

Is People Group Thinking still relevant in today's more-urban world?

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Date: 06.09.2010

Category: Unreached People Groups, Urban Mission

Earlier this week, I had to leave a meeting early. After I left, I understand there was a discussion about the relevancy of unreached people group thinking. Unfortunately, I didn't get to participate in the discussion. Here's my chance to make up time. :-). Is your agency or church still concerned with unreached peoples, or do you think the concept is no longer relevant? Here's my thinking on the matter (below). The cool thing is -- you can write your own opinion in the comment box below mine. If I disagree, I'll just delete your comment. (I'm kidding.) No seriously... you can respond. Tell us what you think:

Regarding unreached peoples and unreached people group thinking:

My original take on all this people group thinking is that it's largely a mobilization tool. I tell people? imagine you're trying to recruit volunteers to water the trees and plants in the mulched beds at Emerald Hills. We could describe the ones close to the building that get lots of water (if we had water sprinklers, that is). And we would say to the volunteers, "The problem is, there are many trees too far from the building, too far from the sprinkler system. These are the trees for which we really need volunteers." Now? having said that? when the volunteers come, we're still going to hop in the golf cart, drive them past a batch of mulched beds, and even get out of the golf cart to feel the mulch. Once we've felt the mulch, we can make a final decision about which flower beds we'd like them to water. But talking about the concept of beds *close* to the sprinkler system and beds far away is a useful tool to help prospective volunteers understand why they're needed. Otherwise, the automatic sprinkler system would take care of all the watering.

Likewise, in partnership with a mega-church here in Louisville, we recently used people group research tools in the process of mobilizing them to pray and launch toward a new outreach project. After tons of prayer and research, they chose a group in Asia. I lined up a few researchers to talk to us prior to going?; but the truth is, not even *I* had been to this particular land. When we arrived, the people group was all but M.I.A. But the general area was filled with people groups that hadn't heard. Thankfully, I had talked a lot with them about "not freezing in until they did the site visit." (By the way, that's the concept we would advocate for all these Restoration Revolution UPG-type projects.) We ended up moving several hours to the Northeast in the country we had chosen. The district has 12 million people? and, to everybody's knowledge, about 8 missionary-types in the whole region. Most folks agree there are way less than 300 believers? probably only around 50 known believers. They're all Muslim.

Does the church regret the power of people group thinking? Not a bit. It was a mobilization tool?; and it needed verification on-site. Upon returning, we sent our findings to Joshua Project and they were ever-so-thankful for the error-correcting research. That's the only way, in my opinion, that we'll ever improve on their list of 6800 groups: When all of us work together to set them straight.

Regarding whether or not urban areas un-do the concept of people group thinking:

I guess, to me, it's a bit like saying, "If there exists any situation that doesn't fit the model, then the model is bad." I trust we all agree that that logic is bogus. A model is just that?; a model. It *always* breaks down somewhere. Missiologists have been talking about the breakdown of people group theory in urban contexts since 1987, as far as I recall. It's absolutely nothing new. That's why we have practically always suggested that adopting entities say "people groups" or "cities." In October, I'm scheduled to participate in the 3rd Lausanne congress (in Cape Town). The track I'll be attending is the Unreached Peoples Track. Lausanne has called together 4000 people from over 200 countries. There are 10 key concepts that will be discussed, all 10 of which are the most critical and most relevant themes in modern missions. These concepts have been carefully conceived and

represent literally two years of preparation prior to including them in Lausanne. They wouldn't be including unreached peoples as a major component if they thought the concept was dead or irrelevant or useless.

Now one could call all of this "managerial missiology" if one would prefer. But to me, the point is to get at least some of the folks out, away from the building, where there are no sprinkler heads. Then and only then will we start understanding the need to carry the water in buckets in the back of the Gator. Or we'll buy more water hose. Or pray for rain. To me, when we advocate the demise of unreached people group thinking, we might be risking the demise of any sense of prioritization. We live in a big world. For example, there are about 68 cities with a population of 3 million or more. How in the world do we decide which city to focus on? One could argue that it doesn't help to look at unreached people group thinking in those cities. But I think one would be wrong. Look up unreached peoples in Chile. (Go to www.joshuaproject.net specifically to this page?)

<http://joshuaproject.net/countries.php>

and set the drop down box in the upper right on Chile.

The two "unreached groups" are measured in the hundreds or so. Some Jews, some Turks, and that's it. That should tell us something about Santiago. There are 17 million people in Chile. *Many* of those 17 million are non-Christian. But *most* of those 17 million have the capacity to meet a Christian today. That tells us something about Santiago. Now set the country to Bangladesh. There are 372 groups considered unreached/least reached. The majority of those have zero percent Christian, zero percent evangelical, zero percent adherent. The population of these unreached groups represent *millions* of people. *tens* of millions. These folks are way out, away from the sprinkler heads. We need some very proactive folks to get involved in reaching these people. Most of these millions have no capacity whatsoever to know or even meet a Christian today. That's the power of using unreached people thinking.

It's not unlike Nehemiah 3, where we get the sense that Nehemiah had assigned certain parts of the wall-rebuilding to certain families. We note that many of the most important "public" sections (like the Fish Gate or such-and-such a fountain) were embraced by particular clans. Only when those clans accepted responsibility for that public area would it be truly repaired effectively. Why? Because nobody lived there, building their house as a lean-to against those walls. So?; those walls were "unreached" walls; someone had to accept responsibility for them.

By the way, at the beginning of this piece, I said "My original take on all this people group thinking is that it's largely a mobilization tool," but I've broadened my thinking on that. My good friend, Greg Fritz, wrote me, saying, "I agree that the people group paradigm has been a helpful mobilization tool. However, it is more than that. It also helps in setting strategy, focusing prayer, and evaluating progress. Moreover, several biblical references cause us to wonder if God himself sees the world through a people group construct. People group thinking has power and continues to be relevant!"

Based on all the above, I've come to the conclusion that we are missing the point if we somehow conclude that "unreached people group thinking" is no longer relevant. I like the "both/and" thinking -- Reach Unreached Peoples now *and* reach urban settings now... and realize that our data/descriptions might not be perfect, but they're the best we've got -- so let's use them as starting points and send in corrections -- to groups like JoshuaProject.net -- when appropriate.

So that's my story -- and I'm sticking to it. :-)

Does any of that make sense?

What's your response?