

On Strategies of Closure

Refining Our Strategies for “Engaging” All Peoples

by Leonard N. Bartlotti

It stunned me when I saw the Mangurbuz crossed off the priority list. Smaller people groups were listed. Why is this one missing? My instincts were violated. How could a people of 42 million be considered effectively engaged? Surely the presence of eight to ten workers living among them in one city could not constitute “engagement.” Significant and reachable populations in other areas were virtually untouched, not to mention rural areas.

What does it mean to “engage” an unreached people group and how do we know when we have done so? The way we answer that question has significant implications for the resourcing of global ministry to the unreached. Is it more strategic to give the highest priority to recruiting new workers for “unengaged” groups, when millions of people in vastly larger so-called “engaged” unreached people groups continue to be under-served and have less than adequate access to the Gospel? This paper suggests the need to further refine our understanding of what constitutes adequate and effective “engagement” with an unreached people, and proposes a model for assessing engagement in terms that are quantifiable, pragmatic, and field-driven. I want to challenge us to wrestle with the question of how we determine what is strategic, and suggest a practical mechanism by which agencies and churches can determine the potential allocation of new personnel and other resources.

Background to the Problem

Since Ralph Winter’s seminal 1974 address at Lausanne, the evangelical world has been occupied with the goal of “reaching” *panta ta ethne*, all of the thousands of diverse “tribes, languages, peoples and nations” of our world. One consequence was the development of a kind of missiological *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), a logical, though not necessarily linear, sequence involved in penetrating these groups with the Gospel and seeing church movements established. Basic to this understanding is the Church’s perceived need to catalog all of the ethno-linguistic compartments of humanity in order to make purposeful efforts to reach each group in this “register of the peoples” (Psalm 87:6 NIV).

Leonard N. (Len) Bartlotti is an ethnographic folklorist, educator, strategist, and consultant to humanitarian organizations. He served fourteen years among a large Muslim tribal people, and earned his Ph.D. from the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies/University of Wales. He currently lives in La Mirada, CA. lbartlotti@gmail.com

A micro-missiological specialty has evolved devoted to this herculean task. These dedicated and beloved mandarins of missiometrics (many of whom I know personally) have overseen, managed and massaged disparate “lists” of peoples and the dizzying numbers that go with them. These lists continue to help evangelical leaders chart progress toward establishing work among “unreached” peoples, ethno-linguistic groups without a viable, indigenous, evangelizing church movement among them.

In recent years, however, mission leaders have appealed to the church to place its highest priority on reaching a specific subset of unreached peoples who are “unengaged.” As Paul Eshelman stated in his plenary address at Tokyo 2010, these 3500 “unengaged” unreached people groups are “without access to the gospel.” Together they embrace some 352 million people; 632 of these groups are over 50,000 in population. Eshelman elaborated that these peoples tend to have no Scripture, no missionary, no church, and many have no known believers—in sum, “unengaged peoples have no access to the gospel...no [outside] resources coming into that group.” Whether due to their remote locations or opposition to the gospel, or the Church’s lack of awareness, fear of failure, lack of personnel, or assumption that “someone else is doing it,” “no one is even trying” to reach them.

However, the drive to prioritize “unengaged” people groups also has raised a number of questions. Some of the most vocal objections have come from field practitioners. Many of them labor with small, under-resourced teams among large unreached peoples who occupy vast and ecologically diverse territory, in one or more countries and in multiple urban centers.

“How can it be strategic to give the highest priority to recruiting new teams for so-called ‘unengaged’ groups,” they ask, “when millions of other Muslims in vastly larger people groups continue to be under-served

by under-resourced teams, and thus have less than adequate access to the Gospel?” Is it reasonable to consider a people engaged when a mission team shows up in one city—even if most of the dispersed population remains untouched by that minimal witness? Can we in good conscience “tick a box” and count that people group “engaged”?

For example, the “100,000 Persians” in one South Asian country are considered unengaged and make the list. But a massive urban concentration of over 3 million Muslims from another



ethnic group does not. Assuming the first group is verified (and that Persian believers from a neighboring land are not actively reaching them), then no problem: All peoples, large and small, have a right to hear the Good News. But field workers have asked, “Why is the latter group not a ‘priority’?” In part because that people is considered already “engaged”—due to the presence of a few workers among them in a different, smaller city 700 miles away.

