

# MISSION<sup>TM</sup> FRONTIERS

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**“We are belongers  
before believers.”**

—Samuel Perry

# 50 FRONTIER VENTURES

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can they hear without someone preaching?  
And how can anyone preach unless they are  
sent? It is written: 'How beautiful are the feet  
that bring good news!'



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# 50 Years and Still Questioning Boxes

By **DUKE DILLARD**, Editor

Duke Dillard served overseas for 18+ years before settling in Denton, Texas, in 2019 with his wife, Laurie, and their seven children. He helps people and organizations become fully who God created them to be. He loves spending time with his wife, children, and grandchildren.

Happy New Year to you, and Happy Anniversary to Frontier Ventures!

In 1976, Ralph and Roberta Winter launched the US Center for World Mission (now Frontier Ventures) in Pasadena, CA, and over the last 50 years, unreached peoples all over the globe have felt the godward impact. We will include an article focusing on the 50<sup>th</sup> in each issue this year. You can read Sue Patt's retrospective on page 6.

And speaking of birthdays, I hope you experienced deep joy celebrating the birth of our Savior. With small grandkids in the house, we are back in the phase of simple gifts bringing great joy. Just put an excavator or a trash truck in a box, wrap it, and put a bow on it to make a two-year-old boy dance with joy on Christmas morning.

I have found that we humans like to put things in boxes and tie them with bows, whether they fit or not. In this issue, we dive into one of those topics that has been an ill-fitting box for too long. Dr. Samuel Perry published *Religion for Realists* in 2024, pointing out the box in which we put beliefs, doctrines, and religion needs to be reconfigured. Research (and the Bible) tell a more nuanced story about our need to belong and how the social groups with which we identify shape our beliefs.

As humans, we are constantly scanning to find "our people." Churches realized this in harsh ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. People who seemed content pre-COVID, left churches in droves during COVID. How often did we hear, "If you have that mask policy, then I'm out of here!"? In essence, they were saying, "I thought y'all were my people, but you're clearly not!" Rarely was an in-depth biblical argument given for the departure. As we reflect on this phenomenon, *Religion for Realists* helps us understand.

But *MF* doesn't focus on America. Thus, we wanted to take the ideas Dr. Perry shares and expand them to cross-cultural, frontier contexts. This issue is a bit more academic than most of our issues, but I beg you to engage with our authors who have worked hard to take the concepts and bring them to a practical level.

Dr. Perry says, "We are belongers before we are believers."<sup>1</sup> If this is true, how must we then minister in frontier settings (and every setting, for that matter)? I think you'll enjoy the diverse opinions and contexts our authors engage in this issue. We cover movements, Muslims, and Buddhists, the kingdom, the Bible, and history, those hurt by the church and those eager for discipleship. Dive in and consider what this means for your ministry.

Lastly, I want to point out a new column we have added for 2026. Irene Springfield (pseudonym), a young mom (Millennial) serving in North Africa will be sharing stories of her life ministering among a UPG as a wife, mother, and team leader with her husband. You don't want to miss the authentic wisdom she shares. And we are continuing our other columns as well, so enjoy the perspectives of Greg Parsons, who has been here since the beginning, our Gen Z contributors sharing their zeal, and our diverse 24:14 authors keeping us aware of what God is doing in movements around the globe.

My prayer is that 2026 is a year in which you grow in loving intimacy with Jesus, feel a deep belonging to his people wherever you live, and end the year with Christ more fully formed in you than you began it.

That all the world may experience God's love,  
Duke Dillard 

<sup>1</sup> Perry, Samuel L. *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 44–45.

# Letter to the Editor



Dear Duke,

I just read your Nov/Dec 2025 *MF* editorial (“Becoming Loving: Experiencing Failure and Being Loved”). I love what you shared and appreciate your heart and insight.

You wrote, “Most of us mask our lack of capacity to trust and receive people’s love with spiritual achievements and knowledge. We are works in progress.” It takes insight and experience to have that perspective, beyond just information from a book.

You also humbly shared, “When I went to reach the unreached as a 28-year-old with my wife and daughter, I said all the right things. But I was immature, full of shame, and desperate to be accepted. I wasn’t going to let anything get in my way and treated people accordingly.”

I could have said something similar about when my wife, son, and I went to the mission field when I was 35.

The QR code shows part of my testimony about how I wish I had received heart healing teaching before I moved overseas ([hearthealing.site/wounded-heart/](http://hearthealing.site/wounded-heart/)).



Now, my wife and I are broken vessels who have received love and acceptance from Jesus. We have seen the urgent need for missionaries, young and old, to receive heart healing from Jesus.

I am currently part of a holistic ministry—Deeper Walk International—that has helped and is helping many to experience more breakthrough, healing, freedom, and walk in greater maturity. There is such a great need for this, and the Lord continues to bring more attention in the body of Christ to this previously overlooked area.

Increasingly, more missions organizations and ministries are now devoting more resources to the emotional and mental health and well-being of their missionary families. This is good, and I pray this continues.

I hope that some day *MF* will dedicate an issue to this topic that used to be unknown, invisible, or ignored.

You ended your article with, “That all the world may experience God’s love.”

I’ll close with, that all missionaries may truly experience God’s love and know it in their heart.

All the best and much shalom,  
John & Leigh

# Frontier Ventures 50 years in Retrospect: 1976-2026

By **SUE PATT**

**Sue Patt** has been on staff with Frontier Ventures since 1982. She lives in the Philadelphia suburbs with her husband, Fran. She is passionate about seeing God's glory displayed among all nations.

**T**his title breathes wonder and incredulity at the same time. How is it that 50 years have passed since the founding of the US Center for World Mission (USCWM)<sup>1</sup>, and how is it that I now have a first-hand account of some part of 46 of those years? We all have only some part of any shared history, and the staff of this organization along with collaborators, have had a front row seat to massive global change in and through the mission enterprise.

Much has been written about the brilliant life and contributions of Dr. Ralph D. Winter and his equally brilliant wife, Roberta. The USCWM was founded by them and a small handful of dedicated servants of God in 1976, to be a place focusing the efforts of the global Body of Christ toward people clustered in groups (people groups) where there was insufficient gospel witness to see the good news of Christ take root and spread. There were no churches to evangelize, and there were no cross-cultural workers to incarnate the love of Christ within an estimated 16,750 unreached people groups because they were “hidden” from view of the global church. The mission enterprise was thinking about the word “nations” in scripture as the socio-political construct better known as “countries,” but those words are vastly different. It’s almost inconceivable now. The mission enterprise has been irrevocably altered by this one shift, most notably championed by the USCWM but quickly adopted by the rest of the global mission workforce.

Ideas, such as “people groups,” began to spread through literature, books, conferences, and educational opportunities released by the USCWM. Chief among educational opportunities has been the Perspectives Study Program, started in 1974 in response to the exponential uptick in interest among Urbana 1973 attendees in dedicating their lives to the completion of the Great Commission. Early prototype classes were later revised into a semester-long “extension” class first tested at Penn State University, where I was in my junior year. So began my 46-year eye-witness view to the remarkable and explosive growth in the Perspectives Study Program, now a truly global movement with programs in more than 40 countries—and growing!

The ideas contained in the Perspectives curriculum have been powerful change agents across the mission enterprise. Look at the May-August 2024 *Mission Frontiers* issue celebrating that program’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary to gain a better picture of its impact.



<sup>1</sup> The USCWM changed its name in 2015 and now goes by Frontier Ventures (FV).



Not only have individual lives been forever redirected, churches and denominations have refocused their energies, and many new agencies have been formed across the globe toward seeing the gospel of Jesus made available in culturally relevant expressions of community. Of course, Perspectives has not been the only thing going on through the USCWM.



Ralph & Roberta Winter surveying the WCIU campus

Not long after the USCWM was launched, William Carey International University (WCIU) was also founded by Dr. and Mrs. Winter to provide keen skills to future field workers who had intended to bring the gospel to places with least access to followers of Jesus. The early offerings included Community/International Development, Intercultural Communications and Applied Linguistics (TESOL), a course of study I began, but didn't complete, as a single gal in the 1980s. Though there are around 450 alumni who did complete their studies, the magnitude of their influence over decades of service across the globe far outweighs the significance of the number of students. Many of these students completed their studies from countries in the non-Western world, ready to put their learning into action in real time. They are an extremely talented and dedicated pool of global leaders.



1987 WCIU Graduates

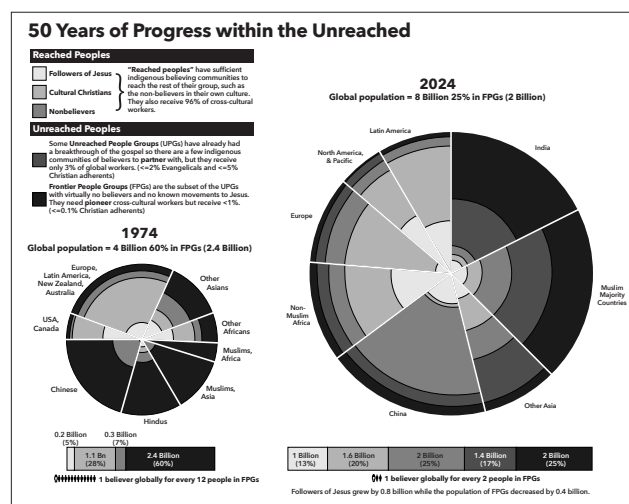
Building momentum toward the completion of the Great Commission has taken many forms over these 50 years. Much effort was driving toward the year 2000, and perhaps in our best, task-oriented intentions, the global mission enterprise participated. There were watchwords such as "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000" and initiatives such as the "AD 2000 Movement," later adjusted to the "AD 2000 and Beyond Movement." I wonder if the Lord was pleased to see the mission efforts of the Church continue beyond the year 2000 if just to ensure he would be the One leading, rather than we task-oriented Westerners.

We couldn't have imagined in 1976 how the Spirit of God would continue to inspire and equip the two-thirds world to take their place as leaders in the global mission enterprise, but that has certainly been the case. Through persistent involvement in dissemination of ideas through education, publishing, and global gatherings, those with whom we collaborate reflect an increasingly diverse community of devoted Jesus followers. It's astounding to see when we stop long enough to acknowledge this reality.

William Carey Publishing (WCP), *Mission Frontiers* (MF) magazine, and the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (IJFM) have been a big part of the dissemination of ideas through the USCWM and now Frontier Ventures (FV). Our staff has listened carefully to voices from all corners of the earth to discern trends and fruitful practices to see the kingdom of God move forward. WCP has published over 500 titles and sold more than 1 million mission books over its more than 55-year history. *Mission Frontiers* has published more than 275 issues highlighting a wide array of topics relevant to people interested in the global mission of the Church. The *IJFM* has been stimulating and provoking deeper thinking on mission topics for more than 40 years. There is no way to calculate the cumulative effect of all the words published, and that's a good thing. We dare not take credit for fruit that could only come from the blessing of God.

