives* of different unreached people groups than any other country in the world, the total population of representatives of especially frontier unreached people groups in the US is very small. So if people from these diaspora groups come to Christ, they usually drop their old people group affiliation and become culturally American Christians, which makes it far less likely that they will be able to successfully reach out to relatives in their home country.

### Problem #2: Misusing the Terms *Unengaged* and *Engaged*

The terms unengaged and engaged came out of an important attempt to keep mission agencies and churches from sending teams that were piling up on top of each other in some unreached people groups while completely ignoring other unreached people groups in more difficult or remote areas. This worthy distinction was designed to help get the frontier mission task back on track, and get more people deployed into what I am calling the frontier people groups. It sought to identify which people groups had not yet been engaged—in other words, where there were neither believers from that people group, nor any concerted strategic effort by missionaries (from any country in the world) to bring the gospel to that people group.

This initiative is extremely important and very helpful for highlighting the frontier people groups. However, in the rush to identify unengaged people groups and to send missionaries to them, several things have become clouded or confused. These consequences were not expected but resulted from the way the unengaged data was defined, collected, and represented. Finishing the Task (FTT), an organization that focuses on collecting data on unengaged

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people groups, counts a people group as engaged if it has at least *one* full-time worker engaged in church planting, while unengaged refers to unreached people groups (with populations as small as fifty in number) among whom there are no known full-time workers involved in evangelism and church planting.

#### *Ways Engagement Demographics Confused the Frontier Mission Task*

1. *The size of the UPGs was initially ignored.* From the beginning, very large people groups were taken off Finishing the Task's "Unengaged Unreached People Groups" (UUPGs) list if they had at least one person engaging that group with a long-term missionary effort. But, while one apostolic team might realistically be able to engage a people group of less than 100,000, a people group of five million would need *fifty times as many teams* to be equally engaged. This is especially true if the people group is spread throughout a large area or across several countries, or divided by other barriers such as caste. Encouragingly, FTT has recently begun to make a list of larger *under-engaged* people groups that have way too few people reaching out to them, with a new goal of at least 1 worker per 50,000 people. This change will significantly help the larger frontier people groups, taken off at the beginning, which now need to be added back on to the original list.
2. *Engagement became the goal or sign of success.* Let me emphasize that tracking engagement has been a significant help in moving deployment towards frontier people groups. Unfortunately, engaging an unengaged group has taken on more status or significance

with some churches and donors than persevering until movements are started in frontier people groups that are already minimally engaged. Those promoting engagement clearly state that it is just the beginning of what needs to be done to actually finish the task. However, agencies are being compared and judged by the number of new engagements they've begun rather than by success in establishing indigenous, reproducing movements to Christ.

3. *Contact began to be reported as engagement.* Since engagement was now the goal and sign of success, people who did not clearly understand the criteria began claiming to have engaged a people group long before they had even learned the language or made any progress in effectively sharing the gospel within that people group. Furthermore, the term engaged translates very poorly into other languages. So some national churches believe they have engaged a distinct unreached people group in their town simply because someone from that people group (a Sikh or Muslim) attends their church. They might even count all fifty people in their church as involved in engaging that people group, whether or not they are on a team committed to starting a movement among that people group.

So a frontier UPG can be reported as engaged without even one mission team among them with a long-term commitment to learning the language and seeing an indigenous movement to Christ started within that people group. Even committed mission teams can abuse the term in order to seem successful. A mission team



who over time has developed relationships with people from different people groups is tempted to report that they have engaged all of those people groups. I myself saw this happen on a team of which I was a part. Mere contact should not be counted as engagement.

4. *Small diaspora communities have been distinctly labeled unengaged.* As mentioned earlier, this practice diverts attention from the full people group. For example, if 500 Indian Sikhs living in Paris are defined as a distinct unengaged people group, while 80 million Sikhs living in India are considered engaged, it might seem more strategic to churches to send a team to the unengaged Sikhs in France. But it is not. There has been such a rush to engage all of the unreached people groups that even tiny diaspora representatives of unreached people groups, as small as fifty people in size, are now getting priority over huge frontier people groups.

