

Unreached People Groups

Executive Summary

DEFINING “UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS” AND DEVELOPING A SUGGESTED AGWM STRATEGY FOR RESPONSE

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AGWM Missiology UPG Working Group

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This synopsis serves as a report of the findings of the missiology group whose assignment was to evaluate and interact with the definitions of “unreached people group” and suggest appropriate AGWM responses in light of the challenge of this information.

The terminology of “people groups” along with the determination of reached-ness or unreached-ness finds its home in frontier mission missiology. The ideas originated from two sources: a statistical monitoring of the status of the Christian faith throughout the world from the beginning of the modern missionary era, and the observation that even small sociocultural differences can create barriers to people coming to faith. Thus people groups can have no near-neighbor witness in their social system and require a cross-cultural worker to bring the gospel.

Over time, mission strategists decided to define an unreached people in terms of an ethnolinguistic group without the presence of an “indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize the rest of its members without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.” In order to quantify the process, the Joshua Project designated a people group as unreached if less than 2 percent of the population was Evangelical and less than 5 percent of any form of professingⁱ Christians existed. By this definition some 2.8 billion people in 253 people clusters are classified as an unreached ethnolinguistic group living throughout the world with little or no access to the gospel. The majority of these groups are found among Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim populations, but no region of the world is exempt.

How should AGWM respond to the demographic challenge presented to Christian mission by unreached people group thinking? ***In light of the biblical mandate, the clarity of the information on unreached and least reached people groups, and our understanding of the centrifugal driving force of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, we suggest a response that is systemic, priority, and linked to an intentional trajectory that moves us as a united body to focus on over 2.8 billion people who have the least access to the gospel in our world.*** As such this would include:

- Utilizing Joshua project database terminology for people group, unreached people, unengaged people and reached people but critically interacting with these definitions according to our Spirit-led missiology.
- Adopting a 10-year plan that intentionally but gradually modifies our missionary distribution ratio, (presently 65 percent working among the existing church), prioritizing mission to those with least access to the gospel (people groups with 1 percent or less Evangelical Christians in the population regardless of where they are found in the world) and refocusing our objectives as we partner with national

churches, serving in an apostolic function to empower them with the will and the skill to reach the unreached in their vicinities and around the world.

- Instigating a well thought-out plan to cast vision and (re)educate our missionary family, our constituent churches and the national churches with whom we partner.

There are a number of issues that will need to be addressed in formulating a missional trajectory that crafts a systemic and priority response. We conclude this report by identifying five major areas that are implicated.

DEFINING “UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS” DEVELOPING AN AGWM STRATEGY FOR RESPONSE

Introduction to the Issue of Unreached People Groups

In 1974 at the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Ralph Winter challenged the Church to establish cross-cultural evangelism as the highest priority and in doing so, he unleashed a firestorm in mission circles, with an impact that continues to redefine mission today. Building on insights from Donald McGavran, his colleague at Fuller Theological Seminary, he argued that in socio-cultural settings where there are very few or no Christians or churches, to bear witness requires by definition, a cross-cultural effort. He contended that believers from outside that social setting must come and do the labor-intensive work of “picking the lock” of that culture and planting the church of Jesus Christ. Using contemporary data he demonstrated that geographic proximity between Christians and non-Christian neighbors alone is not what matters, but rather cultural proximity. He maintained that it is quite possible for Christians from one ethnic background to live next to non-Christians of another ethnic group and yet be uninterested in or incapable of sharing the gospel in a relevant and intelligible way.

In recent years, the Spirit has been calling workers to minister among unreached people groups and an increasing number of voices inside of AGWM desire the development of a more intentional strategy that grapples with the demographic realities of the many peoples and places with few or no Christians or churches.

Our assignment was to explore a definition and nomenclature for Unreached People Groups for AGWM, which led a proposal on appropriate missiological responses to the challenges of this information. With that in mind, our missiology group submits the following findings and suggestions to the Executive Director, Greg Mundis, and to the Executive Committee.

A Brief History of Unreached People Group Thinking

The idea of unreached peoples was not birthed in a vacuum. A confluence of ideas from several streams coalesced into a set of interrelated concepts forming what is now known as frontier mission missiology. Bosch notes that traditionally, Christian mission was seen as taking the gospel to non-Christian people (1991:1). The ethos of taking the gospel to places where Christ is not known has characterized the modern missions era and has been accompanied by efforts to catalogue spiritual need. Survey works by Carey, Taylor, Broomhall, C. T. Studd, as well as studies for the Edinburgh conference and more recently the work of Barrett and Johnston show a concern, generated by the Holy Spirit, to continually drive the Church from the borders where faith exists to areas of non-faith. As the church grew in the world, a taxonomy was established of populations that exist without the gospel from the nation-state and broad civilizational level down to tribes and tongues.