The fruitfulness of the mission enterprise is a glorious reality over the past 50 years. The view of world evangelization has been getting clearer as the global Church has also grown and there are more researchers

carefully watching progress in kingdom growth across the globe. Where 50 years ago we estimated a total number of unreached people groups to be 16,750, today the estimated number of unreached people groups is around 7,250, with the greatest need represented by peoples in the Indian subcontinent. The way we see the unfinished task has gotten clearer, bringing adjustments to the view of all people groups globally, but this is no shell game of statistics. There has been unprecedented progress in world evangelization within the past 50 years. My favorite data crunchers are my friends at Joshua Project who manage [joshuaproject.net](https://joshuaproject.net), where you can see resources such as the “Status of World Evangelization 2024.” Only by God’s empowerment can this progress be explained.



Yet kingdom advance has come at a high price. Many communities of Jesus followers suffer greatly at the hands of those who are threatened by the good news Jesus brings. Many workers have paid a terrible price personally when they have come to the end of their own spiritual resources and run dry in their service to God. Missionary attrition has caught our eye as a barrier to gospel advance, and we have developed more resources to deepen our well of living water, to strengthen our connection to the vine spoken of in John 15. There is no substitute for abiding in Christ. It is essential for fullness of life, and field workers living among the least reached need a full tank of living water for their fruitful service. Our spiritual formation offering, Second Half Collaborative, (<https://2hc.life/>) was created to give field workers a deeper bucket, so to speak, to continue in the second

half of life. I was in the first cohort of this sweet community five years ago.

For 50 years the USCWM, now Frontier Ventures, has kept our gaze on the completion of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20. That will not change. There have been ways the global landscape has shifted, and we endeavor to remain nimble to respond to change. Consider for a moment how the internet has changed the landscape, or how artificial intelligence is changing the landscape again. In 50 years, we have witnessed incredible evidence of God’s work in his world through our efforts, and we want to celebrate and recount his glorious deeds in our midst. So, tell us your part of the story. I will offer four quarterly virtual gatherings for alumni staff and collaborators to tell stories. Take a couple of minutes to connect with us through this form: <https://forms.office.com/r/aSwNjJ1pei>. We may want to publish what we receive so keep an eye out for more all year about our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary! MF

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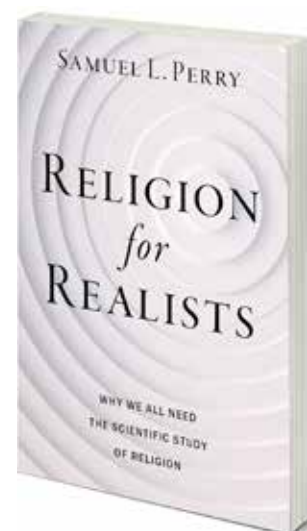


# RELIGION *for* REALISTS

## Conversion, Community, and the Social Nature of Faith Journeys

By **DR. SAMUEL L. PERRY**

**Samuel L. Perry** is the Sam K. Viersen Presidential Professor of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago and his ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary.



**W**e seldom think about how fundamentally social our own conversion stories are until we're reminded by newborn Christians.

Decades ago, my wife and I worked for a discipleship ministry at a small university in Georgia. The ministry was “student-led, staff-directed,” which meant we primarily invested in key student leaders while most of the evangelism and discipleship was happening student-to-student. Every fall semester, our student leaders would throw themselves into dorms, Greek life, and intramural sports teams, build close relationships with incoming freshmen, and share the gospel. And students were making decisions for Christ, often in the dozens. Many of those students are actively involved in their churches to this day, some even in full-time ministry! But occasionally I would wonder what those students were actually converting into.

Let me explain.

Each week, we had a large group gathering. Our student leaders could bring their new friends with whom they were hoping to share Christ. A team of student leaders would put on a funny skit, another leader would give a testimony of how he or she became a Christian, and one of the staff would give a

talk, always with a clear gospel presentation. But one year, after dozens of students had made decisions for Christ, we decided to have some of those newborn Christians give their testimonies. No coaching; we just let them tell the audience what happened in their lives.

Their raw stories were revealing. Often through tears, they described how they felt alone and insecure before coming to college; but then they met this great new group of friends who challenged them to live for God; and they were so grateful for their new friends, and they were fired up about participating in future ministry events. That's it.

At the time, these testimonies alarmed me. I wondered to myself, “Have we not been communicating the gospel clearly? Do these students think they've been converted into some cult? Why don't they emphasize their old spiritual condition or their new faith in Christ?”

The truth is, those newborn Christian students—without the coaching on how to give a standard gospel testimony—were describing *exactly* what had happened to them. Their old friendships, and consequently their very social identities, had been



severed in the act of coming to college. They felt isolated and alone. But then they met this new, welcoming, fun, Jesus-loving group of students who taught them how to swing-dance and play the guitar. And they were excited to be part of this new Jesus-loving group and live out their new social identity.

Did these students *actually* put their faith in Christ in a salvific way? That’s a Holy Spirit question, one we can only try to answer over time. But from a human perspective, their “conversion” to Christianity was fundamentally about a slower transition from identification with one social group to identification with another, and for many that newer identification has lasted decades. I know because that’s my story, too. That’s how I became a Christian in college.

As it turns out, my story and those of all those students we discipled in college ministry reflect a key insight from the social scientific study of religion. And it’s one I’m confident missionaries in non-Western contexts know all too well. This is that “religion” is fundamentally more about social identities, practices, and in-group norms than it is about one person placing their faith in a theological claim and determining to live their life in light of that decision.

In my book, *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion*, I argue that Anglophone Westerners often unwittingly embrace several misconceptions about how religion actually works, largely because of our dominant Anglo-Protestant culture. These are misconceptions that a social scientific study of religion (when done rightly) can correct, because it grounds our understanding of religion in empirical evidence rather than anecdotes or tradition.

Though there are a number of misconceptions the social scientific study of religion can clear up, I focus on three major Anglo-Protestant misconceptions presented in Table 1 below. The first one is that we tend to think of religion as about “faith” or “belief” as the primary cognitive force that drives religious behavior, when in fact mountains of evidence reveal that religious behavior is primarily a reflection of our attachment to social group identities and norms of behavior. The theology is often downstream. We are *belongers* before we are *believers*.

Table 1—Primary Operant in Religion According to Anglo-Protestant Tradition vs. Reality

Domain	Anglo-Protestant Tradition	Reality
Cognitive Force	Beliefs (Faith)	Social Identity and Norms
Growth Factor	Ideas (Doctrines)	Population Dynamics
Change Agent	Individuals (Obedience)	Social Structure

And though my evidence for this comes from numerous studies, this is far from an unbiblical perspective. Christians do not baptize privately or in isolation. We do it publicly. But why? Because we are baptized into a community and that implies a change of social identity. In fact, in one study, my co-author and I demonstrated that Americans who undergo religious “rites of passage” (baptism, confirmation, Bar Mitzvah) in their teens are less likely to fall away from their religious tradition as adults. Why? It’s almost certainly because the rite of passage marks them socially, binding their adult identity to the faith of their youth.

There are other examples. For instance, the nature of church discipline as Jesus describes in Matthew 18 is fundamentally social, not cognitive: First your brother confronts you, then he involves the community to apply pressure, and if that doesn’t work, you face the threat of ostracism—your community treats you like you were never one of them (“like a pagan or tax collector”). We see the same emphasis in Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians where they are told to disassociate themselves from someone who claims to be a Christian but lives contrary to Christian ethics. The point as Paul reveals in his second letter to that community isn’t to help the offender to believe new things, but to apply social pressure and bring the person to repentance.

The scientific study of religion tells us our theological faith convictions matter less than we realize, especially compared to the powerful cognitive force of in-group attachments and unspoken group norms. But then, so does the *content* of our faith convictions. The second misconception the social sciences correct is that the



primary growth factor shaping religious futures is the merit of *ideas* or *doctrines*. In reality, it is not the best or most compelling religious ideas that determine whether Islam, Christianity, or secular humanism grow to dominate a nation. Rather it is—and always has been—more often natural population dynamics: Who is having more babies? Who is dying at higher rates? Who is migrating to new territories? We are *belongers* before we are believers, yes, but even more we are *bodies* with durable group identities and norms before we are believers.

**The scientific study of religion tells us our theological faith convictions matter less than we realize, especially compared to the powerful cognitive force of in-group attachments and unspoken group norms.**

But what factors shape the population dynamics that influence how our bodies, group identities, and norms proliferate or change? The third and last Anglo-Protestant misconception the social scientific study of religion corrects is that large-scale religious change does not primarily take place person-to-person like some contagion. Rather, beneath religious transitions lie structural shifts in whole economies, governments, and technological developments. These transitions affect information flows, minority rights, access to public education, social safety nets, and so on. What often looks like a grassroots religious revival or sudden religious decline is—again, from a human perspective—the consequence of massive and interconnected legal, economic, technological, and organizational shifts.

The implications for understanding religious growth and decline in the Western context are legion. But the social scientific study of religion also helps us understand other pressing social problems. Take, for example, political polarization.

Remember how it sounded like the newborn Christians in my college ministry were somehow confusing being a Christian with just being part of our particular social group? Research on group

identities shows that happens on a much larger scale in that our religious identities often overlap with other important identities like race, nation, or political regime. And that makes intuitive sense. Just like we unconsciously conflate “Hindu” with “Indian” and “Muslim” with “Middle East,” we can do the same with our own Christian identities. If all the Christians I personally know in the world are White, American, and Republican, when I think “Christian,” I might intuitively start to conflate that category with those other social identities.

In fact, I’ve witnessed this. About five years ago, while dropping my kids off at school, I was listening to a popular Christian talk radio station that is *strongly* conservative. The show host for that hour asked listeners if their radio station had played a role in their spiritual conversion and to call in with a testimony. Caller after caller shared a story that went like this: “I used to vote Democrat; I was very liberal. But then a friend of mine recommended that I start listening to your radio station. It made so much sense. And now I’m a solid conservative.” Is that what a *Christian* conversion looks like? It did for these people because the social identity of “conservative” or “Republican” and “real Christian” have become so conflated that to ask these Americans about their own spiritual journey was to ask them how they went from Democrat (spiritual darkness) to Republican (light).

And this likely happens on both sides of the political spectrum. But in a culture where “Christian” is rapidly becoming synonymous with one particular political party, and “secular” is becoming synonymous with another, our *political* disagreements are becoming *religious* conflicts, with cosmic stakes. Reasonable people can disagree about climate policy, tariffs, police reform, and education funding. But those disagreements are virtually impossible to overcome when one’s political opponent is viewed as an “Army of Satan,” and they view your party as “Theocratic fascists.” It’s not theological conviction that amplifies the conflict, but identity.

What is the relevance of all this for the task of global missions?