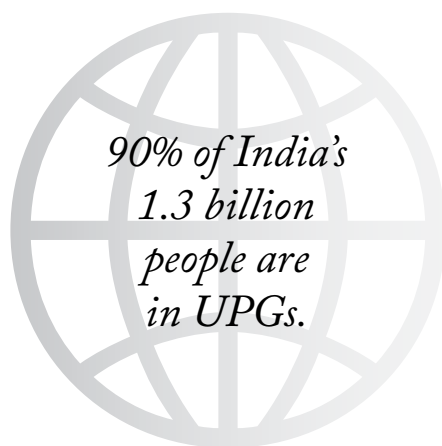
Unwittingly, a false impression is being given that a noteworthy beach head or inroad has been made into many large frontier people groups, by moving them into an engaged category, when in fact *no such noteworthy inroad has actually been made.* So, unfortunately, teams have been redirected and even reassigned on the basis of misleading information.

#### *A Demographic Case Study: Engagement in India*

Indian strategic demographer, Yashwant Koli, has called the OBCs (Other Backward Castes) of India<sup>14</sup> the “elephant in the room” of the frontier mission task. Over 30% of all people living in UPGs *in the world* are in India. 90% of India’s 1.3 billion people are in UPGs—more than the entire population of Africa, or of North and South America added together. Over 600 million of these people are members of OBCs living in roughly 2,500 people groups who will not

inter-marry and who each have their own clan gods.<sup>15</sup> These OBC people groups (farmers and artisans who work with their hands, in the Shudra caste of Hinduism) make up over two-thirds of caste Hindus in India.

Using their definition, Finishing the Task reported in 2016 that fewer than a couple dozen people groups in the entire country of India (population 1.3 billion) are unengaged.<sup>16</sup> However, in addition to the thousands of Hindu OBC people groups, there are also close to 200 million Muslim people in India also in thousands of people groups when you take into consideration languages and castes and sub-castes. On-the-ground experience shows that there are certainly no



sustained, targeted, strategic teams focused on the vast majority of India’s Muslim or Hindu people groups.

Thousands of dedicated teams are required to effectively engage the thousands of large OBC and Muslim people groups of India, not even including the many Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, and other groups. But foreign teams *focused on Muslims* are in the mere dozens, and teams of national believers from elsewhere in India do not number significantly more. According to the *Atlas of Global Christianity*, as of 2010, the USA receives 32,000 foreign missionaries, Brazil, 20,000 foreign missionaries, the Democratic Republic of the Congo receives 15,000, and France receives 10,000—however, with more than

twice as many people as all these other countries added together, India receives only 8,000 foreign missionaries.<sup>17</sup>

I have often heard it said, “Let the Indian church reach India. It is easier for them.” However, less than 2% of India’s population is evangelical,<sup>18</sup> and 95% of the Christians are from Dalit (outcaste background) and tribal groups, with hundreds of distinct languages and cultures. As Koli pointed out, there are many significant barriers to reaching the UPGs of India.<sup>19</sup> One particularly unfortunate barrier is that the OBCs historically refuse to even associate with Dalit and tribal people, because they fear defilement—and there is mutual prejudice with Muslim people groups, too. It is not realistic to expect that India’s Christians can reach the 1 billion people in UPGs in India on their own, even with outside resourcing.<sup>20</sup> Did we expect the earliest Christians in Africa (the Ethiopians and the Egyptian Coptic believers) to reach the entire continent of Africa by themselves? The task is just as great, if not greater.

Indian Christians still have huge numbers of unevangelized people among their own people groups. According to a former executive director of the Indian Mission Association (IMA—comprised of some 200 agencies), most Indian agencies are focused on reaching their own people group or people groups of similar tribes and castes.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the middle class urban churches in India are not yet indigenous in their own cultures. In larger cities, these churches meet in English because that is the language they have in common, with believers coming from distant tribes or other language groups.

