

Introducing Frontier People Groups (FPGs)

Editor's Note: The concept of Frontier People Groups is still developing. Rather than representing an established consensus, this article explores potential nuances of the concept. Further insights, clarifications and adjustments may have emerged, even in the time between when this article went to press and you are reading it. For the latest version of this article, and other information regarding FPGs, visit FrontierPeoples.org

*No matter how much
one waters and fertilizes,
no fruit will come forth
until after the seed is sown.*

Seed before fruit

Wherever the only believers inside a people group are scattered individuals estranged from their family and community, the blessing of God remains unknown to that people group, and that people group's interest in the gospel is low.

However God promised to Abram (Abraham) that every family line of humanity will be blessed (Gen 12:3, etc.), and Jesus commissioned us to disciple each of these family lines (people groups). And once the Holy Spirit begins blessing the first contagious community of believing households¹ inside that people group, it becomes like the seed of an orchard—bearing the multiplying fruit of God's blessing such as we see on households throughout the book of Acts, and indeed the whole of Scripture.

Such communities of believing households must first experience God's blessing through the kind of *pioneer work* Paul modeled, in prayerful collaboration with the Holy Spirit. Only once a community of believing households is modeling God's blessing inside a people group can it benefit from the *partnership work* of outsiders alongside those inside the people group, in

- *tending/pruning* for greater fruitfulness, and
- *guarding* against threats to their fruitfulness.

Inside every people group, the spread of the gospel begins with the first seed of God's blessing—a *contagious community of believing households*. Only after the seed has taken root does *partnership work* become possible—outsiders serving alongside believing families inside a people group.

Frontier People Groups lack this seed

The new designation of *Frontier People Groups* attempts to clarify two very different conditions inside *Unreached People Groups (UPGs)*:

- Among *many* UPGs, the Holy Spirit has already begun blessing a community of believing households. These display to their community what it can look like to follow Christ *inside their own group*. Inside these groups where a community of believing households is enjoying God's blessing, extraordinary things can happen as the Holy Spirit anoints *partnership work* with outsiders. One spectacular example of the multiplying power of the Holy Spirit's blessing through *partnership work* is the T4T movement birthed through Ying Kai's training of 30 believers already present inside one people group.²
- *Other* UPGs (here labeled *Frontier People Groups*) still require *pioneer work* for the first community of believing households to experience God's blessing. Steve Smith's years of labor among the Ina people illustrates the *pioneer work* through which the Holy Spirit blesses these first believing households. Once established, these believing households display inside their own people group what it means to follow Christ, and a rapidly spreading gospel movement can develop.³

Frontier People Groups need this seed

Ralph Winter described implicitly the importance of the presence of this first community of believing households in his editorial for the Jan/Feb 2006 *MF*. Following is my own adaptation to reflect Winter's additional concern, expressed explicitly elsewhere, that we learn to think in terms of households rather than just individuals:

¹ See *The Oikos Hammer—You & Your Household* by Steve Smith, in the Aug/Sept 2018 *MF*

² *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* by Steve Smith.

³ *Ibid.*

Imagine an individual coming to Christ in a *reached* people group. The new believer can observe, interact with and follow the example of believing households inside the new believer's own people group. And others in that people group will have no thought that the new believer has left their people group to follow Christ.

How different it is where individuals are among the first inside their people group to believe. With no patterns yet established for following Christ inside their own people group, these first believers will commonly assume—along with their family and community—that to follow Christ means leaving their own people group to adopt the outside worker's culture, or the culture of some "Christian" people. The outside worker and other Christians may also implicitly or even explicitly encourage such "conversion" away from the new believer's culture and people group. *This common misunderstanding is the primary obstacle to be overcome in pioneer work among Frontier People Groups.*

Inside our own "Christian" peoples we have learned to be quite patient in sowing God's Word and letting the Holy Spirit transform individuals and even "deviant" communities at their own pace. But when it comes to people groups whose identity is wrapped up with "competing" world religions, we are often far less patient about allowing the Holy Spirit to change hearts through the Word of God over time. Too often in such contexts we engage in urging "conversion" of new believers to cultural forms we consider "Christian," but which separate them prematurely from their own people group.

When the first believers in a *Frontier People Group* embrace a new, foreign "Christian" culture, their family and community perceive them as betraying their own people group. This generally provokes both unnecessary and unfortunate persecution of the individual, and community rejection of the gospel, which may have nothing to do with the new believers' faith or the merits of the gospel itself.

