

The Changing Landscape of Lostness

Why Global Shifts are Driving the Need for New Engagement Indices

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The landscape of lostness is changing. Much has changed since the early 1800s when the Lord used William Carey to jumpstart the “modern missionary movement.”¹ Those who followed in Carey’s footsteps worked systematically for almost two centuries “to evangelize the nation or country to which they were sent.”² In the 1970s, Donald McGavran and Ralph Winter standardized the “concept of seeing the world as people groups,” instead of simply a collection of countries (nations), resulting in arguably “the most significant thought innovation in twentieth century missiology.”³ As Kevin Baggett and Randy Arnett rightly state, “the church owes a great debt to them for opening our eyes to lostness.”⁴ Recently, however, missiologists have

¹ Jerry Rankin, “The Present Situation in Missions,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 41.

² *Ibid.*, 41.

³ Dave Datema, “Defining ‘Unreached’: A Short History,” in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 33, no. 2 (2016): 45.

⁴ Kevin Baggett and Randy Arnett. “Redefining Global Lostness,” in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism (SBJME)*, vol. 2 (2016): 66.

begun questioning “the legitimacy of interpreting the Great Commission through the controlling lens of modern anthropology.”⁵ While some of this is due to exegetical differences, the core of this shifting landscape of lostness is globalization.

While current people group engagement scales have been helpful for assessing the status of people groups, a changing ethnolinguistic landscape driven by the modern realities of globalization and urbanization requires new criteria and engagement scales. Using missiological literature and International Mission Board (IMB) documents, this article will examine the current definitions and indicators for people group engagement and unreached status. It will also explore an overview of relevant Scripture and practical issues regarding engagement scales. After defining these concepts, the effects of globalization on the current definition of engagement will be examined. Finally, this article will set the stage for the introduction of new multi-indicator engagement scales, developed by IMB’s Global Research Department and field researchers to address this changing landscape of lostness.⁶

Current Engagement Definitions

Winter defined an unreached people group as “a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people group without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.”⁷ He also categorized a people group as engaged if “work has begun on site or in specific

⁵ Jarvis J. Williams and Trey Moss, “Focus on ‘All Nations’ as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy” in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks, (Lexham Press, 2019), 131-132.

⁶ See “Status of the Task and State of the Church: IMB’s Multi-Indicator Engagement Scales for Peoples and Places” in *The Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions (GCBJM)*, Vol 1, Issue 2, Fall 2022.

⁷ Ralph Winter, “Unreached Peoples: What Are They and Where Are They?” in *Reaching the Unreached: The Old-New Challenge*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1984), 44.

‘non-residential’ endeavor[s].”⁸ While Winter’s definition of unreached was qualitative, in the 1980s C. Peter Wagner and Ed Dayton added a quantitative 20% threshold, based on E. M. Rogers’ diffusion of innovation theory, “for the purposes of creating lists of unreached people groups.”⁹ For a number of years, IMB followed the 20% threshold. In 1995, however, a committee of evangelical agencies, including IMB, decided on a threshold of “less than or equal to 2% Evangelical – AND – less than or equal to 5% Christian Adherent”¹⁰ for a people group to be categorized as unreached. While IMB initially agreed to this threshold, within five years, they adopted only “the 2% Evangelical criterion . . . opting for a more exclusive view of salvation in terms of evangelical faith.”¹¹

In 2018, IMB’s *Foundations* document returned IMB to a definition more closely aligned with Winter’s original definition but also combined Carey’s geographical focus with the reintroduction of places. “Unreached peoples and places are those among whom Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help.”¹² This was primarily in response to a feeling by some at IMB that the AD2000 and Beyond Movement definition “arbitrarily identifies . . . the determinate between reached and unreached.”¹³ Others share this concern noting “that it ends up including peoples at disparate ends of the

⁸ Ralph Winter, “Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept,” in *Mission Frontiers* (1989), <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/unreached-peoples>, accessed 10/10/2019.

⁹ Datema, “Defining ‘Unreached,’” 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹² International Mission Board, *Foundations v.4: Core Missiological Concepts, Key Mission Terms, the Missionary Task* (IMB Press, 2022), 88. Available at <https://store.imb.org/imb-foundations/>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

spectrum: some that already have a strong Christian presence, and others that have almost no exposure to the gospel.”¹⁴

The introduction of two additional categories, Unengaged Unreached People Groups (UUPGs) and Frontier People Groups, is an attempt by the larger missions community to alleviate some of this potential disparity. Many sending agencies define an Unengaged Unreached People Group as having “less than 2 percent evangelical” population and “no existing missionary efforts among them.”¹⁵ IMB’s definition is stricter, adding that a “people group is unengaged when there is no church planting strategy, consistent with Evangelical faith and practice, under implementation.”¹⁶ The Frontier People Group category does not consider engagement but is instead defined as a group with “no indigenous Christian movement of their own” and an evangelical population of “less than 0.1% evangelical.”¹⁷

Since August 2005, IMB has classified people and place data using a seven-point scale that combines the percentage of evangelicals within a people group, along with the group’s access to evangelical resources and reports of church planting. This seven-point scale is called the *Global Status of Evangelical Christianity* (GSEC).

