**Partnering with Indigenous Ministries to Reach the Last Frontiers**

By David Taylor

**Introduction**

The subject of this paper assumes two important realities: First, there are still frontiers to be reached with the gospel, and second, there are believers near these frontiers that can be equipped to reach into them.

Let us first examine the idea of frontiers. A frontier for the gospel is a place or people group that does not yet have a strong indigenous church. Around 7,000 unreached people groups have been documented to date. This is a good start. There are probably many more that have not yet been discovered. These figures, for example, do not include the many hundreds of tribes in the Arab world. They do not include the thousands of dialects of the world’s known languages. If you were to take all the unreached castes in India and list them by the languages they speak, you would have over 7,000 unreached groups in this one country alone. It is really impossible to know how many frontier people groups there are at the present time. All we really know is they are plentiful, and the more we research them, the more we discover. When Wycliffe first began cataloging spoken languages for the purposes of Bible translation they started with a list of a couple thousand languages. Today they have documented over 6,800. Most of these still do not have the Bible in their language. The good news is we have more information on what remains to be done than ever before. If we start with what we know, we will be well on our way to finishing the task of world evangelization.

If you were to place all of these unreached groups on a map it would quickly become apparent that most of them live in what are called restricted access countries. Over half the world’s population live in countries where it is illegal for foreign missionaries to proselytize. Less than 10 percent of the foreign missionary force are working in these countries. In every restricted country, there is at least some small contingent of foreign missionary presence working in various clandestine forms. However, their presence is almost always at risk of exposure the moment they are successful to any extent. They can, and often are, removed at a moment’s notice.

India, for example, is very good at tracking down clandestine foreign missionaries and expelling them from the country. The same thing has happened in China. A friend of mine who worked among the Zhuang told me recently that over 70 foreign missionaries working among the Zhuang were rounded up and banned from the country. This happened quite suddenly, without warning. Something similar happened in Morocco.

Thankfully, there are over 100 million believers in China. The same is true in India. Even in Morocco, there are now thousands of indigenous believers. There is no country on earth today that is without some presence of local believers. The work of foreign missions over the last two hundred years has produced a growing evangelical movement in the non-Western world that today numbers over 400 million. From a practical strategic standpoint, the effect of this movement is that the cultural distances separating unreached peoples from the gospel are shrinking day by day.

This brings us to the second assumption from which we began – in every area of the world there are indigenous believers with the capacity and willingness to evangelize and plant churches among the frontiers nearest them. This type of mission has been referred to as indigenous mission, near-cultural mission and proximate mission. There are growing signs that this modern wave of local mission is fast becoming the predominant form of frontier engagement today in partnership with international ministries.

A great example of this is the Finishing the Task network, which began with a list of 3,000 unengaged people groups ten years ago. These are groups that were documented to have no known Christian witness. Ten years later over 2,500 of these groups have been engaged with full time workers. Over 90 percent of these engagements have happened through international ministries partnering with indigenous believers and churches nearby the unreached groups.

**Missiological Theory and Biblical Foundations**

When we speak of indigenous missions, we have four principal types: 1) Indigenous to the region, 2) indigenous to the country, 3) indigenous to the local area, 4) and indigenous to the people group. The goal of mission is obviously to see the fourth type happening everywhere. But where it does not yet exist, partnering with these other types is proving to be one of the most effective forms of achieving breakthrough in newly engaged groups.

We must also define what we mean by mission in this context. There are obviously many types of mission. All are important and valid. But the reason frontier mission is so important is because all other forms of mission must by definition flow out from this initial step. The purpose of frontier mission is to see a thriving, indigenous church established in every people group. The strategy of frontier mission is to effectively bridge the gospel between cultures such that the gospel itself is transferred with the least degree of foreign culture.

It is self-evident from this strategy that the gospel will move most effectively when there is the least amount of cultural distance to be overcome. A Christian pygmy from the Congo forest is going to have a challenge in planting a church among sophisticated New Yorkers on Wall Street. Equally, a southerner from Mississippi might find it just as challenging, though he is from the same country. But a believer from nearby Connecticut might have an easier time communicating.

