

# The Challenge of Unreached Peoples Groups

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The term “Unreached People Groups” is a challenge!

This is a challenge often missed by denominational leaders and individual Christians. Unreached people groups are to be found in virtually every African nation. Yes even in countries where the majority or a significant number of citizens, profess to be Christians.

Unreached people groups are distinct groups of people isolated from the Christian faith by language, religion and ethnic origin. In the Global Consultation on World Evangelization (GCOWE 97) in Pretoria in 1997 Kenyan church leaders were surprised to be confronted with a list of 22 unreached people groups in a country they considered evangelized. Likewise Zambia, a nation declaring itself to be Christian, was challenged by a list of unreached people groups.

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The Lausanne Strategy Working Group defines an “unreached people” in the following way:

*“A people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this group.”*

This definition implies that the people group has only a small percentage of Christians, and these have inadequate resources to effectively evangelize their own people without outside assistance. More recently the definition has been quantified as:

*“Less than 2% evangelical and less than 5% Christian adherents.”*

The *Joshua Project* and *Operation World* databases use this latter definition in their efforts to status the ethno-linguistic peoples of the world by country. Both data bases have also adopted the term “least-reached people group” as their preferred term when identifying groups less than 2% evangelical and less than 5% Christian adherents. For *Joshua Project* and *Operation World* “unreached” and “least-reached” are the same but prefer to use the latter.

MANI has chosen to follow the lead of *Joshua Project* and *Operation World* in using “least-reached” in preference to “unreached”. Accordingly in the rest of this article we shall use “least-reached”.

## The People Group Concept

The term *People Group* is used to refer to sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of shared: language, religion, ethnic origin, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation etc or a combination of these. These cultural, linguistic and social similarities are the factors by which people interact and communicate. They

give a group of people the sense of common identity so that they regard their group as being 'we' as opposed to others who are 'they'.

The concept of seeing people as not just isolated individuals, but as part of a society and a network of personal relationships is of great help in developing effective missionary strategy.

When we look at a nation in terms of *people groups* we are quickly able to see that some groups have a much higher percentage of professing Christians than do others. The people group approach helps us to identify those groups where there are few Christians and ministry resources.

According to the Joshua Project data base, 26% of the ethnic people/country groups on the continent of Africa still meet the *Least-Reached Peoples* criteria of less than 2% evangelical and less than 5% Christian adherents. That is almost 1,000 people groups in Africa with so few believers they likely cannot evangelize themselves. Their total population is almost 138 million people.

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As you seek to come to understand and to respond to the challenge of Least-Reached People Groups begin with a focus on your own nation; begin by identifying the ethno-linguistic groups in your nation that still lack a viable indigenous church planting movement.

### **Which Groups in Your Country are Currently Classified as Least-Reached and Where are They Located?**

For a listing of People Groups and Least-Reached Peoples in your country please refer to one of the following sources:

- ❖ The Joshua Project folder on the MANI Resource DVD (distributed to participants at MANI Southern Africa 2008 consultation).
- ❖ The Joshua Project page on the MANI website: [www.MANIAfrica.com](http://www.MANIAfrica.com).
- ❖ Email [research@maniafrica.com](mailto:research@maniafrica.com).

### **The Challenge Of Missions In National Capitals And Major Cities**

Major cities are like magnets drawing people from every rural area and every people group. As migration takes place, members of ethnic groups link together in identifiable communities with recognized leadership structures. For most migrants there is an increased awareness of their own ethnic identity as they live out their lives in an alien environment. Unfortunately the churches have been slow to recognize the nature of these migrant communities and how to utilize ethnic identity for effective ministry.

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*Very few Christian workers, missions and para-church ministries are to be found working amongst migrants from least-reached people groups in the major cities of Africa. Churches have not seen the need to target specific migrant peoples coming from least-reached people groups. Rather the assumption would appear to be that migrants should assimilate into existing urban churches. But this is something few are prepared to do. Most least-reached peoples are not ready to give up their culture to become Christians.*

*There is no evidence to support the notion that migrants from least-reached peoples groups will be reached through traditional evangelistic efforts and assimilate into churches that serve dominant reached people groups.*

*At the time of the first Ghana National Church Survey in 1987, 24% of the population of the capital, Accra, were migrants from the northern half of the country or neighbouring countries. Of the total northern community of over 350,000, less than half a percent attended a church despite the presence of over 2,000 churches in the city. When denominations deliberately identified people groups from the north and opened northern language congregations, hundreds of churches were opened and northern ethnic communities reached.*

*Churches in major cities need to recognize that least-reached people groups represent a missionary challenge in their own back yard. It is time to wake up and recognize the extent of the mission field in their midst and accept responsibility for reaching communities of migrants from least-reached people groups.*

## **Turning Barriers To Bridges**

*In seeking to penetrate migrant/ least-reached people groups, the importance of ethnic identity must be recognized and used to advantage. What has been a barrier to communication must become a bridge. Ethnic identity must be used and not destroyed.*

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Attitudes change and doors open when people groups are identified and recognized for who they are, when they are:

- ❖ Approached through traditional structures (i.e. their tribal or area chief or elders and in tribal meetings).
- ❖ Encouraged to read in their language, through the use of literacy programmes.
- ❖ Have the Gospel presented to them in the context of their ethnic community, through 'felt needs'.
- ❖ Are given the opportunity to meet for Bible study, prayer and worship in their language.
- ❖ Indigenous leaders are recognized from among the local believers.
- ❖ A sense of responsibly and missionary commitment to fellow tribes people is encouraged.

