**“Finishing the Task”- A Balanced Approach**

The job of the church is not to “finish the task” in missions. Christ will finish the task. Instead, the church’s purpose is to strive to reach the current generation for Christ and lay the foundation for other generations to know Him as well.

Often young missionaries will cite Matthew 24:14 as a theme verse for their ministry. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (NKJV) The verse drives current missionaries to have a passion to reach all the peoples of the world in order to fulfill its eschatological implications.

This type of mentality, whether consciously or not, puts the impetus on the return of Christ on man’s actions, rather than a recognition that not even the Son knows when He will return (Matthew 24:36). Missions strategy changes as well depending on one’s interpretation of the verse. If Christ really is dependent on missionaries reaching each people group in order to return, then missions strategy must logically lean toward attempting to reach as many peoples as quickly as possible.

However, the task of creating strategies to reach all peoples is not so simple. Matthew 28:18-20 reminds missions strategists that the gospel is to be proclaimed to all the world. The Greek translation of “all nations” in these verses is “panta ta ethne”. “Panta ta ethne” means “all  peoples.”

However, in truth, who gets to define the word “peoples”? Both missiologist’s and anthropologist’s definitions of a people group change frequently due to a variety of factors. What elements truly are involved in the definition of a people? Are “peoples” defined by ethnolinguistic, geographic, and/or sociological terms?

Regardless of one’s criteria to define “panta ta ethne”, the Bible is not explicit on how to define a people utilizing any of these categories. It seems safe to infer from historical context that a “people” would not be defined geopolitically as one thinks of peoples of today. Certainly the nation-state boundaries of much of Asia, Europe and Africa would be completely nonsensical to someone living in the first century. Yet, one must guard against becoming dogmatic while defining the term “peoples” with modern terminology.

In the same way, how does one define the word “preach” in Matthew 28? One can assume that the word “preaching” has the idea of proclamation of the Truth of Christ to a people group (Romans 1:16-17)  However, at what point has one “preached” to a people to satisfy the idea of “the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world?” Did Christ mean that every person of a particular people group would hear the gospel in order to have received sufficient levels of preaching? Did Christ mean that 40% or 50% of a people had to hear the Gospel? The current number that missiologists appear to target in evangelization of a group is 2%.  However, if we take away anthropological and sociological foundations for attaining 2% as missionaries’ target goal, there truly is no BIBLICAL reason behind choosing that percentage.

Biblically speaking, the definitions of WHO to target are not abundantly clear. Nor is the decision of HOW LONG one should target a people evident either. As future missionaries determine their role in this generation of mission work, they must be able to discern their way through the fog of current mission strategy. As they attempt to set the agenda for the future among their people, they need to determine to whom and where God has called them individually. In like manner, mission organizations must reject the herd mentality of following the latest fad only to target the “unreached” but instead recognize that the WORLD is unreached. All peoples need mission work.

Circumstances truly are dire in terms of global spiritual lostness.  Yet in the midst of these complicated times God is working in incredible ways among many peoples as well.  Careful examination of hardened as well as fruitful mission fields should help future church planters/evangelists, seminary professors and social workers follow a sound strategy for reaching each lost and dying generation.

**What should be the significant factors in choosing an overall strategy?**

Current missions organizations obviously should set the tone and direction of what area of the world they are trying to reach. Campus Crusade, for example, has a stated focus that their missionaries will attempt to reach college students. For that organization to determine suddenly that they need to work in Bible translation goes outside of the purview of what they have done so well for years. Consequently, each mission organization needs to focus on what its strengths are and what God has led its leadership to do.

However, God’s plan doesn’t center primarily on any denominational mission organization’s plans for reaching the world. God uses His church (Matthew 16) which is comprised of His people (saints) to reach the world (2 Corinthians 5:20). Each individual does not need to base his decision on where to serve based on an assignment request from a mission organization; instead, the individual missionary needs to determine prayerfully where he is led by a variety of factors. A future missionary should ask “Where is my burden right now in the world? Where is God currently moving in the world today, and how do I jump on board with what He is doing? Where do my natural set of skills and giftings seem to fit best?  What has God done in my life to equip me for this work?