Establishing indigenous movements in the 3000+ remaining frontier people groups of India will require a huge cross-cultural effort (E2 and E3 evangelism),<sup>22</sup> learning new languages, changing eating habits, etc.—even for India’s Christians. They need to have long-term commissioned teams with the know-how to work cross-culturally.

# *For 1,700 years any outreach to new unreached people groups was done by those we would have considered non-evangelicals.*

It is not as simple as having huge tent evangelistic campaigns, or inviting a Hindu or Muslim neighbor to church or Bible study in a trade language.

In India, where people groups have resisted intermarriage for millennia, more people group divisions are revealed as further research is done. It is highly unlikely that these thousands of people groups are being *effectively* engaged by anyone from anywhere, making them essentially unengaged even if some group reports being in association with them.

### **Problem #3: Replacing *Indigenous Movements to Christ* with *Planting of Evangelical Churches* as the Criteria for Success<sup>23</sup>**

On the face of it, these two phrases may sound the same, but in fact they are not necessarily the same at all. There can be many evangelical churches planted, yet with no progress made in the establishing of an indigenous movement to Christ, and vice versa. A subtle distortion of the frontier mission task has resulted from measuring success by counting new churches planted instead of counting movements started. Let me give a couple clarifying examples.

#### *Why Counting Churches Planted Instead of Indigenous Movements Has Confused the Frontier Mission Task*

1. *Non-indigenous evangelical churches are counted as if they are indigenous movements to Christ.* What if 3% of a certain Hindu people group have become believers? They have planted a number of evangelical churches in the last few years. Sounds good. But, what if those churches are in the English medium, the people sit in pews, sing Western songs, and are seen by the other 97% of that Hindu people group as completely irrelevant traitors to the people group,

whom they should oppose at all cost? Is this people group really reached now? Do they have an indigenous movement to Christ<sup>24</sup> among them? No, not really. A non-Christian people group should not be classified as reached on the basis of significant numbers of evangelical churches among them, if those churches are not a growing indigenous movement.

2. *Indigenous revival movements are not counted as movements to Christ unless new churches are planted.* What if a group listed as a UPG has considered itself Christian for many centuries, has a Bible or even multiple Bible translations in its language, and has a growing renewal movement happening *within* its historical churches? They are Anglican, Lutheran, Armenian, Orthodox, Coptic, or even Presbyterian, and are genuine believers but do not identify with the term evangelical. They may oppose the establishment of distinct evangelical churches, and will not count as part of 2% *evangelical* if we count only those who have left their historic churches. But do they have an indigenous movement to Christ, capable of sustaining itself without outside help? We would have to say “yes.”
3. *Many disciple-making movements (DMMs) will not be counted.* There are an increasing number of movements among unreached people groups from other religious backgrounds, such as Islam. These movements do not plant churches that fit Western criteria, and so the growth in believers may not be recognized and added into the demographic databases. So the goal needs to remain indigenous movements to Christ, even if new

separate evangelical churches are *not* being planted. The IMB is currently moving toward using the existence of movements to Christ as the criteria for unreached people groups, which should help significantly. Any people group should be classified as reached if they have a viable, indigenous, self-sustaining movement to genuine faith in Christ.

4. *Narrowing the definition of “true faith” down to “evangelical” nullifies the successful expansion of Christianity throughout history.* A vital historical excursus is required here. We wipe out almost the entire history of Christian missions if we assert that the only movements to Christ that “count” are those starting new separate evangelical congregations. This point will require much further treatment, but suffice it to say that for 1,700 years any outreach to new unreached people groups was mostly done by those we would have considered non-evangelicals. Most movements to Christ in history in UPGs, such as the Celtic movement in Ireland or the Presbyterian movement in Korea, have *not* fit our modern Western evangelical model of adult-only baptisms and congregational church ecclesiology. Even the American Protestant mission movement of the last 100–150 years does not completely fit the modern church-planting model.