The time has come in most African nations for a definite, deliberate thrust to reach migrant/ least-reached people groups in major cities. To reach them in the context of their culture and mobilize them to reach *their* people both within the cities and in traditional homelands. Churches, missions and para-church ministries in cities must train and deploy cross-cultural workers in their backyard mission fields.

## Least-Reached People Groups in Traditional Home Lands

The impact of Christianity in traditional homelands may have been limited due to the lack of missionary endeavour or resistance to the Gospel due the strength of traditional ways and religious systems. A new day is dawning for many traditional homelands. A day of harvest is about to dawn. The seeds have been sown – the seeds of pioneer missionary work, Scripture translation, mother-tongue literacy, social services, education and leadership development. When these seeds are linked with the mobilization of new converts in urban migrant communities the harvest will be great!

The stage is set for harvest but the labourers and resources are grossly inadequate. Help is needed from those who are established in the Christian faith. By definition a *least-reached people group* is a group that lacks 'an indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize the group' without outside help.

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### Churches Must Be Mobilized to:

- ❖ prioritize missionary outreach to particular people groups.
- ❖ adopt specific people groups, areas and workers for prayer and support.
- ❖ develop missions programmes to pray and support outreach to least-reached peoples.
- ❖ adopt sister churches in least-reached people groups.
- ❖ redistribute material resources to work amongst least-reached people groups.
- ❖ re-deploy gifted personnel from maintenance ministries in evangelized areas to missionary outreach amongst least-reached peoples.
- ❖ make long-term missionary appointments rather than short-term pastoral transfers.
- ❖ provide cross-cultural orientation for all workers assigned to least-reached peoples.
- ❖ assign workers to specific people groups.
- ❖ encourage workers to learn the language of their target people.
- ❖ plant indigenous churches and develop indigenous leadership.
- ❖ establish national church networks for particular peoples.

### What Can Individual Christians Do?

- ❖ Become informed about least-reached people groups.
- ❖ Pray regularly for missionary outreach to specific peoples.

- ❖ Become involved among the least-reached people groups that have migrated to their area.
- ❖ Train and serve as a literacy teacher for a least-reached people to be found in their area.
- ❖ Visit the traditional homelands of the least-reached.
- ❖ Pledge regular financial support for missions to least-reached peoples.
- ❖ Be open to God's call to become a missionary
- ❖ Study cross-cultural mission and learn from experienced cross-cultural missionaries.
- ❖ Become a missionary. Live, learn and work amongst a least-reached people group.

### What should be our strategy?

Not only does the people-group concept provide us with an answer to the question of **who** are the unreached, but also allows us to answer the question of **how** are they to be reached.

*First, the people-group concept affirms that every group of people not only have their own unique identity, but also appreciate that common identity. They feel "at home" amongst their own people as they speak their own language and discuss issues relating to their own families and villages. It is for this reason that people of the same language enjoy coming to worship God together in their own language, and in their own way.*

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Throughout the world it has been found that churches grow most rapidly when they consist of just one people group. This is not a matter of excluding others, but of enjoying fellowship with one's own people. This is especially true where people are away from their traditional homeland. Wherever there are communities of non-indigenous peoples one finds that the church often becomes the centre of the social life for the community. Amongst minorities one finds that they enjoy meeting with people who speak their own language. In thinking of the "unreached" in your country we must not think of them as being one block of people, they actually consist of many different language groups. Each of these groups has the potential for a church in their own language and culture.

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*Secondly, the people-group concept leads us to start planning with the people to be ministered to, rather than with a programme to be administered. We must give time to understand the particular people and see what problems they are facing. This will allow us to develop methods of evangelism that will be relevant and effective for that particular people. It is like a man going fishing. He knows that he uses a net to catch some types of fish, a spear for others, and a hook-and-line for yet others. No one strategy will be equally effective for all people-groups.*

*Thirdly, the people-group concept allows us to set new goals for the missionary task. Our aim can be seen to be not just the making of converts, but also the planting of living Christian fellowships within every people-group. These Christians will in turn reach out to their own people, and draw them*

into their own people-group churches. Here they will be able to worship God in their own culture, and hearing the Scriptures read and preached in their first language.

Surely, this is what Jesus meant when He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations (people-groups)." Matthew 28:19