In addition to demographic work on spiritual need, McGavran’s work on bridge people extended the foundation for Winter’s thinking about “hidden” people. If no bridge person exists within a distinct group, then cross-cultural effort is required for the people group to hear the gospel because invisible (and at times visible) socio-cultural barriers hide or block them from having access to the gospel. Therefore, Winter formulated the term “Hidden Peoples” to signify those veiled not geographically but culturally from the message of the

gospel. The nexus of meanings surrounding peoples in their group-ness and the mandate for cross-culture witness, became the fertile soil out of which a number of key supporting concepts grew.

A Review of Standard Definitions

People group

In a 1982 meeting in Chicago the Lausanne Strategy Working Group and the EFMA met to standardize terminology using ethnolinguistic determinants, resulting in this final definition:

A people group is a significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread as a viable, indigenous church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptanceⁱⁱ.

While an ethnolinguistic definition has made it possible to do demographic work on the status of unreached groups in the world, various missionary agencies employ a variety of methodologies and categories in their data gathering to serve their own purposes and perspectives. As a result, every “list” is somewhat different. The goal of identifying groups, however, is not to arrive at a precise number of unreached people groups, but rather to focus ministry on those sufficiently unified groups with the greatest need of the gospel in which evangelism can be pursued without encountering barriers of acceptance or understanding.

Unreached People Group

An unreached people group is, therefore, an ethnolinguistic population among whom there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize the rest of its members without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.

Reached People Group

A reached people group has adequate indigenous believers and resources to evangelize their own group without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.

Unengaged People Group

An unengaged people group is one that has no active church planting underway. According to the [IMB Global Research Office](#) “A people group is engaged when a church planting strategy, consistent with evangelical faith and practice, is under implementation. In this respect, a people group is not engaged when it has been merely adopted, is the object of focused prayer, or is part of an advocacy strategy.” At least four essential elements constitute effective engagement: apostolic effort in residence; commitment to work in the local language and culture; commitment to long-term ministry; sowing in a manner consistent with the goal of seeing a church-planting movement (CPM) emerge.

Operationalizing the Definitions

Conceptual definitions were then operationalized in order to provide a way of determining needs in a group. After much deliberation, the Joshua Project designated a people group as unreached if less than 2 percent of the population was Evangelical and less than 5 percent of any form of professing Christians existed (see footnote i). Sociologically, 2 percent represents a critical mass needed to be capable of influencing society with their

beliefs and start a people movement. By this definition some 2.8 billion people in 253 people clusters are classified as an unreached ethnolinguistic group living throughout the world with little or no access to the gospel. The majority of these groups are found among Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim populations, but no region of the world is exempt.

| Stage | Level | Level Description |
|----------------------------------|------------|--|
| Unreached / Least-Reached | <u>1.1</u> | <u>Few, if any, known Evangelicals. Professing Christians <=5%.</u> |
| | <u>1.2</u> | <u>Evangelicals >0.01%, but <=2%. Professing Christians <=5%.</u> |
| Formative / Nominal Church | <u>2.1</u> | <u>Few, if any, known Evangelicals. Professing Christians >5%.</u> |
| | <u>2.2</u> | <u>Evangelicals > 0.01%, but <= 2%. Professing Christians > 5%.</u> |
| Established / Significant Church | <u>3.1</u> | <u>Evangelicals >2%, but <=5%.</u> |
| | <u>3.2</u> | <u>Evangelicals >5%.</u> |

How Should AGWM Respond to the Challenge of Unreached People Groups?

In answer to the question “what is the definition of unreached people group?” we **recommend that AGWM publicly utilize the terms and definitions that have become standard for the mission world and then craft a missiological response that we sense to be the leading of the Spirit for our organization at this time in our history.** Utilizing the Joshua Project standardized definitions and critically engaging with them missiologically, we believe, will aid in communication and clarification of our missiology, will facilitate our conversations with other evangelical mission groups and our AGWF partners, and will enable us to more effectively articulate our Spirit-given vision with a relevant and more powerful voice.