First, decades of social scientific research on religion confirms what missionaries in Muslim-majority contexts have long experienced: the work of seeing Muslims become Christians is daunting not primarily because it is difficult to convince Muslims that Jesus Christ was who he said he was. Our theologies are often loosely held and more fluid than we like to admit. Rather, what is more challenging is getting Muslims—with all their lifelong social connections to Muslim family and friends whom they still love—to imagine themselves as Christ-followers who have left Islam behind. For many, it is absolutely unthinkable. We tend to characterize Jesus as being hyperbolic for effect when he told his disciples to “Hate your family” and to “Hate your own life” for Christ’s sake. But to these Muslims, neither command feels like hyperbole; both are connected through the power of in-group attachments and identity.

What is more, there are structural barriers in place in the form of anti-proselytizing laws, anti-conversion laws, and the systematic persecution of Christians to suppress their numbers.

Tertullian was empirically dead-wrong when he asserted,

“We spring up in greater numbers the more we are mown down by you: the blood of Christians is seed.”

On the contrary, research shows systematic persecution is quite effective at suppressing targeted religious groups.


And this is not merely a reflection of Muslim theological commitments or individuals who hate Christians.

As it turns out, autocratic regimes around the world are much more familiar

with how religion actually works than many Western scholars and journalists. They understand that suppressing religious change to maintain a particular social order is much less about convincing citizens with ideas and more about setting up structural barriers to stifle communities of religious minorities and prevent them from gaining cultural and political influence.

Incorporating these facts within our missiology, the missionary task becomes less about convincing Muslims (or anyone from a non-Christian context) of theological claims (though that certainly takes place eventually) and more about making it possible to build thriving communities of committed Christian nationals with whom group membership becomes a structural—and eventually a social—option for former Muslims.

In addition, the implications of these findings invite us to pursue structural change, which means political change. Perhaps lobbying our government to use greater diplomacy and apply pressure on Christian-persecuting nations to cease and adopt religious liberty reforms would help? Though there are few bipartisan positions left in American politics, encouraging nations with histories of human rights violations to protect the religious liberties of their own citizens may be one.

Ultimately, insights from the scientific study of religion require us Anglophone Westerners—steeped in the ambient folk theology of our Anglo-Protestant culture—to think differently about what “religion” means in *any* context. Confirming much of what non-Christian religious groups and missionaries who minister to them already understand: Religion is more social, less private; more embodied, less cognitive; more contextual and fluid, less doctrinaire; more ritual, less textual; and more systemic, less individualist. Understanding this not only makes us more effective in ministry, it helps us understand our own Christian experience in a deeper way, one more tethered to reality. A religion for realists, if you will. 

# Redeeming Realism for Understanding Movements

By **WES WATKINS**

**Wes Watkins** (formerly Warrick Farah) serves with One Collective as a missiologist and facilitator of the *Motus Dei* Network (<https://MotusDei.Network>).

**A**mong the frontiers of mission today, enthusiasm for church planting movements (CPMs) or disciple making movements (DMMs) often outpaces our understanding of what actually makes them work. Much of the current conversation focuses on theological precision or methodological replication, while too little attends to the social, structural, and cultural dynamics that shape missional transformation. If movements are to be sustainable and reproducible, our missiology must both deepen and widen.

In my work with movement practitioners, I have noticed that the same stories can circulate for years with little examination of the lived realities beneath them. Some assume that sound doctrine and clear obedience alone can explain movement dynamics. Yet beneath every movement are complex webs of kinship, social pressure, economic conditions, and group identity that profoundly influence whether the gospel “runs ahead” (2 Thess 3:1) or stalls.

Sociology offers tools that help us see this reality more clearly. Samuel Perry’s *Religion for Realists*<sup>1</sup>

argues that religion should be studied empirically rather than idealistically. Although Perry’s focus is on Anglo-Protestant Christianity (mainly White Evangelicalism) in America, his “realist” framework can illuminate what God is doing in very different settings, especially among least-reached peoples in the Majority World. We do not have to accept all of his conclusions to appreciate his insights. His emphasis on group identity, population dynamics, and social structures provides helpful lenses to examine the communal and embodied realities of movements. Especially since sociology explains how individuals form groups, movement missiology needs realism as a companion to theology to help us discern how the gospel interacts with real social forces.

## Belonging Before Believing

Perry maintains that religion is primarily about group identity and social norms rather than individual belief. Theology, in this view, functions as a marker of belonging that reinforces community cohesion. This may sound backward to those of us trained on the primacy of theology, but think about it: Depending on your own theological tribe, your position on gender roles (or charismatic gifts, politics, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc.) is often *the* defining feature of

<sup>1</sup> Perry, Samuel L. *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).



your faithfulness to Jesus! Our theological convictions are strongly shaped by the communities we belong to.

This sociological realism resonates with what practitioners of CPMs have long observed. Transformation often occurs collectively rather than individually. Movements grow when the gospel spreads through existing relational and kinship networks instead of extracting people out of them.<sup>2</sup> As *Motus Dei* notes, people tend to accept or reject a new faith depending on whether it strengthens or threatens their social identity.<sup>3</sup>

In my experience, movements among Muslims illustrate this vividly. CPMs/DMMs are not “Insider Movements” seeking to retain a Muslim identity, yet they also resist premature labeling as “Christian.” Believers often form new communities of faith while using novel terms to identify with Jesus, usually because the “Christian” label does not fit. This reflects Craig Keener’s observation that the socioreligious identity of early Jesus followers did not solidify as “Christian” until the late second century.<sup>4</sup> Movements today may echo that same slow, organic process of identity transition and formation.

**Believers often form new communities of faith while using novel terms to identify with Jesus, usually because the “Christian” label does not fit.**

Discovery Bible Study (DBS) also demonstrates how group belonging shapes belief. Perry references an anthropological study of evangelical Bible study groups in the West, showing that participants often use Scripture to confirm what their group already assumes, a process called “establishing congruence.”<sup>5</sup> While that study concerned believers in the United States, it raises intriguing parallels for non-Western

contexts. In CPMs, groups of seekers (often oral-preference learners) study Scripture together and encounter Jesus in community. Social congruence may initially guide interpretation, but the Spirit works through those same relationships to bring change. DBS leverages the communal nature of belief formation. The gospel enters relational networks and begins reshaping them from within.

Practitioners who recognize the realist priority of belonging over abstract belief are better equipped to catalyze movements. This should challenge missiological frameworks that center theology as static and primary. Western models that assume isolated individual conversion often overlook the collective processes through which faith actually spreads. Realism calls us to take group belonging seriously as the environment in which movements are formed.

## Population Dynamics

Like other sociologists of religion, Perry argues that religious change follows population dynamics more than intellectual debate. “Bodies precede ideas.”<sup>6</sup> Growth or decline in religious movements often mirrors demographic patterns in society.

This insight has important implications for movement research. Where there is population growth, particularly across parts of Africa and Asia, there is often church multiplication and potential for movements. Where populations are shrinking or aging, movements seldom emerge at scale. In my observation, every major movement I have studied also exists within a wider environment of population growth. Even in the United States, Ryan Burge has documented that growing churches are also much more likely to be in counties with positive population growth.<sup>7</sup>

Sociological realism highlights a fascinating paradox between population dynamics and ecclesiology: It’s easier to plant a church in the West than among the least-reached, but it’s easier to plant a movement among the least-reached than in the West.

2 Warrick Farah, “The Homophilous Unit Paradox: Church Planting Movements Within and Beyond the Oikos,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 40.1–2 (2023), 69–77.

3 *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*, ed. by Warrick Farah (William Carey, 2021), 15.

4 Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols (Baker, 2013), ii, 1850.

5 Perry, 53.

6 Perry, 70.

7 Ryan Burge, “What Predicts Church Growth or Decline?,” 14 March 2024 [www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/what-predicts-church-growth-or-decline](http://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/what-predicts-church-growth-or-decline).



Realism does not reduce the work of God to demographics; it roots our theology in reality. Movements are embodied in human communities and subject to birth rates, migration, and generational change. Understanding these factors invites us to see how God works through ordinary patterns of life to accomplish extraordinary things.

### Structures That Shape Faith

Perry next highlights social structure, the systems and institutions that organize and constrain human behavior. Western societies tend to downplay these structural dimensions of religion, focusing instead on personal belief. Yet social structures such as state power, economic security, and community networks deeply influence how faith takes root and spreads.

Religious groups that enjoy state privilege often stagnate, while marginalized or minority faiths tend to grow. Authoritarian regimes can fuel religious activity, but such growth is often tied to nationalism rather than genuine discipleship. The lesson for missiology is clear: Structural privilege rarely produces biblical-spiritual vitality.

In my research among movement leaders, I have noticed that the most dynamic expressions of faith often emerge from communities without access to formal power or resources. When persecution or poverty limits options, believers adapt by becoming flexible, mobile, and networked. In such contexts, structural issues such as a lack of access to large meeting halls and the presence of persecution means they have the built-in architecture (pun intended) for multiplication in simple churches. They rely on relational trust, shared ministry, and local leadership rather than institutional dependency.

Realism helps us recognize that abundant evangelism alone is not enough. The shape of society, with its institutions and networks, either constrains or enables the spread of faith. Movement missiology must therefore engage both social structures and spiritual realities.

### Realism and the Powers

Here theology becomes essential. Perry's sociological realism, though helpful, can make it seem that humans

are prisoners of their social environments. I believe the Bible insists otherwise. Social forces are real but not ultimate. Scripture names these structuring realities as the "powers," structural-spiritual forces that influence human systems (Gal 4:3; Col 1:16; Eph 6:12).

Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers* offers a way to hold this tension together.<sup>8</sup> Wink describes the "powers" as both spiritual and structural realities that shape institutions, governments, and ideologies. They are created good, fallen in rebellion, yet capable of redemption to aid in human flourishing when brought under Christ's rule (Col 2:15). This insight allows us to take sociology seriously while also affirming that the gospel penetrates beyond what mere sociology can explain.

Jesus and Paul both demonstrate a profound awareness of these dynamics. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus never says "what to believe" but focuses on "who to be" and "what to do," showing what life under the reign of God looks like. Paul likewise addresses the church as a social body marked by unity, love, and holiness. Both understood that transformation occurs when new identities, grounded in the Spirit, overturn the norms of the surrounding world.

**In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus never says "what to believe" but focuses on "who to be" and "what to do," showing what life under the reign of God looks like.**

The New Testament also declares that these powers can be resisted and redeemed. The gospel breaks through deterministic systems, both sociological and spiritual, by inaugurating a new creation. Those joined to Christ enter a new social order governed by the kingdom of God rather than the powers of this age.

For missiology, this means realism cannot stop with sociology. We must unmask the invisible powers that shape cultures and institutions while proclaiming the gospel that liberates people from them. The same Spirit who works through social identity also transforms it,

<sup>8</sup> Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers: 25th Anniversary Edition* (Fortress Press, 2017).

creating new communities in Christ that no ideology or structure can contain.

Both sociological realism and biblical theology affirm that religion is socially embedded, but Scripture reveals that God enters those very structures to redeem them. CPMs/DMMs are not simply sociological phenomena; they are manifestations of God's power breaking through entrenched norms and systems, turning the world right-side up.

