Do
People
Groups
Still Matter?

A Review in 2010

DARRELL DORR

The year 2010 is an appropriate year to step back and re-visit the emphasis on "people groups" that has been foundational for the U.S. Center for World Mission and others in the frontier mission movement since 1974. Therefore, this issue of *Mission Frontiers* is a springboard for a series of reflections and discussions throughout 2010, a series that will be continued by our sister periodical, the *International Journal of Frontier*

Missiology, and by the September 21-23 meetings in Charlotte, North Carolina of the International Society for Frontier Missiology.

One good place to start the discussion is to consider comments by the late Paul Hiebert, comments found on pages 90 and 92 of *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Paul G. Hiebert, BakerAcademic, 2009):

Sociology and social anthropology have had a profound impact on Western missions. Early mission strategies were largely based on a geographical division of the world. But missionaries found deep social divisions within the cultures to which they went, divisions that shaped the people's response to the gospel more deeply than geography. This led to the Church Growth movement started by Donald McGavran, Alan Tippett and Peter Wagner. McGavran and Tippett demonstrated how social dynamics play a major role in the growth and organization of the church. They introduced concepts such as homogeneous groups, people movements, social receptivity/resistance, and social barriers into mission literature. More recent applications of social theory to missions include the People Group movement that defines some seventeen thousand people groups and seeks to plant churches in each of them (in part through the Adopt-a-People movement).
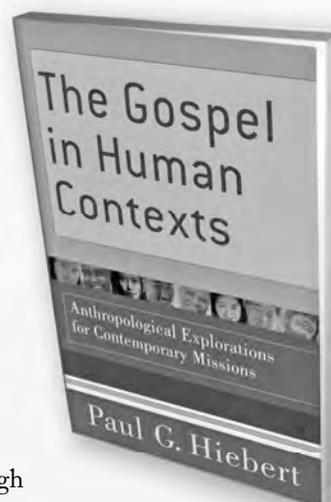
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A third limitation [of the Church Growth movement] comes from the early theories of sociology. Initially, social anthropology focused its attention on small societies and examined them as closed systems. Social anthropologists saw societies as harmonious organic wholes. The concept of people groups fits best with such a view of small-scale societies. But peasant and urban societies cannot be cut up into distinct, bounded people groups without seriously distorting the picture. In large-scale societies, individuals participate in many different groups and cultural frames and do not fully identify with any one of them. Associations, institutions and networks are the middle level of social organization in urban societies, and macroinstitutions such as nation-states, businesses and transnational organizations are at the highest level of social systems. Consequently, we cannot really speak of distinct people groups or hope to generate people movements in complex settings.

Hiebert's comments prompt a variety of questions:

- Is the concept of people groups applicable primarily to small-scale societies? If so, what examples can be identified?

- Are the concepts of people groups and people movements really inapplicable in "complex settings", especially in urban societies? Do field realities confirm or contradict Hiebert's assertion?

- Ray Bakke challenged missionaries to learn how to "exegete a city," but how can missionaries also learn to "exegete a people" in contexts both urban and rural?

- Is the concept of people groups passé for mission in the twenty-first century? If so, what other concepts of social organization are more appropriate for mission mobilization and field ministry? Do mission mobilizers and field workers need new constructs of people groups, or do they need substitute constructs that more accurately reflect social realities?

The following articles launch our reflections and discussions in 2010. Enjoy what others have to say, and then tell us what *you* think. f
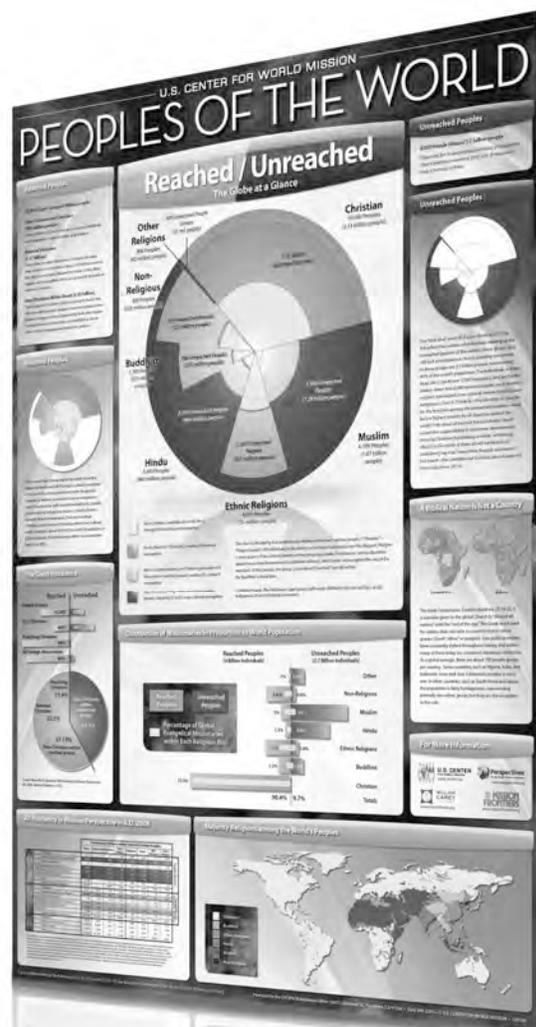
Lifting, Pushing, Squeezing and Blending

The Dynamics of Ethnicity and Globalization

Brad Gill

An emphasis on "people groups" has become a common way to map our mission to the world. It was not always so. When Donald McGavran emerged from caste-ridden India in the 1960s, evangelicals were confronted anew with the strategic role of social and cultural boundaries in world evangelization. The persistent individualism at the core of our Western gospel made many nervous at the idea that large, ethnically homogenous peoples could move so quickly and powerfully towards the gospel. The idea of group conversion remained suspect. Then, in 1974, when Ralph Winter used this controversial idea to map a new demography of "unreached" peoples, the idea of "people groups" began to find its place in mission vernacular.

