

Analyzing the Frontier Mission Movement and Unreached People Group Thinking

by Alan Johnson

Two events in the late 1970s radically altered the direction of my life. Just after high school graduation I began attending an Assemblies of God church, and that summer I was baptized in the Holy Spirit. That experience brought a zeal and passion to share the Gospel and ultimately led to a decisive calling into full time vocational ministry. The second event happened a few years later when a missionary friend from my church handed me a brochure about a group trying to found an organization called the U. S. Center For World Mission. I liked the idea when I read about it, sent a small financial gift and received in return a poster that I hung on the wall across from my desk in the small youth pastor office I was occupying. Day after day I would look at this simple pie chart depicting the five major blocks of unreached people. Looking turned into praying, and led in turn to more reading and study until the Holy Spirit used that data to create an unshakable conviction that I personally had to work among an unreached people. That pie chart changed my life by giving me a whole new vision of the world.

Before that my local church experience of hearing missionary reports had fanned the flame for evangelism, but it never pushed me toward the conclusion that I must be involved personally. With my missiological naivete and lack of context, the glowing reports I heard were so victorious and exciting they only confirmed my conviction that overseas the job was being finished and someone needed to stay in America to try to bring such revival here. However, this unreached peoples chart turned my naïve thinking upside down. Suddenly I found myself in a world where some people had access to the Gospel and others did not—unless someone crossed a cultural frontier with the message. Now, my own personal calling to involvement in missions was created as two streams of my experience converged. Baptism in the Spirit brought passion to reach the lost, while missiological data showed me the state of the world and where those with least access to the Gospel were located.

What I was unaware of at the time was that just a few years before, the developer of that chart, Ralph Winter, had given a brief presentation featuring facts, figures and biblical interpretation that challenged the Christian community to make cross-cultural evangelism the very highest priority. The concepts presented that day became the foundation of a new paradigm of missiology and the inspiration for a movement that has mobilized Christians everywhere in unprecedented fashion for a final thrust at the last unreached and least reached harvest fields. Calling itself the frontier mission movement, this new

way of thinking centers on the concept of people groups and the need for establishing a viable church movement among every people. Gary Corwin assesses the impact of the movement in this way:

When in 1974 Dr. Ralph Winter gave his famous speech, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," at the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, a new era in mission history was begun. It was not really so much that a new vision was born, but that a new way of looking at an old vision was provided . . . What was new at Lausanne was that for the first time in the modern period the task was now couched primarily in terms of ethnic or peoples and religious blocks, rather than in geographic or geopolitical terms. Over the last two decades since that speech an astounding shift has taken place. The concept of unreached peoples (in contrast to unreached people) is on the lips of virtually everyone concerned with the mission of Christ's church.¹

However, the spread of this new mission philosophy has not come without controversy. While being enthusiastically embraced in some corners, it has found a mixed reception in others. There has been sharp debate in the missiology literature regarding the concepts, definitions and strategies of the movement.

In this series I am suggesting that the concepts of the frontier mission movement form a powerful paradigm

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for viewing the world missiologically and for understanding the work of the missionary. However, these concepts are capable of providing only a partial framework for understanding what is happening in mission around the world today. As we move into the 21st century I believe that it is vitally important for those of us involved in cross-cultural missions to do two things. First, there needs to be analysis and evaluation of the frontier mission movement and unreached people group thinking as a mission philosophy in order to clarify the fundamental contributions it makes to missiology. Second, these core contributions should be utilized to develop a more comprehensive view of mission that embraces the whole world and the whole Body of Christ.

The structure of this series therefore reflects these two major concerns. The first three sections involve analysis and evaluation of the frontier mission movement and unreached people group thinking. They include a look at the historical context in which this movement developed, definitions of terms, important movements, applications and organizations that have grown from it and a critical analysis that looks at some of the problem areas that have developed from this type of thinking. The last two sections examine the key contributions that this movement has made to missiology and then seeks to integrate these core contributions into a paradigm for understanding the missionary role in every context and that can assist mission agencies in developing appropriate strategies for mission in the 21st century.

The frontier mission movement represents a diverse group of organizations and key thinkers without a single headquarters or center. There is no one person or group that speaks authoritatively on its behalf. The major concepts that form the shared thinking of those involved act as a mission philosophy or paradigm that provide a perspective

for understanding the missionary task. If a more comprehensive framework for understanding missions is going to be attempted, it must be built on a clear understanding of the contributions of prior frameworks. This section on analysis seeks to provide a historical and conceptual understanding of the thinking and major concepts of the frontier mission movement.

I have chosen to begin my analysis (Part 1) with the movement's particular view of mission history in the modern era because I believe that it provides the best introduction to the specific understandings it has about what a missionary is and the nature of the missionary task. Then using the 1974 Lausanne meeting as a critical turning point, I will examine the pre-Lausanne roots of the movement to provide some historical background, and then look in detail at Ralph Winter's Lausanne presentation. The next two sections will overview the major concepts, and trace the development of key organizations, movements and applications that have grown out of frontier mission ideology. In the next issue of the IJFM, I will look critically at the movement to identify problem areas and conceptual difficulties, as well as summarize the core contributions made to missiology. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹Gary Corwin 1996 "Sociology and Missiology: Reflection on Mission Research," in *Missiology and the Social Sciences: Contributions, Cautions and Conclusions*, ed. Edward Rommen and Gary Corwin (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 20-21.