

LABORERS FOR THE HARVEST:

A NEW WAVE OF MISSIONARIES



The Vocational Mission Model

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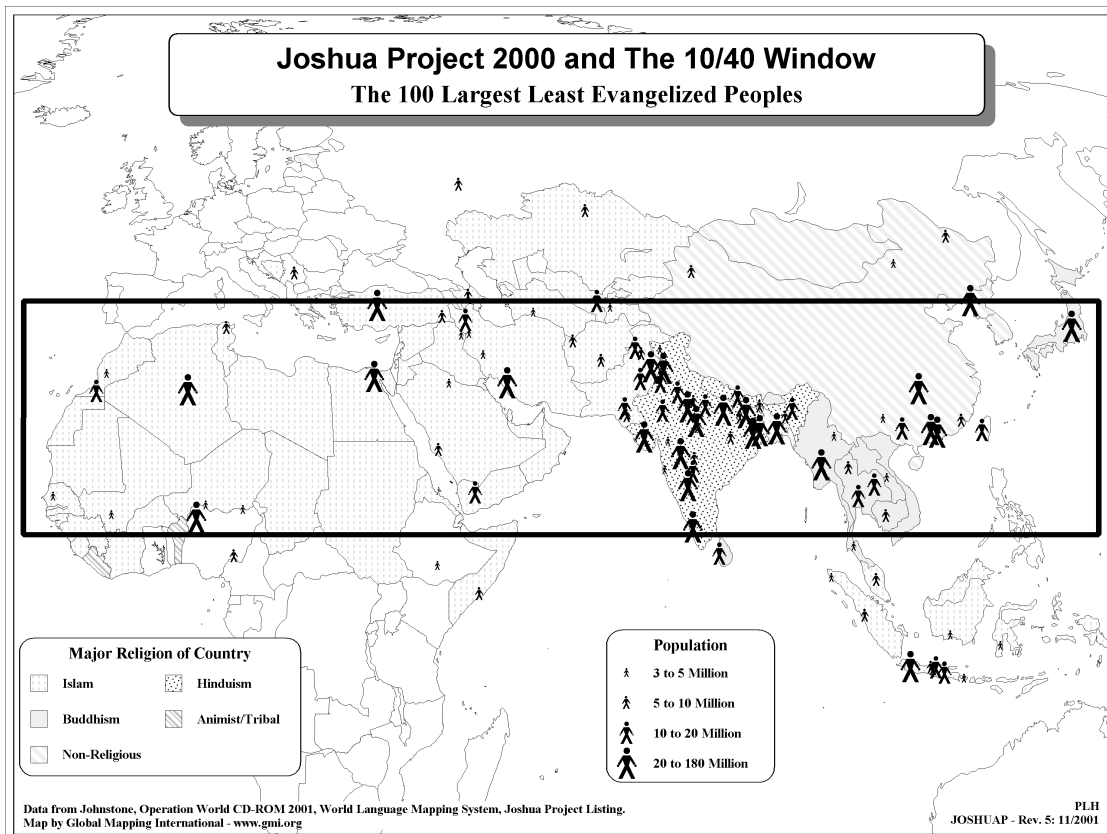
Laborers for the Harvest

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Matthew 9:37-38 (ESV)

The Problem

Almost eight billion people live on our planet today. In 1800 there were one billion — but by 2015, the number of Earth’s citizens had grown to 7.3 billion. According to a Pew Foundation report that year, about 2.5 billion were Christians — or 31.2 percent.¹ That is amazing! Maybe? In 2021 only 660 million make up the evangelical portion of the entire Christian population – or about eight percent of our present 7.9 billion world population!²



*Map provided by Mission InfoBank

Christianity multiplied in the 19th and 20th centuries in areas that were not particularly resistant to the gospel message. But a “resistant belt” often called the 10/40 Window has been remarkably impervious to Christian witness.