A future missionary needs to examine these questions while choosing his location of service. He then needs to see what kind of strategy best fits how God has gifted him. Below are two general strategies one needs to consider first before deciding where to target.

**Harvest Strategy- Targeting Where God is Evidently Moving**

In modern missions, this strategy seems to be all but forgotten. The idea, typified by the “people movement” ideas born out of Donald McGravan and the Church Growth Movement, provided a powerful strategy for reaching the world. Today, great areas of incredible harvests are occurring. China, sections of India, large swaths of Southern Africa and South America are just a few areas where incredible movements of God are occurring.  Missionaries need to follow the advice of men like Rick Warren in searching for a place to minister by “finding the wave” of what God is doing and get on board. Ultimately, it is God who is drawing all men to Himself. If a large segment of individuals are making professions of following Jesus, it certainly isn’t the devil causing that movement to happen! Instead, mission organizations and individual missionaries should see that a harvest of great fruit-bearing in an area is a strategic moment. They should send large amounts of missionaries to the harvest area, and let them reap as God is moving. These churches or organizations should work with great speed to send as many missionaries as possible.

Why should churches and organizations prioritize these areas? Put simply harvests historically never last. Examples are abundant. At one point in time 100 years ago, Wales was a great harvest. Areas of the Southern section of the United States saw massive growth in Baptist and Methodist churches after the Revolutionary War. Japan saw an incredible harvest in the 16th century after the ministry of Francis Xavier in which hundreds of thousands possibly came to salvation. Yet, in all of these instances, as well as countless others, one common denominator reigned—the harvests all lasted for a period of time and then ended. Some harvests ended with persecution (Japan). Others ended with sin creeping into the church (Wales) and some died out from a variety of social and economic reasons (the South).

Harvests never last and opportunities must be seized. As missionaries, churches, and organizations determine where they should target, an honest evaluation of reaching the harvest fields while they last should be evaluated.

So many positives for the Kingdom come from reaching out to the harvest fields:

a. *A soul is a soul is a soul*. Often mission organizations and churches become so focused on reaching groups for Christ, they overlook the fact that each soul matters for eternity. If a ministry in a harvest field will yield 1000 salvations in a year, but at the same time a ministry in a sowing field might yield 10 salvations in a year, shouldn’t the reality that 990 more individuals knowing Christ be a factor in examining whether an area should be a target for missionaries?

b. *Harvests provide the next generation of missionaries.* America never has and never will bear the sole responsibility of reaching all the lost world for Christ. God can utilize Americans however to reap souls that will be the next generation of missionaries where Americans cannot move as freely. In certain locations in the world Americans are disliked politically. There are current harvest fields that can produce missionaries to go to places where Americans are not as productive. Very, very rarely have I met someone who is virulently anti-Brazilian, anti-Nigerian or anti-Indonesian. Reaping the harvest in these areas can bear great fruit for future missionaries among unreached groups.

c. *Harvests have biblical support*. Christ commanded us to look unto the harvests (Matthew 9:35-38) and even to be quick to move on if an area was hardened to the gospel (Luke 9:5). Beyond the obvious reasons in terms of evangelism and church planting, the Biblical support for targeting the harvests is evident as well.

Mission organizations and future missionaries overlook the current harvests to their chagrin. People with a natural love and passion for evangelism and discipleship can have an incredibly fruitful impact for the Kingdom targeting these areas. Others who have a heart for seminary work or who have the desire to teach church planting literally can make a global impact as they reach their particular harvest field for Christ.

**Sowing Strategy- Targeting the Unreached Groups of the World**

Missionaries and mission organizations should consider a sowing strategy as well. Paul showed a great passion for going where the Gospel had not been shared previously (Romans 15). He went to some places that were extremely difficult (Athens), and other times he went to great harvests (Berea). In each place, Paul strove to push the Gospel forward to unreached fields. With 7,085 peoples around the world classified as unreached (less than 2% evangelized and no appreciable church movements among the group), it only stands to reason that God would send out many individuals, churches and organizations to preach the Gospel to them. While this strategy is certainly not easy, it bears remembering that someone must often till the difficult soil first. This task does not make the person who chooses the sowing strategy more sacrificial than someone in harvest strategy, but it does mean that God calls different individuals for different purposes. The world provides ample locations for sowing fields.

