

## A Response to the Responses

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First I want to express my thanks to the five people who took the time and effort to work through this material and bring such excellent insights in their responses. It was gratifying to see that at a number of points these readers resonated with central ideas and arguments in the paper. They also came up with a number of excellent suggestions for further work and refinement. What I will focus on here first is a new insight that their responses brought about for me, and then to address some of the specific questions they raised.

I begin with a fresh insight that grows from their vigorous interaction with the core concepts of frontier mission missiology. A repeated theme in the responses was the call for further clarity of the concepts and also a challenging of their applicability in differing contexts. The new insight that I gained from reading the responses is that it seems that many missiological concepts that are floated as being universal in their scope of application, are actually much more embedded in particular contexts. What this means is the user of the concepts needs to acknowledge that applications of them will of necessity vary in differing contexts and likely have different levels of usefulness.

I have noted in discussions with students that ideas like “unreached” and “reached” are human constructions based in both biblical data, and historical and contemporary observation. Thus they are in a sense “twice removed” from the actual biblical text. I think of this in terms of three levels.

If we take the biblical text, for instance the command to make disciples in Matthew 28, the first level is our understanding of that text in our era. A second level comes when we begin to infer things from these texts and these become mission values. So for instance from specific biblical data in Acts we discern first level tasks-proclaim the Gospel, found churches, train leaders and so on. But at a second level, moving up a level of abstraction, we infer from that data that the churches we plant should be indigenous and capable of flourishing on their own in their own cultural soil. So level one uses biblical language from biblical functions, whereas level two conceptualizes many

pieces of biblical information into a concept, such as the notion of the goal of an indigenous church.

But there is a third level that draws on biblical data and historical observations to develop useful mission concepts that are even more abstract and distant from the biblical text itself. When we move to things like reached/unreached, national church, partnership and so on, these are powerful ideas at a more abstract level and have the potential for broader application.

The responses to the paper helped me see more clearly that even these apparently more abstract concepts are actually products of a particular configuration and era, and as such need careful consideration when hunting an application outside of the framework in which it was generated. The idea of reached/unreached ethnolinguistic groups was generated specifically around the setting of large religious blocks with few Christians, such as the Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist worlds. The trap of the double blind illustration that I used was not theoretical for me but lived experience in Thailand with its Buddhist majority and Christians from that group and a Muslim minority with hardly any Christians and no churches.

The idea of 'peopleness,' reached, and unreached provide both explanatory power and the ability to think strategically about what to do. Murray Cornelius' experiences in African populations of ethnic and tribal diversity resonate well with these ideas. He also finds the concepts helpful with the diaspora from unreached peoples coming to Canada and the need for appropriate missional response from the church there to their presence.

However for other respondents the concepts are not as helpful without making adjustments. Alexander argues that ideas like unreached and other current popular missions ideas need to be revisited in light of global change. The Gaylens rightly point out the problem with the arbitrariness of the percentage of any form of the Christian faith as the breakpoint for "unreached" that put populations with very low levels of evangelical Christians into the "reached" pile. They also note some of the complexities of thinking in terms of ethnicity in the European setting.

My feeling is that there is a tremendous amount of "strategic" power in these third level mission concepts like unreached/reached, people group, national church and partnership. However, they bring the most power and clarity in the specific scenarios in

which they were birthed. Outside of those settings, the concepts require reframing and additional supportive ideas in order to be useful in the new setting.

It is also important to make a distinction between the concept itself and an application that may lie outside or go beyond the original range of intent in the concept itself. The whole idea of “people group” is often questioned on an anthropologic basis or in light of globalization and the breaking down of boundaries, and the vast movement of people both voluntary and involuntary. The utility of the idea of discrete groups is questioned in a world with so many homogenizing forces. Here is where a solid grounding of the big picture of a concept is needed. One point in Ralph Winter’s work that was neglected is the idea that the number of unreached people groups was never a closed issue. The point was never to try and get an exhaustive listing of every ethnic group but rather to identify on the ground when a barrier is encountered that slows down the progress of the Gospel or makes its reception very difficult. His idea of a unimax group, meaning the unified maximum group where the church can be planted without encountering barriers of acceptance or understanding, never caught on. The reality is that you can only find these barriers on the ground and they become the boundary lines for starting a new church planting movement among the new group. Totally quantifying all the ethnic groups of the world, as helpful as this is for getting a sense of the absence or presence of the Christian faith among them, was never the point.