### Conclusion: Redeeming Realism

Missiology needs realism, an honest engagement with the social, structural, and embodied dynamics of how people come to faith and form multiplying communities-of-the-kingdom. Yet Christian realism must go further. It must affirm that while humans are shaped by their sociology, they are not bound by it. The gospel is both socially embedded and transcendent, both immanent and liberating.



**To study mission within our fallen world *as it is*, can strengthen our faith in what God is making it to be.**

My hope is that missiologists and practitioners alike will see realism as a means of discernment. Studying mission within our fallen world *as it is*, can strengthen our faith in what God is making it to be. Movements to Christ among the least-reached remind us that theology and sociology need not compete. When held together, they reveal much of the *motus Dei*, God's movement within real human networks, transforming social worlds from within. Realism helps us see the world truthfully. Jesus shows us how that world can be redeemed. ■



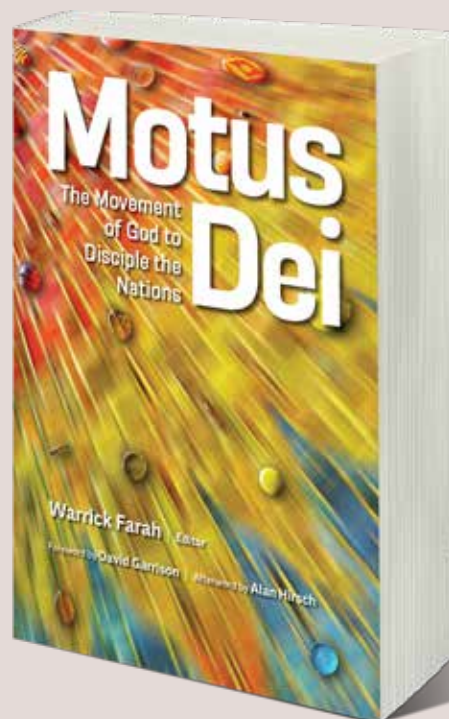
### ALSO BY WES WATKINS

#### *Motus Dei:* *The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*

Warrick Farah, editor

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# Belonging, Purpose, and Power

## Reflecting on Discipleship

By **JACOB KELLEY** (a pseudonym) Scripture references from the NIV.

**Jacob Kelley** and his wife served with OMF and most recently with Beyond among a Muslim UPG in Asia for almost 20 years. They currently live among and love Muslim refugees in the United States.

Mark 3:14, “He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.”

**B**elonging and purpose. From the early stages of his ministry, Jesus identified two essential human needs. Samuel Perry, in his latest book, *Religion for Realists*, would agree. Belonging trumps belief. His thesis is one we need to consider deeply as we labor in the harvest. He quite convincingly contends that:

... Anglo-Protestant assumptions about what motivates human beings (faith), what directs the futures of religious communities and broader societies (ideas or doctrines...), and the emphasis they place on individual agency are largely wrong. Not biblically or morally wrong... But they are empirically wrong.<sup>1</sup>

To put it another way, Perry writes, “But religion isn’t fundamentally about faith... it’s about our

relationships to in-group and out-group members. Religion is sacralized ‘us-ness.’”<sup>2</sup>

If we examine Jesus’ life closely, Mark’s description of Jesus giving belonging and purpose to his disciples is paradigmatic of his ministry. Examples abound: From the tombs to the town, the man with the legion of demons was restored and given a purpose. Jesus doesn’t extricate him from his community to ensure he is properly catechized. Instead, he commands, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). Belonging and purpose.

In another cross-cultural encounter, Jesus says to the woman at Jacob’s Well, “Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in Spirit and in truth” (John

<sup>1</sup> Perry, Samuel L. *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Perry, 41.



4:21,24). Jesus addressed a socio-historical issue from the start: She didn't need to become a Jew, just like the former demoniac didn't need to leave the Decapolis region. In fact, Jesus sent him into the Decapolis with a mission. The woman didn't need to be sent; the good news so overcame her that she went to whom she belonged and "good news'd." Jesus' love compelled her to go.

It is no wonder that we see the Decapolis region responding to Jesus later in Mark 7:37, "People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'" And in John 4, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." In both cases, a Christ-centered movement began and belonging catalyzed belief.

Does this mean that belief isn't as important as belonging? Social scientists like Perry make a strong point (despite my general concerns about demonstrating causality in the social sciences): We are wired to belong. Maslow recognized it, so did Jesus. Perry's thesis is about tendencies, not exceptions.

### I Want to Follow Jesus But...

Perry discusses the reality of cognitive dissonance in the process of belief change: Essentially, it is easier to change beliefs than behavior. Applied to religion, if someone has a sense of belonging, beliefs often follow. When confronted with an opportunity to change their beliefs, we can help frontier peoples navigate the journey by addressing their needs for belonging.

**Essentially, it is easier to change beliefs than behavior. Applied to religion, if someone has a sense of belonging, beliefs often follow.**

A Muslim woman, Yasmin, from an unreached people group said to a coworker of ours, "I want to follow Jesus, but I don't know what it looks like as a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in 'your' UPG)." Yasmin recognizes the value of Jesus' teachings and strives to embody them. But she hasn't surrendered her life to Jesus. What's her dilemma? In her mind, she

"must go to Jerusalem." She believes in Jesus, but she cannot imagine what following Jesus would look like. Belonging (or lack thereof) makes enacting belief inconceivable to her. It is for all of us who are already "in Christ" to discern how we can help Yasmin belong.

Yasmin's context and background offer another challenge that Perry addresses: wealth. Although not affluent, a robust welfare system supported her and others like her. As Perry notes, as existential security increases, levels of religiosity decrease.

How does the kingdom come in relatively affluent, urban contexts? In Ephesus and Corinth, the kingdom must come with power, not just with words. In Acts 19:11, we read, "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick..." More acts of the Holy Spirit continue, and the result is reminiscent of the Decapolis: "When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor" (Acts 19:17). As Paul said to the church in Corinth, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Cor 4:20).

In Acts 10, God provides a powerful vision to motivate Peter to go to Cornelius so he and his household can belong. Peter needed a paradigm shift. He also erred by aligning himself with the party of the circumcision (Gal 2:12). Later, we see our beloved Peter championing the importance of belonging (Acts 15:9, 19:28).

Rewinding to Matthew 16, we see Peter revealing that he hadn't grasped essential Christology. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter correctly answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). However, as recorded a few verses later, Peter's Christology needed some depth, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (16:22b). Peter gets an "A" on the fill-in-the-blank portion of the exam but flunks the essay.



Does Peter belong despite his erroneous beliefs? Yes. Even after almost three years of following Jesus, Peter had serious misconceptions that needed correction; nonetheless, he remained part of the community. Almost a decade after Jesus' ascension, Peter not only belonged to the Church, but he also led it, despite his aforementioned theological issues. The erroneous beliefs were, of course, corrected. Belief matters. Jesus strongly (to put it mildly) rebukes Peter in Matthew 16, and Paul does the same as recorded in Galatians 2:11. Peter learned correct beliefs, his theology grew, but he always belonged.



As we survey Scripture, it seems that Jesus and Perry would largely agree: Belonging is foundational and often precedes belief. As Perry puts it, “We are belongers before we are believers. We have social brains that automatically direct us toward groupish concerns like inclusion, status, stigma...”<sup>3</sup> As Peter’s life attests, Jesus recognized this, as he helped people to first belong and then taught them what to believe.

If Perry is right, how should we then live? Jesus gave a mission that included miracles. Miracles happened along the way, in spades. Using a broad definition of “miracle,” there were 40 in Acts, and only one happened in a “church” setting. Luke 10:9, the command to heal the sick, seemed to have become the norm. Is it the norm in our ministries? When the power of the kingdom is demonstrated through disciple-makers, the barriers to belonging begin to deteriorate.

An elderly Muslim woman who had practiced shamanism since she was young was delivered of demonic possession at 75. At first, she refused deliverance, not because she didn’t believe in Jesus’ power, but because she didn’t think she could belong. “Jesus doesn’t want me,” she lamented. But, Jesus did. He wanted her to belong, and he set her free so she could be a part of his family. There, in the house of a

shaman in an affluent Asian city, she was set free. She belonged to Jesus.

Returning to Sychar, the woman doubtlessly felt loved by Jesus. One reason, which has been covered above, was that she could remain a Samaritan and didn’t have to enter into the Judean religious system. She also felt tremendous liberty and even exuberance when Jesus revealed that he knew her past and still loved her. What liberation! She experienced a different type of healing, a healing that Jesus wants to provide to all in our complex urban areas, with rampant isolation and loneliness, anxiety, and instability.

Jesus brings belonging to the people of our cities today, just as he did to the woman crippled by a spirit for 18 years. He put his hands on her and healed her body, dealt with the spirit, and recognized that more was needed. In front of her people, assembled in the synagogue, he restored her identity—her belonging. He called her a daughter of Abraham in front of all the other children of Abraham who looked on with scorn. He esteemed her and brought “belonging” to her.

**Jesus brings belonging to the people of our cities today, just as he did to the woman crippled by a spirit for 18 years.**

In our fragmented and complex urban areas, teeming with people from many different UPGs and backgrounds, Jesus brings the same healing today, not just to the body and the spirit but to the social fabric that forms the communities in which “Yasmins” and shamans study, work, shop, celebrate, and grieve. The insight that Perry provides reverberates from the practice of making disciples that Jesus gives us. From Sychar to Singapore, from the Decapolis to Dhaka, the need to belong remains essential for human flourishing. Jesus recognized this, and his Church must too. ❧

<sup>3</sup> Perry, 44–45.

# The Gospel and the World's Religions

By **RW LEWIS** Scripture references are taken from the NIV.

**RW Lewis** wrote “a church for every people” in her Bible in 1980 and has worked toward that goal with her husband, Tim, ever since, helping to found the USCWM/FV, Frontiers, and Telosfellowship.org.

**T**oday, 97% of the remaining Frontier People Groups are either Muslims or caste Hindus—people groups who identify strongly with major world religions of at least 1 billion adherents. These “FPG” people groups from formidable religious blocs have no known movements to Christ and 1% or less Christians of any kind. They have either been bypassed by mission workers or have repeatedly rejected historical attempts to reach them.<sup>1</sup>

Is the goal to somehow get individuals or families from these FPG groups to be so attracted to a fellowship of Christian believers from a different people group that they leave their own families and communities to join fellowships in the other group? No! Donald McGavran pointed out long ago that whenever this method of *attractional extraction* has been used historically, such as in mission compounds, it has ultimately failed to implant the Gospel into the “dough” of the original people group. There is a 200-year history of failure of this methodology in places like South Asia.

When a people group is associated with a global religion, like Islam or Hinduism, the people becoming believers are almost always ostracized by their families and encouraged by mission workers to leave their communities to join churches in a different people group. If the church they join is made up of former strangers from multiple people groups, sometimes called “aggregate churches,” the church frequently falters and collapses under the weight of all the deep and complex functions normally fulfilled by the extended family and whole society. The believers end up in “no man’s land” where the fabric of belonging has been torn, and they no longer “belong” anywhere.