For the gospel to spread rapidly inside a *Frontier People Group*, the Holy Spirit must

first bless a community of believing households, and guide them in wrestling together through what it means to follow Christ inside their own people group.

This Spirit-led emergence and modeling of new patterns—conforming faithfully to the Bible while remaining inside their own people group—paves the way for many others to follow Christ inside their group. And as God's blessing spreads within this people group, the Holy Spirit will lead the believers there and the rest of their people group to see that connection with the global body of Christ does *not* separate them from their own people group.

As this first community of believing households sorts out how to follow Christ inside their own people group, and the rest of the people group begins to observe that following Christ does not require leaving their people group, biblical faith can spread very rapidly. When this shift of perspective occurs, *pioneer work* gives way to *partnership work*, and the people group leaves the *frontier* category.

The spiritual and social realities of FPGs

Behind all the statistics, and the physical presence or absence of the first believing households, lie some very significant spiritual and social realities:

- ***Socially***, frontier peoples are commonly bound to a perception of their own religion as central to their identity as a people. They have no living models for following Christ without betraying their people group to join another people. And outsiders commonly share this perception of their religion as central to their identity as a people group. Thus there is often pressure from both from inside and outside *frontier people groups* for new believers to leave their people group to follow Christ. This is the dynamic which *pioneer work* must overcome if there is ever to be a rapid gospel movement within that people group.
- ***Spiritually***, the families in these peoples remain "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in [God's people] and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12).

The finishable task is among FPGs

Inside *Frontier People Groups*—where the first community of believing households has yet to experience God’s blessing—this initial *pioneer work* is a *finishable* task. Once the Holy Spirit has blessed the first community of believing households, nurturing and guarding this community becomes the ongoing task of *partnership work*.

When a people group is blessed with its first community of believing households, it remains *unreached* initially—in the sense of still needing outside assistance as measured by the statistical standards. **But it is no longer in need of *pioneer work*.** It remains *unreached* because the necessary nurturing and guarding require continuing outside assistance in the form of *partnership work*. As these believing households multiply under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the group becomes *reached*, and such nurturing and guarding can then come primarily from within.

Thus the focus of *pioneer work* is the seed—the first community of believing households enjoying God’s blessing inside their own people group—with the potential for multiplying rapidly.

Non-Frontier people groups contain this seed in two categories:

- *Reached* people groups—where the gospel is widely known and has brought widespread blessing—are like mature orchards. These still need renewal (tending), and guarding against the complacency that often comes where there is little opposition. But this kind of ministry can come mostly from inside the people group.
- *Unreached* people groups (no longer in the *Frontier* category)—where the first community of believing households is experiencing God’s blessing—are like orchards that have just begun bearing fruit. Amidst an ocean of non-believing households in their own people group, these believing households need *partnership work*—assistance and encouragement from outside workers to continue multiplying God’s blessing inside their own people group, often amidst greater opposition than in *reached* people groups.

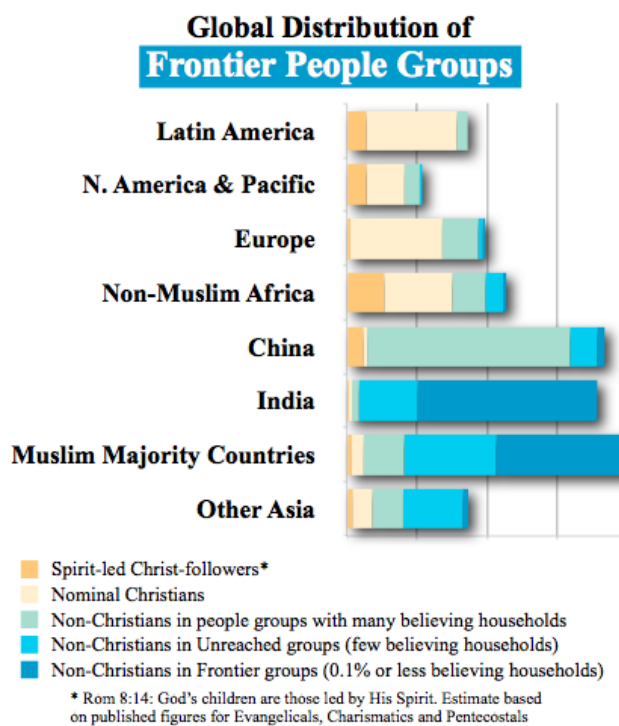
A day will come, perhaps in our lifetime, when the Holy Spirit will complete the finishable task of

pioneer work inside every remaining *Frontier People Group*. Until then, such pioneer work should be the highest priority for those called by God to share Paul’s ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not known (Rom 15:20).

