

Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle The Common Sense Principle

by Markos Zemedede

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It is a great honor to be here and to share at the Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship. I took Perspectives in 1999. It really changed not only my life but my family's life. Ever since then, we live differently and serve differently. And our children have been raised differently. So, I'm indebted to Dr. Ralph Winter, his team, and the entire Perspectives family.

Where Did These Movements Come From?

What I will share with you in this article about the Homogeneous Unit Principle is a direct result of what Perspectives has done for me. My presentation is simple. It's not complicated. After we took the Perspectives 15-week series of classes in 1999, my wife and I said to each other, "We can't live life the same again." I remember one of the speakers talking about the American dream. He said, "The American Dream is to buy things you don't need, with the money you don't have, to impress people you don't like. . . . So you better live for a Kingdom dream." And I thought, "You're right." My family had come to the US as poor immigrants from Africa and I had eventually finished my education by becoming a medical doctor. I knew the American dream was within reach—right there in front of me. But we were no longer the same.

We started a church planting movement in the Horn of Africa and in the last three to four years, more church-planting movements have now begun in North Africa and the Middle East. We plant simple churches. For example, in southwest Ethiopia, there is a church planting movement among the Hamar people, a nomadic people. Their churches often meet under a tree, and I like to joke that if you attend a church like that, it's a "moving experience." Every time the shade moves, you must move, too! I had been in the region in 2011 with some of our local leaders to start a movement among the Hamar. I remember meeting one young man, and he told me, "I'm learning Amharic," even though Amharic was not his native language. Amharic is the national language of Ethiopia, but the Hamar people don't speak Amharic; they have their own

Markos Zemedede, MD, was born and raised in Ethiopia. He immigrated to the US as a refugee in 1984 and eventually became a physician. In 2002, he started Horn of Africa Mission to plant Christ-honoring and culture-affirming churches in the Horn of Africa and beyond. Today, more than 24,000 simple churches have been planted in the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. Zemedede practices internal medicine in Fresno, CA. He is married and the proud father of three adult children.

native language. But this young man said, “I’m learning Amharic, so that I can become a Christian. Because the church is in Amharic, I must learn that language, and so I’m doing my best to learn it.” I remember thinking to myself, “Wow! People have to jump through so many hoops to become believers.”

Two years ago, when I went back there, I could hardly wait for the preacher to finish his sermon so that somebody would translate it for me. I literally had no idea what he was saying, but I was rejoicing! Finally, the Hamar people are listening to that message in their own language, and somebody’s explaining the gospel to them. The preacher didn’t even know how to read and write yet, but his message was very powerful. He was talking about Abraham.

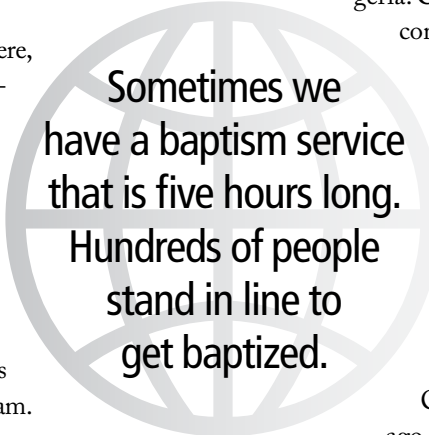
The Common Sense Principle

When you and I talk about the Homogeneous Unit Principle (or HUP), we see it from a different angle. I’m going to look at it from a practitioner’s perspective and from the region where we are active. In fact, I don’t even call it the Homogeneous Unit Principle. I just call it the “Common Sense Principle.” It’s so common sense, it just makes sense. We never did any of this just because somebody told us about the HUP. We were already doing it, and when somebody explained the HUP to us, we responded, “Yeah, of course. It makes sense.” But at the same time, there is also a danger, and I will share a little bit about that as well.

Background on Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia

Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing faiths. Sometimes when we baptize people, we have a baptism service that is five hours long. Hundreds of people stand in line to get baptized. God is doing great things!

Most of us in the leadership in evangelical churches in Ethiopia believe twenty-five to thirty percent of the population is now evangelical. Just to give you a picture, I left Ethiopia when I was sixteen in 1982. I knew only one evangelical family when I was in Ethiopia. I grew up in an Orthodox family, and I thought Christianity only meant Orthodox and that’s all. Evangelical Christianity was unknown forty years ago, but in the last forty years, evangelicals are now twenty-five to thirty percent of the population. Our Ethiopian Prime Minister is a strong evangelical believer. There are now many evangelicals in government and leadership positions which demonstrates how fast the gospel has advanced in Ethiopia.