Similarly, in a Central Asian country, workers are serving among a large Muslim people, primarily with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the capital city. Tick the box—“engaged.” Meanwhile, other population centers for this people group remain under-served. Granted, there are security-related and other factors that currently make a residential team prohibitive in certain other locales. But the point is, if we consider that people already “engaged,” then potential workers,

vision trips, exploratory teams, awareness, intercessory prayer and intentional efforts will be focused elsewhere. The “box” has been ticked—however minimal or skewed the resourcing may be in reality.

If this is the case, how can we determine if and when we have “effectively engaged” a given people group?

One clue in determining the level of “engagement” of an unreached people is the way field workers “map the context.” Often field-based personnel are in the best position to assess whether a people group is adequately engaged, and their relative access to the Gospel. Field workers know what cities and geographic areas are accessible, which sites function as centers of influence, and where there are opportunities. In short, they know the places that (expat) workers of any kind can enter, or work be initiated. These contextual ethnographic realities (including historical efforts and previous approaches to a people) can provide important indicators for new initiatives. Thus, field dynamics and assessments are important factors in the development of a fresh approach to engagement.

The Concept of Engagement

“Engagement” is one stage in “reaching” an unreached people. But this must involve more than mere evangelistic activity. Jeff Liverman helpfully insists that what is needed is “effective engagement,” which must include “activity that is strategic and will most likely produce fruit that remains and multiplies.”¹

Liverman suggests four essential elements of effective engagement:

1. Apostolic [pioneering] effort in residence;
2. Commitment to work in the local language and culture;
3. Commitment to long-term ministry;
4. Sowing in a manner consistent with the goal of seeing a church-planting movement emerge.²

While some ministries might question the first point, whether “residence” is always necessary, the IMB’s

Jim Haney agrees: “Engagement is about implementing church-planting strategy among each unique global entity.”³

However, not everyone (including some field workers) agrees that the notion of “unengaged peoples” is helpful or meaningful in affecting strategies.

First, “church planting strategies” and “engagement” are generally viewed as needing to come from the “outside in,” that is, from the perspective of intentional cross-cultural mission. Embryonic insider movements, initiatives launched by neighboring communities of faith, by local Christian-background (CBB) churches, or by any “unlistable” but organized entity, are harder to track. Agencies may or may not take these activities into consideration as they develop their own strategic priorities. Nevertheless, these efforts constitute a valid and potentially powerful means of engagement.

Further, the re-definition of “church” in terms of family-based movements to Christ (as proposed by Ralph Winter, Becky Lewis, and others), is also not in view, however promising these may be. The latter issue has been raised more pointedly by Kevin Higgins in his “Beyond Christendom” address at Tokyo 2010,⁴ where he challenges us not to discount or dismiss Christ-ward movements that don’t fit our usual ecclesiastical categories, but nonetheless carry the potential for a significant engagement of a people with the gospel.

Other critiques have been raised by informed researchers, one of whom notes that a large number of peoples in the original list (of 247 Unengaged Muslim Peoples) appear to be “duplicates” (peoples with different names), already reached or engaged, or “legacy listings” (names suggested long ago by the field, but not yet verified). Thus in actuality, the list may represent peoples “for which we need to do adequate research and then confirm their need.” This does not discredit the list. However, it does underline the importance not only of on-going efforts

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to upgrade the list, but of qualitative data from field practitioners. Finally, the focus on the relatively small total population (e.g., of Unengaged MUPGs) in comparison with the larger “whole body of neediest MPGs” may have delayed implementation of CP strategies and omitted “massive (people groups) that are grossly under-engaged.”

Notwithstanding these caveats, it is possible for a people group to be purposefully “engaged” according to Liverman’s criteria above, and *still* not have adequate access to the Gospel. Said another way, one or more agencies may “engage” a people *without having engaged it strategically, adequately, or effectively*. We can “tick” the box on our charts, and inadvertently miss desperate realities on the ground. Just as seriously, we may shift our attention elsewhere at precisely the time when a massive “surge” of intercession, aid, personnel, and Gospel activity in word and deed, at just the right “pressure points,” could lead to breakthrough among a people group.