But the concept of people groups has always met with "friendly fire" from missionaries and mission anthropologists who have served among these unreached peoples. Their profound critiques call us to reassess whether the social and cultural boundaries that define people groups will persist in today's shrinking world. The recent publication of Paul

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Hiebert's last two books provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for this reassessment.[1] His rich, eclectic and nuanced anthropology probes the way modern social processes impact the distinctive boundaries of peoples across the world. And "people group" thinking is maturing as it absorbs these modern trends.
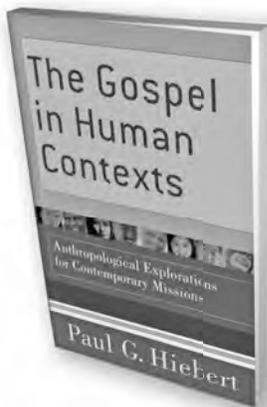
This topic reminds me of a conversation I had recently on the edge of the Sahara Desert. I rode with the son of a 90-year-old camel driver who had led caravans 11 times across the Sahara to Timbouctou. This son was raised with the same set of skills, but he had learned English amidst the burgeoning tourist industry, and he had recently married a European tourist. He was on his way to Europe, where she awaited. I happened to mention that I had made friends with some from his "Berougi" (people from the desert) years earlier when I worked in a city adjacent to his region. He immediately seemed uncomfortable and corrected my use of this ethnic term "Berougi." His people were not just from the desert, but they were exclusively from a prestigious lineage in the desert. He and the "Berougi" were very reluctant to visit these cities where I had worked because of all the prejudice they had experienced there. Forced by the crisis of drought to leave their desert trade, it was easier for them (and for him) to access another part of the globe than to contend with a cultural firewall a few hundred miles away.

This young man represents the massive migrations and dispersions of peoples across the world. In the "push and pull" of this young man's story, I notice the interface of two social realities: ethnicity and globalization. The mixture of these two contested concepts is a new focus of many mission anthropologists, for together they seem to provide a new way to exegete the complex field of relations in and around people groups. Ethnicity refers to culture, a people's corporate sense of tradition, of shared value, belief and habit. Globalization, on the other hand, addresses the context of global change, and one's sense of place in the flow of it all. The convergence leads to the new "glocal" reality, and I could see it in this young camel driver's story. He carried both an ethnic identity with his people and a new relational link to a globalized world.

Everybody's trying to get their arms around this idea of globalization. Thomas Friedman calls it that "inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies" that enables us "to reach around the world farther, faster, and cheaper than ever before."[2] It flattens our world. Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* suggests it's a "Post-American World," where the processes historically identified with "the rise of the West" now include "the rise of the Rest."[3] The original Western carriers of education, media and technology have been decentralized into initiatives from other parts of the globe. Whatever the definition, globalization gives us a sense that modernity has shifted into overdrive.

So, do the ethnic boundaries of people groups persist, or does globalization rupture and flatten people groups into another social reality? I'd like to exegete four processes or effects of globalization on peoples of the world. They're tossed around by social scientists, but we see them all the time. They can be highly theoretical, so let me begin with another snapshot.

I can recall my initial idea of the Muslim people group I entered years ago: tribal, noble, a corporate sense of destiny, and a coherent sense of religious tradition. My mental map held for a few weeks before adjustments began. I was rummaging through the old market place one day when I came across an ancient-looking gateway. Over the threshold it said, "Dior Shyukh" (the Houses of the Sheikhs). I

discovered that 60 years earlier this had been the seat of government for the entire tribal confederation. Now it was run-down, forgotten, not even a tourist stop. My wife would tell me that all the women at the public bath knew where judgment was now handed down. They would gossip the latest intrigues from across that mountain town, and inevitably it all fastened on either the new courthouse or city hall. Modern institutions had grafted themselves onto this "people group." What initially seemed culturally solid, bounded and corporate was actually looser, fragmented and conflicted.

Lifting
First, there is a hint here of what Anthony Giddens calls the "*lifting out*" of local relations.[4] The global reach of modern systems is pervasive; these systems begin to subtly redirect the trust persons have traditionally placed in local face-to-face commitments. Making a call on a cell phone, getting water from the kitchen sink, or going to the bank are all actions which imply a realignment of trust towards modern, global systems. Consequently, trust in traditional relations slowly surrenders its grip to faceless and anonymous global systems. One is gradually lifted out of what was once a more inclusive sense of people group.

Pushing
Second, there's the "*push down*" effect.[5] Globalization doesn't just pull you up and out, it presses down and creates new demand for ethnic autonomy. It makes the boundaries of people groups become more salient. This downward pressure has been a major catalyst in the astounding revival of local ethnic identities in recent decades (which really surprised mainline social science). When the lid comes off, as it did in Yugoslavia with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it exposes the reality of this "push down" effect. The nature of the ethnic explosion between Serbian, Croat and Bosnian Muslim is manifest in similar ways across a swath of nations in recent decades.

I could see this downward pressure in the Kurdish region I visited a couple of years ago. Here's an entire region of displaced Muslims who had to flee the genocidal onslaught of Saddam Hussein. A

"no-fly zone" granted them security, and they had come out of the hills to reestablish their worlds. Amidst the displacement and fragmentations, there was a resurgence of ethnic identity. Boom-town cities were expanding, with new high-rise buildings everywhere. I noted that one tribal group of 20,000 had relocated and settled together in a suburban area, keeping intact their sense of tribal identity and traditional tribal leadership after 25 years of exile. Their ethnic autonomy isn't melting down.