According to Mike Pettengill, a mentor and mobilizer for Mission to the World:³

Argentine-born evangelist Luis Busch coined the phrase “10/40 Window” in 1989. The Joshua Project currently defines the 10/40 Window as those 69 countries that sit between 10- and 40-degrees north latitude in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. This is the heart of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. It has been estimated that 90% of the 4.4 billion people living in the 10/40 Window are unevangelized, yet only 10% of our global missionary force serves there.

Recently the Joshua Project has expanded the 10/40 Window to include nearby areas that are also gospel resistant. The resulting data:⁴

The original 10/40 Window included only countries with at least 50% of their land mass within 10- and 40-degrees north latitude. The revised 10/40 Window includes several additional countries that are close to 10- or 40-degrees north latitude and have high concentrations of unreached peoples. . .

Approximately 5.22 billion individuals residing in 8,883 distinct people groups are in the revised 10/40 Window. 6,170 (69.5%) of these people groups are considered unreached and have a population of 3.16 billion. This means approximately 61% of the individuals in the 10/40 Window live in an unreached people group.

This data should present a huge problem for every Christian. And this problem is compounded even more when you realize that most of the world’s fastest-growing areas, population wise, are in this resistant belt.⁵

While the past decades have seen rapid urbanization in India and China, cities in Africa are growing fastest in the current one. In the first half of the 2020s, the U.N. Population Division expects 28 cities to grow at an average annual rate of more than 5 percent. 22 are located in Africa. 86 cities are expected to grow at a rate of 4 to 5 percent in the same time period.

Out of these, 58 are located in Africa and 24 in Asia and the Middle East. The fastest-growing city on the U.N.'s list was Gwagwalada, a satellite of Nigeria's capital Abuja, followed by Kabinda in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both countries are home to several of the world's fastest-growing cities, as are Angola, Tanzania, and Mozambique.

Increasing urbanization goes hand in hand with economic progress in the developing world. But rapid urbanization in Africa has brought about challenges like growing slums and overcrowded living, road congestion as well as pollution, as urban development fails to keep up with urban growth. In 2018, around 55 percent of urban populations in Africa lived in slums, compared with around 30 percent in Asia and around 20 percent in Latin America. . . .

Half of the increase in urban populations until 2030 will come from just eight countries: continuously urbanizing India and China, quickly urbanizing Nigeria and the DRC as well as Pakistan, Indonesia, the U.S. and Bangladesh.

Given that Indonesia and Nigeria are in the Joshua Project's revised 10/40 Window — the United States and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the only countries expecting rapid urban growth that are not in an area resistant to the gospel. We haven't seen global opportunities like this since the first few centuries of Christendom described in the book of Acts.

These rapidly growing cities welcome workers from other countries due to their rapidly increasing economic growth. What is surprising is that Christians, who could easily find jobs in these cities, are so slow to see the opportunity for vocational missions in these gospel-needy areas.

The harvest is plentiful!

The harvest is plentiful, yet evangelism, worldwide evangelism, as a standard Christian practice is decreasing rather than increasing. In an especially prescient article in the publication, *Missions Frontiers*, authors Dave Datema and Dan Scribner, state that the rate of conversion among the unevangelized is decreasing after a period of rapid increase in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. They ask:⁶

Our question: why is the percentage of the unevangelized going down so slowly after the amazing percentage decrease between 1970 and 2000? In that time period, there is a 15% decrease in 30 years (44.7 to

29.9). However, after that, the percentage decrease is only 1.3% between 2000 and 2025 (29.9 to 28.6) as well as 2025 and 2050 (28.6 to 27.3).

What gives? We thought it might be caused by an overall population spike post-2000, but world population doesn't appear to be that different in these time periods (massive growth of 2.4 billion between 1970 and 2000, which is commensurate with the projected 2 billion increase between 2000 and 2025, after which it decreases), so there must be another reason.

By our admittedly reductionistic calculations, if the 1970-2000 percentage decrease had become the norm (15% decrease every 30 years), the world would be evangelized by 2060. By contrast, if you follow the trajectory from 2000-2050 (1.3% decrease every 25 years), the world will be evangelized by 2540.