The strategy of frontier mission then is to identify where are the best bridges for the gospel in each place. The bridges may come in unexpected ways as we see in the Book of Acts. Luke documents for us the way in which the gospel breaks out from the Jewish cultural sphere into the Greco-Roman world. In Acts 11 we see this in detailed form. We are told that believers who were scattered from the persecution in Jerusalem went out and talked to Jews only. But some from Cyprus and Cyrene shared their faith with Greeks as well in Antioch. Now why was that? What made the difference? Here was the key to God’s strategy. These believers were Hellenistic Jews—a blend between Jewish and Greek culture. They were a bridge between two worlds. As a result of this transference, the first major breakthrough occurred in the Greco-Roman sphere, leading to millions of conversions in the centuries to come.

Luke was part of Paul’s team and he faithfully documents Paul’s unique strategy of identifying the bridges of God wherever they went. Paul understood that God had prepared the nations for the gospel by scattering the Jewish diaspora in major cities around the world. His strategy was to go into these cities where such cultural and linguistic bridges could be found, and evangelize the Gentile “god-fearers” who had been attracted to the light found in Judaism.

Donald McGavran describes this process as follows in the *Bridges of God:*

There were Gentile servants in Jewish homes, and Gentile patients of Jewish physicians, and Gentile officers under the influence of Jewish teachers, and many others. Each one was a small bridge into the Gentile community. Paul sought to bring them all into the existing Christian movement which started out by being Jewish and ended up with the conversion of the Roman world. But at the outset he preached Christ mainly to a limited group of Gentiles, those Gentiles who were predisposed to become Christians by their Jewish contacts. . .

By means of "the Gentiles on the bridge" there came to be in town after town within a comparatively short time a considerable number of Gentile converts who remained in close organic connection with large numbers of unconverted relatives. These new churches which had in them now large numbers of Greeks, were immersed in a Greek milieu, and a People Movement among the Greeks was underway. (p. 34)

We can see in this a deeper understanding of what the “fullness of time” actually meant. God sent his Son at just the right moment to capture the progress that had been made from three centuries of Jewish diaspora development from Spain to the China Sea. The mission of the apostle Paul and others was to look for what God was already doing in an area. When Paul found a Timothy, who was part Greek and part Jew, he welcomed him on the team and trained him to reach his fellow Greeks. It was through this strategy of working with the natural bridges that God had been creating over centuries that enabled the gospel to spread so rapidly in the first fifty years after Christ.

**Current Examples**

The pattern from the book of Acts continues today on a scale almost unimaginable. A great example of this happened recently in Iran. As a result of the Armenian genocide, Armenians were scattered all over the world. Some went to Iran, and of these a few became evangelical Christians. In the 1980s God spoke to an Armenian pastor in Tehran named Haik Hovsepian about the need to start reaching Persians with the gospel. He began using Farsi in his services and developed contextual Bible studies and worship songs for Persian believers. When the government discovered what he was doing, they ordered him to stop. He refused. Eventually one of his Persian disciples was arrested and sentenced to death. Haik didn’t give up. He initiated an international campaign to keep him from being executed. His campaign worked, and the man was released. But that same day both would be brutally martyred by Muslim extremists.

At the funeral, many Persian believers came to pay their respects, knowing full well the secret police were documenting all who were there. The courage of Haik and his Persian friend inspired a whole generation to boldly proclaim their faith. Though the Armenian churches were closed and forced to go underground, God used this as the necessary means to covertly disciple and train the steady stream of Persian believers who were looking for truth. Today, there are thousands of underground house churches all throughout Iran and an estimated one million believers. The children of Haik continue to broadcast the gospel via satellite along with others. It is conservatively estimated that over 40 percent of the population of Iran has heard the gospel through these satellite programs.

God is now raising up Persian pastors, evangelists and leaders. He used Persian-Armenian refugees to get things started. He used a martyr. But from out of this tragedy has come a harvest no one can stop, and the whole Muslim world is now talking about. Twenty years ago, few would have predicted such a thing was possible. But our God is that amazing. He chose to turn fear and hate into love and hope. That’s what our God does, that’s who he is, and the whole world is about to know it, and see it.