Squeezing

Third, globalization can "*squeeze sideways*." Amidst the pressure of global systems, a single meaningful aspect of a people's identity can move laterally and link itself with others who share the same aspect. Economists note this in new economic zones, but by far the most vital aspect of identity that squeezes sideways is religious. The religious core of ethnicity intensifies and moves sideways, galvanizing large religious association. We've seen how the recent radical *"Islamic jihad"* forges together Muslims from all over the globe. What fuels this? It could be that abstract and impersonal global systems fail to provide the psychological reward that comes with personal face-to-face ties. Religion becomes the means by which people "re-imbed" themselves in meaningful relations.

> I THINK WE CAN EXPECT THAT ETHNICITY WILL HAVE A NEW INTENSITY IN LIGHT OF GLOBALIZATION.

We see the markers of this broad ethno-religious identity almost everywhere. How else can one explain the teenage Muslim girl at our local high school whose head is fully covered, but who wears a halter-top and tight cut-off shorts and who hums to the cadence of a heavy metal Middle Eastern tune on her iPod?

Blending

All these effects contribute to a fourth, "*blending*" effect, what social scientists call "hybridity", or "hybridities" since we see it in many forms and combinations.[6] In mission circles this subject of hybridity began with the observation that large people movements for Christ happened in rural settings, not in urban settings. In the city the *inclusive* categories of family, clan, and tribe were more complicated as people joined, attended or aligned themselves with modern institutions and associations. The religion and culture of people groups is *intersected* by new educational and vocational affiliations. And it's in the urban environment that people feel the hyper-effects of global "lifting out," "pushing down" and "squeezing sideways." Ethnicity doesn't necessarily disappear, it just gets compartmentalized as people construct their identities.

So what are we to conclude? Do these effects add up to anything we can calculate or map out? I'm not the one to prognosticate, so I won't. But on the field, I have found that understanding these processes and effects helps me to better understand the intentions and reactions of Muslim peoples among whom I've served. So allow me to venture just three modest observations.

First, I think we can expect that ethnicity will have a new intensity in light of globalization. It will hold, but among many peoples it will hold differently. Ethnicity will be held more deliberately, more defensively, even more defiantly. In the congestion and pressure of globalization, peoples will continue to construct their social boundaries, but even more so. The forces of globalization may continue to be successful in assimilating traditional worlds to modern life. But we should anticipate a kick-back effect, where people recreate a lost ethnicity in reaction to the psychological homelessness of modern life.

Second, I concur with Robert Priest that it's not a time to relax our anthropological analyses. On the contrary, more sophisticated tools are needed to inform mission practice.[7]

Third, let's remember that our motive for sifting and sorting mankind is to honor and obey the God who created every people, "who determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26,27). ⊕

Footnotes

1 Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2009

2 Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 2005

3 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, W.W.Norton, N.Y., 2008

4 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Blackwell, U.K. 1990, p. 21

5 Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World*, Routledge, N.Y., 2009, p. 13

6 Ted C. Lewellen, *The Anthropology of Globalization*, Bergin & Garvey, 2002, p. 98f

7 Brian Howell and Edwin Zehner, *Power and Identity in the Global Church*, William Carey Library, 2009, p.185f

Is God Colorblind or Colorful?

The Gospel, Globalization and Ethnicity

Miriam Adeney

Isabell Ides was 101 years old when she died last June. A Makah Indian, a member of a whale-hunting people, she lived in the last house on the last road on the farthest northwest tip of the United States. Isabell was known far and wide because she loved and taught Makah culture and language. Hundreds of people learned to weave baskets under her hands. Several generations learned words in their language from her lips. Young mothers brought her their alder-smoked salmon. After chewing a bit, she could tell whether their wood was too dry. Archaeologists brought her newly excavated 3,000-year-old baskets, and she could identify what the baskets were, how they were made, and how they had been used. "It's like losing a library," an anthropologist said at her funeral.

Isabell also taught Sunday School at the Assembly of God church on the reservation. She attributed her long life to her Christian faith.

Did Isabell's basketry matter to God, as well as her Sunday school teaching? How important was her ethnic heritage in the Kingdom's big picture? This question reverberates as we explore globalization.

Creative Destruction

In the spring of 2001, representatives of 34 nations gathered in Quebec to discuss a free trade agreement that would cover the whole of the Americas. There were many worries. How can there be a level playing field between the US or Canada and Honduras or Bolivia, between some of the richest and some of the poorest countries on the planet? Won't the small ones be gobbled up? Even Brazil, Latin America's largest economy, was skittish.

Into this discussion, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, dropped the phrase "creative destruction." Yes, he said, more open global trade means some "creative destruction." Businesses will close. Jobs will be lost. "There is no doubt," Greenspan stated, "that this transition to the new high-tech economy, of which rising trade is a part, is proving difficult for a large segment of our work force…. The adjustment process is wrenching to an existing work force made redundant largely through no fault of their own." But such trauma is just part of the price of progress. As is often said, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. You can't garden without pruning. You can't use the computer without pressing the delete button now and then. You cannot train as an athlete without sloughing off bad habits.

Honing, sharpening, weeding out, paring down—these are positive terms. So Greenspan spoke of the "creative destruction" inherent in globalization. But, he added, "History tells us that not only is it unwise to try to hold back innovation, it is also not possible."

Ethnicity is one arena of destruction. In today's global system, local ethnic values are being trampled. Cultural values are more than commodities. They are parts of heritages on which we cannot put a price. Yet, like endangered species, cultural values are being threatened. How should we respond when globalization drowns ethnicity?