This practice is the exact opposite of the way we see Jesus and the apostles spread the good news to people from other religious groups in the New Testament. We need to get away from a “war of religions” perspective, where we are trying to make our religion or religious groups more attractive than the other religions. Instead, we need to implant the gospel into the households following the example of Jesus and the apostles.

## The Good News is a Message, not a Religion

The gospel is a message that enters and transforms existing people groups, even those associated with pagan practices and other religions. Ralph Winter pointed out “the churches are already there, they just don’t know Jesus yet” meaning the familial and societal structures remain intact as the good news takes root within them. We have seen this work countless times in tribes all over the world, including our own ancestors, who can tell you when the gospel came to our own people. It also is the way to implant the gospel into people groups with strong religious identities.

Jesus showed us the way to approach people in other religions when he spoke to the Samaritan woman in John 4. She immediately pointed out that she belonged to a different religion. (And John emphasized that Jews did not associate with Samaritans.) But Jesus bypassed religious arguments by clarifying that *God is spirit and is seeking all those who will worship him in spirit and truth* (verses 23–24). Then he did the unthinkable by going into the Samaritan village (without the Jewish disciples) and eating and fellowshiping with them for two days. The Samaritan villagers realized that Jesus was for their community also, and was “the savior

<sup>1</sup> For a deeper dive, look at the Nov/Dec 2018 (40.6) and Mar/Apr 2024 (46.2) issues of *Mission Frontiers* magazine.



of the world,” not just of the Jews (verse 42). Jesus consistently took his message to distinct religious groups instead of extracting believers out from them. Even when the demoniac became a believer and wanted to join the disciples, Jesus sent him back home to witness to his own community (Mark 5:18–19).

Peter showed us the way to bring the gospel into the household of another religious group when God challenged him to overcome his aversion to the Roman socio-religious mega group and sent him to a Roman military family (Acts 10). After making sure they understood that he had never even entered a Roman home before, Peter said, “Now I realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” He then shares the gospel message—the whole story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection—concluding with “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:34, 43). At that point, Peter saw the Holy Spirit fall upon the whole extended household.

A turning point in history came because of Peter’s vision and experience with Cornelius’ household. God prepared him to be a witness of God’s grace to those in other religious contexts during the crucial council of apostles in Acts 15:7–11 saying: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith... We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” As a result of his testimony, the apostles decided in Acts 15 to “not make it difficult” for people coming to faith in other religious contexts, setting very minimal religious rules for them.

There is no indication that Cornelius’ family was asked to leave their Roman military community to become Jews, regardless of how religious their people group was. Beginning in 27 BC, the Roman emperor had demanded that he be worshiped by his citizens. This rule lasted for about 300 years, and many Roman Christians were persecuted or killed because of it. Yet those Romans who received the good news of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection did not have to renounce their Roman

citizenship to become believers. Instead, the faith of these Christians continued to spread within their pre-existing communities despite persecution.

Paul also showed us the way to spread the gospel across religious barriers when he did not denounce Greek philosophy (Acts 17) or the gods and goddesses of the Romans (Acts 19) but instead taught new believers to remain in their families, communities, and people groups (1 Cor 7:17, 20–24). Their community of belonging was not changed, only what they were putting their faith in. They were not saved by “becoming Christians” but by having faith for salvation in the Lord Jesus, by believing *the message of the gospel*.

Paul made clear that what was of utmost importance was **the saving gospel message**: “That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day... this is what we preached and this is what you believed” (see 1 Cor 15:1–11). This gospel message is the same for every people group. In fact, Paul spends ten whole chapters in 1 Corinthians (chapters 6–15) clarifying which things matter and which do not, when a person is coming to faith from within a different religious community (see Table 1). Paul gave us all an example of how to listen to God when communicating the gospel message into an idolatrous society or another established widespread religion.

In 1st Corinthians, Paul wrote that it did not matter if people were circumcised, slaves, married, had a believing spouse, ate meat sacrificed to idols, nor whether they were paid to spread the gospel. It also did not matter whether they had spiritual gifts (and what kind), whether they had faith (and how much), nor if they generously gave to the poor. What *did* matter was whether they were transformed, born again as a new creation (Gal 6:15–18), obedient to God (1 Cor 7:19), sexually pure, faithful, not hurting or causing others to stumble, not mastered by anything, honoring the gifts God gave others, speaking a clear gospel message, and above all else—loving others (1 Cor 13, Gal 5:6).

### God’s Plan for Blessing, not Replacing, Communities and Family Households

The church was never intended to replace one’s natural family and community. The New Testament shows us over and over again how to bring the good news

## Listening to God from I Corinthians 6-15

### What does NOT matter:

#### cultural/temporal

1. Circumcised or uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:17-19)
2. Slave/free, your status in society (1 Cor 7:20-24)
3. Married or unmarried (1 Cor 7:25-40)
4. Having a believing or unbelieving spouse, believing spouse sanctifies all (1 Cor 7:12-16)
5. What we eat or don't eat, meat offered to idols or eating meat (1 Cor 8:1-13, 10:25-30)
6. Paid or not paid (1 Cor 9:1-18)
7. "Everything is lawful" (1 Cor 10:23)
8. Which spiritual gifts we have (1 Cor 12)
9. How gifted we are with prophecy, faith, generosity, martyrdom (1 Cor 13:1-3)
10. Speaking in tongues or not (1 Cor 14)

### What DOES matter:

#### biblical/eternal

1. Keeping God's commands (I Cor 7:19) [faith expressing itself through love Gal 5:6]
2. Remaining in the state you were called (1 Cor. 7:20-24)
3. Sexual purity (1 Cor 6:9-7:8)
4. Faithfulness to spouse (1 Cor 7:12-16, 25-28)
5. Not eating food that causes others to stumble, or hurts their consciences (1 Cor 8:1-13)
6. Becoming like those you seek to win, so that you can win more (1 Cor 9:19-27)
7. Not everything is helpful/beneficial, seek the good of the other person, not mastered (1 Cor 10:23-33)
8. That we honor each other's gifts (1 Cor 12)
9. **LOVING OTHERS is the most important** (1 Cor 13)
10. Speaking a clear gospel message (1 Cor 15)

message without pulling people out of their families or people-group identities, including the socio-religious identities of the rest of their people group. The followers of "the Way" (what the Jewish believers were called in the New Testament) continued to be part of the non-believing Jewish community for centuries. Sociologist Rodney Stark points out in Chapter 3 of his book *The Rise of Christianity* that the gospel spread through both the Jewish and the Roman social networks precisely because it retained "cultural continuity" in both cases, allowing the believers to retain a significant amount of their original cultural heritage. We know that believers continued to be considered part of their own religious communities if they could be buried in their community cemeteries. And Stark points out that Jewish cemeteries contain people buried with signs of faith in Christ for nearly 300 years after Christ.<sup>2</sup>

But, as Stark also points out, when the Roman Empire stopped persecuting Christians, the Roman and Greek Christians began to denounce Jewish believers for continuing to follow the Jewish religion and for staying in their Jewish communities alongside many

who refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>3</sup> The movement of faith in Jesus as their messiah within the Jewish communities slowed to a stop when the Gentile Christians essentially forced Jewish believers to leave their Jewish communities with their religious practices, and join Roman or Greek communities, complete with Roman and Greek ways of following Jesus—many of which were unnecessary and some syncretistic. (For example, the Roman Christians increasingly adopted Roman religious hierarchical structures, with empire-funded priests, while the Greek Christians brought in the constant philosophizing and theologizing of the Greek religious culture, triggering the theological battles, anathemas, and creeds. Both Greek and Roman Christians substituted Mary, the mother of Jesus, for the "mother goddess" pagan figures and began calling her the "Mother of God.")

There is long biblical history of God saving and working through whole households, notably the hundreds of men in Abraham's household being circumcised because of his faith, and God's covenant to bless all the families of the earth being reiterated to each of his descendants. This pattern is repeated throughout Scripture, as listed

<sup>2</sup> Stark, Rodney, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 49–55.

<sup>3</sup> Stark, 55–70.

## Tanzania case study in movements vs. resistance

### **Chagga People: 1900-1960**

#### **0% Christian to 90% Christian**

- “No man is truly a man except as a member of his society... and interdependence with his social order... in harmony with his fellows.”
- “The mission... must not pull individuals out in order to form them into a new organization, the church. It should not break up clans in an attempt to exalt the nuclear family.”
- Viewed mission not as the separation of individuals from their society but calling of whole tribes and peoples, with their society slowly transformed. The early believers were viewed as the first fruits of the whole people.
- To keep the clans intact, baptism was delayed until it could be received as a group. The first baptism was 20 years in. Used tribal language.

### **Arusha People: 1900-1960**

#### **0% Christian to 10% Christian**

- They separated the new believer from his old associations and environment as soon as possible.
- Individual Christians had to leave their families/clans and become the nucleus of a new Christian society, the church.
- Young Christians should never attend any ceremonies, rites of passage, or festivals involving non-Christian religious practices. If they did, they were expelled from the church and mission school.
- New believers were rejected by their parents and relatives. But influential parents gave over their children to get a Western education for them. Used trade language.

Case study from: *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: 1972 Consultation* (Chapter 9), edited by R. Pierce Beaver, published by William Carey Library.

in the *Mission Frontiers* (Sept/Oct 2018) article “The Oikos Hammer” by Steve Smith. Paul understood this principle when he told the Philippian jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you *and* your household” (Acts 16:32). In Luke, Jesus told the disciples he was sending out to evangelize to look for a “person of peace”—someone who would invite them in to stay and share the gospel with his whole household (Luke 10). In this way, a person of peace (while still an unbeliever) brings a blessing onto his or her family (1 Cor 7:14–16). And Peter teaches that by remaining in their homes and living godly lives, believers can win non-believing family members to the Lord without even speaking any words at all (1 Pet 3:1). Rodney Stark credits the continuous expansion of the gospel throughout the Roman empire to “open networks” in which believers continued to participate with their non-believing families and communities, including marrying non-believers.<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, we see that God’s plan throughout the ages is to win whole families and communities to himself, thereby “blessing all the families (*ethne*) of the earth.” He never intended the “church” to replace the family or community, even in the most difficult situations.

The gospel was a message brought into households and communities, which when received by faith resulted in salvation coming to some and blessing coming to all. This plan was modeled by Jesus and the apostles, and missionaries throughout the ages, when they brought the gospel message into very different communities, including religious ones (see Table 2 above).

With the remaining people groups untouched by the gospel (the Frontier People Groups, mostly Muslims and caste Hindus), we must seek to diligently copy the apostles and missionaries who successfully brought the gospel message into the families and communities of other religious blocs. Even if their family is trying to ostracize them, we must not seek to replace the family of new believers by attracting them to other cultural expressions of Christianity as a “new family.” If we do the latter, these people groups will continue to be completely unreached. Instead, we must bring the gospel message into their households, as Peter did with the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them will confirm that God has accepted their faith, even as he accepted ours. 🏠

<sup>4</sup> Stark, Rodney, 55–57.