This is why Jesus taught his disciples, “blessed are the peacemakers”. It was precisely because he was sending them out into the conflict-zones of the world, into the darkness of prejudice, unforgiveness and hate to shine his light of love, hope and grace. This is also why proximate missions is so important. Like nothing else can accomplish, near-cultural mission most clearly demonstrates the power and truth of the gospel of grace. Of course we all believe this, but we have sometimes wrongly assumed that it has to wait—that reconciliation cannot happen as the lead—as a primary methodology of mission. Yet when you look at Scripture, you find that is exactly what God intends to do.

Recently I learned of a movement in Myanmar among the Rakhine Buddhists that demonstrates this beautifully. Thousands are coming to know Jesus in a house-church movement along the Western coast of Myanmar. The movement is highly contextual—they pray, for example, with their hands upright, together but unfolded in the Buddhist style. Now as Jesus is transforming their hearts, he is also giving them a burden to reach out to their neighbors, the Rohingya people. At first glance this might seem like a terrible idea. The Rohingya are in the midst of being ethnically cleansed by their Buddhist neighbors. But that may also be the very reason why the witness of these new Rakhine believers is so outstanding and effective. Being sensitive to the need for contextualization, when they came to the Rohingya, they came as culturally appropriate as possible. Their female missionaries covered their heads to show respect for the Rohingya’s Muslim culture. They had the wisdom to teach new believers to pray in a way that was culturally relevant to their context. They also saw that they needed help economically, and so they created businesses to employ them—no strings attached. It wasn’t long before God raised up a local Rohingya leader who caught the vision and begin evangelizing his own people. The transfer was complete! You see, as the adage goes, it only takes a spark to get a fire going, and many times the heat from a burning fire among one people group is all you need to get the process started in another. In fact, wherever there is sufficient gospel movement heat you can expect that to happen. When it doesn’t happen, buyer beware! Such lifeless Christianity is not worth living for.

Another good example of proximate mission is happening today in the country of Chad. The early missionaries there reached the South of the country, which was mostly animistic. They did little to reach the northern Muslim areas and were discouraged from doing so. Today the capital city of Ndjamena reflects this reality even though it is located in the north of the country. There is an invisible line down the middle of the city dividing the Christians in the south and the Muslims in the north. There are no churches in north Ndjamena and Christians have been afraid to go there—until recently.

A group of MBBs from the central Guerra region in Chad have dared to open a school there and are actively evangelizing the Chadian Arabs who live there. The Guerra region is a geographical bridge between north and south where 5,000 MBBs have come to faith in Christ. Though the MBBs from Guerra are not Arabs, they speak Arabic with a much purer accent than their Southern Christian counterparts in the city, who prefer French. The Guerra believers have turned out to be the perfect bridge to reach the Chadian Arabs and other northern peoples. Now, does this exempt everyone else from participation? Obviously not. While this has been happening, God has also been awakening the Southern Christian diaspora that has been scattered through government jobs all over the country. In every northern Muslim city you have at least one church made up of Southern Christians. In the past they have done little to reach their Muslim neighbors, but today this is beginning to change.

Recently a group of Southern Christians, in partnership with believers from the Guera region, went door to door to every home in the city of Mao, the capital of the Kanem province. The people who live there, known as the Kanembu, are a completely unreached group of 750,000 people. In this small evangelistic campaign more Kanembu came to Christ than ever before in history. It was less than twenty out of a town of 10,000 people. But that’s a beginning. Now they must believe God to soon raise up Kanembu pastors, teachers and evangelists. Eventually, the proximate outsiders must step aside, allowing the Kanembu church to develop their own expression of the faith.

One more example must be given, which is quite different from the others, but with the same principles applied. In India, near-cultural missions is often vertical rather than horizontal. In other words, it is defined by degrees of separation created by India’s complex social hierarchy—reaching up the social ladder as opposed to reaching across linguistic or geographic barriers. In the beginning missionaries to India planned to reach those at the top first, expecting that breakthroughs among the forward castes would guarantee everyone else could be reached as well.