Is there an alternative way to assess engagement?

Engagement Points, Access, and Centers of Influence

I have a friend who has loved and labored among a Muslim people group for almost thirty years. This man and his wife have lived in at least six or seven major urban centers where members of that MUPG live. In his heart and mind, he carries a burden for at least double that number of strategic locations where he prays passionately that God will raise up and place new teams. If you asked him where we needed workers in order to reach this MUPG, he could tell you.

Another friend and his wife have a burden for a major city in the territory of a large unreached people group. For

security reasons, however, they were unable to live in the city. While they waited for that door to open, they chose an alternative (multicultural) urban location and initiated ministry among “their” people. Recently, they had to leave the country altogether. They moved to a neighboring country and settled in another metropolis where millions of ethnic compatriots of that same adoptive people group live—including some from the dialect area of their initial vision!

A third friend has had a long-standing burden for a relatively small (100,000 population) unreached people group living in a mountainous region of an Asian country. Unfortunately, unrest in the region made anything more than occasional trips impossible. However, while waiting for government permissions, he and his wife stumbled on a door of opportunity in a major city far from the valleys of the UPG. To their delight, they discovered a small but influential community of upper-middle and upper class members of that people group in the city. Literate, multi-lingual, and highly educated, this urban ethnic cohort has opened a significant door for relationships, linguistic research, language and culture acquisition. Even though that newly discovered “open door” is deemed less desirable than residence in the primary locale, the fact is that this worker and his team are taking advantage of a significant opportunity that has increased the level of engagement of this people. Recognition of additional opportunities like this facilitates a broader vision and expanded sphere of influence for teams, and greater access for communities to experience the gospel of the grace of Christ. While we might not want to “tick the box,” we can rejoice and tick “a” box.

Based on my own field work and study of several large unreached people

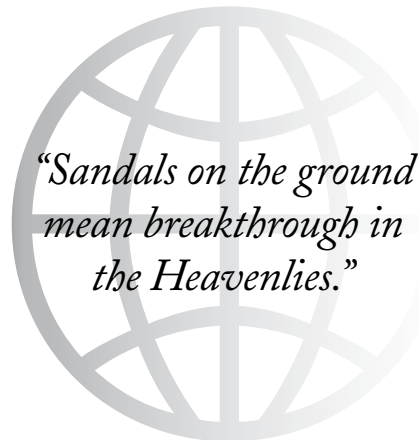
groups, as well as conversations with dozens of workers like those described above, I am convinced that if someone wants to work among a given unreached people, there are generally certain obvious and strategic *points of “entry”* or “access,” “centers of influence,” or what I will now call “*Engagement points.*”

Here are some common characteristics:

- “Engagement points” are generally (but not always) urban centers, or at very least, might be considered socio-economic or political “*centers of influence,*” (especially when viewed from an emic perspective), accessible to insiders and possibly outsiders as well.
- Such centers may be relatively small (100,000 to 500,000 people), but may lie within a population “catchment” area of millions (e.g., a small urban location frequented by semi-nomadic groups from several provinces).
- Access points for a given people group may lie in two or more countries, due to historical claims to land, or when war, disasters, economic migration, or other factors cause some ethnic peoples to spill across national boundaries.
- The determination of access points for expatriate workers, whether from the West or the Global South, is based in part on pragmatics and strategic considerations, e.g., opportunities for business, tentmaker activity, proximity to government or university facilities, logistics of NGO work, etc.
- The determination of access points is based on a collaborative effort between informed field practitioners, veteran workers and scholars, as well as an analysis of the contemporary cultural context, ethnographies, and other data.
- These centers of access and influence are generally quantifiable: when one talks with experienced field personnel, one quickly realizes that, while perhaps not agreeing on the precise number, field workers can come

up with a *finite tentative list of locations* where teams or service ministries have been, can or should be initiated—strategic locations where a people group can be “engaged.”

- Residential incarnational witness—of whatever variety and origin—is optimal for effective engagement. This does not in any way diminish the significant role played by media, literature, and other forms of witness. The on-site presence of ambassadors of Christ is an eschatological turning point in the redemptive history of an



unreached people. In a way we do not fully understand, as I have said elsewhere, “Sandals on the ground means breakthrough in the Heavenlies.”