Datema and Scribner continue their analysis of the present crisis in world missions with more statistics and close reasoning. It is well worth the time to read the entire article. For our purposes, however, the following excerpt is sufficient:⁷

But now we find ourselves in a new reality. We must say again that statistics are slippery and dogmatic statements based on the figures above would be foolhardy.

*However, perhaps it would be allowable to suggest that the reason for this sharp decline in evangelization is both quantitative and qualitative. **Simply put, there are not enough workers.** [The emphasis is mine.]*

Many unreached people groups remain vastly underserved. But it goes far beyond more workers. To quote Ralph Winter, "More of the same will not get the job done." There remains the all-important issue of methodology. From Jesus to Paul to Roland Allen to the present, how we go about evangelization matters.

What paradigm-shifting changes need to take place within the frontier mission movement, in theory and practice, to see these last unreached peoples evangelized? Dear Reader, what will happen on our watch?

What *will* happen on our watch?! How will we be judged by future generations when they look back on our response to Christ's call for harvesters? Will we be remembered for our zeal and for our enthusiasm in seeing the world won for Christ?

Or will we be seen as those who turned aside to pursue their own goals, devoted to their own interests while oblivious to the needs of others – as the most comfortable generation in Western history.

The laborers are few!

The Western evangelical church presently supports 13,000 of its members as full-time missionaries in the 10/40 Window. It also supports (along with help from what can be called Global South churches) another 13-14,000 “same-culture” missionaries – men and women who are missionaries within their own countries as a Christian response to this vast harvest field.⁸

That represents a singularly weak response by the Church to our Lord's command. Twenty-eight thousand, to be generous, divided by 4.4 billion is .006 percent. Thus, we have responded to our Lord's command by sending out less than one missionary for every 100,000 people in the most unreached and the most rapidly growing parts of our world today.

What do you think? Did our Lord intend for our response to be this tepid? Or do you think He meant for our prayers to produce a much larger mission workforce? Perhaps we don't share His sense of urgency. Do we believe Christ was merely making an interesting observation and simply suggesting a possible solution?

The way you answer these questions will show you a lot about your view of Christ's authority. It will reveal the way you approach, read and interpret Scripture. Finally, it will shape your testimony as a follower of Christ.

Our lack of urgency regarding the Church's global mission may indicate a sense of complacency that this kind of response could characterize: “After all, we are doing all we can do. The Church is giving all it can reasonably expect to give. Our engine is running as fast as it can run!” Maybe we need a better engine!

In 2004 a Pew study showed there were over 9 million expats from the United States working globally. It determined that twenty-six percent of those expats were evangelical Christians. Imagine! Between 1.5 and 2 million evangelical Christians worked overseas in 2004. We don't have updated figures but we can reasonably expect

that the number of expats has increased and that there may now be as many as 3 million Christians working overseas.

Why aren't they included in our missionary numbers? I believe that they are omitted because we don't think of them as missionaries. And because we don't think of them as missionaries, most of these evangelical expats also don't think of themselves as missionaries.

While we have made great strides in an area that we might call "the theology of faith and work," we have done very little to apply it to our global mission model. As a result, the Church's present global mission model is dated.

It was a response to Christ's command for a different world in a different age. Think about reading Matthew 9:37, 38 in the 18th century. Think about how you would pray for laborers. Think about how you might become a laborer in a foreign land.

Now place yourself 100 years further into modern mission deployment. Think about how you might read this passage in the 19th century. What might that mean?

How would you expect laborers for the harvest to catch the vision, answer Christ's call, raise the necessary funds, get to where they were going and then learn to serve Christ well in a completely foreign socio-economic-linguistic context? How would you do it? Let me share two personal stories that might help you place yourself in that context.

In the mid-1950s, as a young boy, I remember traveling to the Philadelphia dockyards with my parents to "see off" a medical doctor, his wife and his sister who were going to work in a surgery in a hospital in Sierra Leone, West Africa.