Likewise, renewal movements within older denominations throughout history have happened on a regular basis, and almost no century is without the Spirit of God moving in some way within these older Christian groups. Many monastic movements in the Catholic Church brought renewal and missionary outreach. Separatist renewal movements renewed churches by dividing them or by starting new churches, like the Waldensians,

the Hussites, and the Menonites, or the Pietists, Puritans, and Baptists. These were also part of God's plan. But for our comparison here, it should be noted that separatist movements were not as effective in bringing renewal to Christianized populations as internal renewal movements, which did not divide the existing church. This pattern is also seen in the Protestant Reformation and the evangelical awakenings (the first of which was internal to the Church of England under John Wesley, who planted no new churches).<sup>25</sup>

While the modern evangelical model of church planting has been successful in some areas, it has largely been unsuccessful in high-identity, global-religion, multi-cultural areas, where people struggle to preserve their unique people group identity amidst an encroaching Western Christendom or threatening melting pot. God has used many other models throughout history, and our evangelical sympathies need to be opened to what he may want to do today.

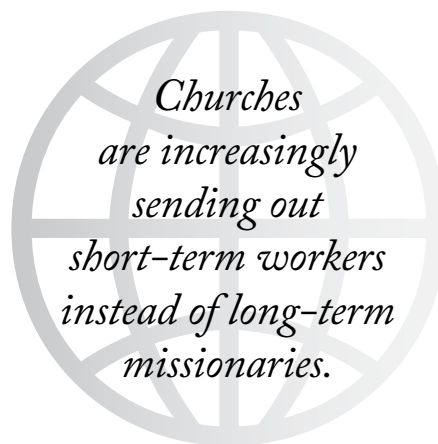
#### Problem #4: Sending Churches Have Lost Sight of the Frontier Mission Task Because of Demographic Presentations

We cannot hold the global sending churches entirely responsible (or even mission agencies) for not sending people to frontier people groups or for faulty strategies when their view of success has been shaped by mobilization based on the demographics presently coming out of people group databases.

1. *Churches are confused about which people groups have the least help, and so continue to send missionaries to places with many missionaries.* The databases do not clearly show which people groups are frontier people groups, and many people groups that have strong movements to Christ in them are still included on lists of unreached people groups. While some databases assume

churches can figure things out for themselves, other compilations remove people groups if they have even minimal engagement. The result is that even mission mobilizing organizations are putting out false impressions that lead to unhelpful deployment, which militates against any progress among the least-reached.

2. *Churches are increasingly bypassing mission agencies to plant churches overseas modeled on churches in their home culture.* Church mission committees assume that church planting methods that work in an American pluralistic society will work in the highly clan-oriented, stratified societies of the



remaining frontier people groups. So, churches bypass mission training and send out missionaries to plant churches in UPGs without understanding the problems and the consequences of planting new aggregate churches. The access to global communication and quick travel gives churches confidence that they can successfully supervise their own missionaries directly. But they rarely understand the complexities of cross-cultural outreach.

3. *Some churches are increasingly sending out short-term workers instead of long-term missionaries.* The number of short-term missionaries has exploded recently reaching

1.6 million in one year from the USA. An increasingly large percentage of foreign mission funds is being spent by US churches to send people for less than a month.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, this increase has not led to an increase in long-term workers as hoped. Very few short-term workers go to frontier people groups; instead they are sent to help existing churches. However, long-term commitment is normally needed for an indigenous movement to arise in a frontier people group. Perception and skill are acquired by learning the language and culture so that believers can be effectively disciplined to reach out to others. My father told one pastor who promotes sending every church member on a short term, "It would not help short-staffed hospitals to have your church members come for two week shifts."

