

Status of the Task and State of the Church

IMB's Multi-Indicator Engagement Scales for Peoples and Places

Jim Courson and Wilson S. Geisler IV
International Mission Board Global Research Department

The article “The Changing Landscape of Lostness: Why Global Shifts are Driving the Need for New Engagement Indices”¹ highlights some of the ways that globalization is prompting missiologists to rethink traditional understandings of engagement. Immigration and urbanization, two key drivers of globalization, continually spur questions about how lostness should be measured among peoples and in places where the traditional ethnolinguistic understanding of *ἔθνη* (*ethne*) is blurred. IMB researchers grapple regularly with these issues and recognize the limitations of current indices.² To address the limitations expressed in the companion article, a team of IMB researchers has worked to craft new and more accurate indices and metrics for determining engagement and measuring progress in the missionary

¹ Jim Courson and Wilson S. Geisler IV, “The Changing Landscape of Lostness: Why Global Shifts are Driving the Need for New Engagement Indices” in *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions (GCBJM)*, Vol 1, Issue 2, Fall 2022.

² See Courson and Geisler IV “The Changing Landscape of Lostness” to gain a sense of this grappling.

task.³ The results of their labor are two new multi-indicator scales, the Status of the Missionary Task and the State of the Church, designed to work in tandem to more reliably assess lostness (where the gospel and the church are not present). First, the two indicator scales will be presented separately. Then, the usefulness of combining these two scales will be shown along with concrete and practical examples.

IMB's New Scales

One must acknowledge that regardless of what an engagement scale reveals, the mission agency must prayerfully ask God where He wants missionaries. Holy Spirit prompting always trumps statistics. In our estimation engagement scales must meet four criteria. First, they must be realistic, accurate, and not merely subjective. Second, they must be practical and useful for prayerful decision making about where to send missionaries to make disciples and plant churches. Third, they must allow for tracking of progress along the scales. And finally, their data must be sourced from and validated by the larger evangelical missions community. With these criteria in mind, IMB researchers have developed and are currently implementing two new multi-indicator engagement scales.

Indicator Scale 1: The Status of the Missionary Task

IMB's *Foundations* defines the six components of the missionary task as entry, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation, leadership devel-

³ The authors would like to thank several additional contributors. Field researchers Nicholas Eardley*, Debbie Porter, Samuel Smallwood*, and James Sullivan* assisted with finalizing and readying these scales for publication and wide-spread use. In addition, the authors thank and acknowledge all the IMB researchers who have contributed over the past decade to the development of these much-needed scales. *Names changed for security.

opment, and exit to partnership.⁴ These six components arose from study of Scripture and had been widely used in the IMB and throughout missions history, sometimes with varying terminology, long before the publication of *Foundations*. IMB's Status of the Missionary Task (mTask) indicator is a mixed-method scale based on both the quality and quantity of activities reported within each of the six components of the missionary task with reference to when the most recent activities within a given component took place. The Status of the Missionary Task Indicator Scale is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – IMB's Status of the Missionary Task Indicator Scale

Value	Description
mTask 0	No Known Missionary Activity Ongoing
mTask 1	Reported Entry Activities Ongoing
mTask 2	Reported Evangelism Activities Ongoing
mTask 3	Reported Discipleship Activities Ongoing
mTask 4	Reported Church Formation Activities (including Health Indicators) Ongoing
mTask 5	Reported Leadership Development Activities Ongoing
mTask 6	Reported Self-Engagement in Any of the Other Components Ongoing

A strength of this indicator scale is that it can be applied not only to individual people groups but also to places, religions, languages, segments, and any possible social or geographical combination. Also, because the data collection method includes qualitative as well as quantitative data, researchers and strategists will be able to make better evaluations of the true health of disciples and churches among the peoples and places of the world. This scale carries with it the potential to tabulate the quantity of each activity type over

⁴ For detailed definitions and descriptions of the six components of the missionary task, see International Mission Board, *Foundations v.4* (2022), 93-121. Available at <https://store.imb.org/imb-foundations/>

time, as well as the number of separate individuals involved in each of the activity totals being reported. For example, mTask 2 activity data might report that over the course of a month thirteen individuals on three different teams shared the gospel with seventy-one members of an unreached people group in a single village with fourteen people praying to receive Christ, thirty-three indicating an openness to hear more, and twenty-four indicating no interest. Missiologists and researchers will be able to calculate from this granular detail much more than simply that the gospel was shared seventy-one times.