# The Kingdom of God for Realists

By **S CRAWLEY** All Scripture references taken from the ESV.

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Samuel Perry’s *Religion for Realists* makes an important contribution by arguing for religion’s real-world significance. He challenges assumptions about what drives religious growth which he says are grounded in the Anglo-Protestant tradition, arguing that these “operants” are actually driven primarily by human factors, summarized in the table below.

**Table 1–Primary Operant in Religion According to Anglo-Protestant Tradition vs. Reality<sup>1</sup>**

Domain	Anglo-Protestant Tradition	Reality
Cognitive Force	Beliefs (Faith)	Social Identity and Norms
Growth Factor	Ideas (Doctrines)	Population Dynamics
Change Agent	Individuals (Obedience)	Social Structure

Contrary to the rhetoric of the “Anglo-Protestant Tradition,” beliefs (faith), ideas (doctrines), and individuals (obedience) are not the primary forces at work in the health and growth or otherwise of religion. What really matters are social identity and norms, population dynamics and social structure.<sup>2</sup> He seeks to persuade academics and policy makers in the USA to take religion seriously as something that needs to be understood rather than ignored or sidelined.

He raises legitimate questions about religion and the Anglo-Protestant tradition in US society. However, his framework, while sociologically sound, does not allow for divine agency. For those of us concerned with following Jesus, participating with God in *missio/motus Dei* and helping others take the same journey, the table is inadequate, and to focus on either column would have important downstream implications for discipleship and evangelism, among other things.

I’d like to propose a revised and supplemented version of his table in the hope that it will build on the conversation he has started and be of use to those seeking to follow Jesus and help others do the same.

To do this, I’ll first review the invitation extended by Jesus and Paul in the Gospels and Acts as a New Testament reference point for religion and religious growth. Then I’ll look at each of Perry’s operants, before wrapping up with my proposed amendment to the table above.

## The New Covenant Is Not a Religion

Jesus and Paul proclaimed something fundamentally different from “religion” as described by Perry.

Jesus’ gospel concerned the kingdom of God, the living and active reign and rule of the Father. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:14–15).<sup>3</sup>

1 Perry, Samuel L. *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion*, Kindle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 10.

2 Perry, 4.

3 It’s also noteworthy that “the kingdom of God” was a significant part of Paul’s theology (Rom 14:17, 1 Cor 4:20, 6:9–10, 15:24, 15:50, Gal 5:21, Eph 5:5, Col 1:13, 4:11, 1 Thess 2:12, 2 Thess 1:5) and that Luke concludes Acts with Paul continuing to proclaim the kingdom of God (Acts 28:31).

Jesus called people to repent and believe the gospel—that God’s reign was now accessible in a new way.

What did that mean?

This meant accepting Jesus’ authority and adjusting life accordingly. At Pentecost, God’s presence was made directly available to “all flesh”—embracing the kingdom continued to mean accepting Jesus’ authority, now also mediated through direct access and relationship with the Father by the Spirit.

**Jesus’ gospel was not merely to adopt a new belief about the world, but to embrace the reality of God’s reign and rule personally by relating to him in a new way—first through the Messiah, and then through the Holy Spirit in light of the Messiah’s death and resurrection.**

Jesus expected people to walk in direct relationship with God. In John 14–17, he describes the role of the Holy Spirit after his departure through whom he expected all his disciples to have access to God (John 14:16–17, 15:7–11). He expected that the Spirit would directly guide, instruct, and teach (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7–15). This is in keeping with the Gospels’ depiction of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, and many of the Old Testament prophetic pictures of God’s ultimate goal (e.g. Jer 31:33–34, Joel 2:28–29), not to mention the original picture we see in Genesis 1–2.

Jesus’ gospel was not merely to adopt a new belief about the world, but to embrace the reality of God’s reign and rule personally by relating to him in a new way—first through the Messiah, and then through the Holy Spirit in light of the Messiah’s death and resurrection.

Paul holds the same expectation.

For example, in Galatians he paints the picture of the Messiah replacing the tutor of the Law, bringing legal minors to full sonship<sup>4</sup> and enabling a life of direct relationship with and submission to the Holy

Spirit.<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that for these former pagans, now disciples, he appears to place pagan culture and Jewish religious culture on the same level in the post-Messiah, post-Pentecost unfolding of God’s kingdom—to submit to the Jewish religious tradition was to revert to the “same worthless principles” they formerly submitted to (Gal 4:8–11). In contrast, he expects that if they “walk by the Spirit” this will outflow in transformed relationships (Gal 5:16–26).

So, Jesus and Paul are both clearly announcing and expecting something new and distinct from the existing social order, and external to humans and human society—namely, the reign and rule of God expressed dynamically through communication between God and people.

Both demonstrated this kind of relationship personally and appeared to expect it would be part of the new reality for those who accepted their message.

### **Social Dynamics Are Primary Drivers for Religion, Not the Kingdom**

As we discussed earlier, Perry highlights three “primary operants” in religion, and contrasts Anglo-Protestant rhetoric with what he asserts is truly important in religion.

While Perry’s table may be sufficient for describing religion and the Anglo-Protestant tradition, it appears to be insufficient for describing the kingdom of God that Jesus and Paul proclaimed.

There are clear indications that Jesus and Paul were aware of the operants that Perry highlights, and that they leveraged them in the way they sought to spread the good news and invite people into it. However, it is equally clear that these operants are unable to fully describe the impact of their ministry—the kingdom of God cannot be reduced to either the Anglo-Protestant tradition or Perry’s “Religious Reality.”

Our space here is limited, but let’s take a brief look at each of Perry’s “primary religious operants,” some

<sup>4</sup> A reference to legal status and honor, rather than gender.

<sup>5</sup> There are a range of views regarding the relationship of the Law to followers of Jesus under the New Covenant which I don’t have space to engage with here. One overview is available in Greg L. Bahnsen et al., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Zondervan Academic, 2010).

ways each driver connected with Jesus and Paul's practice, and potential implications for our own missional engagement.

## Operant 1: Cognitive Force

Perry argues that social belonging, not belief or doctrine, holds religious groups together. Knowing “our tribe” motivates religious alignment more than faith content.<sup>6</sup> The *content* of belief is not so important as *who else shares* it. The cognitive force is relational.

Jesus and Paul recognized this insight, as do many modern mission practitioners.

Jesus appears to have prioritized his time and energy with “*the lost sheep of Israel*” as his primary (though not exclusive) focus (Matt 15:21–28). Paul's recurring strategy was to go to the synagogues in the cities he visited (Acts 14:1, 17:1–2). Where there was no synagogue, Paul sought out places he knew that Jews and God-fearers would gather (Acts 16:13). In these places, he knew he would find people—Jewish and non-Jewish—who were drawn to the God of Israel, were familiar with his story and character, and valued the Hebrew Scriptures as a source of authority.

**Jesus and Paul were operating in social environments where few initially agreed with or understood them.**

Furthermore, they adjusted their approach to different groups,<sup>7</sup> engaging and inviting those groups to respond to the accessibility of God's kingdom in ways that resonated with their “belonging group.”

Social belonging was a concept that informed Jesus and Paul as they engaged different communities, determined focus and strategy, and what and how they communicated with them.

However, the gospel message proclaims new information about God, people, and our relationship

to each other. It invites us to embrace a new belonging structure in the light of who God says he is and who he invites us to be. What held these new communities together was not primarily beliefs but a shared identity of people relating to God, belonging to the Messiah, and seeking his will in their lives.

For those accepting the gospel, the new relationships tended to *reduce* rather than increase the status of participants, and it often led to tension and conflict with established belonging groups—Jewish and Roman.

The example of Jesus and Paul suggests that the relational implications and substance of the gospel were more significant than just doctrinal beliefs or social belonging.

## Operant 2: Growth Factor

Perry recounts an “Anglo-Protestant pop culture story of how Christianity grew throughout history” which he believes heavily (and wrongly) emphasises the transformative importance of ideas.<sup>8</sup> Leaning heavily on examples in the US, he argues that population dynamics drive religious growth. Others have previously explored this dynamic in relation to the Roman Empire,<sup>9</sup> and while there are indications that population dynamics may have played a part in long-term growth once disciples reached a critical mass in the wider population<sup>10</sup> this does not appear to have been the case in the early stages we see in the Gospels and Acts.

Jesus and Paul were operating in social environments where few initially agreed with or understood them. It's difficult to be categorical about what drove the growth in response to their message, but we can confidently say it was neither population dynamics—the timeframes of change were simply too short—nor mere ideas.

They weren't asking people to agree with an idea about the kingdom of God but to embrace its reality. They were inviting people to a new way of relating to God, the world, and each other. They personally embodied

<sup>6</sup> Perry, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Jesus' audience and message in Mark 1:14–15, John 3:1–21 with John 4:1–26. Compare Paul's audience in Acts 13:14–41 with Acts 14:8–18 and 17:22–31. Note, also, the explicit description of his approach in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.

<sup>8</sup> Perry, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Stark Rodney, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, 1st ed. (Harper Collins, 1997), Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*, 2nd ed. (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.



and lived out that invitation, and they appeared to expect those who responded to their message to do the same.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, recent research of unchurched Australians who began following Jesus as adults points in a similar direction.<sup>12</sup> In large part, the change in their lives was precipitated by exposure to people who embodied strikingly authentic relationships with God, themselves, and others, and invited them to participate.

Where implicit acknowledgement of population dynamics is significant is in the importance of sowing that embodied relationship into different cultural contexts. Jesus was focused on Israel, but his interactions with people from other communities indicate deliberate desire to have them understand and embrace this new relationship in their own context (John 4:5–26, Mark 5:1–20). Paul, too, was explicit in his intention to enable people to experience this new reality with God in their own cultural and social context. How would Gentiles across the Mediterranean world truly grasp what life with Christ entailed if they only ever saw it in a Jewish cloak? Hence, he sought to embody life with Christ in a Jewish way amongst Jews, and in a Gentile way amongst Gentiles to effectively communicate the reality of the gospel where they were so that it might spread through their context (1 Cor 9:19–23).

Ideas and population dynamics are both significant, but Kingdom growth appears to take place primarily through the impact of authentic relationships with God, self, and others.

### Operant 3: Change Agent

For his third operant, Perry discusses change agents. He contrasts the idea of an individual or group being the primary change agent in the Anglo-Protestant tradition with what he calls the realistic view in which social structures are what make the difference. In this regard, he deals mainly with the impact of government

policies and religious pluralism, which serve to weaken religious affiliation.<sup>13</sup>

Perry's arguments deal primarily with macro structures. These things certainly impact people and *religion*, but are they the primary drivers of change in the kingdom of God?

Jesus and Paul show awareness of these broader structures in their commands to pray for government and emperor but appear to be more concerned with what we might call “micro” structures.