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So let me sketch for you a little bit about Ethiopia. Most of you know where Ethiopia is. It’s one of four countries located in the easternmost tip of Africa which is known as the Horn of Africa. It’s a large country, with about 119 million people, and is the second most populous nation in Africa after Nigeria. Christianity is the largest religion. When you combine all kinds of Christians—Orthodox, evangelicals, and Catholics—we number about sixty percent or more of the population. Thirty-three percent of the population is Muslim and there are also tribal religions. There are eighty-six languages and 128 people groups, but the Amharic language is the national language. The people who are educated almost always will speak that language.

Christianity came to Ethiopia a long time ago. In Acts 8, you will have read about the Ethiopian eunuch. That was about 1,700 years before America was birthed, so it was a long time ago. But Ethiopia became a Christian nation about 330 AD. Ever since then, Christianity has been in Ethiopia.

In the last hundred years, perhaps mostly in the last fifty years, there has been a big movement towards Evangelicalism. There were Western missionaries who came to Ethiopia, but there is also a lot of indigenous evangelical mission and evangelism work. A lot of it is not by plan. It’s not like we sat down and strategized together, “Okay, let’s go and do this.”

In fact, when you study Ethiopian evangelical work in the country (missionary work reaching the unreached), most of the churches were planted by professionals: doctors and nurses, who would go from the capital to other unreached regions; or teachers and government workers who were sent by the government. When they went, all these believers planted churches. These were not mission professionals. These were professionals who were going to do business, but they also planted churches. Because of that, they planted churches that looked like their own churches back home. That’s all they knew. They knew how to worship, so they planted churches which looked and functioned exactly like the church in which they were used to worshipping. They taught everybody to worship in Amharic and sing the songs they sang back in Addis (in the capital, or wherever they came from) because that’s what they knew. And wherever they went, there were unreached people groups, and churches were planted. People had to learn Amharic to be able to worship with the believers, because for the people who had started the church, Amharic was all they spoke. They brought their guitars, they were worshipping with Amharic songs, and the new believers had to learn those songs. So, most of the church planting done in the last fifty years was done by

professionals who had moved to different parts of the country for work and started churches. But the only church they had ever known was their mother church, their home church, and so the church planters carried on doing the same thing.

Now I tell our church planters,

When you go to the unreached, and you plant a church, if you feel comfortable worshipping God in that church, you need to recognize that you've actually done a terrible job. This is because you planted a church in your own style, not their style. If you plant their church—a church that fits with them—you will feel uncomfortable, because they will worship differently from what you're used to, and they will want to do church differently. And that's not normal for you and you won't feel comfortable.

This is how we challenge them.

The other thing to know about Ethiopia is that there is a lot of ethnic strife. There is a war still going on, even now, in northern Ethiopia. There are a lot of reasons why. But ethnic strife is at the center of it: the Tigray people versus the Amhara people and the Oromo people versus the Amhara people—this is all ethnic strife. That's important to understand. How do you do HUP where there is sensitivity about ethnicity?

In America, when they hear my accent, people ask me, "Hey, you have a nice accent. Where are you from?" And I tell them. Surprisingly, when I go to Ethiopia, people still ask me, "Hey, where are you from?" But they're not asking me, "Are you from Ethiopia?" They have no doubt I'm an Ethiopian at least by birth. What they're really asking me is, "What is your ethnicity? Which part of the country do you come from?" That was so unheard of when I lived in Ethiopia. Nobody used to care who is who, and so forth, but now, there is this sensitivity. People want to know, "Which tribe are you from? Where did your parents come from?" Even the government asks you, "Which part of the country did your parents come from?"

The Hararghe Oromo Case Study

In this article on the Homogeneous Unit Principle, I'm going to focus on one people group called Hararghe Oromo. These people live in eastern Ethiopia where there are two big people groups: the Hararghe Oromo and the Somalis. From time to time, fighting breaks out between the Somalis and the Hararghe Oromo. The Hararghe Oromo are one of the largest people groups in Ethiopia. The Oromo people in general, is the largest people group in Ethiopia—about a third of Ethiopians are Oromo. But in the Oromo, there are a further twelve distinct people groups. The Hararghe Oromo who make up the eastern part of the Ethiopia Oromo group are one of the twelve. They are the third largest people group in the country, numbering about 7.2 million people. Ninety-three percent of them are Muslims, and one half of one percent are evangelical believers.