Indicator Scale 2: The State of the Church

The State of the Church scale is a quantitative indicator scale that can be applied to individual people groups, places, languages, religions, segments, or any other social or geographic grouping. IMB's *Foundations* document speaks to the state of any local church in terms of its relative sufficiency to make Christ known among its broader population without requiring outside help.⁵ A quantitative-only scale will never adequately be able to provide a complete picture of the state of the church. Therefore, this indicator will not be comprehensive unto itself but will instead provide an indispensable piece of the overall combined picture of engagement and local indigenous church health, especially when combined with the qualitative and quantitative data reported in mTask 4 through the Status of the Missionary Task scale. IMB's State of the Church Indicator Scale is presented in Table 2.

Where there are no known believers or churches among a people or place, Christ will be largely unknown. A few evangelicals present among a people group with no local church or a single local church are typically insufficient to make Christ known among the broader population without outside help. Limited, moderate, and extensive evangelical church saturation, however, requires explanation.

⁵ IMB, *Foundations v.4*, 88.

Table 2 — IMB's State of the Church Indicator Scale

Value	Description
SOC 0	No Known Evangelical Believers and No Evangelical Church
SOC 1	Reported Evangelical Believers but No Evangelical Church
SOC 2	Reported Evangelical Believers and a Single Evangelical Church
SOC 3	Reported Evangelical Believers and Limited Evangelical Church Saturation
SOC 4	Reported Evangelical Believers and Moderate Evangelical Church Saturation
SOC 5	Reported Evangelical Believers and Extensive Evangelical Church Saturation

Church saturation is determined by a church-to-population ratio. Thresholds and definitions for limited, moderate, and extensive church saturation as currently defined by IMB's Global Research Department are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 — IMB's Saturation Scale Relative to Population Evaluated

Value	Threshold as % of Population	Description
Limited	# of churches is less than 0.001% of population (rounded up)	Probably insufficient to make Christ known among the broader population.
Moderate	# of churches is greater than 0.001% and less than 0.01% of population (rounded up)	Possibly sufficient to make Christ known among the broader population.
Extensive	# of churches is greater than 0.01% of population (rounded up)	Probably sufficient to make Christ known among the broader population.

Using these percentages, limited church saturation is less than one church per one hundred thousand people. Extensive church saturation

is more than one church for every ten thousand people. Moderate church saturation is anything between those two ranges. A church saturation scale like this allows for easy differentiation between metrics relative to population, such as the difference between ten churches among a people group of ten thousand (Moderate Saturation on this scale) versus ten churches among a people group of ten million (Limited Saturation on this scale).

Defining saturation in this way allows the State of the Church scale to remain relevant regardless of the population of the group or segment being examined. As additional data begins to flow into this scale, if the church-to-population ratios that set the saturation level require adjustment, such adjustments would be done carefully and with full disclosure to the research community so that people and place lists built on this scale could be compared over time. While the State of the Church indicator scale is primarily quantitative, when combined with the Status of the Missionary Task scale, the results become extremely helpful in determining the true status of engagement worldwide.

Bringing It Together: IMB's Multi-Indicator Engagement Scales

Before moving into examples of the combined scale, a brief reminder of the overall objectives is in order. In the changing global landscape, any combined scale that hopes to help decision-makers prioritize peoples and places needing the gospel and church planting must do the following:

1. Be accurate and applicable for people groups, places, religions, languages, dialects, segments, or any combinations of these.
2. Be able to handle issues of globalization and urbanization, allowing for a variety of people groups and segments to be assessed in both concentrated and scattered places.

3. Be based not only on arbitrary percentages but be relevant amid changing global dynamics.
4. Be based on both quantitative assessments and qualitative indicators of Kingdom growth and church and disciple health.
5. Be able to update in real or near-real time with data flowing in from various sources.
6. Allow for the tracking of combinations of people and places where the gospel is understood and accepted and where the gospel is not penetrating.
7. Provide clarity to the terms “Least Reached,” “Unreached,” and “Unengaged.”
8. Provide a framework that allows for the quantitative and qualitative tracking of progress and metrics showing when missionaries might exit to partnership in a healthy way.