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A Place in the Story

What is God's view of ethnicity? God created us in his image, endowed us with creativity, and set us in a world of possibilities and challenges. Applying our God-given creativity, we have developed the cultures of the world.

In the beginning, God affirmed that it was not good for humans to be alone. Humans were made to live in communities of meaning. So God gave his blessing to cultural areas such as the family, the state, work, worship, arts, education, and even festivals. He gave attention to laws which preserved a balanced ecology, ordered social relations, provided for sanitation, and protected the rights of the weak, the blind, the deaf, widows, orphans, foreigners, the poor, and debtors.

He affirmed the physical world, out of which material culture is developed. He delighted in the very soil and rivers that He gave his people. It was "a land which the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year" (Deut. 11:12) ….

IS IT ANY SURPRISE IF OUR CREATOR PROGRAMS US WITH THE CAPACITY TO CREATE AN AMAZING KALEIDOSCOPE OF CULTURES TO ENRICH HIS WORLD?

In the picture language of the Old Testament, God gave people oil to make their faces shine, wine to make their hearts glad, friends like iron to sharpen them, wives like fruitful vines, and children like arrows shot out of their bows. Economic, social, and artistic patterns combine to make up a culture. This is the context within which we live. It is where we were designed to live. Global systems may immerse us in virtual realities— media, packaged music, the stock market, sports scores, and news flashes—in which great tragedies are juxtaposed with beer ads. Yet if we are absorbed in the global or virtual level, we miss out on the real rhythms of nature and society. Seed time and harvest, and the health of our soil, trees, and water. Friendship, courtship, marriage, parenting, aging, and dying. Creation, use, maintenance, and repair. There are rhythms to living in God's world. These are expressed locally, through specific cultural patterns. Knowing these helps us know ourselves, our potentialities and our limits, and the resources and sequences that weave the fabric for happy choices. They cannot be known at the abstract, global level. Disciplining a child, for example, is not virtual. Being fired from a job is not a media experience. Having a baby is not a game. Coping with cancer is not abstract.

… Our Creator delights in colors. He generates smells, from onion to rose. He shapes every fresh snowflake. He births billions of unique personalities. Is it any surprise if he programs us with the capacity to create an amazing kaleidoscope of cultures to enrich his world?

Cultures contain sin and must be judged, as we will discuss in the following section. But ethnic pride is not automatically sin. It is like the joy parents feel at their child's graduation. Your child marches across the platform. Your chest hammers with pride. This is not pride at the expense of your neighbor, whose face also glows as his child graduates. No, your heart swells because you know your child's stories. The sorrows he has suffered. And the gifts that have blossomed in him like flowers opening to the sun. You yourself have cried and laughed and given away years of your life in the shaping of some of those stories.

At its best, ethnicity is an expansion of this good family pride. Ethnicity is a sense of identification with people who share a culture and a history, with its suffering and successes, heroes and martyrs. Like membership in the family, ethnicity is not earned. It is a birthright, received whether you want it or not.

Human beings were created to live in community. In today's world, we still feel that need. "Even when our material needs are met, still our motivation… emotional resilience… and moral strength… must come from somewhere, from some vision of public purpose anchored in a compelling image of social reality," according to anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Being a world citizen is too vague to provide this motivation and strength, says Geertz. World citizenship makes the common person feel insignificant. Even national citizenship may breed apathy. But when you are a member of an ethnic group, you have celebrations which give zest, values which give a cognitive framework, action patterns which give direction to your days, and associational ties which root you in a human context. You have a place in time in the universe, a base for the conviction that you are part of the continuity of life flowing from the past and pulsing on into the future. You are in the story.

When Ethnicity Becomes an Idol

God ordained culture. But customs that glorify God are not the only reality that we observe around us. Instead of loveliness, harmonious creativity, and admirable authority, we often see fragmentation, alienation, lust, corruption, selfishness, injustice and violence cultivated by our culture. No part remains pure. Science tends to serve militarism or hedonism,

ignoring morals. Art often becomes worship without God. Mass media is full of verbal prostitutes. Businessmen pull shady deals. Politicians fill their own pockets. Workers do shoddy work. Husbands deceive their wives. Wives manipulate their husbands. Children ignore their parents as persons.

We are not only created in God's image. We are also sinners. Because we have cut ourselves off from God, the cultures we create reek with evil. We are called, then, not only to rejoice in the patterns of wisdom, beauty, and kindness in our culture, but also to confront and judge the patterns of idolatry and exploitation.

Sometimes ethnicity is turned into an idol. Like other idols of modern society—money, sex, and power, for example—ethnicity is not bad in itself. When we exalt it as though it were the highest good, however, ethnicity becomes evil. Racism, feuds, wars, and "ethnic cleansing" result. When ethnicity becomes an idol, it must be confronted and judged.

Implications for Mission

Ethnicity counters the dehumanizing bent of globalization. Even at its best, economic globalization tends to treat cultural values as commodities. Ethnicity reminds us to keep faith with our grandparents and with our human communities. It is a vital counterbalance. What does ethnicity mean for mission? We will suggest four applications.

1. Affirm the Local

First, mission should affirm local cultures. We do not do this uncritically. Working with and under local Christians, we judge patterns of idolatry and exploitation, as explained above. Yet we love the local culture. We receive it as a gift of God. And while we live in that place, we adapt gladly to those dimensions of local values that are wholesome....

We patronize local businessmen and businesswomen. We encourage local artists, musicians, and writers, rather than routinely importing foreign books or translating them.