They were embarking on a ship that would take them across the Atlantic to Freetown and they would then travel inland to Kamakwie. They were taking all their earthly belongings with them. They had all their clothes and furniture – and very exciting for me – they also had guns (presumably to protect themselves from ferocious, wild animals in the bush!).

I know this because my father pointed out the gun cases to me. I also remember him pointing out the cases that held the shortwave radio equipment so that they could communicate with the outside world. Finally, I remember very vividly a crate-like box going up to the ship in a woven net, containing two lively, barking dogs of a mastiff variety or such.

Fast forward to the early 1970s. I was in India with Operation Mobilization as a two-year, short-term missionary. I served on their first ship, a floating book exhibit, the M/V Logos. The ship was docked in Mumbai.

My mom had written to me about two single missionary women for whom she had been praying for many years. Their mission location was just outside the port where our ship docked and I decided to visit them and give them my mom's greetings.

To my surprise, they lived in a walled-in compound. This was not at all what I expected. We sat and drank tea, served by servants in blue uniforms, on a veranda with slowly turning electric fans hung from above. I marveled that I had the unique privilege to look back in time – this was 19th century missions right before my eyes.

I was in a living, mission history museum. Why? Because in the intervening years between the 19th century and even still today, not much in the present model has changed. Western mission agencies have simply applied 20th century technological improvements to a model that was created hundreds of years earlier.

Technological improvements are helpful but they aren't enough. We need to reframe Christ's commands in the context of a drastically changed world. We need to take a new look at Scripture, a fresh look at the world and a more critical look at ourselves as harvest laborers for Christ in our present generation.

In the quote from Datema and Scribner, they mention that evangelism has decreased both quantitatively and *qualitatively*. [Again, the emphasis is mine.] Their Ralph Winter quote also bears repeating here:

Many unreached people groups remain vastly underserved. But it goes far beyond more workers. To quote Ralph Winter, 'More of the same will not get the job done.' There remains the all-important issue of methodology. From Jesus to Paul to Roland Allen to the present, how we go about evangelization matters.

Many church leaders agree – while we do need more of the same thing, the same thing, in this case, more of a traditional model of mission deployment alone, will not accomplish enough to fully obey our Lord's command:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. Matthew 28:19, 20 (ESV)

J.D. Greear has written extensively about a new wave of missionaries that utilizes ordinary Christians to spread the good news of Jesus Christ around the world. In 2018 the International Mission Board published an article by Greear on its website: *What's the Next Missions Wave: Ordinary Christians on a Mission*.⁹

Greear wrote:

In the Church I grew up in, “missionary” was a sacred and scary title, bestowed only upon the spiritual elite, the Navy Seals of the Christian world. We considered them heroes, sat in awe through their slideshows, and gladly donated our money to their ministries.

It was years later when I first realized that every Christian is a missionary, that all Christians are called to leverage their lives and talents for the kingdom. God’s calling into mission is not a separate call we receive years after our salvation. It’s inherent in the very call to salvation.

Every believer is given a spiritual gift and a role to play in the spread of the Great Commission. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “And I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19 ESV).

*That’s for everyone, not just those who have a special tingly feeling they interpret as the call of God, or those who see some message from heaven spelled out in the clouds. Too many Christians sit around waiting on a “voice” to tell them what God has already spelled out in a verse. Another way to put it: the question is no longer if we are called to leverage our lives for the Great Commission; it’s only **where** and **how**.*

When “normal” Christians embrace this idea of calling, the gospel spreads like a prairie grassfire. Luke, the writer of Acts, goes out of his way to show us that the gospel travels faster around the world from the mouths of regular Christians than it does through full-time, vocational Christian workers.¹⁰

Luke notes, for example, that the first time the gospel left Jerusalem, it wasn’t from the mouths of the apostles. Regular people went everywhere preaching the word while the apostles stayed in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–4). The next wave of missions will be carried forward, I believe, in much the same way—on the wings of business.

