



MOVED BY THE NEED

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When Jesus told his first wave of followers that they would go into all the world and make disciples, could they possibly have conceived of how far that would take them and indeed future followers of Jesus? Could they have even imagined what the very edges of the Roman Empire were like; let alone daring to believe that future Christians would take this disciple-making project to the top of Scandinavia, to the tip of Argentina, further west than the Atlantic and further east than here in Cambodia?

And yet by the power and vision of this one man, the truth that our God reigns through Jesus the Saviour has been announced and demonstrated right around the planet. It has liberated and set free millions upon millions of people throughout history. It is a relentless and unstoppable global movement.

That movement, launched by Jesus' words to his first followers, has resulted in one third of the population of this planet identifying themselves as Christians. Last year the population of the planet reached seven billion people...so we're talking about a lot of Christians!

But, what about the rest?

One third of the global population is considered 'least-reached'. While Christianity has grown rapidly and continuously across all continents, there are many places where it has encountered barriers within countries, particularly barriers caused by tradition, hatred, religion, culture and language. The least-reached have no indigenous community of believers to share the gospel with them. For example, here in Cambodia less than one per cent of the Khmer are Christians, so the chances of say, this guy even knowing a Christian, let alone knowing one well enough to talk to about faith, they're pretty slim.

Many people in these communities go from birth to death without ever having an opportunity to hear the gospel in a way that makes sense to them.

Despite all these years of mission effort, there are still 7,000 least-reached people groups in the world today. The bulk of the least-reached people come from Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist regions, mainly from North Africa across to China, encompassing most of Asia. These days we no longer talk about reaching 'nations' with the gospel. Instead we refer to 'people groups'. A people group is a group of individuals who share a common affinity for one another – the same ethnicity, language, cultural practices and beliefs. Because of the complexities of cultural groups within countries, it's not possible to distinguish people simply on the basis of nationality if we want to share Jesus with them meaningfully. Here in Cambodia there are about 40 people groups. While right across the border in Thailand they reckon there are 100. In Indonesia, there are over 700 distinct people groups. For Global Interaction, thinking in terms of people groups is really important. That's because the gospel can spread more easily within a people group, because it encounters less cultural resistance. But least-reached people groups are their greatest challenge, because something, usually some kind of cultural barrier, has stopped the gospel from taking root within it.

Unfortunately, the message of Jesus is just not heard because of all the 'stuff' that gets in the way – fear of change or distrust or negative influences of the 'Christian West'. It can be fairly messy, and well, frankly, sad... **These people groups may be least-reached, but they're not out of God's reach. Despite the complexities and struggle, there are no God-forsaken places on Earth. As we read in Scripture and have learned through history, God is still drawing people to himself and the Spirit is still moving. People are still interested in Jesus.**

As well as being least-reached with the gospel, these groups are home to the poorest of the poor, people living in deep poverty and who have the lowest quality of life. Most struggle with economic hardship, limited education, poor health and sanitation, and short life expectancy. They also receive a tiny fraction of the world's Christian resources – pastors, missionaries, theological education, Bibles, youth workers, data projectors, Madonna headsets...

While the third of the world that are reached – the Christians – receive ninety-seven percent of the resources, the third of the world that is least-reached receive less than one percent. Now this is a great injustice!

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I'm often told that in Australia we need effective, contextual, relevant mission in our own backyard. I'm not going to argue with that, I've been trying to convince Australians for years that we need to see our own country as a mission field. But we need to keep this thing in perspective. When we look at the gross injustice of all the Christian resources and workers being utilised in the West, we need a shift in our thinking. Despite centuries of Christians being involved in mission, there are still billions of least-reached people. It's not easy. It takes time. It takes creativity and innovation. It takes a bit of 'give' on our part to address the imbalance of Christians and workers distributed to the West and those to the least-reached. **As Australian Baptists we're taking this challenge head-on. It's in our nature!**

Global Interaction is working among nine least-reached people groups in Asia and Africa to bring the message of Jesus to people in culturally appropriate ways. It's just not helpful to view these groups as resistant opponents to the gospel. And so we don't. We see them as communities of friends, neighbours and colleagues getting on with their lives. These are people that our team members can get to know, love, support and empower to embrace faith in Jesus and develop their own distinctive ways of following him. **The ultimate goal is to establish communities of faith that are themselves engaged in mission – in their own way, using their own language, among their own friends and relatives.**

Coupled with that is a commitment to help the poor help themselves, to provide for their families, to increase their education and to develop their communities. It's word and deed together. We can be proud as Australian Baptists that it's *our* people, *our* commitment, *our* resources, that are helping some of the world's most innovative, creative and effective mission to take place. Pray for our workers. Support them financially. Even consider going and joining one of our teams. The story of mission – laid out for us in the Bible, demonstrated by ordinary Christians throughout history, and lived out by cross-cultural workers right now – must continue to be told. What began in a small, intimate room with Jesus and a ragtag group of his followers continues to be our mandate today.