

Reaching UPGs in the United States through Church–Missionary Partnerships: A Proposal

By Mike Urton

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According to the Joshua Project, there are a total of 521 different people groups living in the United States. Ninety-seven of these groups are from the least-reached areas of the world (Joshua Project 2021). This certainly seems to be a modern-day example of Paul's teaching in Acts 17:26–27, "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

Where I live in the western suburbs of Chicago, one of the main thoroughfares is lined with restaurants and stores offering traditional cuisine and clothing from India, Pakistan, various parts of the Middle East, and China. One Muslim website maps out twenty-nine different mosques in my county (Salatomatic 2021), which does not even begin to consider the Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh temples that also call this part of Illinois "home."

In light of Acts 17, this proliferation of unreached people groups

(UPGs) in the United States is clearly by God's design.¹ The local church in America has an amazing opportunity to reach the "ends of the earth" by reaching out to their UPG neighbors. While this is a fascinating opportunity, American Christians must be equipped to take advantage of it. Training seminars may be part of the equation, but these alone will not be enough to engage UPGs in every locale across the country. This article outlines a basic strategy for reaching UPGs in the United States through the local church and gives an example of how the Evangelical Free Church of America's (EFCA) Immigrant Mission (IM) is hoping to implement it. This strategy involves deploying missionaries who have returned from overseas into local churches to launch and maintain an outreach to a UPG in the community.

The Role of Experienced Missionaries in Reaching UPGs

Recently, a study was conducted focusing on seven evangelical churches in the Chicago area that formed relationships with Muslims in their community (Urton 2021). These churches ranged in the duration of their engagement with Muslims from three months to twelve years. They employed multiple approaches when reaching out to their Muslims neighbors, including English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, inter-faith dialogues, Bible studies, picnics, holiday dinners, as well as standing in solidarity with Muslims during times of tragedy such as the New Zealand Mosque massacre. These ministries resulted in deeper relationships between Muslims and Christians, joint efforts in community service, Muslims growing in their curiosity and openness to Christ, Christians being equipped to effectively engage Muslims and, in some cases, Muslims becoming followers of Jesus.

1 Some missiologists have noted that peoples designated as "unreached people groups" are not static, but ones that can change when they migrate to different cities or countries. For more on this phenomenon see "Testing Models, Shifting Paradigms: Re-imaging and Re-envisioning People Groups" by Leonard N. Bartlotti in *International Journal of Frontier Mission* 37:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2020): 133-140. Yet, for our current purposes the UPGs listed by the Joshua Project will suffice.

One finding in this study was that five of the nine leaders who launched and sustained these ministries were former overseas missionaries who served among Muslims, one worked for a humanitarian organization in a Muslim country, and another was a first-generation immigrant. Also, eight out of the twelve volunteers interviewed had previous cross-cultural ministry experience both overseas and stateside (Urton 2021, 193).

Fruitful Practice Research had a similar finding in their study, “Fruitful Practices in Ministry to the North American Muslim Diaspora: A Mixed-Methods Study” (Kronk et al. 2017). Researchers interviewed eighteen former Muslims who became Christians while living in North America. The study suggests that the top two reasons for Muslims coming to Christ were an experience with a local evangelical church and a relationship with a Christian friend. Furthermore, three-quarters of the 173 participants in this study who work with converts from Islam did so in “the context of a ‘western,’ non-Muslim-background-convert church” (2017, 9). As most of the participants in this study had some form of long-term or short-term overseas experience, the authors concluded the following:

It would be beneficial for local churches and ministries to engage the services of those who have served in long-term, overseas Muslim-majority contexts. The accumulated set of skills, resources, and approaches gleaned in these contexts makes a difference in more fruitfulness—even in North American non-Muslim-majority contexts. This could be either as workers, or possibly as consultants, who help coach and upgrade the skills of those who lack extensive ministry experience with Muslims. (2017, 13)

In other words, workers returning to their homeland in North America represent a powerful human resource for reaching Muslim immigrants, if we think and act strategically.

The Strategy: A Church–Missionary Partnership for Reaching UPGs

These findings have important implications for mission leaders and field workers as they consider ways to reach the least reached that have come to the United States and Canada. At times, missionaries leave their field for various reasons, by choice or compulsion, due to security, health, family, or other factors. Returning missionaries can still play a role in reaching the unreached, and mission leaders can be proactive in how they redeploy field workers who are leaving an overseas assignment and returning to their home context. In conjunction with local church partners, they can consider developing a list of churches interested in reaching UPGs that have relocated within reasonable distance from the church and her members. The missionaries could then become part of this local congregation, gather a team of interested individuals, and launch a ministry to a specific people group. This may prove especially effective for denominational missions who have a more direct connection with churches in their denomination.

If an organization is not directly associated with a denomination, they could focus on the relationships that returned missionaries already have. In this scenario, the missionaries can contact their supporting churches to see if they have an interest in reaching a UPG in their community. Through these churches, missionaries can build a network of human and financial resources for outreach.