People or places less than two percent evangelical are classified as unreached. People or places greater than or equal to two percent evangelical are classified as no longer unreached. This scale has been the basis of numerous maps and people group lists and has served the evangelical community well, spurring many individuals to pray, give, go, and send to the nations.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kate Shellnut, “Why Missions Experts Are Redefining ‘Unreached People Groups,’” in *Christianity Today*, (May 2019): 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ IMB’s Peoplegroups.org website, <https://peoplegroups.org/294.aspx>, accessed 09/14/2022

¹⁷ Shellnut, “Why Missions Experts Are Redefining ‘Unreached People Groups,’” 16.

¹⁸ For current people group lists and map resources built using these existing scales, see <https://peoplegroups.org/Understand.aspx>.

Table 1 — IMB's Global Status of Evangelical Christianity Scale (GSEC)

Value	Description
GSEC 0	No evangelical Christians or churches. No access to evangelical resources.
GSEC 1	Less than 2% evangelical. Some evangelical resources. No active church planting within past 2 years.
GSEC 2	Less than 2% evangelical. Initial (localized) church planting within past 2 years.
GSEC 3	Less than 2% evangelical. Widespread church planting within past 2 years.
GSEC 4	Greater than or equal to 2% evangelical.
GSEC 5	Greater than or equal to 5% evangelical.
GSEC 6	Greater than or equal to 10% evangelical.

In addition, since January 2014, IMB has implemented an additional classification of people and place data that combines unreached status with engagement status to form a three-point scale known as the Strategic Priority Index (SPI).

Table 2 — IMB's Strategic Priority Index (SPI)

Value	Description
SPI 0	Unengaged and Unreached
SPI 1	Engaged yet Unreached
SPI 2	No Longer Unreached

Where the GSEC scale provided a level of granularity that served the research community well, the SPI scale has proved useful in its simplicity to the broader missions community. While both scales are helpful, neither corresponds closely to the emphasis in the *IMB Foundations* document on

accurately identifying the state of the church and providing access to the gospel among a particular people or place.¹⁹

Practical and Scriptural Issues

While setting percentages to determine when people groups are reached is arbitrary, Dave Datema aptly states that although the criteria are “not perfect, wise handling of the lists, and the assumptions behind them, will prevent presumption and promote mature reflection on the overall health of any given people group.”²⁰ As mission agencies grapple with the practical implications of the current percentage model, some like TMS Global have opted to only use the term “least reached,” stating that they “did not want to follow the path of getting so obsessed with definition and precision that it would negate other missions or cause people to be blind to other mission opportunities.”²¹ Others, like Finishing the Task (FTT), use IMB’s existing people group lists to build quantitative lists, set specific objectives, and seek to see church planting strategies implemented among these “144 Unengaged, Unreached People Groups, over 500 in population and still dwelling in their ancestral homeland.”²² Despite the weaknesses of an arbitrary model, quantitative lists of unreached people groups have helped many mission agencies track the evangelical progress of people groups and prioritize missionary efforts to those peoples.

In addition to the differences concerning the term *unreached*, there has been a surprising surge of individuals and groups advocating for a need to change the definition of people group, particularly the use of ethnolin-

¹⁹ International Mission Board, *Foundations v.4*, 88-90.

²⁰ Datema, “Defining ‘Unreached,’” 65.

²¹ Shellnut, “Why Missions Experts Are Redefining ‘Unreached People Groups,’” 17.

²² This is directly from the Finishing the Task website, which based on their current list holds that there are only 144 remaining unengaged and unreached people groups over 500 in population. Finishing the Task Website, <https://www.finishingthetask.com/about-finishing-the-task/people-group-list/>, accessed 06/10/2022.

guistically defined groups. Jarvis Williams and Trey Moss argue that the current people group model incorrectly “assumes a modern social-scientific definition for ἔθνη [(ethne)].”²³ They counter that “God’s promise . . . should motivate Christians to preach the gospel to all people without ethnic distinction.”²⁴ Baggett and Arnett, while also questioning the use of ἔθνη (*ethne*), argue that while the current people group definition should not be discarded, it should not be exclusive, especially “in an ever-changing world affected by globalization and urbanization.”²⁵ While these are valid points that address exegetical issues held by some at the edges of people group movements, they miss the intent of Donald McGavran’s original practical question, “How do Peoples become Christian?”²⁶ Codifying peoples is less about what should be than about what is. McGavran rightly observes that “People Movements have . . . considerable advantages,” including “being naturally indigenous” and naturally “spontaneous.”²⁷ The furthest natural spread of the gospel is at the heart of what it means to categorize a people.