We stay in locally owned hotels and homes. We learn from the lore of local herbalists. We safeguard local forests. We gain skills in local sports and games. We make efforts to be present at local parties and funerals. We empathize with local social reformers. If we are missionaries, we discipline our thoughts so that we are not preoccupied with our

homeland's cultural patterns. Specific heritages matter. Even the 20th century epic *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) affirms the local. Columnist Mike Hickerson observes:

> *The Lord of the Rings* suggests that God's victory on Earth (or Middle-Earth) is incomplete unless and until the victory fills the "small places."...The final battle between good and evil is not some gigantic historic battle—like the destruction of the Death Star—but rather a small fight, followed by a small reconstruction of a very small place. The Good News fills every valley.... In their return to the Shire, the Hobbits continued their mission to its proper conclusion. Without their humble work among their own humble folk, evil would have retained a stronghold in Middle-Earth. The global is important, and so too is the local.

In missionary training programs, this emphasis must be made. There is a tendency for missionaries from dominant cultures to assert their ethnic heritage as though it were God's pattern for everybody. Western missionaries do this. Chinese and Korean missionaries do it in Central and Southeast Asia. Latinos do it in indigenous communities....

2. Be Pilgrims

Many people have several ethnic identities. Consider this situation: On the west coast of America, earlier generations of Asians were prevented by law from marrying Caucasians. Quite a few Filipino immigrants married Native Americans. Picture three adult children in such a family today. One identifies primarily as a Filipino, the second as a Native American, and the third as an American. But all three switch identities from time to time.

Furthermore, cultures change continually. In the process, new identity combinations emerge. The renowned Wing Luke Museum is re-opening this week in my home city, Seattle, Washington. Reportedly it is the only pan-Asian-Pacific-American museum in the USA. What is an Asian-Pacific-American? "Not a race, ethnic group, or nationality," according to Jack Broom in the *Seattle Times*. "It's a census category that historically combined people from more than 40 countries making up a vast portion of the globe, stretching from Tahiti to Pakistan, Japan to Indonesia, Hawaii to India."

Fourteen percent of my county's population is Asian Pacific American. In spite of the *Seattle Times'*

disclaimer, this is a significant ethnic category, a measurable group with enough identity to support a noted museum. In a nesting hierarchy of ethnic identities, it constitutes one level. The *Times* article goes on to say that the high numbers "reflect the Northwest's perch on the Pacific Rim."

Multiple identities are not unusual. Spanish speakers in the USA grew by 50% from 1980 to 1990. They now make up 30% of the population of New York City. Most speak English as well. In the same decade, the number of Chinese speakers in the U.S. increased by 98%. Four-fifths of these people continue to prefer speaking Chinese at home even though most speak English.

At the core, ethnic identity rests on self-ascription as a member of a shared culture, a shared community, a shared heritage. In a multiethnic society, you may not see much difference between the economic, social, and worldview patterns of people whose parents came from different countries. They may shop at the same stores and make jokes about the same sports events.

What matters is not the depth of observable difference but the depth of the identification with distinctive communities. A people's history, for example, is their private property. The Jews have their history. The Chinese have their history. African-Americans have their history. Nobody can take this from them. It is their heritage. When the history involves suffering, and when heroes have arisen in the midst of that suffering, communal ties are even stronger.

Heritage matters, but a lot of people have more than one, and are at various points on an identity continuum. Some balance several identities. People may not put this into words, or even into conscious thought. But they know when they feel uncomfortable, when they feel crammed into inappropriate categories, into boxes that don't fit. It is important to respect the way people identify themselves at any particular time; however, doing so may scramble our categories or lists of people groups. Individuals from the same ancestry—even siblings—may choose to identify differently.

What is the identity of the refugee immigrant? The bi-racial child? The Navaho who wonders whether home is the reservation or the city? The cosmopolitans and the youth who buy and wear goods from everywhere and who read, listen to, and watch media from everywhere? Who are their people? Are they destined to be global nomads?

Wherever they are, the gospel offers them a home. God doesn't stereotype us. He meets us each as

the exceptions that we are, with our multiple and overlapping identities, our unique pilgrimages, our individual quirks. God doesn't slot us into pigeonholes. Whether we have permanently lost our community, or are temporarily adrift, or have patched together bits of several heritages, God welcomes us into his people. The gospel offers us a home beyond the structures of this world.

Local cultures are gifts of God, but they are never enough. Yes, like Jeremiah, we "seek the welfare of the city" where we find ourselves (Jer 29:7, NASB). Yet, like Abraham, we know that this is not our final resting place. We remain pilgrims, seeking the city "whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:8-10, KJV).

3. Build Bridges

In 1964, when he was 14, Zia entered a school for the blind in Afghanistan. He became a joyful Christian. Over the next years, he learned to speak the Dari, Pushtu, Arabic, English, German, Russian, and Urdu languages, and to read these languages where Braille script was available. During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, Zia was put in charge of the school for the blind. Later, because he would not join the Communist Party, he was thrown into prison. He escaped to Pakistan in the disguise of a blind beggar, which was his actual state.

In Pakistan, because Zia was translating the Old Testament, he was offered a scholarship to go to the United States to study Hebrew. He declined the opportunity. Why? He was too busy ministering locally. Although he didn't think he had time to extract himself to learn Hebrew, he did learn Urdu as his seventh language in order to reach Pakistanis. Eventually he was martyred.

Zia represents the millions of Christian witnesses over the centuries who have discovered that the gospel links us with the globe. We begin locally, but we do not stop there.

Today the world desperately needs people like Zia. Economic and technological globalization connect us at superficial levels. Societies must have people who can make deeper connections. Thomas Friedman explores this idea in his powerful book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, where the Lexus represents the global economy and the olive tree represents local traditions. Clifford Geertz writes about the tension between epochalism and essentialism, between the need to be part of the contemporary epoch versus the need to maintain our essential identities, to know who we are. Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Networked Society* argues that although a networked globe means an integration of power, this happens on

a level increasingly divorced from our personal lives. He calls it "structural schizophrenia" and warns, "Unless cultural, political, and physical bridges are deliberately built…we may be heading toward life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet."