Armed with a basic understanding of the Status of the Task and the State of the Church scales, practical examples will now be provided for additional clarity. These examples will fall into two broad categories. First, examples of using these scales to refine and clarify the terms “Unreached,” “Least Reached,” and “Unengaged,” will be given. Then a few examples of using these scales to assess engagement and progress in the six components of the missionary task will be provided.

Examples of Providing Clarity to Definitions

Since 1995, IMB has classified a people group as “Unreached” if less than two percent of the population is evangelical. The presence or absence of church was not considered. Because the State of the Church scale looks both at evangelical presence and evangelical church presence, it can assist in improving the clarity of this definition. Under the current definition, a people group

that is more than two percent evangelical but has no evangelical church would falsely be considered no longer unreached. Using the State of the Church scale, that same people group would be classified as SOC 1 and would then be considered unreached. While this change in definition will initially increase the number of unreached people groups in IMB's list, it will provide a more accurate assessment of which people groups are "Unreached."

The term "Least Reached" is used in numerous ways by different organizations. Some use the term interchangeably with "Unreached."⁶ Others define it as a subset of "Unreached" based on lack of access to a church.⁷ IMB researchers envision combining the mTask and SOC scales to provide objective measures by which "Least Reached" could be broken out as a subset of "Unreached." Those who are truly "Least Reached" would be those peoples among whom there are no evangelical churches and/or believers (SOC 0 or 1) and among whom there is no gospel witness (mTask 2) activity reported since a given date. Rather than "Least Reached" being based only on more nebulous qualitative indicators, it would be based on a consistent set of mixed-method scales that would allow for tracking progress toward being "more reached."

IMB currently defines engagement as the implementation of a church planting strategy, though *implementation* and *strategy* can both be subject to various interpretations. Moving forward, actual activities from various individuals or mission agencies would update and populate the mTask scale and would then help determine engagement. A people group with no reported mTask activity (mTask 0), or only mTask 1 activity, would be unengaged. Reports of mTask 2 or higher activities would indicate possible engagement. Real-time activities reported over an extended period, from single or multiple sources covering a range of mTask components, would allow researchers

⁶ See "Definitions." Joshua Project website, <https://joshuaproject.net/help/definitions>, accessed 09/16/2022

⁷ See "Frequently Asked Questions About the Least-Reached." Christar website, <https://www.christar.org/leastreached-faq>, accessed 09/16/2022

to craft a more reliable list of which people groups and places are truly “Unengaged”.

Examples of Evaluating Progress in the Missionary Task

First is an example of using the two scales to help discover where the Holy Spirit seems to be causing Kingdom growth. In this case, a list of people groups could be identified within a certain time range, such as three to five years, where there is moderate or better saturation of mTask activities of scale 3 to 5 (discipleship, church formation, and leadership development), and where SOC has grown from level 2 to 3 (from a single church to limited church saturation). This would provide a list of peoples and places where God is clearly at work building His Kingdom and where additional resources might be needed to join God at work, expanding the potential for Kingdom harvest.

Second is an example of using these scales to evaluate church multiplication progress and health. A list of people groups could be identified which, over a particular time, have had moderate or better saturation of mTask activities of scale 4 (Church Formation including qualitative health indicators) coupled with progress along the SOC scale. The qualitative and quantitative data behind those mTask activities indicating the health of the churches, their ages, and their church planting generations could be evaluated to determine if, as in the first example, the Holy Spirit is causing healthy generational growth of churches over any given time period and past a particular generation. Because the scale works for combinations, even church planting that is happening among multiple people groups could be evaluated by limiting data to a particular spoken language, place, or segment. The ability to gain insight into where God appears to be at work in the world is a strength of these multi-indicator scales.