Scriptural Uses of Quantity and Quality

In response to those who argue against either quantitative or qualitative codification, it should be noted that Scripture is replete with examples of the importance of quantity as well as quality. While establishing the borders of Israel, God defined quantitative limits (Exod 23:31). God commanded Moses to take a quantitative census of Israel (Exod 30:11-16). God was willing to

²³ Williams and Moss, “Focus on ‘All Nations’ as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy,” 131.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁵ For more on this view and alternatives to the GEL (Geo-political, Ethnolinguistic) taxonomy, see Kevin Baggett and Randy Arnett. “Redefining Global Lostness,” in *SBJME* vol. 2 (2016).

²⁶ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1981), 1.

²⁷ McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 88-89.

spare Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous individuals could be found in the cities (Gen 18:16-33). Jesus also cares about the one as well as the ninety-nine (Luke 15:3-7). The Father knows the number of hairs on one's head (Matt 10:30).

In addition to quantity, God is also very much concerned with quality. The quality of each man's work for the Lord will one day be tested (1 Cor 3:11-15). The quality of a gentle and quiet spirit is precious in the sight of God (1 Peter 3:4). Jesus is concerned with the qualitative spiritual health of the individual (Matt 9:12-13). God makes judgments based on quality (Amos 5:21-24). Finally, Jesus expects the church to be qualitatively healthy (Rev 2:1-3:22). While this sampling of Scriptures is not exhaustive, the point is clear: there is no Scriptural mandate to avoid either quantitative or qualitative assessment. God is concerned with both for the sake of His people and His glory.

Practical Questions

Several practical questions arise when any quantitative schema is deeply examined. For example, many people groups have birth rates that exceed death rates and far exceed evangelical growth rates. In such cases, it is conceivable, under the current two percent criteria, for a group to be reached one day and unreached the next. Similarly, given the conflict over the lists of ἔθνη (*ethne*), especially in complex areas such as India, when an agency engages the last people group on their list, is that really the final ἔθνη (*ethne*) to be engaged or reached? No one knows the day or the hour (Mark 13:32), so engaging the last UUPG on a list does not necessarily mean Christ will return that day. Winter was right when he wrote “we must not lightly assume that our human, current definitions of completion are exactly what God has in mind.”²⁸

In addition, the current definition of engagement, that a worker be on site implementing a church planting strategy, raises practical questions. In

²⁸ Winter, “Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept,” 10.

May 2019, Christianity Today raised concerns “about whether a single worker is enough to consider a group engaged and take it off the list.”²⁹ What if the worker leaves before any work begins? If the group was marked engaged, will it again be marked unengaged? Even if the worker remains for a while, what if no disciples are made before the worker leaves or dies?

Datema correctly challenges missiologists to “recognize that different percentages will motivate different ministries for different purposes.”³⁰ In many ways, one might argue that both the quantitative pragmatists and the qualitative idealists are right. One might also similarly build a case that Carey was right in his time for his focus on places, while Winter and McGavran were right in their push for peoples. In many ways, Carey was the father of Winter and McGavran, as “quantification, prioritization, and demographics were first applied to missions by William Carey.”³¹

Scales of quantity are needed to track progress toward making disciples, while scales of quality are equally needed to track the health of those disciples in the context of local church health. In a rapidly globalizing world, scales may be required for both places and peoples. For example, should missionaries *only* use prayer as their guide for where to go and whom to reach in missions? Can agencies know when to move on to other people groups if they only use qualitative indicators, such as “least reached”? Without some quantitative measures can a mission agency or missionary even set goals? To buy groceries to make lasagna, one must have some form of a list. The alternative, to walk the entire store and purchase items based only on their perceived quality and not their compatibility with the food known as lasagna, might give one a cart full of good-looking groceries, but it will not make the desired meal. Can the mission community make its quantitative

²⁹ Shellnut, “Why Missions Experts Are Redefining ‘Unreached People Groups,’” 16.

³⁰ Datema, “Defining ‘Unreached,’” 65.

³¹ Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), Loc. 116, Kindle.

lists while simultaneously working to produce quality disciples in whichever spheres the Lord places them? Such questions should be at the heart of the discussion, especially in a world of globalization.