Who can build bridges? What movement spans nations, races, genders, *ethne*, rich and poor, illiterates and Ph.D.'s? It is an awesome thing to realize that there are scarcely any people more suitably poised to connect interculturally than the church universal.

When civil ties break down, it is often believers who can lead societies across bridges of reconciliation, reaching out to clasp hands with brothers and sisters on the other side. Our loyalties do not stop at the edges of our culture. We are pilgrims. We can step out into the margins. Indeed, that has always been the Christian mandate. Abraham was called to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). David sang, "May all the peoples praise you, O God" (Ps 67:3,5). Paul was propelled by a passion for the unreached peoples (Rom 15:20-21). John vibrated with a vision of peoples and tribes and kindreds and nations gathered together around the throne of God at the end of time (Rev 4-5).

Making cross-cultural connections has been our mandate from the beginning. Our involvement in globalization is rooted not in economics but in God's love for his world. We cannot be isolationists, content in our cocoons. The love of God compels us to step outside our boundaries. Where there is conflict, we step out as peacemakers. Where the gospel is not known, we step out as witnesses. Global connections also make it possible for us to step out to serve the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide more swiftly and comprehensively than ever before.

To whom much has been given, from them much is required. Are we building bridges?

4. Nurture Ethnic Churches

Finally, we must consider distinct ethnic churches in our own communities. Some people ask: "If 11:00 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America, aren't ethnic churches racist? Certainly they foster evangelism and fellowship. But just because something succeeds doesn't make it right. The devil has lots of success, too."

How can we answer? In this chapter, we have laid the foundation for arguing that ethnic churches are justified not only for pragmatic reasons—because

they work—but also because they are rooted in the doctrine of creation. In God's image, expressing God-given creativity, people have developed different cultures. These cultures offer complementary glimpses of beauty and truth, and complementary critiques of evil.

Every church must welcome people of every race and culture. Some people flourish in multicultural churches. Others treasure their own tradition. For them, culture remains important in worship. They pray in their heart language, with meaningful gestures, ululations, and prostrations. Their culture will affect the way they do evangelism, discipling, teaching, administration, counseling, finances, youth work, leader training, discipline, curriculum development, relief, development, and advocacy. Their theologians complement other cultures' understanding of the Bible.

Separate congregations are not bad. What is bad is a lack of love. This lack of love is too often found in churches in which the majority of the members are from the subculture at the top of the power hierarchy. Wealthier, more powerful churches do have special obligations....

In this context, ethnic churches have great value. Like a mosaic, like a kaleidoscope, the whole spectrum of cultures—and ethnic churches—enriches God's world. Just as strong, healthy families are the building blocks for strong healthy communities, so strong ethnic churches can be the building blocks for strong multicultural fellowships. It is when we learn commitment and cooperation at home that we are prepared to practice those skills at large.

Ethnic churches are a good place to begin global mission work too. We can partner with international Christians who live in our own cities—students, businessmen, temporary visitors, refugees, immigrants. Many represent relatively "unreached" peoples. Many regularly return to their homeland to help dig wells, set up clinics, teach in Bible schools, publish hymnbooks and training textbooks, etc. We can pray with them, help them grow to maturity as Christ's disciples, and reach out together to their peoples.

When ethnicity is treasured as a gift but not worshiped as an idol, God's world is blessed, and we enjoy a foretaste of heaven. Let us keep that vision before us. 🌐

Further Responses to Paul Hiebert

Bruce Graham, Duane Frasier, Omid, Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch, and Steve Hawthorne

Bruce Graham

Bruce Graham is an Associate Editor of the Perspectives Reader. *He is a member of the Frontier Mission Fellowship and has served in South Asia in a variety of roles.*

The concept of people groups, and the dynamic of people movements, as a focus and goal of frontier mission effort brought to light ethnic realities that needed increasing sensitivity in the last 30 years in fulfilling the Great Commission. This focus well served North American mission mobilization efforts that desired a simple, clear, "manageable", measurable strategy for "completing" the Great Commission. It has launched new efforts and programs with a people group focus. Yet "field strategy" perspectives, and growing understanding of field realities, reveal that Paul Hiebert's reflections have a lot of truth.

From a field perspective, there are many contexts in our world where "people group" boundaries are not clear, particularly in an increasingly urban and globalized world. Our definitions of a people and an unreached people assumed that evangelistic work had already begun among a people before discernible boundaries could be discerned. Other, more strategic factors were necessary in guiding the beginnings of the work.

In most field contexts, work develops through relational networks, or through recognition of a problem enslaving particular peoples. These networks or problems vary according to context and in some situations may cross "people group" boundaries. Recognizing and working within these relational networks, confronting these problems, has more strategic value that trying to focus on a particular people group once you've "arrived" on the field. Paul's work in Ephesus turned the whole city "upside down". It had ramifications among many relational networks and peoples that might not have been discernible or a focus of concern initially.

A "maturing" unreached peoples movement ought to grow and deepen its awareness of the kind of gospel (or "Christianity") we're called to bring among these peoples. How do we proclaim and live out a gospel of Christ's Kingdom? This will keep us from transplanting and proselytizing peoples into a gospel of "Western Christianity, church, religious ritual or program" which comes across as "bad news" for many non-western peoples. May this core issue bring new awareness and sensitivity to a new generation of workers going among unreached peoples. It's a challenge far beyond the movement, concept, definitions or strategy. It draws people into a Story that restores identity, relational networks, communities and peoples in all their ethnic diversity as they find their place in a Kingdom of Jesus which has power to overcome all earthly kingdoms. Every people finds good news in this Story!