The third is an example of using the scales in comprehensive urban church planting strategies. As discussed previously, globalization and urbanization have complicated the people group discussion, making it more

difficult to identify where people are located and to track the spread of the gospel. Previous data collection systems focused primarily on people within a country, providing limited capacity to gauge the status of work among multiple people groups in a limited geographic area. New systems that record precise geolocations for mTask activities can assist urban missionaries in strategically evaluating their cities in multiple ways. Consider a city like London. As activities based on combinations of unique people names, languages, religions, and segments begin to be entered into a system based on these scales, the urban team would be able to evaluate, both separately and together, the city and its segments. For example, the British population in London may have a moderate saturation of mTask scale level 6 activities (indigenous British are engaging their own people), and an SOC scale of level 4 (moderate church presence to population). However, the Syrian Arab population in London may have a limited saturation of mTask scale levels 1 and 2 (entry and evangelism) and an SOC scale of 1 (some believers and no churches). Such a view into each combination will provide local teams with scales based on data that can inform prayer into where and with whom God wants them to engage. Because these scales can be calculated for each combination that has been identified within a city boundary, both peoples who need attention and those who could be equipped to give other groups attention can be identified. In addition, an overall city mTask and SOC scale can be calculated behind the scenes for all people group combinations weighted by their populations to allow mission leadership to evaluate strategic cities across a country or region.

Fourth is an example of using the scales to track the potential for healthy missionary exit to partnership among a people or place. When a particular people group is, over a sustained period, continuing to regularly trigger mTask 6 activities on the mTask scale and the State of the Church is SOC 3 or above, it could be an indicator to begin a deeper evaluation of the state of the work among that people group. The mTask scale could then be applied specifically to the work being done by members of this people group, both within their own people group and cross-culturally. Current systems provide

only a check box to report engagement. Data collection systems that support these new scales will be able to gather the details necessary to evaluate exit to partnership in a considerably healthier way based on tangible data.

As seen in these examples, IMB's multi-indicator engagement scales encourage a more complete and accurate evaluation of the status of missionary work among any combination of people, place, language, religion, or segment. While these scales should help mission agencies quickly and accurately determine where the missionary task is progressing well and where it is not progressing well, they are heavily dependent on real-time data.

Current and Future Implementations

Upcoming software tools and systems that gather activity metrics in near real-time are being built to support these multi-indicator scales. Everyone using the software, from front-line mission workers and individual believers to mission agencies, will be able to examine their own work in detail using the scales, while also viewing high-level aggregated results in near-real time that inform the status of the task and the state of the church. As more users enter data, they not only help evaluate their own work using these scales, but they also benefit the larger evangelical community with better and more complete global data. Better informed metrics will change the way evangelical agencies view the world, as myriad combinations of peoples, places, languages, religions, and segments can be evaluated in terms of their need for the gospel, discipleship, churches, or any other Kingdom work.

Conclusion

Datema rightly calls the people group scale debates “messy-ology” and surmises, “field realities are messy and don’t translate easily into mobilization

slogans without significant loss.”⁸ While this is true, the complexities of the globalized world and the realities of the urgency of lostness demand solutions. Simple and practical qualitative and quantitative metrics are needed to adequately categorize lostness. Engagement scales must be simple enough that the global evangelical community can easily adopt and integrate them into reporting systems while remaining practical enough to spur urgency and influence the church and the mission agency to mobilize. It is our hope that the scales described in this article, along with IMB’s implementation of these scales in cooperation with the evangelical community over the next few years, will move the Great Commission community to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness in the days ahead. May the Lord grant us wisdom as we seek to take His Gospel to the ends of the earth!

Bibliography

Christar. <https://www.christar.org/leastreached-faq>, accessed September 16, 2022.

Datema, Dave. “Defining ‘Unreached’: A Short History,” in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, vol. 33 no. 2 (2016): 45-71.

International Mission Board. *Foundations: Core Missiological Concepts, Key Mission Terms, the Missionary Task*, IMB Press, 2018.

Joshua Project. <https://joshuaproject.net/help/definitions>, accessed September 16, 2022.

⁸ Dave Datema, “Defining ‘Unreached’: A Short History,” in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 33, no. 2(2016): 65.

Jim Courson has served as a GIS Analyst on IMB's Global Research team since 2007. Prior to that, he and his family served overseas with IMB in East Asia for 17 years. He is also the editor of the Registry of Peoples. He has an MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a ThM from Asbury Theological Seminary.

Wilson Geisler is the Director of Global Research for the International Mission Board (IMB). Wilson has a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a Master of Science in Structural Engineering from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. He is a software developer and previous owner of Inertia Software, Inc. in Austin, Texas. He served with IMB in various strategy and leadership roles for 13 years in South Asia and the Middle East before becoming IMB's Director of Global Research in 2019.