Areas such as the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, North Africa, as well as Central and Southeast Asia combine to form what is called “World A”. This is a region between 10 degrees and 40 degrees North Latitude which comprises much of the world’s unreached population. Unreached peoples also can be found on every continent far outside of the region of World A. With a population of billions who do not know Christ AND have not had a chance to truly hear the message of salvation in a clear manner, these groups desperately deserve to receive missionaries.

Mission strategists have plenty of other valid reasons to target the sowing fields of the world:

1) *The issue of fairness*- Entire peoples have never heard the name of Jesus, while other areas of the world have had opportunities to hear about Christ from multiple venues. Logic demands for the Christian world to recognize this inequality.

2) *Sheer numbers*- If 2.3 billion people in World A died today, they would spend an eternity in hell separated from the Father. An army of believers needs to heed the call and try to reach these souls.

3) *A sowing field must be tilled*- The purpose of missions to a sowing field is to make it a harvest field. Every farmer knows that you must first till the soil before it can receive the seed. God certainly chooses individuals to work the difficult ground.

4) *Biblical support*- Just as with the harvest field, the sowing field has Biblical support as well Paul’s heart passion in Romans 15 has already been mentioned. The Bible is filled with examples of God fearers who went to supposedly hardened fields, and sometimes God brought a great harvest (Jonah, the demoniac in Gadarenes, Phillipi, etc.)

Future missionaries as well as current mission agencies and churches should examine both approaches, harvest and sowing, to determine their vision. The future of modern missions, in order to be both Biblically and strategically balanced, needs BOTH an army of harvesters and sowers for the Kingdom.

**What specific geographic areas of the world need to be reached?**

The simple answer to the above question is- “Every area!” There are no “reached” areas of the world. For example, even in areas such as the United States, the Southern Section of Nigeria, or even Seoul, Korea a majority of people are still in desperate need of Christ as their Lord and Savior. Missionaries from the United States only need to ask themselves, “Would I label the job in my hometown as finished?” Of course no missionary would do that. A prospective missionary needs to keep an open mind that each area needs a risen Savior. This section of the article will follow, loosely, the outline Operation World utilizes to pray for the world.

**Europe**

It is hard to imagine that Europe needs missionaries. After all, for hundreds of years Europe was the center of Christianity. In fact, if you are descended from a family of believers today, more than likely your family was influenced by a missionary sent from Europe at some point in history. The entire continent is filled with giant cathedrals and state funded churches. On the surface, everything should be fine in Europe. However, those giant cathedrals stand empty and many of the state-funded churches are steeped in liberalism. Europe is unquestionably lost.

In a recent study by the European commission, only 52% of Europeans claimed to believe in God. Zaimov, Stoyen<http://global.christianpost.com/news/missionaries-moved-to-evangelize-secular-europe-amid-influx-of-immigrants-69989> (accessed December 17, 2012).  Compare these numbers to almost 90% of people in the United States who claim to believe in God. Church attendance has plummeted across the continent. 60% of those surveyed in France say they “never” or “practically never” go to church. In the same survey, 55% of those in Britain, 48% of citizens of the Netherlands, and 46% in both Belgium and Sweden never or practically never attend church. Knox, Noelle<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-08-10-europe-religion-cover_x.htm> (Accessed November December 1, 2012)

These statistics are disheartening but still portray an overly positive perspective of Christianity in the continent. Even if many believe in God, this statistic does not translate into lives that have surrendered to Kingdom living.  Operation World lists the percentages of European Evangelicals at 2.4% whereas Joshua Projects lists the percentages of Evangelicals at 1.8%.

