



Why are the Unreached Unreached?

by Dr. Nik Ripken

With the modern missionary movement shifting into high gear, attempting to access unreached peoples, it is advisable to pause and ask, "What are the obstacles to giving a viable Christian witness to those who have never heard?" New buzz words abound as the AD 2000 movement, and others, lead the evangelical community to look through the "10/40 window," striving for a "church" for every people group by the year 2000.

Looking at the obstacles to reaching the unreached will move mission personnel beyond sticking pins in maps, gaining institutional satisfaction from the initial command to "Go." "Going" is substantially easier than "staying," developing a viable long-term Christ-like presence among those who have yet to hear clearly, especially where many are openly hostile to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Recognizing the hindrances that would allow the Gospel to take root among unreached peoples will enable mission agencies, churches and missionaries to plan means overcoming these obstacles.

What are some of those obstacles, not necessarily in their order of importance?

1 *A Harvest Mentality*

The New Testament word for evangelism is to "tell" or "proclaim." Somewhere along the line the missionary task has added the seemingly mandatory element of harvest. Reviewing the relationship between what ministers of the Gospel are primarily responsible for through obedience and what God, Himself manages is obligatory. The missionary task is to clearly share the Gospel until all peoples have had an opportunity to hear; baptizing and discipling those whom God has quickened into faith.

This harvest mentality affects sending agencies as well as missionaries. Two colleagues of mine from Kenya visited the same church in the States on furlough. One works with the responsive Giriama Peoples, the other with Somalis. The former reported massive numbers converted with resulting churches. The latter had seen one Somali accept Christ with three other "seekers" return to Islam. Guess which missionary the church increased support to?

Among Muslims in the Horn of Africa, the rate of persons coming to know Jesus is approximately one per year per church based evangelical agency. Over the past 50 years eight of every 10 "seekers" have returned to Islam. What is the key to service? Certainly not a harvest, or even the promise of one. Is a harvest of souls contrary to the will of God? Absolutely not! But focusing on the fruitful or harvest areas of the world, to the detriment of those who have never heard of Jesus, is not a balanced biblical approach.

The key is obedience to "go... tell... and disciple" all people groups.

2 *We Know One Way to "Do Church"*

80% of the unreached do not read or write a word. A Somali nomad explained, "Show me how to put your church on my camel before you talk to me about your Jesus."

Many of the unreached dwell in enemy held territory where there are few, if any, churches, pastors, Bible Studies, etc. Remove church buildings, corporate worship, pews and hymn books from believers' environments and where does one meet God?

Sharing the "Good News" is intrinsic to "being in Christ." What effect does the absence of Bibles studies, corporate worship, baptisms and the Lord's Supper have on those called to minister?

Couple this with an inherent Western desire to transfer Christian attributes to non-believers who have never benefitted from exposure to a Christian environment, culture, or country, and the opportunity for spiritual burn-out is increasingly real. Often I have witnessed heartache on behalf of my colleagues because they wanted non-believers to exhibit the attributes of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, etc., when those persons had never known, or been around anyone who knew, the Author of those attributes.

As my doctoral professor was quick to chastise me, "Don't be surprised when pagans act like pagans!" Discovering new ways of "doing church" is mandatory in many unreached settings.

3 Security

Institutions grow and perpetuate themselves by generating funds through the promotion of their programs and personnel. How then do sending boards, seminaries, and mission publications handle ministries they cannot talk about? The need for institutions to promote themselves at times exceeds the needs of the ministry. How does one publish the baptism of a former Muslim businessman when doing so may cause his death?

Yet how does the ministry raise funds, recruit personnel and garner prayer support? What a tension! Many agencies cannot handle such ambiguity and therefore avoid the areas that cannot accept traditional methods of church planting and reporting. In the Western psyche, often the desire to keep our personnel out of harm's way exceeds the corporate desire to allow the lost to hear about Jesus.

4 Persecution

As we began our ministry four years ago in the Horn of Africa a colleague/mentor pointedly told my wife and I, "If you are 'successful' in sharing Christ with your target people so that they come to faith, you will get someone killed." I shrugged this admonition off as being the framework for a good deputation story.

Until three of the first believers I ever discipled were murdered for their faith.

70% of the believers from one of our target groups have regularly been extracted from their environment by well-meaning evangelical agencies. I do not subscribe to "extraction theology" within persecuted environments. Yet 60% of believers left in such a setting experience extreme persecution and/or death. Colleagues have come to me in despair as new converts are beaten, expelled from families, shot and killed.