- When an unreached people group is viewed from a global perspective, salient “diaspora” engagement points also come into view. These communities may function as nodes in the ethnic groups’ negotiation of transnational identity (identity formed by intra-ethnic communication and relationships across geographic boundaries, e.g., Gujaratis in Kenya with links to India), and for any number of reasons may be accessible and strategic points of witness.
- Any list of engagement points must make room for “doors of opportunity,” recognizing that God may move or lead in unexpected ways. In His sovereignty, the “Lord of the Harvest” may create innovative opportunities (for residence, gospel

sowing, humanitarian activity, etc.), opening up “engagement points” we would least expect and never have planned. In a similar way, centers previously “closed” may be opened by a change in government or political climate, economic policy, ecological and other factors.

- All of the strategic points of engagement and influence among a people may or may not be “open” to the same degree at a given point in time. A simple and updateable “green-yellow-orange-red” color system might help to visually indicate the potentialities for engagement in each access point.
- Information on “Engagement points” is exactly the type of information needed in the “Church-planting Registry” proposed by Chris Maynard to tell us where effective church planting is taking place.⁵ A field-accessible “CP Registry” and field-based “Ethnopedia” created in a Wiki format, would enable field personnel to share, collaborate, exchange ideas, and have more and greater ownership of the information they and their colleagues need to make strategic decisions on the ground. Granting the challenges of funding, security, and oversight, broader sharing of relevant field data (including levels and locales of engagement) would add texture to the rich storehouse of knowledge already in place.⁶

One could helpfully reduce these criteria to four types of engagement points for any given people group:

- Primary engagement points** (*major cities, population centers, and access sites*).
- Secondary engagement points** (*e.g., smaller cities, locations of strategic institutions, companies or economic activity, universities, government, etc.*).
- Diaspora engagement points** (*strategic or significant communities of immigrants, refugees, guest workers, etc.*).
- Doors of Opportunity** (*opportunities sovereignly or serendipitously*

opened by God through personal or business relationships, divine favor, natural disasters, etc.).

Does this proposal reduce engagement to a matter of “location” or “access”? Yes, and no. Yes, because by definition, incarnational ministry involves access, “sandals on the ground,” in a specific time(s) and place(s), whether that is Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem, and villages in between, or Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Pattaya. At the end of the day, for any given team of workers, engagement involves *engaging real people (families, leaders, men and women of peace) in specific contexts within or among the people group.*

Note, too, that the notion of “engagement points” proposed here builds upon the criteria for “effective engagement” discussed above. That is, in each gateway site, effective engagement would involve pioneering efforts in residence, innovative ministry that “fits” the local language and culture, with a long-term ministry vision, and effective sowing toward CPMs.

What this proposal does is suggest practical considerations to identify, register, and monitor the *optimal sites for effective real-time engagement* by team(s) of workers, with a view to facilitating Christward movements among a people.

Accessing these engagement points will not guarantee that gospel witness will extend to all sub-groups and regions of an unreached people. However, the concept would tend to ensure that church and mission leaders, as well as potential field workers, are at least aware of—taking full advantage of and fully resourcing—a wider range of significant centers of entry and influence in any strategy to “engage” and “reach” any given people.

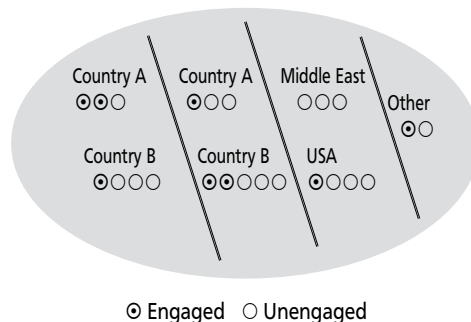
An Illustration: The Mangurbuz People of Central Asia

For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the case of the pseudonymous “Mangurbuz” people of Asia, a large ethno-linguistic people group that lives in two main countries, with significant diaspora populations in the Middle