The Impact of Globalization on the Current Definitions and Scales

Unlike engagement scales, the globalization phenomena and its impact on missions are undisputed. McGavran foresaw the rising impact of globalization when he insightfully wrote, “the world is in a period of cataclysmic change. During this period the shape of things to come is being steadily determined through the interplay of colossal forces.”³² Richard Lewis states, while “the globalization and integration of world commerce is . . . difficult and complex, a process that will take decades,” cultural meshing “will be immeasurably more complicated.”³³ That said, this article will now examine migration and urbanization, two of the many factors playing into globalization, in reference to their impact on engagement scales.

Immigration and Emigration

As Darrell Whiteman rightly states, globalization has “become a reality the church can no longer ignore.”³⁴ While it is true that “globalization has developed over centuries as people have engaged in trade, conquest, and religious expansion,” recent “widespread and rapid migrations have the potential to

³² McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 3.

³³ Richard Lewis, *The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21st Century* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 2003), 229.

³⁴ Darrell L. Whiteman, “Anthropological Reflections on Contextualizing Theology in a Globalizing World,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 53.

make geographical and nation-state issues seem almost irrelevant.”³⁵ Air travel and the ease by which peoples immigrate and emigrate have changed the world. Whiteman argues that the “world, with its compression of time and space, new categories of thought, and rapid culture change . . .,” has “made it more obvious that cultures are changing and that culture itself . . .” is no longer “the neat package for analysis that we often assumed.”³⁶

Immigration and emigration, however, are opening doors for the gospel. “Migration,” states Michael Pocock, “brings non-Christians into areas more strongly Christian and more open to evangelism and religious change.”³⁷ Of course, the opposite is true as well, with Christians migrating to traditionally non-Christian areas. Both provide tremendous opportunities for mission agencies.

Any scale of engagement must wrestle with the realities of migration. Will the gospel flow through migrated peoples scattered across the globe? How strongly do migrated peoples adopt their new culture? Will social media allow migrated peoples to live in one place yet maintain community in another? If an evangelical people group migrates to another location in large numbers, will the indigenous groups hear the gospel if the new total evangelical percentage removes them from a mission agency’s list? Large-scale immigration and emigration mean questions like these must be realistically examined.

Urbanization

Urbanization is another major factor in the changing face of evangelical engagement. Urbanization is “a complex socio-economic process that trans-

³⁵ Pocock, Rheenen and McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions*, Loc. 320-333, Kindle.

³⁶ Whiteman, “Anthropological Reflections on Contextualizing Theology in a Globalizing World,” 53.

³⁷ Pocock, Rheenen and McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions*, Loc. 346, Kindle.

forms the built environment” and shifts cultural identity.³⁸ The United Nations projects that “by 2050, the world will be more than two-thirds urban (68 percent), roughly the reverse of the global rural-urban population distribution of the mid-twentieth century.”³⁹ Rankin rightly assesses that “mission strategies have struggled to cope with world metropolises.”⁴⁰ He writes, “these cities are not monolithic but rather a maze of self-contained, ethnically distinct communities and diverse social and economic strata that defy any homogeneous approaches to evangelization.”⁴¹

Borrowing from French sociologist Michel Maffesoli, Arnett and Baggett argue that urban identity is often shaped more by shared interests and lifestyle preferences than by ethnicity, language, or geographical homeland. These emerging “urban tribes” are cosmopolitan amalgamations of people groups spanning the spectrum from unreached to no longer unreached.⁴² Given these complexities, when would urban centers be considered engaged or reached? In a city of twenty-five million with no Christian presence, the addition of a single missionary unit running a church planting strategy could hardly be considered engagement. Engaging one people group or segment of complex urban society should not inherently signal a mission agency to shift its focus to another urban area. Urbanization mandates a blending of Carey’s and McGavran’s thinking and a melding of peoples and places. As such, missiologists need better engagement scales suited to the blending of both realities.

³⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *World Urbanization Prospects 2018: Highlights* (ST/ESA/SER.A/421), 2019, <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-Highlights.pdf>, accessed 11/21/2019, iii.

³⁹ United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects 2018*, 5.

⁴⁰ Rankin, “The Present Situation in Missions,” 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴² Baggett and Arnett, “Redefining Global Lostness,” 81.

Conclusion

In the increasingly mixed and muddy world of social, ethnic, and urban complexity, global researchers and missiologists must move beyond simple quantitative thresholds and binary toggles. Fortunately, amid this increasing complexity, the Lord has provided technology and tools to His church to begin to assess and track where the gospel and the church are not making inroads and which people groups are truly unreached. IMB's Global Research Department has developed multi-indicator engagement scales designed to function from hundreds of millions of global data points and Great Commission activities and reveal the extent of gospel flow. These new scales are introduced and explained in the article entitled, "Status of the Task and State of the Church: IMB's Multi-Indicator Engagement Scales for Peoples and Places."

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