Duane Frasier

Duane Frasier serves with Joshua Project (www.joshuaproject.net), a ministry of the U.S. Center for World Mission.

Throughout mission history there has been a progression in our strategy to complete the Great Commission. Taking up the call from Acts 1:8, the church has advanced the message geographically in ripples to the ends of the earth. *Geography* has always figured into mission strategy.

The Church has largely understood the need to

communicate the message to each of the world's many *languages* mentioned in Revelation 7:9, and great strides have been made to identify and produce stories and materials in these languages. Every individual uses at least one language to communicate in a given situation.

From passages such as Joshua 4:24 we have realized that God's heart is for the world's *peoples*. Overlapping efforts to identify, categorize and present ethnic realities have produced a solid, if imperfect, understanding of the diversity of ethnicity and the consequent need for diversity in focus and ministry. Every individual hearkens from at least one ethnic background.

Observe that each of these realities, in succession, is increasingly difficult to understand and quantify. The number of countries is dwarfed by the number of languages spoken, which in turn gives place to the greater number of people groups worldwide. It is difficult enough to get organizations and international bodies to agree on what constitutes an "official" country, to say nothing about achieving consensus as to what makes up a language as uniquely distinct. And delving into what defines or distinguishes a people with its "barriers of understanding or acceptance" to message or messenger often brings bewilderment.

Each of these foci – *geography, language and ethnicity* – is a biblical way to measure the spread of the gospel. Each has enjoyed its heyday in popular mission efforts. And each has had one or several key proponents calling us to identify and fill in gaps in the reach of the gospel.

Interestingly, none of the three perspectives can be described as "mission complete." The globe has been circumnavigated by God's messengers, but there remain untouched areas geographically. The annual discovery of previously unknown languages elongates the noble task of getting the message into all the world's tongues. And by no means has the gospel reached all the earth's "peoples," regardless of how they are defined.

There are a number of realities to be reckoned with in the mission to reach all peoples. Issues such as migration, urbanization and globalization, loss of cultural identity and new ways of social networking will help us to avoid oversimplification in regard to any strategy. The Body of Christ needs to move forward in its mission with unity and humility to ensure that we do not create islands of strategy and emphasis. One ministry may take a language-

based approach. Another may concentrate on a specific region of the world. But the overarching purpose is to ensure that we get the gospel to all peoples.

This is why the people group movement is so important and why streams of other kinds of strategy feed into that movement. An emphasis on unreached peoples is primary not because it is the end-all strategy but because it is one of the beginning strategies. In incarnational mission we must arrive at a geographical location, communicate in the heart language and reach peoples within natural circles of cultural affinity. Sure, there are deep and complex considerations to be taken into account. But we still have to arrive, communicate and reach.

The people group movement has been informed by other movements and should give rise to further movements. But it cannot be abandoned and must not be perceived as obsolete, for it is a central point for additional strategies, and it is thoroughly biblical.

Omid

Omid is a pseudonym for an expatriate researcher working in South Asia and providing Joshua Project with data on people groups in South Asia.

What one wants to achieve in an urban situation, or any situation, influences the details one looks at within the ethnic and social diversity one confronts. My comments focus on South Asia in particular, and on South Asian migrants to some extent.

Probably no attention will be paid to social distinctives if you want to get 20 people together in a church setting. Even in a church of 200, there may be little to no regard for the communities (people groups) from which individuals come. But if you want a people movement (assuming this goal is not mere rhetoric), much attention must be given to communities and their inter-relations.

Yes, in an urban environment ethnic and social boundaries are more fluid and porous, but the core values and beliefs of people may still be intact, similar to those of their parents, grandparents, and other ancestors. The real issue is perspective and strategy: if you are looking for ethnic and social distinctives, you see them, and if you are looking for the breakdown and merging of distinctives, that is what you see.

Let's attempt to view things from the standpoint of people on the receiving end of mission and ministry. In the 2001 census for the Municipality of Kathmandu, around 662,000 of 672,000 people

recorded their caste / people group. Individuals knew their caste and tribe, allowing it to be recorded. Typically in an Indian city, 99% of those of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe status are able to supply their community / people group / caste / tribe name when asked. This is true in both urban and rural settings.

The starting point, I would assume, is "What is the community the people themselves consider they belong to?", bearing in mind the initial answer may be the answer they think we want. But after two years of living among them and being trusted by relationship, we may find that their answers are more detailed. There is too much of classifying people by what we think they are, rather than who they perceive themselves to be. That is arrogance on our part, not a respect of people as people, who are living as members of communities.

Let us start with the social distinctives people make and with how they perceive themselves. The significance of the distinctives may vary from locality to locality. What is accepted in one locality may not be valid even a street away. If the distinctives seem unimportant in one location, wonderful, but it would be a failure of thinking to assume it is so everywhere.

Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch

Ralph Winter founded the U.S. Center for World Mission and served as a co-editor of the Perspectives Reader. *Bruce Koch is an Associate Editor of the* Perspectives Reader. *The following is excerpted, by permission, from an article by Winter and Koch, "Finishing the Task," in the fourth edition of the* Perspectives Reader *(William Carey Library, 2009).*

Each of [the four main] approaches to various kinds of peoples has a proper and valuable use. *Blocs* help us sum up the task. The *ethnolinguistic* approach helps us mobilize. *Sociopeoples* help us begin evangelizing. Beware of taking ethnolinguistic lists too seriously, however. They are a good place to begin strategizing church planting efforts, but cross-cultural workers should be prepared for surprising discoveries when confronted by the cultural realities on the field….