The key issue then becomes not “how to define” but rather “how to respond” to these definitions and the resulting databases of information on the status of Christianity among the various ethnolinguistic peoples of the world. We would suggest that our guiding question for philosophy and strategy in terms of deployment and activity should be, “In light of these definitions, how should we as AGWM be strategically engaging the task of mission?” This can be expanded in a series of sub-questions as follows:

- Among what ethnolinguistic peoples is the church not planted and how will we address this need?
- To what extent and for what purpose do we deploy missionaries to “reached people groups”?
- How do we concentrate our existing mission labors on the greater needs of unreached people groups, wherever they may be found? How do we reframe our existing mission labors in order to attain a maximal impact on unreached people groups through and with our national church partners?

Such a response should include a missiological trajectory that will guide and inspire a transition that is 1) systemic, i.e., a reorientation of the focus of both the individual missionary and the AGWM organization, to take the gospel to neglected regions of the world wherever they are found; and 2) priority, i.e., a renewed application of concentrated effort

directed toward the demographic challenge of large blocks of people with inadequate access to the gospel.

A systemic and priority response to the challenge of unreached peoples is not a knee-jerk reaction that rejects certain types of mission activity in favor of certain geographic locations; rather, it is a reorientation of the identity of every missionary toward the unreached. It is not a massive redeployment of current missionaries, nor is it a radical cutting off of support of some missionaries in order to have a church planting focus among unreached peoples; it is the employment of every missionary as either an active member of a church-planting team among UPGs or as a servant in an apostolic function with national church partners. We are not calling for an International Mission Board that is restructured around UPGs or that moves away from relationships and partnerships with national churches to operate unilaterally, but calling on every missionary to encourage, empower, train, and support national churches to reach the least reached. Nor are we advocating a move toward a board that assigns places of ministry to called missionaries, but we trust the Holy Spirit to call new missionaries to unreached places even as we faithfully communicate the overwhelming need and guide new candidates to find their place within the vision that the Spirit has given to the whole community!

A systemic response must be birthed and guided by the Spirit as He breaks our hearts for a world that has no near-neighbor witness, and bends our collective resources together with those of our partnering national churches to the challenge of an unreached world. The call to a systemic and priority response comes as the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the unambiguous witness of Scripture, the clear declaration of the databases of lost ethnolinguistic peoples, and through the affirmation of AGWM's self-understanding since 1921, when the General Council of the Assemblies of God declared:

The Foreign Missions Department will be guided by the following; the Pauline example will be followed so far as possible, by seeking neglected regions where the Gospel has not been preached, lest we build on another's foundation.

Five Considerations if Adopting A Systemic And Priority Response

1. A missiological trajectory: Devise a ten-year plan that would set goals and serve as a guide, spanning sufficient time to shift our focus naturally and enhance the unity of our missions family.

2. Vigorous Area Assessment: Area Directors and cross-cultural workers on the ground in each region of the world should be the most knowledgeable to assess the UPG needs of the region, the health and strengths of the national churches with whom they are partnering, and key demographic and ideological trends taking place in their nations. From this assessment, Regional and Area Directors, with powerful help from the Holy Spirit, intentionally deploy new missionaries specifically to key tasks, both as pioneers and as partners. Key factors to a priority and systemic regional response are casting vision, in-depth training, and unifying a team that is capable of tackling the tough task of UPGs in their region.

3. Identify the Need for Each Context: Pioneer church planting among the unreached and Apostolic Function among the reached.

Red Zone (see pg. 3): People groups where there are no known or very few Christians, no known or few fellowships of local believers, no Scripture translation, little or no media in the local language, unengaged or minimally engaged. *Needed: pioneer church-planting teams*, involving a multiplicity of missionary roles.

Yellow Zone: People groups with few Evangelicals (> 1% but < 2%) but have Scripture, media, and church movements although the Christian faith has remained a tiny minority. Needed: *pioneer church-planting teams* and *partnership* endeavors with the weak or nascent Christian community. Missionaries should be assigned who strengthen the newly forming church and assist the national church in developing a full-orbed ministry to their society, help the church develop context sensitivity where it tends toward being isolated from the non-Christian society, develop emerging leaders, identify hidden people groups in their neighborhood, empower the church for cross-cultural mission, etc.

Green Zone: People groups with strong national churches where there is greater than 2 percent Evangelical population. Needed: *Apostolic Function* All cross-cultural staff working “with the church” have the vital role to function apostolically: in mission mobilization, theological education, all forms of training, and implanting apostolic DNA into church movements. Thus current missionaries in these situations will be encouraged to intentionally labor to cast vision where there is none, whatever their task. AGWM will seek to avoid assigning missionaries to areas of redundancy (doing tasks that the local church could be/should be doing), supplying vision-casters and resource persons for ministries that the existing church is not doing or unable to do.