Another group to consider for this type of church–missionary partnership is semi-retired or retired missionaries. In some cases, retired missionaries are looking to utilize the training and experience they have built up over years of ministry in service to a local church. Launching and leading a ministry to a UPG in their area through a congregation is one way for them to employ these gifts. In some cases, a retired missionary might not be able to commit to *leading* such an effort; however, they could still function as a consultant or coach to those who are actually doing the work.

In any of these cases, these returned missionaries already have the training, experience, language, and love for the UPGs that they worked with overseas. These qualities can be of great assistance when trying to establish a new work among UPGs through a local church.

Implementing the Strategy: The EFCA's Plan of Action

An example of this church-missionary partnership for engaging local UPGs is a strategy of an American denomination seeking to mobilize its churches to reach the UPGs around them. The Immigrant Mission thrust of the EFCA denomination has recently started implementing a strategy which combines several of the elements discussed above and has three main goals.

The first goal is to identify and recruit missionaries within the EFCA organization who have returned from an overseas assignment and are staying in the United States. Since these missionaries already have a relationship with their home church or another sending church, we encourage them to meet with the pastor and/or church leadership to discuss if the church is open to launching a ministry to a UPG in their community. If so, then we encourage them to plant themselves in this fellowship.

Approaching the leadership is an important first step not only to find out if the church is open to this idea, but also because the support of the leadership is key to the effectiveness and longevity of the ministry. This is highlighted by the comment of one participant in the Chicago study, reflecting on her senior pastor's remarks after a Christian-Muslim Thanksgiving dinner and its impact on the congregation, "on several occasions [the senior pastor] got up and just said how wonderful that was because he came to the dinner. ... So, it's really coming from him. If he says it, it's gold" (Urton 2021, 123). This comment highlights the value of getting the support and buy-in of church leadership for these ministry initiatives.

The second goal can be broken down into two parts. The first involves EFCA Immigrant Mission assisting these missionaries in developing a strategy to inform the congregation(s) about locally present UPGs. Some, but not all, North American sending organizations are developing these kinds of structures. The second is to help the worker mobilize those who express a desire to engage the UPG. This is where identifying those in the congregation with cross-cultural ministry experience will be helpful, as we saw above. This could include conversations with church leadership, announcements at Sunday services, a 'blurb' in a congregational newsletter, social media posts, and including the local UPGs in the church's prayer efforts. Through these means, a list of interested people can be generated and an invitation to an introductory meeting can be extended where the missionary can cast a vision for engaging the local UPG.

Another part of this goal is identifying the particular UPG to be engaged in the community. This can be done through using tools like the Joshua Project's interactive map which locates UPGs around the country. For Muslim people groups, there are websites to help: [Zabihah](#) locates Muslim owned restaurants and other businesses, and [Salatomatic](#) lists mosques and prayer spaces. For Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhist UPGs, a simple Google search of temples, restaurants, and businesses in a given location can prove helpful. After doing this research, a plan can be developed for making contact through attending an event at a mosque, visiting a restaurant, or other events that are open to the community at large. After contact is made, the newly developing missions team can determine needs in this community, if any, and develop an appropriate strategy for engaging this UPG.

Finally, accountability, support, and resources for these missionaries will be provided by EFCA Immigrant Mission to create an environment where they can be effective. This should be similar to the oversight most missionaries were accustomed to on the foreign field. It would probably include monthly prayer meetings, periodic check-in times, and suggestions about resources and training from time to time.

Implementing a strategy like this will have benefits for both the returning missionaries and local churches. The missionaries are afforded another opportunity to utilize their giftings, training, and passion for reaching an immigrant UPG. The local church, in following the lead of the missionary, becomes engaged in reaching a UPG in their community, thus becoming effective cross-cultural missionaries themselves.

Conclusion

Engaging unreached people groups is no longer just an overseas activity for restricted-access countries. God, in his providence, has opened the opportunity for North American churches to reach UPGs in their local community. Missionaries who have returned from an overseas assignment and those with cross-cultural ministry experience clearly have a significant role to play in helping local churches get involved in this endeavor. It is my hope that the proposed strategy detailed above can assist in encouraging effective church-missionary partnerships that will reach out and minister to UPGs. There are probably other creative ways for returned missionaries to engage UPGs that have an immigrant presence in North America. The key is in realizing what a rich and unique human resource these workers are as we work to see people from all nations standing around the throne of God saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10).

Discussion Questions

- What are the benefits and challenges of working through the local church in reaching unreached peoples in the diaspora? Why does the author propose pursuing such a partnership? Do you agree with his proposal?
- What is the theological and missional significance of "diaspora" in Scripture and in the mission of God today?

- The author writes from the perspective of an American church denomination engaging in local outreach to unreached peoples. How should international mission organizations understand and relate to local missional efforts of national churches?
- Compare and contrast discipleship efforts in the diaspora and discipleship efforts among the same people group in their country of origin. What is similar, and what is dissimilar, between church-planting efforts in these different contexts? What are the unique opportunities and challenges in each?

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