Within the field of Jesus' assignment, he intentionally visited and sent ambassadors to the different villages in the region (e.g. Luke 9:1–6, 10:1–12). As he does this, Jesus gives detailed instructions on operating within the “micro” social structures of individual villages. To reach a village, find a household. To reach a household, find an open individual who is sufficiently influential in their immediate relationships to cause that household to be opened to you. Jesus recognized and respected the authority of gatekeepers within social networks and trained his disciples to do the same. Communicate clearly, warn, if necessary, but don't fight. Submit to their authority.

Jesus gives clear instructions that consider social structures and realities in village settings and appear to have been effective then and are proving equally effective in similar social settings in the 21st century.<sup>14</sup>

Paul followed a similar pattern in Acts as he looked at the wider Roman world—visiting key cities, looking for open social structures and serving them where he found them. Once established, he appeared to assume that social structures would do their work, as transformed disciples in the major urban centers impacted their neighbors and those in surrounding regions.

11 e.g. Jesus—John 15:1–25, Paul—1 Cor 4:16–17, 11:1, Phil 3:17, 4:9.

12 Lynne Taylor, “Toward Relational Authenticity: The Experience of Atonement in Christian Conversion Today,” *Colloquium: The Australian & New Zealand Theological Review* 49, no. 1 (2017): 31–47; Lynne Taylor, “Our Doing Becomes Us: Performativity, Spiritual Practices and Becoming Christian,” *Practical Theology* 12, no. 3 (2019): 332–42, doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1595317; Lynne Taylor, “A Multidimensional Approach to Understanding Religious Conversion,” *Pastoral Psychology* 70, no. 1 (2021): 33–51, doi.org/10.1007/s11089-020-00934-1.

13 Perry, 99.

14 Victor John, *Bhojpuri Breakthrough: A Movement That Keeps Multiplying*, Kindle, with Dave Coles (WIGTake Resources, 2019); Aila Tasse and Dave Coles, *Cabbages in the Desert: How God Transformed a Devout Muslim and Catalyzed Disciple Making Movements among Unreached Peoples*, Kindle (BEYOND, 2024); Aychi B.R. and Dave Coles, *Living Fire: Advancing God's Kingdom in Challenging Places*, Kindle (Beyond, 2025), www.amazon.com/dp/B0DTC2SQSX.

Table 2—Primary Operants in Anglo-Protestant Tradition, Religion and the Kingdom of God (Adapted from Perry)<sup>16</sup>

Domain	Anglo-Protestant Tradition	Religion	The Kingdom of God
Cognitive Force	Beliefs (faith)	Social identity and norms	Embracing the reality of Jesus as our living King and living as God's beloved children
Growth Factor	Ideas (doctrines)	Population dynamics	Authentic relationships with God, self, and others
Change Agent	Individuals (obedience)	Social Structure	Holy Spirit working in and through people (collaboratively with surrendered people, sovereignly with everybody)

16 Perry, *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion*, 10.

We see that Jesus and Paul were aware of social structures and worked with them, but those structures were wineskins for the kingdom rather than the agent of change. The choices of individuals were significant, but Jesus and Paul appeared to expect the Spirit of God to drive change as he interacted with individuals and communities.<sup>15</sup>

The change agent for the kingdom of God is the Holy Spirit, working collaboratively with individuals who had received the gospel, surrendered themselves to God's authority, and embraced their identity as his children (and working sovereignly through everybody else).

### Suggested Alternative & Application

Here's my suggestion for building on Perry's hypothesis including the kingdom of God: See Table 2 above.

Distinguishing the kingdom of God (and his activity as a living Person) from religion clarifies important missiological questions.


- What does God invite us into? What does it mean to take hold of it ourselves? Have we taken hold of it?
- What are we transmitting to others? What exactly is our evangelism inviting people into?
- What is the goal of our discipleship processes? What are the outcomes of our discipleship processes? To what extent are they aligned with God's kingdom?

- Are we merely drawing people into our culture (social identity and norm, social structures) or are we helping them embrace a spiritual reality? Is God's personal and direct involvement necessary for them or optional?

These questions are important in any context, but particularly in cross-cultural ministry.

### Conclusion

For those of us concerned with *missio Dei* and *motus Dei*, understanding religious dynamics helps us discern between religious structures and God's kingdom. With this distinction, we can have greater confidence that we are sowing good gospel seed, while also stewarding social dynamics appropriately and in service of the Father's purpose.

Where Perry's discussion of religion is particularly relevant to us is this: The religion that he describes can function entirely without God's direct and personal involvement and fails to acknowledge or capture the essence of what Jesus and Paul were announcing and inviting people into. God's personal and direct involvement were hard-baked into their invitation and process—first, in and through Jesus Christ as he trusted and obeyed the Father, and subsequently, in and through the Holy Spirit. 

<sup>15</sup> e.g. John 14:25–26, 15:26–27, 16:7–11, Acts 1:6–8, Philippians 2:12–13.

# Haunted by Religion, Healed by Christ

## A Path to the Spiritually Burned

By **REV. DR. SAM D. KIM** and **ANDREW FENG**

**Sam D. Kim** is a Harvard-trained ethicist, minister, and author. His work has been cited by Harvard, *Publishers Weekly*, and the *Washington Post*. His book, *A Holy Haunting*, was the inaugural grand prize winner in the Spirituality category of the '25 *Publishers Weekly's* BookLife prize.

**Andrew Feng**, Chief Program Officer at IFI Partners, empowers diaspora and next-gen leaders through digital discipleship, redemptive innovation, and global collaboration for Kingdom impact.

### Haunted by Religion

Untold collateral damage has been done in the world and to the witness of the Church whenever the Church, in a moment of hubris, has substituted epistemic humility with absolute certainty. There have been many iterations of this type of hubris throughout Church history, but the single common thread that runs through the medieval Inquisition, the Crusades, and most recently the rise of Christian nationalism, for example, is that the perpetrators all believed with absolute certainty they were doing God's work.

In a recent study, an astonishing majority—roughly two-thirds among white evangelical Protestants (65%)—qualify as either adherents or sympathizers of Christian nationalism. Moreover, another significant study conducted by Lifeway Research revealed that the Bible only influences one in 10 evangelicals on immigration (10%), while the influence of the local church is a mere 0.2 percent. The study concludes that the secular media, with a 16 percent influence, has more impact on evangelicals on the issue of immigration than the Bible and local church combined. It appears that American evangelicals are more influenced by a cultural and pagan perspective on immigration than one rooted in biblical principles.

### The Often-Neglected Drivers of Religious Belief

This data supports Samuel Perry's argument in *Religion for Realists* that sociology challenges the prevalent notion that religion primarily centers around personal faith and theological doctrines. Instead, Perry contends that the primary driver of religious beliefs is group identity and group norms. This perspective offers valuable insights into the often-overlooked factors influencing religious belief, both within the US and abroad. By adopting this lens, we can better comprehend the underlying causes of religious beliefs and foster a more nuanced understanding of religious trauma. This knowledge empowers us to reconcile the apparent contradictions that hinder our effective gospel witness to a skeptical post-Christian world and alleviate the grief of those affected by religious trauma.

In my book, *A Holy Haunting*, I (Sam) present an evangelistic model designed to help identify where individuals fall on the faith spectrum and what barriers they might face in their journey toward faith. I categorize people into three groups based on their proximity to faith: close, far, or somewhere in between. Again, the key emphasis here is a call to be astute in our reading of the situation.



## Barriers Inside the Church

A major impediment to faith for the next generation within the church in the US is tied to the witness of the Church and to its complicity in systemic injustices toward often-marginalized groups. Mark Twain captures this sense of disillusionment well in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Yet again, his faith experience was embedded in the South, where the dominant culture's proximity to the Christian faith can be largely described as close. The alarming question many in the next generation are asking is, "Why is the Church such a mess?"

In the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck faces a moral dilemma after he realizes that the con man he has been working for has sold his friend Jim—a runaway slave from Mississippi—for 40 dollars. Huck is furious and shocked that anyone could subject his friend to captivity again, especially after all the dirty work he and Jim have done for the man!

**A major impediment to faith for the next generation within the Church in the US is tied to the witness of the Church and to its complicity in systemic injustices toward often-marginalized groups.**

Yet, as Huck ponders what can be done to save Jim, his conscience continues to bother him. He cannot help but feel guilty about assisting Jim, because he was taught aiding a slave is against the teachings of the Bible. After trying to pray for resolution, Huck writes a letter detailing where Jim is, but then quickly tears it up. He decides he can no longer in good conscience go along with what he has been taught in church. In one of the most poignant monologues in English literature, we find Huck grappling internally with what he inherently knows to be right against what he has been taught. Mark Twain writes:

I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell." – and tore it up.

The genius of Twain here is that he shows us how someone who is a Bible-believing Christian can find

himself in profound cultural captivity to a system that is completely antithetical to the heart of God and the Word of God. Why is the Church such a mess? In short, many believers today are tragically unaware that one can be a born-again Christian and yet still find themselves in profound cultural captivity to systems that are unjust, demonic, or both.

Samuel Perry contends that the chief driver for religious belief is always sociological and never ideological. However, we caution not to discount the power of ideas too quickly. Issues of faith and belief are far more complex than social science can theorize. The Church today is now facing a sprawling "migrant crisis" of its own making—primarily over ideas—with millions of spiritual refugees who are displaced somewhere between faith and doubt, uncertain if they still believe.

We need to recognize this pressing need for safe harbor for those who have been spiritually displaced, along with an invitation for fellow sojourners to freely explore doubts and questions without repercussions, obligations, or any judgment, and perhaps find their way back home.

## Barriers Outside of the Church

Brainwashed, anti-science, and socialized—these words encapsulate the attitudes most urbanites often harbor towards Christians, even if they don't explicitly express them. Yes, "brainwashed" is a derogatory term that some might find offensive. Perhaps it's the New Yorker in me, but I prefer to be stabbed in the front rather than be blindsided from behind.

In my overall experience ministering in the Northeast, most who have come to faith were seekers who did not grow up in the Church. On the faith spectrum, their proximity to God was far. Such seekers had prejudices and were somewhat skeptical, but they did not have a list of grievances against the Church. Quite honestly, they didn't care enough to be disappointed. For those in the Northeast, the major impediments to faith from my experience are not disillusionment, but pride, prejudice, and perhaps indifference.

From conversations across many years, friends within the Ivory Tower and seekers sharing their difficulties taking Christianity seriously at first, stated their main

issues arose from it seeming so anti-science. They observed that science was supported by evidence, while faith seemed rooted in archaic superstition. They found it difficult to reconcile their view of faith as mythological and science as empirical. Science and faith were seen as competing, even adversarial, worldviews.

During an Alpha course, one seeker shared that he just always assumed Christians were essentially brainwashed zombies, akin to those in *The Walking Dead*. He thought Christians, for better or worse, were culturally indoctrinated as a direct consequence of their positionality, just like any other religion in Asia or the Middle East. I pointed out to him there are likely more born-again Christians in the Chinese underground church than in the United States, despite the former's geographical and cultural position.