Regardless of which statistic is examined, the number of individuals who would proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior is dismally low and on par with the horrific figures one can find in Asia and Northern Africa. Europe needs individuals ready to till the soil and reach this great sowing field.

**Asia**

The vastness of Asia merits more than just one section in this article. Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Russia, the Orient, and the Indian Subcontinent all have massive populations and extensive land areas. Each should be discussed and researched.  Plus, Asia is far more difficult to label either a harvest or a sowing area. Just as Europe has areas that show signs of life for Evangelicalism, Asia has a vast array of harvests as well. Movements of God have been reported all over Asia in recent years. While many movements are difficult to document because of security issues, anecdotal evidence of great movements abound.

For example, 10,000 Chinese a day are reportedly coming to Christ.<http://www.latimes.com/atimes/China/IH07Ad03.html> (accessed November 2012)  In India currently there are between 58 million to 100 million believers. According to Serving in Mission, there were only 40 known believers in Mongolia in 1990, yet today there are 60,000. <http://www.sim.org/index.php/country/MN> (accessed November 2 1, 2012)

However, Asia also has areas that are extremely difficult to reach for the Gospel as well. Huge sections of China and India are still hardened to the Gospel. Afghanistan is considered 0.0% evangelical by Joshua Project. Other nations are equally dismal. Iran and Iraq are .2% evangelical. Bangladesh is .4% and Kyrgykstan is .7% <http://www.joshuaproject.net/continents.php> (accessed November 21, 2012)

With a total population of 4.2 billion people, Asia MUST be a central focus of prayer for any future missionary.

Missionaries are needed as evangelists in much of the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim World. Maybe missionaries will see great fruit, or possibly they will not, but regardless, an extremely fruitful life commitment would be to sow the seeds of the Gospel among these groups.

At the same time, training current Asian believers can help move the Gospel forward among other Asian people groups at a far greater rate than having an outsider from the West do the work.  Missionaries are desperately needed as trainers. The sheer scale of geographic size, people groups, and population makes Asia a central focus of any mission organization.

**Africa**

With 15% of the world’s population, and 2500 people groups, Africa has proven to be a dichotomy of results in missions. Nine percent of Southern Africa was considered Christian in 1900, whereas 48.7% of Sub-Saharan Africa officially is considered “Christian” today (Mandryk, Operation World, 30-32) Granted, those numbers can be exceedingly misleading. No layperson who has done any work in Southern Africa would ever state confidently that 5 out of every 10 individuals know Christ as Lord and Savior.

Africa provides young missionaries with an abundance of opportunities in both harvest and sowing fields. For example, 41% of the continent claims Islam as their faith.  The reality of Islam provides missionaries with some strategic opportunities.  Missionaries can target a central strip from Western African nations such as Nigeria and Ivory Coast all the way to the border of East Africa in which Muslims and Christians interact on a daily basis. Truly the harvest is plentiful among Muslims in these border lands. However, Muslim evangelists have utilized massive amounts of petro dollars in combination with a focus on dominating business interests across much of Africa to gain many converts as well.

At the same time, missions in Africa provides opportunities for both medical and relief work on a scale that other regions of the world may not require. For mission organizations that utilize relief work, Africa provides no shortage of locations in desperate need.

For those missionaries who desire to teach, missionaries can train Africans to reach their own peoples. Sending new missionaries to guide Africans in basic evangelism, discipleship and church planting principles can help maintain the harvest in the area.

Missionaries can also prepare Africans for international missions as well. As Africans flood the continents of Europe, Asia and North America looking for employment, God can use them to lay the foundation for a new harvest in that region as well.   The great continent of Africa is far from finished in its need for missionaries.

**Southern Americas- (Latin and Central America, Carribean)**

Latin America only comprises 10% of the world’s population but there is still extensive work to be done in this region. One of the greatest harvests in the world today spans from Mexico to Argentina. Mission organizations can target most countries in this region and see great visible fruit. At the same time, some areas of the continent such as Southern Brazil, Ecuador, sections of Mexico, and Uruguay have proven more resistant and provide true sowing field opportunities for missionaries as well.