How can you emotionally/spiritually justify that the consequences of witness is often more serious for the one receiving the witness than the one giving it?

The real issue here is Biblical. Is Jesus worth it? To you as the witness bearer? To the one believing Jesus' claim? Is Jesus worth, not only dying for, but causing the death of one who embraces Christianity? I often, in orientation, challenge the new volunteers and career personnel with, "If you do not believe that Jesus is who He claims to be; the Way, the Truth, and the Life - the very Son of God and the only way to Heaven; then please keep your mouth shut. Don't get someone killed for something you are not sure about."

5 Ignorance and Prejudice Toward Christianity

To be Somali is to be a Muslim. Ask most Somalis if they are a Muslim and they laugh. Within Islam in particular, there is no division of church and state. It is both an economic and political movement as well as a religious entity. Often I have new personnel ask believers who were former Muslims what nationality they are. The reply is usually laced with sadness, "I have no country; I am a Christian."

Their worldview holds, to be a Somali is to be a Muslim. Conversely, they believe fervently that to be an American is to be a Christian. Was it just one year ago that Israel sought to expel an Israeli family for becoming Jewish Christians? To be an Israeli is to be a Jew.

Therefore, what types of "Christians" have they known? Soldiers, diplomats, NGOs, UN agencies, etc. The expatriates from these groups often engage in alcohol consumption, adultery, the eating of unclean foods, etc. All these are "Christian" in the mind's eye of the people. The 30,000 U.S. troops who came into Somalia to "Restore Hope" were "Christians" come to "crusade" against the Muslims.

Christianity, many unreached believe as represented by the West, is a faith of abortion, high crime rate and drug abuse. Therefore, a true follower of Christ does not often begin on level ground among the unreached. We start at minus three or four.

6 Climate

A friend of mine mapped Africa by climate/temperature. Over that, he mapped the location and number of missionaries. As the temperature climbed, the number of missionaries went down. Over that, he mapped unreached peoples, especially adherents of Islam. As the temperature grew, so did the percentage of those unreached by the Gospel.

Many of the unreached are in environmentally unfriendly regions of the world. In a way, Islam "fits" its environment. Reaching the unreached will require consciously moving from one's comfort zone. Four career missionaries entertained two teams of volunteers in a Horn of Africa country last month. The temperatures there averages 52 degrees centigrade (or 125 degrees fahrenheit) three months a year. What a challenge environmentally to incarnate Christ in that climate!

7 *It's Expensive!*

The last few years has seen the destruction of the country of Somalia. Prices for the support of expatriates soared with the advent of the UN intervention. Base housing went up to \$4000 per month. Vehicle rental remains \$30 per day for two-wheel drive and \$40 per day for four-wheel drive. Church based groups with expertise in unreached peoples in the Horn cannot afford to minister within their target peoples' own environment.

Must we live more modestly? Yes. But oftentimes the only way to access unreached people is through projects and human needs response. Must nationals be utilized for carrying the Gospel to their own people? Yes! But where the church is scattered or non-existent, efforts will be expatriate-driven for quite some time. Our agency has scheduled 197 flights to five countries in only six months. Paid flights accounted for seven of these! What financial foundation is needed for such a venture as evangelicals seek to cross borders into people groups closed to normal incarnational methods of missionary service. "Tentmakers" must continue to be emphasized. But in some places the making of tents is not possible.

God does reward obedience with open doors. Staying in the midst of a lost people group with viable ministries and approaches is an awesome challenge with multiple obstacles to overcome.

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8 *High Personnel Maintenance*

Living on the "cutting edge" eats mission personnel at a rapid pace. Oftentimes it involves communal living, isolation from the greater Christian community, harsh climatic environments and extreme spiritual warfare. Many agencies do a credible job in calling out the called, equipping, and sending out personnel.

Then they forget them.

Consistently, I've witnessed godly persons among the unreached lasting six months to a year of service. Quickly the isolation, persecution, danger, and lack of a pastoral support system causes stress and burnout. Reaching the unreached will require intentional care on a regular basis, intervention care when special crisis arise and referral care when the normal just is not enough.

We must take care of our people.

In conclusion, there are many reasons why the unreached are unreached. When my youngest child was a toddler, his older brothers would pick on him as siblings do. When they apologized to him, he learned to say, "Sorry is just not enough!"

When it comes to reaching the unreached, going is just not enough. Going into all the world is often easy, for