Evangelical believers now comprise more than fifty percent of some of the other Oromo people groups—in the South, in the West, and in central Ethiopia. Some of the Oromo people have also been reached. But this particular unreached people group—the Hararghe Oromo who are the largest Oromo people group—remain unreached. They speak the Oromiffa language like the rest of the Oromo people, but they are still unreached. Why is that? What happened? I will focus on this group as a case study.

The First Attempt to Evangelize the Hararghe Oromo

The first Evangelical missionaries to come to the Hararghe Oromo were Lutheran missionaries from the Scandinavian nations. That was over a hundred years ago in 1917. They came to evangelize the Hararghe Oromo and they did pretty well. But when they finished their work and returned back home, they turned the work over to Amharic-speaking Highlanders. This happened because when you come from the West as a missionary to Ethiopia—and I know many Western missionaries who lived for an extended time in Ethiopia—most of them speak the national language, the Amharic language. Those who spend time learning languages, learn Amharic first, and then, if they are able, they go on to learn the other languages where they serve.

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So, as a Westerner, when you go to Ethiopia, you learn to speak Amharic, and when you finish your job, it's natural to pass it to those who also speak Amharic. And you ask them to continue this work because you're returning home. But the problem is, when you pass it to the Amharic-speaking believers, they will continue the ministry the same way the Amharic-speaking Church does—their own way, their own culture. It will not be attractive to the indigenous people there. So that's part of the problem. These peoples' blindness is real. It's a blind spot, and if it wasn't a blind spot, you would know about it. That's why there is blindness. You don't see it. You think it's fine to say, "Hey, we're telling them about Jesus. They better come."

Allow me to illustrate this point. As most of you know, the largest Somali population outside of the Horn of Africa is in the Twin Cities—some 86,000. There are also a lot of Ethiopians in the Twin Cities, some 26,000, and a lot of Ethiopian churches are there as well. One time when we gathered them together, I remember talking to them and I said,

Listen guys, the Somalis are right here. Let's reach them. There are no better persons to reach the Somalis than the Ethiopians. They know us. We know them. If they come to us, they're not coming to us for secondary gain. They will come to us only for the pure gospel because they know they're not going to get money from us. And they know that we're Christians, so this is our chance!

A couple of observations: one pastor said, "When they moved into my neighborhood, I just moved to another neighborhood. I don't want these Somalis to ruin my children." I thought to myself, "Oh, my God, they're so blinded. They're not realizing God is sending them to us, so let's reach them. Now, they're our neighbors."

Another pastor said, "We're trying to reach the Somalis. In fact, we planted our sister church where the Somalis live." To that pastor, I said, "Have you ever been to a mosque?" He said, "Why would I go to a mosque?" I replied,

Exactly! Why would a Somali come to your church, if you don't go to a mosque? It's foreign to you to go to a mosque. Why would a Somali come to a church? It's equally as foreign to them, so if you want to reach the Somalis, you better reach them in their homes and start a fellowship that looks and sounds like their culture.

Even now, there is this blindness—this blindness because you can't see it, so we need to learn a lot about that. I have already mentioned the Hamar people—how they were learning the Amharic language in order to become believers. But they don't need to learn the Amharic language to become believers. Somebody just needs to share the gospel in a way they can understand.

The Second (Mennonite) Effort

The second missionary effort to reach the Hararghe Oromo people happened thirty-one years later by Mennonite missionaries, and they did well. A lot of people came to Christ. Then, in 1974, communism came to Ethiopia, and the missionaries were kicked out. Those few believers who had come to Christ from the Hararghe Oromo people simply joined the Amharic-speaking churches. It cost them a lot to do that. Many of them had to change their names. Ibrahim became Abraham, Mohammed became David, or some other Christian name, and they had to dress differently. They began to speak differently. They were isolated from their communities, and that's what happened.

This was evangelism by extraction instead of reaching the whole family, and when that happens, there are difficult situations, as we will see. Our team did a survey in 2012, and did research, and found out how many Hararghe Oromo believers there are in eastern Ethiopia and where they are

concentrated. To our surprise, we found about four hundred Hararghe Oromo believers. Almost all of them were in Amharic-speaking churches.