4. *Churches increasingly insist that their missionaries partner with local, national churches.* Of course, among the frontier people groups there are no such churches. But that is not being made explicitly clear by the demographic presentations.

#### Five Problems Resulting When Missionaries are Required to Partner with Local Churches in Frontier People Groups

1. Since there are no national churches within frontier people groups, missionaries trying to reach them are forced to partner with churches from other geographically-adjacent people groups. They then try to get church members from the adjacent people groups to reach out (often cross-culturally) to these unengaged and under-engaged frontier people groups who are proximate to them.
2. Frequently the local, national church partner never wholeheartedly adopts the neighboring frontier people group despite years of urging by the missionaries. This partnering strategy was used for nearly 300 years in an attempt to



reach the Kurdish people. Missionaries to the Kurds didn't go directly to the Muslim Kurdish people themselves but instead worked to revive Christian churches in Iraq and Turkey, hoping that the national Christians would reach the Muslim Kurds. However, they only succeeded in splitting churches and starting new denominations. Unfortunately, neither the older nor the newer congregations ever reached out to the Muslim Kurds who were more resistant than existing Christian-affiliated people groups.<sup>27</sup>

3. Missionaries will have to choose between learning the language of the partner national church, or mastering the heart language of the frontier people group they hope to eventually reach. Most never learn that heart language, making it more likely that the local national believers will follow suit. Without specific training otherwise, nearby believers are the least likely to recognize that they need to alter their culture and language to effectively reach neighbors of another people group and religion. How many people in American churches would take on a foreign culture and language to reach a nearby immigrant diaspora group?
4. Missionaries try to train their partners in local churches to do something that they have never done themselves, namely start a movement in a frontier people group. In India, such training is often done in English on short training trips. The sending churches expect this to impact the hundreds of millions of people in middle and upper caste Hindu, Muslim and Sikh UPG groups, who mostly refuse to associate with Christians from lower castes or tribal groups.
5. Missionaries falsely assume that it will be automatically easier for people from the local partner church to reach out to

**T***he next generation is not conscious of the thousands of people groups still waiting to hear for the first time.*

neighboring people groups. It's more likely that Christians from adjacent people groups will try to extract individuals from these neighboring families and communities into their own Bible studies and churches. Or they may expect themselves to lead and run the new churches in these neighboring communities, which is the very same assumption that foreign workers make when they hamper movements.

These problems can be minimized if the foreign missionary has already been successful in starting a movement in a different frontier people group. It also helps if an otherwise inexperienced foreign worker has taken training from a successful movement-catalyst, who then works long-term alongside the believers from a proximate Christian people group to establish a distinct indigenous movement to Christ among that particular people group.

## Conclusion

### New Demographic Presentations Are Needed

The question now is: is there a way to change how we present our demographics so we can lead churches to refocus on the still-great need for long-term workers to the one third of the world in frontier people groups?

1. *How can we distinguish between different types of UPGs?* Some of the data websites are designed for showing what progress the gospel has already made, and others for showing where unreached people groups are, without making a clear distinction between frontier people groups (those with no movement to Christ) and other unreached people groups. Others show

unengaged people groups but do not take into account their size when calculating true need. Still other sites show all unreached people groups, regardless of size, with one dot representing a group from less than a thousand to tens of millions. Small diaspora groups are given as much weight as large homeland groups.

2. *How can we show where all the workers are going?* Most of our demographic UPG sites do not even show where all the workers are going, or not going. The 1978 pie chart, called "Penetrating the Final Frontiers," arrested people by showing them that the vast majority of missionaries were going to work with Christians, regardless of the continent or the context. This statistic is not currently being shown on any website at all.
3. *How can we distinguish between those people groups with a movement able to continue reaching them (EO and E1 outreach) and those peoples still waiting for outside help (needing cross-cultural E2 and E3 outreach)?* These tasks are significantly different and require different training for those sent, and different kinds of help/support from outside the people group. Churches need to be clear about the differences, and then challenged to adopt or help send some people long-term to frontier people groups. They need to understand that they cannot insist that their missionaries partner with local churches in people groups where there are no churches.
4. *How can our data collection and representation encourage the best mission strategies?* Demographic website developers need to

realize how their measurement and reporting of people groups is determining the strategies being used on the field. How can our statistical representations help agencies and churches to understand and work toward a replicating, indigenous movement to Christ? Is there a way to present this data in graphs, charts, videos, or other media that will improve their strategies?