Consider this: if you overlay a map of world poverty with a map of world evangelization, you'll find that the areas most in need of business development are also the most unevangelized. Many of the most unreached places in the world, most closed to Christian missionaries, have arms wide open to any kind of businessmen.

Missiologists frequently refer to a "10/40 window" in which the most unreached peoples live (lying between the 10- and 40-degree latitude lines). For business leaders, the 10/40 window isn't a window at all.

It's a wide-open door.

The Solution

Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest . . .

Our Lord saw the problem. Was He just looking at the world in His own day, however? Or was He also looking forward to our day? Both. And His *solution*, in both cases, is prayer. So His strategy was for us to ask the Father to rectify this horrible situation.

John Piper has said this about prayer:¹¹

Prayer remains one of the great and glorious mysteries of the universe — that the all-knowing, all-wise, all-sovereign God should ordain to run his world in response to our prayers is mind-boggling. But that is the uniform witness of Scripture. God hears and answers the prayers of his people. Oh, do not neglect this amazing way of influencing nations and movements and institutions and churches and people's hearts, especially your own.

God commands us to pray. When we pray according to His will, He has promised to answer our prayers. In Matthew 9, His command is unequivocal, "therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest . . ." And surely we know God will hear these prayers and respond.

How will He respond? Again, what Piper has said is instructive:¹²

*Years ago, when I wrote **Let the Nations Be Glad**, I argued that prayer is a wartime walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom. God is more like a general in Command Central than a butler waiting to bring you another pillow in the den. Of course, he is also Father, Lover, Friend, Physician, Shepherd, Helper, King, Savior, Lord, Counselor. But in this fallen “world with devils filled,” prayer will function best when we keep the frequency tuned to Command Central in the fight of faith.*

God will respond like a commander-in-chief. He will marshal His forces in heaven and on earth to do His will. We pray, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And when we pray earnestly, we expect that God will, indeed, answer.

One crucial proviso we might add is essential. While our prayers don’t change God, they do change us. So how might we be changed through this prayer?

First, it can bring us to our knees in prayer in repentance. Then, recognizing that we have fallen short of the Lord’s charge to win the world to Him, we need to simply repent. In other words, to change our hearts.

A change of heart will lead to a renewed understanding of the resources our Lord has given to His bride, the Church. It will also create the conviction that He has specifically called *and* gifted us to use our talents for world evangelization. For some, world evangelization is work to be done at home. For others, it may mean moving to a new home in another country.

In that regard, our prayers might change from “Lord, please send someone from our church into the harvest field” (and that is a perfect prayer, by the way!) to “Lord, please send me into the harvest field!”

. . . to send out laborers into His harvest.

Suppose you are someone that God has chosen to be a harvest laborer. How might that look? It would like the work of Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18:26. It would consist of sharing your faith as an ordinary layperson, similar to what we read in Greear’s quote above:

- *When “normal” Christians embrace this idea of calling, the gospel spreads like a prairie grassfire.*
- *The next wave of missions will be carried forward, I believe, in much the same way—on the wings of business.*

Piper has also been a great advocate for ordinary men and women taking their jobs overseas, to some of the least reached nations of the world, to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). In 1988, at a conference in Minneapolis, Piper told the attendees:¹³

Acts 18:3 says that Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla because they were of the same trade, namely, tentmakers. So, in a sense you could say Paul's traveling band of men was a traveling band of merchants who worked when they had to, making and repairing and selling tents.

And when they had enough money to live on, they preached the gospel and taught the new Christians what it meant to follow Jesus in their homes and vocations.

This is where the term "tentmakers" comes from.