The power then in this concept of an unreached people is the impulse that it brings to cross-cultural mission scenarios to constantly ask the question, “who is not being reached by the version of faith that we are sharing?” It brings a resistance to the temptation of “one size fits all” views, where local churches or missions simply assume that everyone in their orbit is equally capable of responding to the version of the Gospel they are sharing.

I will finish here with some comments on specific questions from the responders. Alexander rightly observed the lack of specific illustrative material. The reason for this had to do with the circumstances under which the paper was written. There was a time in our mission when frontier mission concepts and associated ideas were controversial and not well received. As I began to write on this topic my goal was to try and build bridges between the missiology of my organization and frontier mission thinking. Part of my

strategy was to keep the discussion at the abstract concept level and not to introduce specific examples that would be seen as a critique of current practice.

This scenario also explains why I appear to be not radical enough in some of my suggestions. It was because I was attempting to push things in a new direction without completely alienating my audience.

Regarding the application of unreached people groups concept to the European work of Assemblies of God World Missions (USA) (AGWM), once the environment in the organization changed to a more positive view towards unreached people groups, it provided the chance to refine our response to the realities of the unreached. I was part of a missiology think-tank writing group tasked with looking at defining 'Unreached People Groups' and the AGWM response to that challenge. We advocated the acceptance of the definition of unreached people by the Joshua project database, but that we would not be bound by it in terms of strategy development. We developed a rubric that started with any county or people groups less than 1% Evangelical Christian. This had the result of immediately bringing 20 countries in Europe into strategic focus.<sup>1</sup>

I also want to clarify a couple of points raised by Dyer. I want to be clear that the position regarding the national church being contiguous with the borders of the nation state is not something that I am advocating. My argument was that it seemed to me this view was assumed rather than required by the concepts of indigeneity being taught. One of my major points was the need to challenge this assumption in order to open the door to see the Gospel rooted among other peoples. To de-link the national church concept from nation state boundaries opens the possibility of forming multiple national churches within the boundaries of one nation state rather than forcing other ethnic groups coming to faith to be integrated into the existing council. While in some cases this works, and in other cases a single national council is an umbrella for different people or language groups, there are other contexts where having a separate national church for the new movement would be much better for identity and evangelistic effectiveness.

Dyer also wondered about the missionaries' involvement with already existing national churches and if they were operating in the local language. In my experience in AGWM, language learning is a core value, and the vast majority of workers are able to speak the language of the people they are working among. My raising the question of having missionaries working among the existing church had to do the frontier mission idea of redundancy. When missionaries do work that local

Christians can or should be doing they are operating redundantly. The point is keeping the focus on the big picture of giving all the peoples the opportunity for access to the Good News. For some workers this means direct ministry among an unreached people group, bearing witness and seeking to plant the church. But for others it means working with existing Christians, not to do what they can be doing, or what we find interesting or fulfilling, but rather to help that church fully participate in God's redemptive mission and take the Gospel to the unreached inside of their own borders and beyond.

Finally, Cornelius' call for Christian professionals and social engagement involvement in cross-cultural mission gets a resounding "yes" from me. I believe that Pentecostal ministry should be integrated. One problem I have observed however, is that many young people coming to missions today see social justice as the core of what they are to do in mission. This social turn is not always connected to the traditional concern of proclaiming the Gospel and planting the church. Mission becomes working on a specific issue rather than planting the church where Christ is not known. In my thinking this becomes a training issue. If expatriate workers are going to be fruitful for the long haul in social engagement they need to be fostered to have a vision for and to embrace the bigger scope of God's redemptive mission that involves reconciliation to God as well.

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<sup>1</sup> You can access this paper at <http://www.agwm.com/team/download/Defining-UPG.pdf>.