

What Happened to People Group Thinking?

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A strange thing happened on the way to bringing the Gospel to every “people group.” A growing number of Christian voices around the world begin to suggest that the focus on people groups was overemphasized. These questions seemed to arise as the “AD2000 and Beyond” movement phased out. Further, the concept of “people group” began to be applied to other “groupings” which do not fit the category.

Admittedly, no universally accepted definition exists. Yet while the main terms *Unreached People Group* (UPG) and *Least Evangelized People Group* have some technical differences, they essentially define the same 25-28% of the world which has little access to the Gospel. A more popularized phrase – Least Reached Peoples – is sometimes used. One UPG-focused country network in an Asian country uses a term which places the responsibility squarely on the Church – the “Ignored” People Groups. (Note: the terms Least Evangelized and UPGs will be used interchangeably below).

So, what happened to the momentum to reach those who have little or no access to the Gospel? Some key misconceptions have emerged and seem to impede movement forward. These include:

1) Great publicity is confused with real progress: The great emphasis in many parts of the world, especially during the last 20 years, on reaching the unreached has led church leaders in many continents to believe that great progress has been made. Yes, some progress has been made. Yet, 25-28% of the world still has little access to the Gospel.

Christians still give only about 1% of our money to Christian causes. Of this money given to Christian causes, 95% is spent on the Church. Less than 1% is used to reach 28% of the world. Only 2-4% of Christian cross-cultural witnesses serve this 28%.

Projections show that the percentage of the least evangelized peoples will not diminish significantly in the next several decades. The world percentage of Christians is also not projected to grow if ministry and mission continue to follow current patterns.

2) “Balance” is sought: Key “unreached peoples” advocates and mission strategists from several continents have discovered they share a common experience. Each had been challenged by key national and/or international Christian leaders to have a more “balanced” view in their advocacy by not emphasizing the “unreached” too much.

Again, emphasis on UPGs seems to have resulted in “boredom” among some church leaders – and they seem to want to find the next idea. One Asian mission leader shared that just about the time the Western Christians have succeeded in raising awareness for the UPGs around the world, some seem to have developed “attention deficit disorder” and want to move on to something new.

To answer simply, “**Yes, we want balance**” so that at least one-fourth of workers, money, and other resources are spent on this “one-fourth” world! When the “Body of Christ” quits spending over 90% of its resources on itself, **balance** might be achieved!

3) Everyone is a people group: The power of “people group” imagery to focus people’s strategic thinking began to be used to re-define all kinds of strata of society as a “people group.” So, young people, the disabled, prostitutes, or taxi drivers in certain cities (which are actually segments or a strata of society) began to be defined as a “people group.”

Factually, a “people group” is a collection of inextricably linked strata. For instance, a large ethno-linguistic/ethno-cultural people group will have youth, urban, rural, rich, poor, disabled, etc. At the end of the day, however, a young person or a taxi driver or a disabled person is in familial and societal relationships with other kinds of people from other strata of the society.

Admittedly, a variety of strategies are needed to reach the variety of strata in a people group. Different ministries are needed for the young, for the disabled, for the urban, for the poor, for the rich. Yet, when a

movement begins among such a people group, it will spread more easily across “strata” lines within a people group than across ethnic lines. For example, a real movement might occur among the youth of a certain people group but may have a more difficult time “jumping” the ethnic barrier to the youth of a neighboring but hated ethnic group.

So, a “people group” may have a variety of defining factors which might include ethno-linguistic or ethno-cultural/religious elements, and may legitimately have unique elements (such as caste factors in India) but it will consist of various strata.

4) Unreached people are “remote”, only “tribal,” or only “illiterate” peoples: A globally recognized Christian leader recently said that while emphasis on the Unreached was still needed, the major challenge for finishing the task of world missions was the major religious blocks. He inadvertently exposed a common mis-conception about what “unreached” or “least evangelized” means.

In fact, the majority of the UPGs are in the three major religious blocks -- and make up vast sections of major urban centers. Sometimes, they are the majority peoples of the country. In one Asian country, one-half of the Christians live in one-fourth of the country – and are mainly tribal (who are more easily reached?) while the majority people of this Buddhist country is still less than 1% Christian. In another Asian country known for very dynamic and mission minded churches, the majority people which is well over 50% of the population remains largely unserved.

