

A New Era in Mission Fruitfulness?

Decades of Mixed Results

Since the mid 1970s, mission research has aimed to show where missionaries are most obviously needed—distinct “unreached” people groups with the lowest percentage of identifiable Evangelicals.

Most missionaries work among “reached” peoples, but thousands have focused on starting churches in “unreached” peoples, and many oppressed and minority groups have eagerly responded. Local leaders, approached respectfully with the good news, have led whole tribes, villages, and groups small enough to make a collective decision to embrace the good news that God’s love for all peoples includes them, and embraced the opportunity to identify with global Christendom.

However our mission efforts have generally been as ineffective among majority peoples as they have been effective among minority peoples. Thus while the count of unreached peoples today is less than half of the best estimates of forty years ago, the **number of people in unreached groups today may be double what it was 40 years ago.**

A More Fruitful Approach

This century, study of Jesus’ and Paul’s ministry methods and later movements has identified *movements* as a biblical and highly fruitful alternative to the traditional pattern of evangelizing individuals, gathering churches of strangers, and hoping they will multiply.

In late 2014, researchers were tracking about 150 movements of Jesus followers reproducing exponentially, even among majority peoples. We learned of even more as God drew leaders from these movements together. By late 2017 more than 600 movements had been found reproducing to four or more generations, currently averaging 75,000 believers per movement. This reality has produced a collective vision for “no place left” where Christ is not known (see the 3 minute video at 2414Now.net).

What *Makes* a People Unreached?

Each unreached people is bound together in 1) a strong sense of birth identity, 2) a desire to maintain their heritage/identity, 3) and concern that Christendom (unknown to them, or as portrayed in the global media) may be a threat to their identity. This third point can at times be fueled by Christian insensitivity, harshness, and disrespect. To them Christendom can appear like the *Borg* in *Star Trek*, declaring “your identity as a people must end,” and “resistance is futile.”

Among the unreached (which are nearly all collectivistic), fear of losing family members to Christendom is often compounded by fear of shame which their people may heap upon a family who loses a member to Christendom.

Thus the very blessing God promised—to their people and to all peoples (Gal 3:8)—is often hidden from their sight by the way our approach to them aggravates their fears.

How are Unreached Peoples Reached?

Normal evangelism and church planting draws individuals from diverse segments of society into congregations of strangers. This approach heightens the fear among unreached peoples of losing their identity. God does use resulting congregations to bless many individuals, but this wins hundreds while distancing millions.

In contrast, more fruitful mission efforts aim for movements to spread God’s blessing among households and relational networks, like leaven in the dough. This results in a contagious daily experience of God’s kingdom in organic (often invisible) *ekklesia* seeking to impart God’s blessing to whole communities without aggravating their fears.

Ultimately God will reveal the “mystery of Christ,” that “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). Toward that end, sensitivity to each people’s fears can help them experience God’s blessing and thus embrace a richer, better identity in Christ.

I am eager to collaborate in refining and promoting these concepts.
Let me know if you have suggestions for improvement or circulation:

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