



Where we have come from: the unreached peoples movement

by Greg Parsons

It is great to be here! Not because of the travel or miles, or being away from family, or co-workers, or to be at a big event, but because there are this many people who are interested in this subject!

But, the global mission movement is struggling. Global culture tells us to always be looking for a new thing—the next thing—the successful, quick thing. Even within the church. Even in missions.

This struggle has come—as it often does—as a result of both a growing number of people with a zeal for outreach and yet often without a clear understanding of lessons from the past. More “hands on the plow” does make the work easier, but it can also get the plow off course. Whether we use a new word or words to describe it, the question before us is: will we continued to focus on the establishment of Christ-following fellowships—the church—in every people group. Even if it becomes unpopular.

It requires a lot. As a popular movie character noted, “Dark and difficult times lay ahead... Soon, we must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy.”

We all want to advance of His Kingdom. Clarity of direction is key. That clarity is rooted in the backdrop of those who’ve gone before us. So, I’d like to reflect on where we have come from.

Around the USCWM, we like to say that “our past in not our future.” While that is becoming true, it is also true that our future does rests on the past. My hope is that this will lay a foundation for where we are headed. I trust that the few, simple yet profound ideas presented here will be at the same time both clarifying and motivating.

Certainly, these profound ideas are not mine, I rest on the work of the names you will hear below and many others. Thanks to them and to the Lord’s work in their respective roles in the

advance of God’s Kingdom. [Note also that when I say church (in various ways) I am not talking about buildings, denominational structures, etc.)]

Think with me a minute about your own pilgrimage. What was it that impacted your life and motivated you to get involved in seeing the unreached reached with the gospel?

Or, perhaps, who was it that impacted your life? Who fanned the flame that gave an outlet to your growing conviction? Keep that in your thoughts—we’ll come back to it.

Let me give an example from the past that is clearly linked with where the UPG movement has come from. Humanly speaking, without this chain of events and people’s calling and vision, we would not be here.

In 1919, a young man went to a YMCA camp in the U.S. where the global statesman and mobilizer, John R. Mott spoke. The man who was listening to Mott later became a 3rd generation missionary, but at that time—during his college years—he felt his family had done all they needed to for the global mission cause. (Don’t you feel that way sometimes?)

But Mott’s message and the Holy Spirit stirred his heart and later at another event where he and others spoke, the heart of the woman he would marry. The man was Donald McGavran.

In November 1923 Donald and Mary McGavran arrived back in India. But those who influenced them didn’t end with Mott. When the McGavrans returned for their second term in India, he was learning about something that he could see would impact missions efforts all over the world. He learned it from the experienced missionary bishop and researcher, J. Waskom Pickett. Pickett did numerous extensive studies of mass movement of peoples to Christ in dozens of places spread over India. He was

The Ethn06 plenary presentation of Greg Parsons, director of the US Center for World Mission.

studying these movements to find out if they were they real? Other Christians were asking: are these peoples really coming to faith together or were they merely following something that might get them a slightly better life.

Pickett found that they were real. He realized a simple yet profound truth—you could think of it probably—people prefer come to Jesus with others like them. McGavran sustained learning from Pickett—even working on his research with him for a period of time—changed his life. As he put it, “I felt like someone who’d found gold on the top of the mountain.” While being known as the father of church growth, McGavran owed much of his thinking and motivation to Pickett. Later in life is said, “I lit my candle at Pickett’s fire.”

McGavran focused on answering the crucial question, “How do peoples become Christians? He saw that throughout history, most of the people who have named themselves as Christians have done so as part of their own people. He was thinking movement. He wrote: “...where men and women could become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ while remaining in their own segment of society, there the gospel was sometimes accepted with great pleasure by great numbers.”

McGavran had a passion to figure out how can help missionaries learn these ideas. He was calling for serious study and understanding of what had happened around the world. During the first 10 years at the School of World Mission he founded at Fuller Seminary, 1000 field experienced missionary (who were called associates not students) did Church Growth studies from all over the world.

Ralph D Winter was brought to the SWM early as well. He reflecting on both those 1000s of studies as well as McGavran’s and Pickett’s work on people movement, but—typical of Winter—took it a step further. He looked at those studies beyond the church growth figures and back in history. He then extrapolated where the missionaries had yet to go.

He was no longer trying to measure how many were inside particular church structures around the world, but how many were outside any kind of church. Which peoples did not yet have any established church?

You could say that McGavran popularized the concept of people groups and people movements, and Winter popularized Unreached People Groups.

In some ways, this culminated in 1974, when Winter gave a paper at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism called, *The Task of Highest Priority: Cross-cultural Evangelism*.

He wrote about this later, noting: “But even if every country contained sufficient evangelical strength, what is often ignored is that pockets of unreached peoples cannot be reached by ordinary “near-neighbor” evangelism. What fell to this writer at Lausanne ’74 was a plenary paper in which I endeavored to show that over half of the people in the world who are not Christians are people who cannot be reached by anything but

pioneer missionary techniques, not ordinary mono-cultural evangelism, not believers speaking their own native language.” Indonesians who go to Unreached Peoples IN Indonesia, are going cross-culturally!

Wilbert Shenk noted: “The 1974 Lausanne Congress gave high priority to strategizing world evangelization. Probably the most significant conceptual contribution to missionary strategy in the twentieth century is the notion of “hidden” or “unreached” people groups introduced at the Lausanne Congress and since promoted worldwide.”

Donald McGavran referred to this same presentation stating that it proved beyond any reasonable doubt that in the world then, 2.7 billion men and women cannot hear the gospel by “near-neighbor evangelism.”