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East and in the West (Europe and America). Due to security considerations, we cannot list the names of the relevant cities (centers of influence and access) for the people group. However, based on the above proposal to consider four types of engagement points, we can illustrate the “set” of residential loci that should be kept in view in efforts to effectively and adequately engage this people group (Fig. 1):

Figure 1: Mangurbuz Access Points
Primary, Secondary, Diaspora & “Doors”



Thus, for the 30 million Mangurbuz to be considered “effectively engaged,” we would aspire to see a distinct witness in approximately 23 engagement points. (If we allow for some margin of error, we can still safely say that there are 20–25 strategic points of potential influence among this people.) Not all of them are of equal “weight,” to be sure. This must be taken into consideration in times of limited personnel and resources, and balanced with the needs and levels of engagement of other peoples.

Possible Advantages of This Approach

This paper does not presume to address all the issues related to reaching and engaging peoples. However, the refined approach to engagement described here does offer a number of advantages over the current zero-sum assessments that preference “unengaged” peoples over large, grossly under-engaged, peoples. Certainly, no people group should be

left out. This proposal offers a quantifiable, pragmatic, and field-informed approach that can help church and mission leaders make strategic decisions about levels of engagement among all unreached groups.

1. Defining engagement in terms of a number of strategic “engagement points” will give us a more realistic and quantifiable picture of the allocation of Christian resources among specific unreached peoples.
2. Field teams and workers can foster and promote a broader vision of the people, one not restricted by narrow country- or city- or project-based visions.
3. The delineation of which points are engaged or not can be used to avoid “congestion” in certain centers, and focus attention and resources on under-served areas.
4. Agencies and organizations can more strategically “pre-position” teams and workers for language and culture acquisition, team formation and adjustment, relationship building, etc. by considering and utilizing all possible points of access and engagement.
5. In volatile contexts, field teams may be able (or encouraged) to “re-position” themselves strategically in one or another alternative engagement point when required by local conditions. Many workers do this already.
6. Mission leaders and strategic analysts can gain a better grasp and truer picture of the relative accessibility of the Gospel among, and the global Church’s “level of engagement” with, unreached and unengaged peoples. Large people groups hitherto considered “engaged,” upon closer reflection, may have resident CP teams in four or five out of twenty or more potential strategic points of influence. As in the game of basketball, a

“full court press” may be needed in order to see breakthrough.

7. Church and mission leaders, and concerned Christians, can respond in prayer and action to the challenges and opportunities for engaging and serving specific Muslim peoples and focus on the “unoccupied fields,” unengaged centers of influence by which entire peoples might have access to the Gospel.
8. The proposal is based on the sociological and missiological assumption that, if the gospel is implanted in a social context, the normal dynamics of socio-cultural communication, economic interchange, transportation, political influence, familial connections, etc. will facilitate the spread of the gospel among the people throughout the area. This is essentially what the Apostle Paul did in focusing on major urban centers like Corinth and Philippi, preaching and estab-

lishing communities of faith—then moving on for work in the “regions beyond.”

Conclusion

At this stage in the movement to reach all peoples, we need a new understanding of what it means to “engage” peoples with the Gospel. This paper suggests that engagement can be measured more helpfully by determining a set of practical, geographically and contextually relevant “engagement” or access points, which serve as strategic centers of influence among a people group. We cannot consider a people adequately engaged until there is an effective pioneering witness—by expatriate teams or the by-products of their witness—in a significant percentage of these entry points. Just as the Apostle Paul preached the Gospel in strategic centers of influence in Asia Minor and the Graeco-Roman world, so too the church today needs the vision, boldness and faith to see and to enter

the gateways set before us by the God of the Open Door. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ “Unplowed Ground: Engaging the Unreached,” in (Ed.) J. Dudley Woodberry, *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), p. 22.

² Ibid.

³ *Mission Frontiers*, Nov-Dec 2006, p. 11.

⁴ See website Tokyo2010.org for this address.

⁵ “Toward an Effective Church-planting Registry,” in *From Seed to Fruit*, pp. 30-31.

⁶ The term “Ethnopedia” is illustrative, as the domain is already in use by <http://www.ethnopedia.co.uk/>, “a business networking site for professionals interested in Multicultural Marketing and Ethnic Advertising in the UK.”

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