- *A tentmaker today is a person who supports himself in another culture in order to make known the reality of Jesus Christ and build his Church.*
- *A tentmaker is a person who believes that Christians ought to be engaged in thousands of secular vocations, but who believes the product or service he is providing is always secondary to the effect he has on people's lives through his work.*
- *A tentmaker has set his eyes on things that are eternal.*
- *And so God has helped him see that making money, getting promotions, becoming well-known are at best secondary means to what really counts for eternity, namely, God being glorified and people coming to know and trust him.*
- *And then tentmakers look at the cities of the unreached peoples where there are no churches, and no Christians, and they hear God's call to go to these cities and live there and work there in order to bring the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the gospel.*

Change is hard; change is necessary!

If we are earnestly asking the Lord to send out laborers into His harvest, our conception of what a laborer looks like will have to change. Our mission tactics will have to change. Innovation will be necessary.

Addressing paradigm change in the centuries just before the birth of Christ, Myke Cole elaborates at length on military innovation. He wrote in ***Legion versus Phalanx***:¹⁴

Innovation is usually not a sudden thing. It happens gradually, as people recognize deficiencies in a way of doing something – and engage in the slow process of trial and error that eventually brings about reform and improvement. . . . Militaries are conservative institutions, and slow to introduce change.

The Church is also a conservative institution. Change happens slowly, sometimes too slowly. For our prayers to be truly earnest, in the context of our rapidly changing world and the state of world evangelization, they must also include the request that God will do a new thing in our midst.

We need to be like the men of Issachar in Old Testament times:

Of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do . . . 1 Chronicles 12:32 (ESV)



Notes:

¹Conrad Hackett and David McClendon, **Christians remain world's largest religious group, but they are declining in Europe**, April 5, 2017, *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

²*Evangelical Focus*, **660 million evangelical Christians in the world?**, February 18, 2020
<https://evangelicalfocus.com/print/5119/660-million-evangelicals-in-the-world>

³Mike Pettengill, *The Pettengills: Missionaries Mentoring New Missionaries*, **Crawling Through the 10/40 Window**, May 1, 2013, <http://www.pettengillmissionaries.org/crawling-through-the-1040-window/>

⁴*Joshua Project*, **What is the 10/40 Window?**, https://joshuaproject.net/resources/articles/10_40_window

⁵Katharina Buchholz, *Statista*, **The Fastest Growing Cities in the World**, February 6, 2021,
<https://www.statista.com/chart/24298/fastest-growing-cities/>

⁶Dave Datema and Dan Scribner, *Missions Frontiers*, **40 Years of Unreached Peoples Effort: Progress and Regress**, October 31, 2016, <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/40-years-of-unreached-peoples-effort>

⁷ Ibid.

*(Roland Allen, an Anglican cleric who is mentioned here, was an early proponent of indigenous missions. His ground-breaking book, **Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?** was published in 1912. It is a must-read for anyone wanting to understand the evolution of the modern mission movement – with the caveat that some criticize Allen for separating doctrinal truth and mission methodology rather than integrating them into a cohesive, unified theological/missiological framework.)*

⁸Andrew Scott, *Scatter Global Webinar*, February 11, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8128771>

⁹J.D. Greear, *IMB*, **What's the Next Missions Wave? Ordinary Believers on Mission.**, September 13, 2018
<https://www.imb.org/2018/09/13/ordinary-believers-on-mission-jd-greear/>

¹⁰ *Greear uses the term vocational, here, for full-time Christian workers (traditional missionaries if you will). Our use of the word vocational is in keeping with the Reformed view that we are all vocational missionaries – most of us, however, have vocational callings that do not include full-time Christian service. This is an important distinction – while we will continue to use the terms vocational ministry or vocational missions to describe both lay and clerical ministry, our goal is to see more and more of the laity recognize their vocational calling as incredibly strategic for global missions.*

¹¹ John Piper, *Desiring God*, **What Should We Pray For?**, November 10, 2006,
<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-should-we-pray-for>

¹² Ibid.

¹³John Piper, *Desiring God*, “Tentmakers” In Minneapolis, September 4, 1988,
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/tentmakers-in-minneapolis>

¹⁴Cole, Myke. **Legion versus Phalanx** (p. 50). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition. 2018