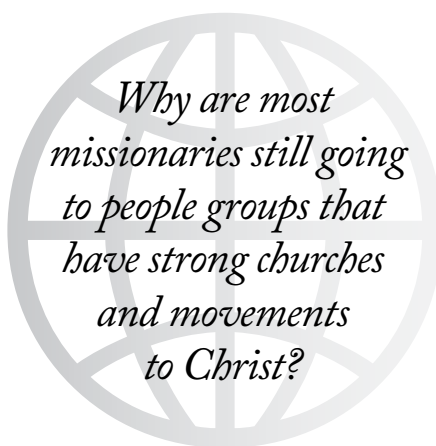
### How Can Our Graphic Representations Show Truth-at-a-Glance?

Most Christians do not know how to interpret our graphs and charts. Some websites even show that the people making them do not know that the charts are giving false impressions. How can we make clear the need for thousands more long-term workers to frontier people groups? Churches and agencies think we are making progress among unreached people groups, and we are, as currently defined. However, they are not taking into account decades-long trends that are crippling progress towards reaching frontier people groups. These subtle shifts add many people groups to UPG lists that are not frontier people groups, divert funds from long-term workers to short-term mission trips, bypass frontier people groups by requiring workers to partner with existing national churches, and plant aggregate churches instead of replicating movements.

My conviction is that there must be Truth-at-a-Glance demographic representations if a new generation is to comprehend this remaining mission task. Mobilizers should be able to easily access and show only the frontier people groups that will never hear without long-term commitment of believers from other cultures. If people are using Joshua Project and IMB maps and data for deployment, the accuracy on the detailed level is not as important as giving people the right impression about where workers are most needed and what kind

of outreach is needed in that people group (E0-E3). The interaction of mission demographers over the last year and a half is encouraging, and these misunderstandings I have listed here in this article are being addressed. But sending churches cannot be expected to sort through the data to figure out what is going on.

The next generation is not conscious of the thousands of people groups still waiting to hear for the first time. I believe a new generation will arise to this exciting opportunity to help fulfill God's promise to "bless all the families of the earth" if the need is made clear to them. **IJFM**



### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Project shows of the approximately 65 million people in France, 46 million are native French. By France we mean metropolitan France in Europe, or France proper, not including its overseas departments and territories.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.shianumbers.com/shia-muslims-population.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The number of Protestants (1.2 million) and the average growth rate of evangelicals (2.4% yearly), *Operation World*, 7th Edition, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 340-341. The number of evangelicals (500,000) and number of evangelical churches (2,263), *Annuaire Evangélique 2017* (Marpent, France: BLF Editions, 2016), 290. The number of missionaries from 2001, *Operation World, 21st Century Edition*, 6th Edition, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 750.

<sup>4</sup> The term *hidden peoples* was later replaced by *unreached people groups* (UPGs), but then the meaning was slowly changed to include many people groups that already have ongoing indigenous movements to faith in Christ.

<sup>5</sup> "Penetrating the Last Frontiers." This mapping of demographic statistics will be taken up in my second article in an upcoming issue of the *IJFM* (35:2, April-June 2018).

<sup>6</sup> [www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/33\\_2\\_PDFs/IJFM\\_33\\_2-Datema.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/33_2_PDFs/IJFM_33_2-Datema.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> After two years of discussions regarding the term UPGs, which is too easily confused with unreached or lost people, I am proposing using the term *frontier people groups* to clearly specify only those UPGs that have never had an indigenous movement to Christ.