For months leading up to that presentation, Winter was floating various ideas from his thinking, including the calling of these peoples without a church “Hidden Peoples”—in order to draw attention to them. The down side of that phrase was that it tended to define the plight of these people in terms of how clearly they were noticed by mission efforts.

Once there was agreement on the term Unreached Peoples (note—not unreached people_ [without the “s”], the idea began to spread. Other mission leaders and agencies got on board with the idea of reaching the unreached and the idea spread. In the process, some sought to break it all down into manageable, bit-sized pieces. They tried—perhaps too hard—to make sense to the American audience and to motivate them toward action in a business or management like way. Some of the criticism of the part of the movement was justified. Some on the global scene felt the Americans were just trying to manage the job better to get it done.

Some criticism was based on lack of understanding. Some heard paternalistic Western goal setting when they talked of “finishing the task” or “completing world evangelization.”

Perhaps another quote from Winter will help here. He wrote: “...the most important achievement of the [Lausanne ’74] conference was the great emphasis on looking at the world as peoples rather than as countries. Strategically, Lausanne also changed one key word from Berlin: the World Congress on Evangelism of 1966 became the International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974—the word evangelism being a never-ending activity, and evangelization being intended to be a project to be completed. Here, in embryo, was the concept of closure.”

Key in his understanding of the task was the idea that in order for the gospel to take root in a people, there would need to be a missiological breakthrough. The people would need to be penetrated with truth about Jesus that made sense to them.

By focusing on seeing the missiological breakthrough occur, Winter saw that the end of church planting is the beginning, it was a means. We want to see the finished product of an

established church in an unreached people as the beginning of the process of transformation.

Once it is begun, the task of evangelization is done for that group, while the job of evangelism goes on. Looking at it this way allows us to stick to our calling and encourage the calling of others, who are involved in the ministries that come after the church is established in a people. But there were several ideas that grew out of the Lausanne '74 paper and the thinking that followed that proved helpful both then and now:

- The so-called “E-Scale” which indicates how culturally distant—and therefore more likely to be obscured or hidden—the peoples were from evangelists.

- Later, Winter developed the “P-Scale” which compares relative distance of the people themselves from a relevant church movement. This helps to rightly focus on the present church movements and their adequacy more than the particular efforts by missionaries to communicate the gospel.

Later, some seemed to dilute the meaning of reaching the unreached to merely exposing people to the gospel—like getting to a destination. By contrast, Steve Hawthorne (co-editor of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course—who is here with us) put it this way: “...the notion of people groups ultimately has value only if the entire task of world evangelization is seen as launching sustained Christ-following movements in every durative human community.”

There is a lot more history to this. In the end, the idea took hold; both in mission agencies, in many churches in the West, and around the globe.

Here are a few things that we do NOT mean by the idea of Unreached People Group and some we do. We are not:

1. Looking for communicators (evangelist) merely getting a message across (nor merely thinking they did of course).
2. Saying that reaching Unreached People Groups and establishing fellowships of Christ-followers is all God wants to do, nor that other kinds of work are somehow less important.
3. Unreached People are the neediest peoples, nor that the individuals in a UPG are either.
4. Talking about what percent of a people is called Christian or Evangelical—these are helpful for other planning and understanding.
5. The key question is not: are there a few believers in a particular people.

On the other hand, we are:

1. Saying that the initial task of seeing Christward movements among a people for the first time is the highest priority task, because it is the first step which allows for further transformation in as many levels as God allows and supplies.

2. The breakdown of peoples socially—or socio-peoples—is important for evangelism, communication, relief/development, etc.; while...

3. The ethnolinguistic people group distinction is significant for church planting or insider movements.

4. The key question is: has a missological breakthrough occurred?

About year ago, the Lausanne leadership asked me to be their Global Strategist. That meant reading through some 1500 pages of Lausanne Occasional Papers that grew out of their forum in the fall of 2004 in Thailand. Each of more than 30 groups produced action steps as a result of their work.

To see all of these action steps be accomplished boiled down to two core requirements: (1) growing, active, multiplying churches or fellowships made up of (2) committed, involved believers. Almost every issue group saw these two needs and commented that this is core to advancing that issue. But two related question rose from my experience in Thailand and my reading of the issue group papers:

1. How do we see the church established and multiplying in every culture—especially where it is not present? and,

2. How do we help believers truly live out their faith—from Monday to Saturday—in the midst of their life, family, school, neighborhood, work, and business?

Simplistically, you could boil down all ministry to either (1) starting churches—so there are people to mobilize and organize for ministry there and beyond that culture—or (2) helping churches to mature and grow in new areas of ministry to which the Lord is His body. The main thing we are talking about when we use UPGs, is being sure that we have the beginnings started in every people where it is not yet.

We have made great progress. There are people out there—like many of you—Carl in M.E. Arab world, David with the Pastun, Brad networking in the Northern Caucasus, Lowell among high caste Hindus, etc. You could list your friends.

Yet, just like Winter in 1974, we need to call pioneers to go and see Christward movements take place among the unreached. We need to call people in other kinds of ministry to back it in heart and prayer. The enemy of our souls will oppose it. It will only happen through prayer. But it will happen.

Paul wrote his own motivation for ministry in Romans 1:5. He was called by God and equipped by grace, given an apostleship for obedience (gk) to: bring about the obedience of faith among all Gentiles on behalf of his name.

So think back to our opening question: Who impacted your life? Whose life are you impacting?

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