The Christian population in Latin and South America hovers around 92% (82% of the Caribbean claims Christianity as their faith (Mandryk, Operation World, 45-47).  As with other areas of the world that statistic can be misleading. The vast, vast majority of the 92% are nominal Christians who are mired in syncretism and Mariolatry. Most Catholics of Latin America would put their faith in a works salvation.

Operation World states the Evangelical population as 91 million or close to 17% of the population in South America (Operation World, 48). Christians around the world can give due praise to the Lord for the massive increase in Christianity in the region. However, many “evangelical” groups grossly inflate their numbers or have questionable theology.  The number of true believers is far, far lower.

Latin America and the Caribbean provide ample opportunity for mission organizations to train current believers in how to reach their own peoples. With over 900 people groups in the region, mission organizations can work successfully in this area with a renewed strategy. A reemphasis on evangelistic missionaries who will also devote time to training current believers can help reap this harvest. At the same time, a refocus on theological education can help insure that current churches can maintain proper theology. Finally, with proper training, Latin Americans and people that live in the Caribbean can comprise a significant part of the global missions workforce.

**North America**

North America often is overlooked in missions discussions. With the sheer number of churches across the United States, mission agencies rightly prioritize other areas of the world that need attention. After all, if the churches in America awaken to the spiritual needs of the country, numerically there are more than enough believers in America to complete the task in not only the United States but also Canada and other surrounding island nations in the region.  North America has around 350 million people and the vast majority are located in the United States. Whereas a careful observer can find many churches that are seeing incredible growth through salvations, much of the “growth” that American churches are experiencing is biological (children of Christian parents coming to Christ) or transfer (people hopping from one church to the next).

The number of individuals in America that claim no religious affiliation has grown to 19.6% or 64 million people. The United States has the fourth largest unreached population in the world.  Canada does not fare better as only 7.7% of the population is evangelical. Grossman, Cathy Lynn, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/10/08/nones-protestant-religion-pew/1618445/>. (accessed November 28, 2012).  As secularism rises, and each generation feels less of a burden to participate in church, churches and missionaries must contemplate the needs for evangelism, discipleship and church planting at home.

**Australia and the Pacific Islands**

This area of the Pacific is one of the great victories in modern missions. Incredible harvests have been experienced throughout this region in the past. However, the picture is rapidly changing. Today 74 percent of the region is classified as “Christian” but only 17% of the region would claim to be Evangelicals. Only 19% of Australians are “frequent” church attenders (attending at least once a month) <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=23> (accessed December 17, 2012). 40% of people in New Zealand now would claim they are non-religious. At the same time, Christianity faces a battle with various cults that have proliferated the region. 20% of American Samoa and Tonga are now Mormon. Samoa and French Polynesian are now 10% Mormon. (OperationWorld, Mandryk, 87) Mission organizations need to have a renewed sense of concern for this region of the world. Although the region’s populaiton is only a fraction of Asia or Africa, the need for discipleship and training is still great among the 45 million inhabitants.

**Beyond Geography**

For many young missionaries, reflecting on massive geographic areas is overwhelming.  Organizations and future missionaries can also examine two other approaches to reaching a lost world.

*People groups-*

The world is comprised of 16,448 people groups. As a reminder, all of the groups need to be evangelized and some need to be re-evangelized. Each generation, of every group, needs to rehear the Gospel. A common misunderstanding in missions today is that once a group is “reached” missionaries can move on to the next group. It took Israel one generation to fall from God’s ideal between Joshua to the Judges. It does not take long for modern people groups to do the same.

Mission organizations must reflect on the great need of those who have never heard the name of Jesus for several generations. Currently there are 7,085 unreached peoples with 6,079 of these peoples located in World A (the 10/40 window). Missionaries would do well to pray about the urgency of reaching these peoples.