<sup>8</sup> Using data from the *Atlas of Global Christianity*, Todd Johnson and Kenneth Ross, eds., (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 267-283.

<sup>9</sup> [www.peoplegroups.com](http://www.peoplegroups.com) maintained by the IMB (International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention)

<sup>10</sup> Ralph D. Winter, "Unreached Peoples: What Are They and Where Are They?," in *Reaching the Unreached: The Old-New Challenge*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), 47.

<sup>11</sup> New people groups are formed when part of a group develops a distinct enough identity that it will no longer intermarry with the original group. Unfortunately, sometimes those becoming believers will break off from their people group, refusing to associate with or intermarry with pre-believers from their own culture, either joining a Christianized people group or forming a new people group. Rodney Stark points out in his book *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1996), 111-115, how much the growth of the church in the early centuries depended on ongoing intermarriage between the believers and non-believers in what he termed *open networks*. <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/sharing-the-gospel-through-open-networks>.

<sup>12</sup> So reaching the 900 Japanese people in Moscow is probably not a completely new missiological problem but needs to be resourced and coordinated with the larger effort to reach Japanese in their homeland. Only large independent immigrant or refugee populations, like the Swahili-speaking Indian diaspora in East Africa, should be considered a newer people group.

<sup>13</sup> See discussion in a Pushtun context: [http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/27\\_3\\_PDFs/refining\\_bartlotti.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/27_3_PDFs/refining_bartlotti.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> From an email exchange with Yashwant Koli, Feb. 5, 2018: “In official Indian terminology OBC is the acronym for ‘Other Backward Classes’ as the British used the term ‘class’ as synonymous with ‘caste.’ After independence, India finds it convenient to carry on with that terminology to cover up for the caste composition of such constitutionally defined categories. I prefer using Other Backward Castes to highlight that this large bloc of people groups are primarily (though not exclusively) made up of people from the fourth Indian caste group, the Shudras.”

<sup>15</sup> See article by Yashwant Koli, “Other Backward Castes (OBCs): The World’s Largest Megabloc of UPGs,” *IJFM* 32:1 (Spring 2015), 20–21. [http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/32\\_1\\_PDFs/IJFM\\_32\\_1-Koli.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/32_1_PDFs/IJFM_32_1-Koli.pdf). From “Other Backward Castes,” 20: “It gets far more complex when we realize that OBCs are an artificial constitutional construct. In fact, people self-identify by their *jati* or traditional occupation sub-caste they are born into—regardless of their current occupation. Each *jati* is endogamous (you can only marry within the *jati*) but made up of many lineage clans called *gotras* that are exogamous, i.e. you have to marry outside the *gotra*. Very few *jatis* are even called by the same name across the state and language boundaries. Each *jati* is therefore an ethnolinguistic endogamous people group. A 2002 compilation of both the central and state lists (‘schedules’) of OBCs show totals of 2,176 and 2,551. These numbers can rightly be interpreted to say that the bloc of Hindu OBCs is made up of between 2,176 and 2,551 people groups.”

<sup>16</sup> FTT defines an engaged group as having at least one full-time worker engaged in church planting, while unengaged means those unreached people groups with populations as small as fifty people that have no known full-time workers involved in evangelism and church planting.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson and Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 2009, 267–283.

<sup>18</sup> In an email exchange, Feb. 5, 2018, Yashwant Koli added, “The latest Indian Census reports that *all* Indian Christians represent no more than 2.3% of the population. The evangelicals would not even represent a third of that. However, both the Hindu nationalist RSS and church planting movements dispute that figure. My own assessment is that Indian Christians represent closer to 5% of the population. Since most of that is

among Dalit (Scheduled Caste) groups, there is little to no reporting of this change of religion for fear of losing government affirmative action (‘reservation’) benefits.”