5) The goal to engage each UPG is misunderstood as an end goal rather than a first step: Some have caricatured plans to make sure every people group is engaged as a simplistic plan to start a few churches so that that people group can be “checked” off the list. This simplistic goal is certainly not the intent of most UPG strategists. Most would emphasize that “engagement” is merely the first step toward the end goal of true Gospel transformation (and not just a few congregations which meet on Sunday) to the people group. Yet, how can they be transformed when few or no workers have taken those first steps?

One aspect of the debate revolves around the interpretation of Matthew 24.14. Some stress that this verse is merely a promise and prediction – not an imperative verse from which specific and detailed strategies must be developed. A clue to the intent of this verse can be found in Abram’s covenant (Genesis 12.1-3). The phrase “You will be a blessing” is not merely a prediction. It is also a command! Matthew 24.14 seems to have the same thrust. This idea does not even include the several “Great Commissions” Jesus gave which are even more specific. The fact remains that Christ-followers are commanded to speak and act out the Gospel in the whole world to all *ethne*. Specific strategies and specific goals are required.

6) An over-balanced “returning mission to the church” concept: A great deal has been said in recent years that the local institutional church is the supreme engine of mission. Much of this emphasis apparently emerges from large churches in both Eastern and Western countries. Some crucial problems, however, have emerged from this mindset.

- This prioritizing of only the local church organization sometimes ignores or diminishes biblical teaching on the universal Church. True, each person should be a member of a local church – but God often calls key leaders to have roles across local and organizational lines. Clearly, in Acts 13, the Holy Spirit asked the Antioch church to set apart Paul and Barnabas and to send them off. Little if any indication is found that they “maintained” local membership in Antioch after that point.
- Is the local church the one in the missionary’s sending country – or the local congregation which he/she has helped create in his/her host culture? Many expat missionaries never become a member of local congregations in their host cultures, claiming a need to maintain their membership in an organization (club?) in their sending culture. Consistency is lacking in such a call for local church membership.
- Many churches do not seem to believe the concept of “dying to self” applies not only to the individual but also to the congregation. An oft-quoted idea is that local churches are “tired of losing their best people” to mission organizations. In fact, sometimes churches do not allow some of their best leaders to

go into full-time mission, arguing that the local congregation needs them more. Are local congregations not also called by our Lord to great sacrifice? What needs to be asked is not “What is best for our local church?” but “What needs to be done to reach this UPG?”

- Some local churches find “missions” as a way to help their members be disciplined and be fulfilled. As a result, the main mission strategy seems to be mainly short-term workers. Yet these same churches would not try to run their church with rotating short-term teams. How then, can Christ-followers think that whole societies can be transformed from the Kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light through quick, easy, surface efforts?
- Many churches will only send short or long term people to “safe” places. The least evangelized of the world will not be reached in such a manner.

7) It is now time for the “Majority” World or the “Global South” to finish the job: This heresy continues to gain ground. Since when did God remove the Great Commission from any believer – North, South, East or West? When did God say, “Now you can just pay for others to go since it is more cost-effective?”

Have we lost the sense of amazement that humanity’s unity, which was shattered at Babel due to pride and arrogance, is now in the process of being reunited into Christ? The greatest proof of our belief in this theology will be that Christians from various races, countries and continents intentionally collaborate as a visible witness that the Kingdom of God truly and visibly unites humanity – not in theory, but in actual work among the remaining peoples.

This last 28% of the world will only be truly reached as representatives from all “reached” peoples join together to speak and act out the Gospel among these least served peoples. The amazing thing about the Gospel is that the new believers from among these formerly unreached peoples will then join us in reaching the others who have little or no access to Gospel in all its forms – word, deed and miracle.

Steps Forward: All of these issues combined create a powerful deterrent to steps forward. A renewed energy, and call for sacrificial, long-term work among these who continue to be ignored by the global body of Christ is critical for avoiding the projections of little progress in reaching the Least Evangelized Peoples. May Christ’s Body be truly faithful.