

Do People Groups Still Matter?



A Review in 2010

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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*

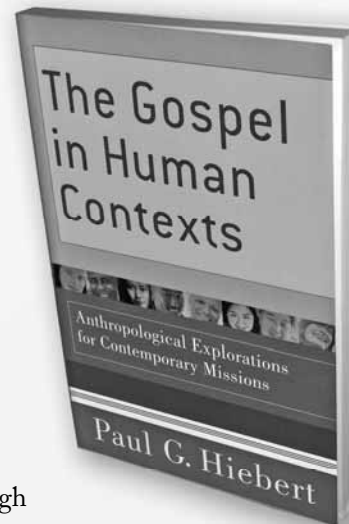
Missiology, and by the September 21-23 meetings in Charlotte, North Carolina of the International Society for Frontier Missiology.

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