*Cities-*

Finally, no strategy can be complete without an examination of the needs of the world’s cities. The world has become urbanized. In 1900 only 13% of the world lived in an urban setting, by the end of the century 50% of the world lived in cities. (Perspectives, Greenway, 559). By 2015 Mexico City is estimated to have 18.8 million inhabitants, Beijing 19.4 million, Lagos 24.4 million, Mumbai 27.4 million, Cairo with 14.5 million, Sao Paulo with 20.8 million and New York will have 17.6 million people. The massive numbers of lost individuals in these areas merits attention. Considering Paul targeted major metropolitan areas (Athens, Ephesus, Antioch, Colossae, Rome), one can find significant Biblical support for targeting cites. In fact, cities comprised the majority of Paul’s strategy.

A quick visit to New York, Paris, Los Angeles, or London reminds missionaries of the immense possibilities of reaching the nations in these large cities. One can reach people groups from across the world and never leave one of these megacities. With Biblical and demographic support, missionaries must consider the possibility of having a mega-city approach to missions as well.

**How Can You Be a Part of the Future of Missions?**

Regardless of which continent, city or individual people group an agency or church targets, the future of missions requires balance.  New missionaries would do well to remember to have BALANCE in the following areas.

1)      Balance of evangelism and discipleship- First, he must recognize that Christ’s pattern for ministry needs to be emulated. A missionary is not called to reach the entire world. That burden is far too weighty for our finite minds. For example, instead of reflecting on the 4.2 billion people that are lost in Asia, focus on the 12 individuals that can be reached and discipled for Christ. If each missionary would focus on discipling a core and multiplying themselves through that 12, then true long term results will inevitably occur.

2)      Balance of vision- harvest and sowing- For the strategist of a church or missions organization, remember that a strong missions strategy will have a balance of focus on both harvests and sowing fields.  Will some organizations target sowing fields? Yes.  Will some organizations primarily target harvest fields? Yes.  Should both groups see the legitimacy in each approach? Yes.  Individual, local church leaders should send some volunteer teams (or long term missionaries) to sowing fields and some teams to harvest fields.  Individual churches should not try to target a multitude of fields at once.  Instead, they should try to focus on two or three fields maximum. They should keep returning to the same fields as they guide the new believers to the necessary steps toward maturity.  As the church or missionary organization recognizes the indigeneous group is completely ready to reproduce new disciples on their own they can move on to the next field.

3)       Balance of ministries: social work and evangelism- Evangelism is foundational to all missions work. However, often in recent years many individuals have spent the majority of their time simply on church planting/evangelism and very little on social ministries.  Social ministries in conjunction with evangelism is a powerful tool.  Utilize social ministries whether your organization is working with individuals in a harvest or sowing field.  Why should we utilize social ministries? Our Lord and Savior established this pattern as He constantly spread the message of the Kingdom while ministering to people’s physical needs.

4)       Balance of priorities- Often times younger missionaries forget the fact that they do not need to spend all of their time reaching all the world for Christ. Far too many missionaries focus on the lost and lose their own kids spiritually in the meantime. (On the other hand, many missionaries use their kids, or their computers, as an excuse to avoid ministry for the majority of their day—there is always a balance.)  Seek to be a part of what God is doing. Strive to serve Him in a missions capacity to the best of your abilities.  Spend time with your kids so they can be trained to reach the next generation after you. Missionaries are truly promoting missions of the future when they are balanced in the home.

5)      Balance of safety with boldness- Living among a people does not necessarily mean a missionary has truly impacted them.  For many years, a noble effort has been undertaken to place missionaries among all people groups.  This is a sacred calling. However, missionaries do well to remember that one can be living among a people and not actually be ministering among them.  Paul, even in the difficult fields, was faithful to proclaim God’s message.  Lifestyle evangelism is not enough to reach a people. People need to hear the truth, verbally, from this generation of missionaries.

Missionaries, churches and mission organizations who seek a balanced approach between harvests and sowing fields, between lifestyle evangelism and verbal proclamation, between work and play with their children, and between social ministries and evangelism, will make the greatest impact in this generation

Each generation, in each land needs to hear the Gospel. As your studies come to an end, where do you sense God is guiding you?

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