One fourth of humanity lives in FPGs

Three-fourths of the world is estimated to live in people groups, whether *reached* or *unreached*, where a community of believing households is already enjoying God’s blessing.

The remaining one-fourth of humanity is estimated to live in *Frontier People Groups*, where the first enduring community of believing households has yet to established, and where *pioneer work* is thus still needed.



As seen in this adaptation of the new “pie chart” (see p. 8), these FPGs are most concentrated where the fewest workers go—India and Muslim majority countries.

Frontier, Approachable and Responsive Peoples

For 50 years, deployment of workers has been shaped by a simple binary classification⁴ in which people groups are considered either:

- *reached*—with adequate internal witness, or
- *unreached*—still needing outside assistance.

The additional qualifier *unengaged* was later added to track Unengaged Unreached People Groups (UUPGs) where researchers didn't know of workers offering such outside assistance.

What these earlier classifications (reached, unreached and unengaged) didn't adequately reveal is the two dramatically different conditions among UPGs, for which I here suggest an additional label:

- *frontier*—no community of believing households yet demonstrating God's blessing inside their own people group. (These need *pioneer work*.)
- *approachable*—a community of believing households is demonstrating God's blessing to their own people group. (This is the seed of a gospel movement, now able to benefit from *partnership work*.)

Where a community of believing households reveals what God's blessing looks like inside their own people group, non-believing households can see what it looks like to follow Christ *inside their own people*. And they can be invited to follow God in Jesus Christ on the basis of what they have personally observed.

Among *Frontier People Groups* however, non-believing families have *no opportunity* yet to observe what it means to follow Christ *inside their own people group*. Here pioneer work must follow the Holy Spirit's leading to introduce the first households to God's blessing in such a way that many others will follow.

From this perspective of mission strategy, there are not just two categories of people groups, but three (two sub-categories of unreached). For measurement purposes, the following standards have been proposed:

- *frontier*—subset of *unreached*:
 - no evidence of a gospel movement;
 - 0.1% or less estimated “Christian” based on such available data as a government census;
 - *unmet need for pioneer work from outside*
- *approachable*—subset of *unreached*:
 - early evidence of a gospel movement;
 - 0.1% to 5% estimated “Christian” and up to 2% estimated Evangelicals, based on such available data as a government census;
 - *ongoing need for partnership work from outside*.
- *responsive*—aka *reached*:
 - strong evidence of a gospel movement (past or present);
 - above 5% estimated “Christian” or above 2% estimated Evangelicals, based on such available data as a government census;
 - *little need for outside assistance*.

How significant is this distinction?

Sixty percent of UPGs are actually *Frontier People Groups* (FPGs).

Until God intervenes, the families in these Frontier People Groups will live and die ...

- without ever knowing a believer
- without ever being prayed for by name
- without the blessing God promised all nations

Yet God *is* intervening...

- Among other unreached people groups, gospel movements have been doubling in number and size every five years since the late 1990s.⁵
- Through a new prayer guide (see p. 17), large global networks are focusing prayer on the 31 largest Frontier People Groups—each of which influences many other people groups. (Half the population of all Frontier People Groups lives in just these 31 groups!)

Conclusion

The kingdom of God grows where it is sown.

We now have a clearer view than ever before of where the first believing households have been

⁴ This is the core distinction as I understand it from working with Ralph Winter. Strategists of course expanded this dichotomy in more technical language, and researchers established percentage criteria for Evangelicals and

Christian adherents in order to apply this dichotomy. But the main point was to establish which groups needed more workers.

⁵ MultMove.net/astonishing-progress

established, and *where they haven't been established yet.*

The day will come, perhaps in our lifetime, when the initial *pioneer work* will have been completed in every *Frontier People Group*. Then, in line with God's promise to Abram (Abraham), every family line on earth will have at least begun to experience God's blessing. We are much closer to this day than ever before.

Let nothing delay us further from ensuring that gospel orchards of God's blessing—contagious communities of believing households—are firmly established among every *frontier people group* as quickly as possible!