4. Communication and Education for Missionary Family: We would suggest that AGWM seriously reevaluate missionary training both pre-field and on the field in order to establish a trajectory of missionary education that will empower the missionary team for the task of church planting among the least reached. A well-rounded, shared experience of education instills a unified vision, instigates a team mentality, and builds common mission philosophy and methodology. Missionaries are empowered, through adequate training, to articulate to the national churches and stateside constituency how their task serves in the greater mission of AGWM; reaching the least reached.

5. Communicate and Educate Stateside Constituency: Our supporting churches need to understand that we are committed to reaching the least reached not as one of many things that we do, but as the core of our identity as a Pentecostal mission agency. The four pillars and the goal of a fully indigenous church feed this one grand purpose of laboring to bring the gospel to those who have the least access in our world. Communication and educational opportunities serve to articulate this vision to our churches, to create an environment for dialogue, build trust, unify the body, and focus us all on the same goal. Our desire is that districts and churches gain faith that AGWM is wisely using the resources, both financial and personnel that have been entrusted to us.

Problem Issues to be Considered

There are a number of issues that will need to be addressed in formulating a change plan that crafts a systemic and priority response to the needs of UPGs. While this is not a comprehensive list, the following areas seem to us to be critical:

- **Reframing the vision of AGWM for our constituent U. S. AG church.**

In the past, terms such as 10/40 window and unreached people groups have caused churches to question the validity of missionaries who work at missionary tasks in other regions of the world. While every supporting church is in a sense a free agent, communication from AGWM, as well as from itinerating missionaries, must validate the strategic importance of missionary

ministry in all parts of the world. The goal of the AGWM national office and missionaries is to help pastors and churches know how to respond strategically and wisely to this focus.

- **Reeducation of the missionary team.**

Since for the past two decades AGWM has not constructed their mission work in terms of an unreached people group focus, the concepts associated with this kind of mission terminology are now widely known but often not well understood and, therefore, wrongly used to promote the importance of “my ministry” in contrast to others. Mission is the work of the whole body of Christ. It is the Spirit that gives gifts to His Body; this means that there is no A team and B team and those working among the existing church should not be made to feel devalued. The change plan will be designed to help such workers and churches not only to understand the shift but to participate as well. Intentional (re)education and consistent, clear, and repetitive communication are vital to enable veteran and new missionaries to shape and articulate their roles in the context of the community vision of taking the gospel to the unreached.

- **Revisiting the theology of the leading of the Holy Spirit in regard to missionary placement:** the role of the Holy Spirit call to the AGWM community in juxtaposition to the individual’s call.

A theology of calling must be explored in order to develop a hermeneutic that encompasses both personal calling and AGWM corporate calling. In the past, personal call has been a primary factor in determining missionary placement. A systemic response would mean that the corporate call of AGWM to unreached people groups would become an increasingly important filter in appointing, sending, and placement of new missionaries.

- **Concentrating our work with national churches to catalyze their own sending to unreached peoples.**

Taking the gospel to the unreached is the task of the whole body of Christ and our understanding of partnership opens up rich areas for missionary labor in empowering national churches to become fruitful senders. Creative options for working together as church planting teams among unreached peoples must be more widely explored.

- **Developing evaluative tools that will help us identify priority work and exit strategy criteria.**

A critical step in emphasizing ministry to the least reached is to develop an evaluative process whereby each area: 1) assesses the health of the national church, 2) determines the presence of least-reached populations and evaluates demographic changes, and 3) identifies what is presently being accomplished by our partners and missionary colleagues. A standard evaluative tool that is flexible but can be applied worldwide is critical for areas, regions and indeed, AGWM as a whole, to develop a comprehensive ministry plan that identifies the full range of roles needed, from pioneer church planting teams to working in apostolic function with the existing church.

Conclusion

When we talk about unreached people groups, it is fundamentally an issue of access to the saving message of the gospel. Increasingly detailed research on the status of the Christian faith among the ethnolinguistic peoples of the world shows us that there is a great divide

between those who have resources within their sociocultural setting that will allow them to hear the gospel, and those that do not. For Pentecostal missionaries in the Assemblies of God to talk about unreached peoples is not to broach a new subject or to move away from “the way we do mission.” Rather it is to draw upon the strongest and deepest streams of the vision of our spiritual forefathers who saw their experience of the Spirit empowering them to take Jesus to the world. There is absolutely no doubt in our minds that with the kind of information that we now hold in our hand the early Pentecostal pioneers would have led the way, borne any burden, and made any sacrifice necessary to take the gospel to the groups where we know there are no or few Christians.