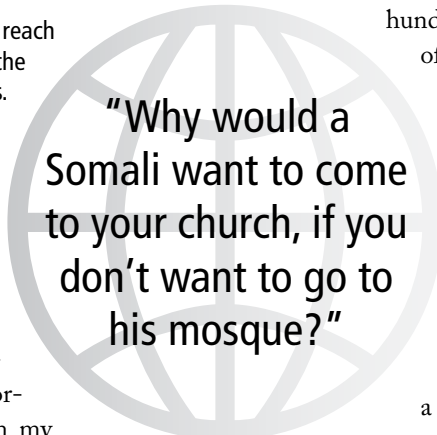
In fact, in the whole region, there was only one church in the Oromiffa language, in the people's native tongue. All the other churches, the growing churches, were Amharic-speaking churches. And for someone from the Hararghe Oromo people to come and join an Amharic-speaking church in order to learn about Christ, they better figure out how to learn a whole new culture—not just the language, but how to act like the Highlanders, the Amharic-speaking people. That's the struggle.

A More Contextualized Approach

We said among ourselves that we must change this picture. There were efforts that were started in 1917 and a hundred years later, we don't have much to show. We have only four hundred or so Hararghe Oromo believers out of 7.2 million people, and even those are not connected to their own people. They are so disconnected. They are living their lives apart from their people. What happened? Why was there not much fruit? Part of the reason was the lack of any intentional effort to evangelize and plant indigenous Hararghe Oromo churches.

For example, here in the US, tens of thousands of Afghans are coming in as refugees seeking asylum. Unless someone speaks their language, knows their culture, and prepares an environment that fits their culture, we can't expect them one day to show up to our churches. It won't happen. You have to intentionally say, "Okay, how can I reach this community?"

Among the Hararghe Oromo people, there was not much contextualization of the gospel. As I said earlier, the church planters knew only their own church traditions, and nobody told them how to plant indigenous, contextualized churches or fellowships. So, they would go to a place and try to just mimic another church like their home church. And then, there's a lot of persecution. In that eastern part of Ethiopia close to the Somali border, the people are predominantly Muslims. There is a lot of persecution, and for a believer to remain in Christ, it will cost him a great deal, sometimes his very life. In fact, two months ago, one of our disciples from this particular people group had his own home burned to the ground, just because he was leading a house church. This brother, who had come



"Why would a Somali want to come to your church, if you don't want to go to his mosque?"

from Islam, never stopped. He continued preaching boldly. Then, two months later, just recently, he himself was also killed. It costs peoples' lives. I mean this is not a story that I'm making up. I'm telling you about a person I know—a person with a wife and children—who lost his life because he wanted to reach his people group and plant house churches that would fit with his people's customs and traditions.

There are not enough workers, and of course, if you're going to go as a missionary, it's easier to go to a people group where they already know Christ. They welcome you and so forth, but when there is a struggle, few people want to go there. Then a lot of people don't know how to evangelize Muslims and win them to Christ. A lot of people think they must become like us first. I love Acts 15 where the discussion was, "Do they need to become a Jew in order to be a follower of Christ?" And thank God the Jerusalem Council said no. For us, the question is the same. Do Muslims have to become evangelical believers to follow Christ? Those are the questions we always discuss and to which we need to find an answer.

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Promising Work

We have had a promising work among the Hararghe Oromo since 2012. Our first Muslim believer's name was Muhammad. In fact, he is still leading our movement there and his name is still Muhammad. We told the new believers, "Keep your names, connect with your families, continue to love your people, and bring them to these house churches." And we plant house churches. In the big cities, Ethiopian, Amharic-speaking churches are like your churches here. They look exactly the same: a big keyboard, a loud sound system, a pulpit, and nice chairs. That's how church happens. But if you go to a Hararghe Oromo house church, everybody sits on the floor around the room, and they sing and have discussions. It looks very different. It does not look like a church, but that's their culture, and the churches must look like their indigenous gatherings. Our mission statement is to plant Christ-honoring culture-affirming churches, so that they can multiply. People are welcomed, and when they come, they say, "This is me. I belong here."

I attend American churches now. When I go to an Ethiopian church, I get extra excited. I say to myself, "Fine, now I can jump around here, and nobody will think I'm weird when we worship." But in an American church, if I jump and worship the way I worship in the Ethiopian church, people will say to me, "What are you doing?" So, I have to fit into the church where I attend.

When we start churches that fit the Hararghe Oromo, that include their customs and traditions, we can do great things. Currently, in the last ten years, we have started 220 house churches with 2500 believers, 928 of whom are baptized. I was at one of those baptisms. They built the baptism tub right there. It's just made out of wood and a tarp, they fill it with water, and then they baptize. If a government official or somebody were to show up, they could just remove it quickly, and it wouldn't look like a tub anymore, and nobody would know what they had been doing. All that would be left would be spilled water. I mean, it's all secretive and hidden, making sure nobody sees, but a great move of the Holy Spirit is happening, nonetheless. I know of another ministry like us, who does Disciple Making Movements (DMM). They also have over 2000 believers. So, in the last ten years, there are now over 5000 new believers. We had seen about 400 people come to the Lord in the past 100 years, and now we have seen over 5000 in the last ten years! We believe this will continue to multiply. We now have twenty-six full-time workers reaching them.