<sup>19</sup> “Challenges to Reaching OBCs” in Koli, “Other Backward Castes,” 21.

<sup>20</sup> In a separate piece Yashwant Koli would suggest some such indigenous and other collaborative strategies to engage India’s middle and upper castes.

<sup>21</sup> In email correspondence, Feb. 5, 2018, with Yashwant Koli, he wrote: “Many of the larger, South India based and staffed agencies like Friends Missionary Prayer Band (FMPB) have sent cross-cultural missionaries to central and north India over the decades. However, they almost without exception concentrated with varying success on the low hanging fruit of Dalits and Tribals (SCs & STs). Hence, even people group movements of tribals like the Oraon has only solidified the existing caste demographic of the Indian church: 70% Dalit + 25% Tribal.”

<sup>22</sup> E0 = renewal/discipleship of nominal Christians in your own people group, E1 = outreach to non-believers in your own culture/people group. E2 and E3 refer to evangelism of people of a different culture, E2 if the culture and language is similar, and E3 if the cultural distance is very far.

<sup>23</sup> The IMB criterion for unreached is less than 2% evangelical, and the most-unreached peoples are identified as those among whom there has been “no active church planting within the past two years.” ([http://public.imb.org/globalresearch/Documents/GSEC-Overviews/2014-09\\_GSEC\\_Overview.pdf](http://public.imb.org/globalresearch/Documents/GSEC-Overviews/2014-09_GSEC_Overview.pdf)). These criteria are a major departure from the original definition put out by Dr. Ralph D. Winter which is still stated clearly on the Joshua Project’s FAQ web page: “An unreached . . . people is a people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize that people group” (<https://joshuaproject.net/help/faqs>).

<sup>24</sup> See criteria listed under footnote #23. *Indigenous* is no longer a common term, but captures well what is needed, namely a movement of people who are still identified as “one of us” by the people group.

<sup>25</sup> The Protestant Reformation stands as the greatest example of church renewal accomplished through the splitting of churches. It also stands as the greatest example of a movement that led to massive bloodshed between religious/political factions, and a change of church allegiance by many for political reasons without necessarily a change

of allegiance to Christ as Lord and Savior. (This was not Luther’s or Calvin’s intent, of course). The English Reformation itself is the classic example of the changing of church affiliation that did not necessarily lead to genuine new faith on the part of the converts. On the other hand, a huge movement that *did* revitalize the faith of the Church of England, later called the Evangelical Awakening, began under the leadership of John Wesley in 1738. *By design*, the movement remained within the “dead” Church of England until after Wesley’s death in 1791. It had a much greater impact on the faith of the British people than any of the separatist or Anabaptist-type churches that were being planted in England both before and after that time period. Notice that John Wesley did *not* plant any churches when he started the Evangelical Awakening. He only started support groups and Bible studies, and left all the sacraments to the established “dead” churches. He encouraged people to become more active in their Anglican churches, not to leave them. He did not baptize any adults or children. He himself, an Anglican minister, regularly attended an Anglican church. As a result, the movement was able to revive the Anglican churches, which have living elements in them to this day. Because of the wisdom of Wesley’s advice (“not to leave their churches”), this movement was able to spread throughout the Anglican communion with much less opposition and condemnation than the various separatist church planting movements in England were experiencing.

<sup>26</sup> Don Fanning, “Short Term Missions: A Trend that is Growing Exponentially” (2009), *Trends and Issues in Mission*, 4. [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cgm\\_missions](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cgm_missions).

<sup>27</sup> This “Great Experiment,” as Bob Blincoe calls it in his book, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from Kurdistan*, (Pasadena, CA: The Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies, 1998), 23–39, was practiced repeatedly over a 300-year period, first by Catholics (partially winning the Nestorians to Catholicism), then by the Reformed (Anglicans and Presbyterians, winning both Nestorians, Armenians, and Catholics), and then by non-denominational evangelicals who split all of those churches, both ancient and reformed.