We believe that we are poised at a great moment in the history of our mission and our movement. Everett Wilson, in his biography of J. Philip Hogan, said that in the 1950s the Division of Foreign Mission was the institutional salvation of the Assemblies of God because it gave the movement something to focus on past themselves. A systemic response that unashamedly prioritizes the unreached of our world could again provide that kind of call to the entire movement to awaken new streams of renewal for the lost near and far. A strong AGWM response to the unreached at this time will also have powerful impact on national churches throughout the World Assemblies of God Fellowship as they begin to send out their own workers.

But most of all we do it because the Bible mandates it and the Spirit is ringing the challenge in our hearts. May God give us wisdom and courage to respond.

Action Steps

- 1. Develop an intentional change plan, a mission trajectory for a 10-year transition to have a majority of our workers focused on unreached people.**
 - Change is never easy and there is a wealth of material to help navigate organizational change. Due to the complexities inherent in a refocus such as this we strongly recommend that a process be engaged to formulate an intentional change plan that has a 10-year time horizon.
 - The locus of change is mobilization of new missionaries for church planting teams rather than redirecting veteran workers.
 - The change plan will ensure that we validate and affirm those who are not directly involved in church planting. Each missionary, however, should be able to articulate his or her contribution to the collective calling of AGWM to take the gospel to unreached peoples.
- 2. Utilize Joshua Project data base terminology for people group, unreached people, unengaged people and reached people; critically interact with these definitions according to our missiology, and communicate our missional response to our constituency.**
 - To utilize the terminology is not to be bound by it; rather, it requires critical interaction, prophetic analysis of future needs in light of demographic trends, and the development of Spirit led mission strategies. This missiology needs to be communicated regularly to our constituency.
- 3. Clarify the corporate call of AGWM.**
 - A clarification of the corporate call of AGWM to bring to the forefront the commitment to take the gospel where Christ is not named becomes an additional filter to help in assessing call and determining placement.
- 4. Develop creative educational pathways for the missionary body and USA churches and pastors.**
 - Realizing the complexities of exegeting cultural differences, developing mission strategies for the unreached, and carrying out church planting, it is imperative to adequately prepare missionaries for the challenges of developing sustainable and fruitful ministry.
 - Every avenue available to train and cast vision among our USA churches must be developed and utilized.
- 5. Prioritize church planting among those with least access to the gospel, wisely assign missionaries with Apostolic function skills to work with national churches.**
 - Ethnolinguistic group 1 percent or less Evangelical would be a top priority for church planting, moving through to groups between 1 and 2 percent Evangelical, to sociological subgroups and geographically remote places that do not have the gospel, (aiming at up to 70 percent of our missionary population focusing on these groups). Fewer workers would be assigned to serving in an apostolic function among reached people groups to strengthen their ability to send their own cross-cultural workers.
- 6. Create evaluation tools and empower Area Directors and personnel on the ground to perform vigorous evaluation of their area (Area Director Led)**

- Every Area Director should be commissioned to begin a collaborative evaluative process of the strategic function of the missionaries and mission work in their area. This evaluative process should include at minimum the following questions:
 1. What are the UPGs in the Area?
 2. What is AGWM doing among UPGs in the Area?
 3. What is the strategic function of each worker in the Area? (How does their ministry contribute to reaching UPGs?)
 4. What is the health of the national church?
 5. What demographic shifts are signals to future needs? How should we be working prophetically in this area or region?
 6. What is the Exit Strategy for workers in the Area?

ⁱ The Joshua Project defines “professing Christian” as “One who professes to be a follower of the Christian religion in any form. This definition is based on the individuals self-confession, not his or her ecclesiology, theology or religious commitment and experience.” (see <http://www.joshuaproject.net/definitions.php?term=3>) Although this demonstrates a supposed availability of faithful witness and access to Christian materials, it does not account for the marked differences between cultural Christians, nominal Christians, and believing Christians. This terminology will be explored in the larger document that is to follow.

ⁱⁱ See for instance the definitions posted on the following websites:
http://www.uscwm.org/index.php/resources/detail_page/people_groups/
 or <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-list-comparison-general.php> (both accessed May 25, 2012).