The Benefits of the Common Sense Principle

What are the benefits of what I'm calling the Common Sense Principle? As I said earlier, for me, the Homogeneous Unit Principle is the Common Sense Principle. It's common sense. You want to reach an unreached people group. You better go and find them and keep them in their families and kinship groups and then encourage them to go and love people who are like them. Bring the whole family. And start a fellowship and encourage them to grow. It just makes sense at least in the region where we are serving. It just makes sense. It is way easier to do that.

I remember one time in our training, a Muslim follower of Christ stood and said with tears,

I wish I had known fifty years ago what I know now; if I had known this when I was young, I would have loved Jesus for fifty years. But it just happened now, I learned the truth now when I'm old.

He went on to say,

When I was young, people came to our village and told us about Jesus, but they told us, "You must change how you dress. You must change your culture. You must change your name. You must become like us." So we said, "No way, get out of here, we don't want to hear this gospel," but now you have come and you have told us to stay the way we are, that we can still love Jesus and follow him.

He continued,

I wish somebody had told me that a long time ago. Now, it's easy for me to go and share with my family, my children, and the next village. It is so easy.

That's why I'm saying it is common sense.

In the indigenous Hararghe Oromo church, momentum builds naturally. In rural parts of eastern Ethiopia, most of the people are one tribe, so it is easy for the gospel to spread like wildfire as it moves from one place to another

The Danger of the HUP (Common Sense Principle)

When I think of the HUP, this is how I look at it: it is a small key that opens a big door—a big door of an unreached people group—that's the benefit. After you enter that gate, if you use the same key to lock the door behind you, then that's where the danger is. That door must remain open, so that these people are not just isolated as one people group keeping the gospel just for themselves, because as you know, that's not our assignment.

As believers, our one assignment is to make disciples of all nations. That must be something we always keep in front of us. We must make disciples of all nations, not just the Hararghe Oromo. To enter a people group with the gospel, we need this key, but the door must remain open.

So as leaders, we must be mature enough to help the people from day one to pray for the next tribe, to pray for the unreached people in their communities, to remember other peoples, and to encourage them. We must love them. We must share what we know with them, so that they can also gather like us and follow Christ. That must be done early on, so that's very important. In Matthew 10, Jesus told the twelve disciples to go to the House of Israel. He's not telling them to *stay* there, but to *start* there. Later he will tell them, "Okay, now you're going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" but they must start somewhere.

For me, HUP is that. It's an ignition, a key that opens doors, but it's not a key to lock behind you. You must keep the door open.

So, what's the danger? The danger comes when we lock the door, stick to our own kind, keep the gospel to ourselves. A movement, by definition, moves from one place to another. If it stays in one place, it's not a movement. If you're going to have a people movement—a church planting movement, a disciple making movement—if it is going to be a movement, it better go beyond what you're doing.

So, if the door is open, and once you enter, you lock the door, then you stop the movement. That's why you need a wise leader, a leader who understands his people, a leader who understands the Bible, a leader who will equip others.

Now, we have the gospel. Let's pray for the family but not just our family—beyond that. I mean look at us here. Why in the world did we come here to this conference? Because for all of us, HUP means something—that's why we came. In a small way, we here are a homogeneous unit attracted or conflicted by the HUP concept. But when we leave, we're going to go and do our own thing. We're not going to be stuck here just for ourselves. So also in HUP, don't just hold it as an end unto itself. It's just a beginning, a starting point, an ignition point. And once you do that, make sure you keep advancing. That's why you need key leaders.

I don't know if you know this story. Most of the water for the Nile River comes from Ethiopia. The Nile comes from two source regions: in Uganda and Ethiopia. The two Niles connect in Khartoum, Sudan. In fact, Ethiopia is building a big dam on the Nile River, in order to start getting energy. That was a big issue with Sudan and Egypt both of whom feared that they might lose their water. But Ethiopia continued to reassure them that Ethiopia won't stop the water. They will get their water, but Ethiopia needs to get energy from the water, too.