It didn’t turn out that way and instead the first mass movements began at the bottom. As a result of foreign missionaries being removed from the country after India’s independence, the gospel has been forced to trickle up instead of down. It has been slow going to be sure. Yet the progress we have observed has been achieved in a way that may have seemed completely counter-intuitive to the early foreign missionaries. Untouchables at the bottom are reaching those closest to them on the social hierarchy and gradually the gospel is moving its way up. At the same time, through the Holy Spirit’s enabling, from time to time the gospel movement makes a giant leap. In the city of Hyderabad there is a Dalit pastor whom God has given a ministry of healing. As a result of this over 500 from the wealthy Reddi caste have become believers. Normally these two groups would never interact at this social level. But now these Reddi believers are building this Dalit pastor a 20,000 seat capacity building in the heart of Hyderabad.

Does this sound familiar? God did something similar with the early disciples, the untouchables, you might say, from Galilee. He could have started with the elite, Pharisee educated, citizen of Rome, Paul of Tarsus. But he decided to start with fisherman, carpenters, prostitutes and tax collectors. This trend continued throughout the Roman Empire, and to this day all over the world. Not many of you were wise, influential or of noble birth, Paul wrote. But God choose the uneducated and the weak, the poor, the slaves, and the illiterate to shame the wise and the powerful. He did this to demonstrate his power and illuminate his glory in the most brilliant way for the darkest places of our human condition.

**Best Practices and Cautions**

Partnering with Indigenous ministries can be a very effective strategy for international missions when done the right way. However if done improperly it can also cause great harm. While enormous good has resulted from these relationships historically, the effects of corrupted partnerships are especially amplified in frontier mission contexts. When fraud occurs in a well-established field it can be more readily absorbed. But in frontier, pioneering contexts it can be devastating beyond repair due to the fragility of the emerging church. One of the tragic long-term repercussions are its effects on the gospel itself and the reputation of the Christian faith. If non-believers get the impression that Christianity in their culture is a Western financed invasion and its local actors are mere mercenaries seeking to profit from it, the reputation of true followers of Christ may all be called into question for many years to come.

To avoid such catastrophes there are seven rules every Western partner should consider adopting before entering into long-term partnerships with national believers, especially in frontier mission contexts:

1.  Check your agenda at the airport.

The biggest source of problems in partnerships with local believers is when we come in with our programs and brilliant solutions. The best and most productive vision is always the indigenous one. Avoid the posture of being the “expert” and come as a servant.

2. Remember it’s about relationship.

Good partnerships take time, so go slow. Yes, we want to hurry up and evangelize the world— it is our natural tendency. But when we get out of step with the Holy Spirit we get into trouble. Start simple, and try to keep it that way. Remember our God works in terms of centuries and millennia to accomplish his purposes.

3. Don’t exceed capacity and sustainability.

Has the ministry ever done before what you are now doing together? Is there a proven track record of faithfulness and fruitfulness? Most importantly, when the funds are gone will the work continue? Effective outside funding should increase capacity to grow without compromising the ability to sustain the work long term.

4. Ensure there is both internal and external accountability.

Make sure you know how funds are handled. Most problems can be avoided right here. How are decisions made within the ministry? Are the ministry leader’s personal funds co-mingled with project funds? If there is a building project, who owns the land? If there is a business, who owns the assets? Ask all the common-sense questions you can think of. Most importantly make sure that the ministry leader is accountable to other leaders that are not under his or her control, and make sure there are internal controls for good accounting and fund management.

5. Ask around, but reserve judgment about a potential partner.

Ask other missionaries, ask other national believers, and talk to ex-staff if you can. Remember that just because you hear something that isn’t positive doesn’t mean it’s true. Sadly, in the competitive environment for foreign funding, it is all too common for false rumors to spread. Nonetheless, you should be aware of what others think in the local culture, while being open to reserving judgment.

6. Don’t tie results to funding.

The moment you give economic incentive for glowing reports, you have changed the nature of your relationship. In a patron-client culture, the job of the client is to keep the patron happy by whatever means necessary. This is the source of endless problems in corrupted partnerships. As a general mission rule, if it sounds too good to be true, it almost always is. Attrition and setbacks are a normal part of any mission endeavor. It’s a red flag if you never hear of any!

7. Listen to the Holy Spirit and don’t stop asking.

At the end of the day, no partnership should be engaged without significant prayer and discernment. This really should be the first and last rule! The more people you have praying over it and into it, the greater the safeguards you will have in any healthy partnership.