As history unfolds and global migration increases, more and more people groups are being dispersed throughout the entire globe. Dealing with this

phenomenon is now called "diaspora missiology." Not many agencies take note of the strategic value of reaching the more accessible fragments of these "global peoples." The new Global Network of Mission Structures (www.gnms.net) is intended to help agencies do just that.

Another reason to be cautious when applying people group thinking is the reality that powerful forces such as urbanization, migration, assimilation and globalization are changing the composition and identity of people groups all the time. The complexities of the world's peoples cannot be neatly reduced to distinct, non-overlapping, bounded sets of individuals with permanent impermeable boundaries. Members of any community have complex relationships and may have multiple identities and allegiances. Those identities and allegiances are subject to change over time.

People group thinking is a strategic awareness that is of particular value when individuals have a strong group identity and their everyday life is strongly determined by a specific shared culture.

Steve Hawthorne

Steve Hawthorne is a co-editor of the Perspectives Reader *and the director of WayMakers.*

"Is the people group approach passé in that it seems to reflect a simplistic, dated, non-dynamic idea of people groups no longer found in our urbanized, globalized world?" Doing mission by focusing on people groups has become more firmly established than ever. Two things help put Hiebert's comments in context.

1. People groups: simplistic as promoted, richly complex as practiced

If we can speak of a "People Group movement" as Hiebert does, as a development of the Church Growth movement, we have to recognize two aspects to it. It is indeed a complex and long-lived movement. For decades we have seen a somewhat interconnected global network of mobilizers and field missionaries with passionate public exponents, recognized leaders, numerous publications, seasoned practitioners, critics, conferences, policy statements, programs and more, all of which emphasize people-specific church-planting among ethnolinguistic groups as a desired outcome of mission. In the excerpts in question, it was not Hiebert's purpose to offer an exhaustive description of this movement. If he had done so, he would have distinguished what I call *promoters* from *practitioners*.

First, consider the people group *promoters*. By this I mean the publications and voices promoting the idea of reaching every people group, using a list of people groups, always aimed at a popular or general audience. Despite the asterisks and exceptions that accompany such lists, there is the abiding misunderstanding that such lists are intended to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Critics have always been able to forage through the lists and slogans to find rash statements in order to assemble a flammable "straw man" argument, claiming that the entire people group approach is based on a static, bygone, simplistic understanding of people groups.

There are also what we can refer to as *practitioners*. These are the thousands who have been working in the midst of populations distant from, or distrusting of, any existing churches. It is naive to think that these practitioners are naive about the boundaries and complexities of the peoples they serve. Anyone who stays on beyond a short-term becomes aware of the intricacy of social distinctions, the complexity of urban migrations and associations, and the fluidity of the constantly morphing, dying and multiplying ethnic identities. The practitioners have sustained the people group movement by steady reports of people groups as they really are. Their reports of migrating, inter-marrying, multi-lingual, ever-shifting people groups have seasoned the understanding of the boundaries and beauties of particular peoples.

Despite the occasional anecdote of a disappointed novice, who somehow can't locate the people group his church adopted, the thousands of human years of mission labor in the last three decades have demonstrated the value of focusing on people groups. If focusing on people groups *as they actually are* were not a valuable way of mission, the entire approach would have been forgotten long ago.

2. Recognizing social complexity may blur identities and boundaries but actually highlights the importance of people-specific ministry.

Even Hiebert's later writings support a nuanced understanding of societal groups and the validity of planting churches focused on particular people groups. In *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies,* published in 1995, Hiebert devotes entire chapters to understanding peasant and urban societies and how to plant churches amidst those societies. Regarding peasant societies, he says, "If we plant a church in one group, people from other groups may not be willing or permitted to attend. Consequently, to effectively evangelize a village we may initially need to plant separate churches in the different communities. Social distances are as important as geographic ones. People may live a few yards from each other but socially be a hundred miles apart" (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 239).

"Ahah!" we may hear from a critic of people-specific mission efforts, "He says such things about how things go in a 'village,' but everything changes in the city." But peasant societies, as defined by Hiebert, are not small, closed-system social structures. He groups peasant as well as urban societies as "large-scale societies which cannot be cut up into distinct, bounded people groups without seriously distorting the picture."

Urban societies, far from being homogenized by forces of globalization, in Hiebert's teaching were always complex variegated realities, with an intricate overlay and interplay of associations, networks, neighborhoods, lineages, tribal enclaves, languages, social strata, migrations and political pressures. Planting churches in urban settings, in Hiebert's view, requires careful attention to all of these dynamics. Each of the steadily changing subsets of people is deserving of particular focus. When it comes to church planting, there is often a place for multi-ethnic churches. But even multi-ethnic churches flourish best when the distinctive ethnicities that constitute them are recognized and even celebrated. But often Hiebert says, "City churches tend to serve their own kind of people. Who reaches out to groups of people who have no churches? Unless the church intentionally plants new congregations among unreached people groups and neighborhoods, they will not hear the gospel" (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 341).

One of the cardinal principles of urban ministry is to shape ministry around the realities of always unique and ever-changing urban settings. It is commonplace among urban mission circles to speak of "exegeting" a city. Hiebert himself didn't use the language of exegesis with respect to cities, but he steadily called for "relevant research" of all the different "populations, ethnic communities, class differences" and more (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 341). Among urban mission practitioners, a large part of any "exegesis" of a city is to be profoundly aware of the diverse groups and the dynamics which form them. How is this not in a basic way the people group approach?

Instead of debunking the people group approach, in this instance Hiebert serves as a constructive critic of the people group approach. As he did throughout his career, he helps us to dynamically define people groups and to deal with the theological complexities of people-specific churches. ⊕