For me, that's a picture of a movement. The movement is the Nile that must continue to flow, so that the Sudanese will drink, and the Egyptians will drink, and the water must continue. But at the same time, you can build a dam and benefit your own people too.

A Muslim follower of Christ said with tears, "I wish I had known fifty years ago what I know now—that I didn't have to change my culture, how I dress, or my name. I would have loved Jesus for fifty years."

Going back to the Common Sense Principle, it's okay to benefit our people group, our family, our tribe, but the blessing of God must continue to flow like the river Nile and give water and life to the next tribe and the next tribe and the next tribe. That must happen.

An interesting discussion took place between some of our church planters and some of the new believers from this people group, the Hararghe Oromo. The new believers said to some of the church planters,

Okay, where you come from, you guys have a big church, a sound system, and you sit down on chairs like this, and you worship like this, whereas we sit down on the floor with no

sound systems, and no church buildings, and so, who are we? Are we like you or are we something else? Are we Muslims or are we evangelicals?

That's a good question to ask. A question of identity. Who are we? And I love the answer of our leaders. They said,

You go and ask God, and he will tell you who you are. We can't tell you that you are evangelicals, or this or that. Ask God. You are followers of Christ. Now you, too, have access to him. Go ask him.

What happened was that most of them said,

We are Muslims who follow Christ, and we follow the Bible. We are Muslims because to be Muslim is more than religion. That's our way of life. And the Bible is our guidance, and we will go through that.

Others, a few of them, said,

I don't want to remain in the house church. I want to be free to worship God the way you guys worship. I'm going to come to the big church in the city and join you.

And that's okay. At least, they get to make the decision themselves. But the rest said,

No, we want to stay in the house church model. We will continue reaching our families and neighbors and relatives and continue to advance God's Kingdom.

That's the way it should be. If everyone moves into the big churches of another culture, there is a big problem. It will kill the movement. It will come to an end.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a few general observations. The HUP is very effective in rural Africa, where most people who are living together are from the same people group. That was our observation. When it comes to urban settings, it could be different. I know there is another approach for urban settings, and I will leave it there.

But it's very crucial as we start reaching people groups through the Homogeneous Unit Principle that we expose them to other people groups. And Jesus is very, very strategic in this. I don't know if you ever ask this question, but sometimes I ask this, "What would the disciples say if when Jesus first met them, he had said, 'Follow me, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth?'" They would have said, "What, Samaria? I'm out of here. I'm going home." But he told them this at the end in Acts 1:8, after he had trained them and showed them his life, and after he had himself witnessed to the Samaritans. John 4 is a wonderful chapter—you know, the woman at the well. Jesus had a conversation with this Samaritan woman and revealed himself to her. She left her jar to tell her community about Jesus. The

woman came back with them, and they begged him to stay with them for two or three days. Jesus said, "I guess they're inviting us, so let's go to their home." The disciples were thinking to themselves, "What? We're going to go to their homes, sleep in their beds, and eat and drink using their utensils?" But Jesus was saying to them, "I mean, they invited us, so let's go." He was preparing them for the coming ministry.

So as leaders, that's the strategy. How can we start by using the HUP in the initial encounters and discipleship training? But how can we also use that to train (from the gospel) the Hararghe Oromo about how to love the Somalis or other people groups? That's the burden of the leader to help them and to show them.

A few others said, "I'm going to come to the big church in the city and join you." But if everyone moves into the big churches of another culture, it will kill the movement.

My last point is this: unity in the body of Christ. One of the leaders in Ethiopia said that it's not good to deny the HUP for the sake of unity with others, but also, it is not good to deny unity with the body of Christ just for the sake of maintaining the HUP. That's why we need wisdom from the Holy Spirit.

I really like that because the Holy Spirit must guide us in each scenario. We don't decide in the boardroom what we will do on the field. We must allow the field leaders to be led by the Holy Spirit and know when to say yes and when to say no. My last point is that all people groups have a natural right to know and worship God in their own language in a way that affirms their culture. At the same time, all believers are called to make disciples of all nations. Therefore, we can start with the HUP, but we must not stay there. The heart of God is for all people. Somebody mentioned Acts 11:20 earlier. I love that! A couple of guys from Cyprus and Libya, said to themselves, "What would happen if we were to take this gospel and instead of just going to the Jews, we would go to the Gentiles?" That was God's heart. There was a huge blessing, and the church in Antioch was birthed out of that. So, we must help others. For us, the HUP is a methodology, not a theology. It opens up a great door for evangelism, and as leaders we must use that to advance God's Kingdom beyond a given unreached people group. **IJFM**