**Christianity might be more than just a social construct—it could be true. This is why breaking these Christian stereotypes is one of the greatest missiological mandates of our time.**

This revelation was confounding because he had always assumed Christianity, or religion in general, to be a byproduct of cultural factors—nothing more than social human inventions. Perhaps for the first time, he and many in the room were confronted with a startling possibility: Christianity might be more than just a social construct—it could be true. This is why breaking these Christian stereotypes is one of the greatest missiological mandates of our time. Thus, the primary work of evangelism to a post-Christian culture today is that of breaking the destructive labels surrounding Christianity.

## In Christ Alone

Lastly, we should remember that hyper-Zionism predates Christian nationalism. Even before the emergence of MAGA, the apostles collectively lobbied Jesus with a MIGA Campaign—Make Israel Great Again! Honestly, I'm not sure which is more tone-deaf, but it still gives me hope for the future. It suggests that all the shenanigans we're witnessing today may seem novel but are actually cyclical. Mark Twain was right: History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. Or perhaps it's not history that's cyclical, but rather human nature.

The inconvenient truth is that the early Church was just as messy as ours is today. However, through the power of the Holy Spirit, these tone-deaf witnesses were transformed and became the vessel God used to bring his shalom to the world. The Church has never been perfect—not then, not now, and never will be. It was never meant to be. It will always be a work in progress. Although it may feel bleak at times, I still believe the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church, and that God's kingdom will prevail. How can I be so sure? Well, because Jesus promised, and if we can be certain of anything, it is his Word.

## Representing the Gospel in Mental Wellness: From Performance to Presence to Peace

If the previous sections expose how cultural captivity and misplaced certainty have haunted the Church, the crisis of *mental wellness* reveals how these same patterns echo in the lives of those searching for faith and belonging. Beneath the surface of Christian nationalism or religious disillusionment lies a more subtle struggle—the exhaustion of performance and the erosion of presence.

For the past decade, I've served at the intersection of faith, technology, and diaspora—especially among international students navigating identity, belonging, and purpose in a digital world. Born into a Chinese-American family and immigrating after the first grade, I (Andrew) learned early what it means to cross cultures and live between worlds. Today, I serve students across 50+ campuses, helping design digital ecosystems that empower next-generation leaders to create redemptive solutions—especially in closed-access nations where traditional missions cannot reach.

Every year, nearly 7 million students cross borders to study; more than 1 million come from China alone. They are among the brightest and most connected people on the planet—yet many quietly carry loneliness and anxiety. Half of all international students in US universities screen positive for depression or anxiety. Among Chinese students abroad, nearly 80 percent report depressive symptoms. These are not simply statistics; they are stories of displacement, pressure, and a deep longing for belonging.

In this global diaspora, I see three invisible pressures shaping mental wellness—**Performance Pressure, Perfection Projection, and Placelessness.**

**Performance Pressure** drives students to prove their worth in new cultures and online spaces, constantly performing on multiple stages.

**Perfection Projection** hides behind the social-media mask—“I’m thriving”—while silently unraveling inside. It’s image without intimacy, visibility without vulnerability.

**Placelessness** aches at the soul level—belonging nowhere, when passport, platform, and purpose all feel temporary. Home becomes more of a hope than a place.

Together, these forces create what I call *digital displacement*—people connected everywhere but rooted nowhere. The crisis beneath the crisis is not only mental health; it’s the erosion of meaning and belonging.

If every crisis reveals what a culture worships, this one exposes our worship of performance—the belief that our value depends on what we achieve or how many people notice. For international students and young professionals alike, this belief multiplies under family

expectations, cultural transitions, visa limits, and algorithmic validation. It’s easy to be well-known and yet never be known well.

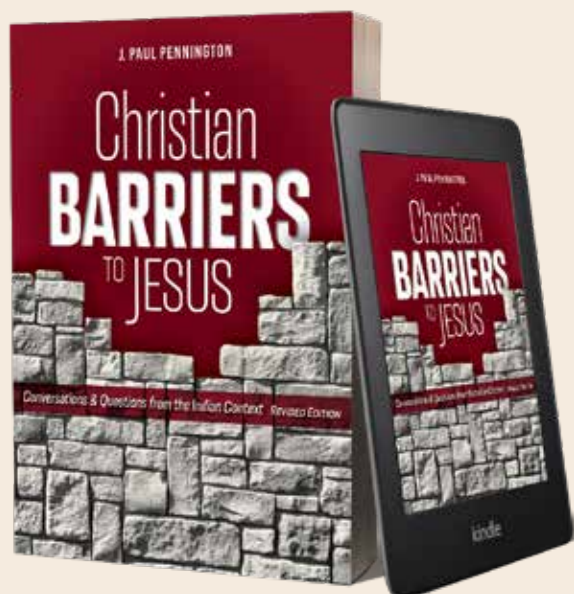
The gospel, however, invites a radical reorientation—from **Performance to Presence to Peace**. God meets us not in what we do, but in who we are. For those far from home, that truth transforms everything: You don’t have to chase belonging; you can finally rest in it. From that presence flows peace—being fully seen and still fully loved.

When the Church embodies this rhythm, it becomes more than an institution—it becomes family. A home where the spiritually displaced and emotionally weary can find rest. A community where international students, skeptics, and seekers alike discover that they don’t have to perform to belong.

The students we serve aren’t a side ministry—they are both the *mission field* and the *future mission force*. They are living proof that God is using the movement of people to move his gospel to the nations.

In a world haunted by religion yet hungry for renewal, this is the witness we must recover: not certainty, but compassion; not dominance, but presence; not performance, but peace. 📖

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# Focusing on Muslim Contexts with a Kingdom Realist Approach

By **JOHN JAY TRAVIS** and **ANNA TRAVIS** Scripture references taken from the NASB.

**John Jay** and **Anna Travis** have been involved in witness in Muslim contexts since the 1980s. Both are graduates of Fuller Theological Seminary where Jay currently teaches as affiliate faculty. The Travises train, teach, and write on contextualization, movements to Jesus, Scripture engagement, and inner healing prayer.

**I**n *Religion for Realists*, Christian sociologist Samuel Perry challenges readers to look at religion with fresh, “realist” eyes. According to Perry’s research, religion is here to stay, religion defines “us” versus “them,” and the actual practice of religion has more flexibility within it than we think. How do these realities relate to Jesus-centered witness in Muslim contexts?

## Religion Is Here to Stay

Perry states that “religion is among the most powerful and pervasive forces in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Those involved in witness with Muslims can attest to its resilience. In most contexts, religious identity is assigned at birth and informs social norms, holidays, rites of passage, dress, diet, education, choice of spouse, child rearing, as well as death and burial rituals.

## Religion Defines “Us” Versus “Them”

Perry notes that belonging to a religious community easily produces a strong sense of “us” versus “them,” along with pressure never to leave the community. Religion, he writes, is about “relation-

ships to in-group and out-group members. Religion is sacralized ‘us-ness.’”<sup>2</sup>

For 25 years we lived in Asian Muslim communities. Neighbors and friends became like aunties and uncles to our children. We shared what we experienced of God through *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah), even praying with these friends. Yet despite this closeness, we always felt the religious divide between us and the rest of the community—especially at funerals.

The body of our deceased neighbor would be wrapped in white and laid on the living room floor as we all paid our respects.

The local religious leader would end the gathering with this message: “Dearly beloved, one day it will be your body lying wrapped in a burial shroud. Therefore, stay true to our religion and don’t die unless you die inside Islam.”

## The Practice of Religion Can Have More Flexibility Within It Than We Think

Perry found that religious affiliation often centers more on belonging to a community than on personal belief or conviction. Virtually all our neighbors were Muslim, yet many held beliefs not officially endorsed by textbook

<sup>1</sup> Perry Samuel L. *Religion for Realists: Why We All Need the Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Perry, 41.



Islam. Engaging in spiritual discussions and healing prayer with them, we came to better understand how they thought and felt. Some described experiencing God's presence; others wondered if God even cares. Some practiced occult or folk traditions. Still others—often through an exploratory Bible study, a healing, or a dream—came to embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior yet did not feel compelled to leave the community where God determined they would be born (Acts 17:26).

What we saw among everyday Muslims was that, within certain boundaries, there was more “wiggle room” than we imagined. Perry observes that on the ground we often see “how malleable and situational theological beliefs end up being.”<sup>3</sup>

The sentiments of Mazhar Mallouhi, Middle Eastern author and devoted Muslim follower of Jesus, are instructive:

I have an emotional attachment to my culture which I imbibed along with my mother's milk... However, although I am born a Muslim, I am not obligated to practice it, nor am I obligated to believe all of it. But the day I reject it outright, I disavow myself of my family, my community, and my people. There are many ways to bring the gospel... and the words I use to describe a life-changing relationship with God through Christ will determine how the community understands and reacts to my journey.<sup>4</sup>

### Biblical Reflections: Faith, the Kingdom of God, and Religion

The operative paradigm of Muslim-Christian interaction has historically been that Muslims wanting to follow Jesus must not only have faith in him and enter the kingdom of God but must change their religious identity as well. Biblical reflection on religion, faith and the kingdom of God, however, may point the way to another paradigm, one which could be good news to Muslims who want to follow God

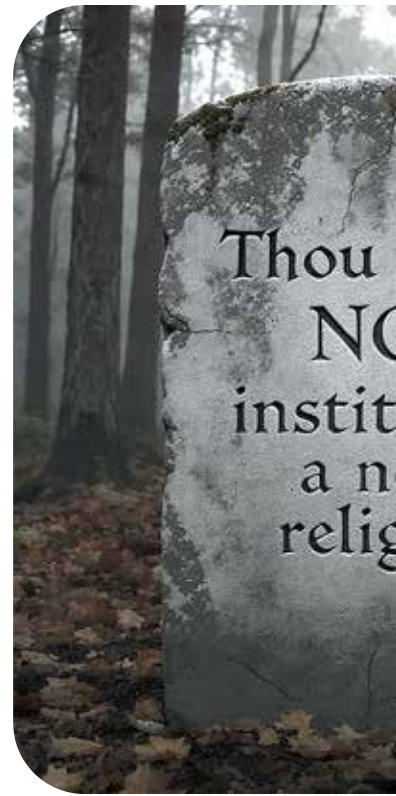
through Jesus but also long to honor the family, culture, and community of their birth.

Jesus called people to follow him, put their faith in God through him, and live in the kingdom of God. His words about religion were few—he pointed instead to a kingdom not of this world (John 18:36). Yet the people of this kingdom remain in the world (John 17:15–16) and pray for it to come to the world (Matt 6:10). This kingdom is above and beyond religion—*neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*—centered not in Samaritan religion or Jewish religion, but in this kingdom where God who is Spirit, is worshipped in Spirit and truth (John 4:21–24).

After God raised him from the dead, Jesus spent forty days with his followers. There is no mention of establishing a new religion with structure and tenets—only Jesus instructing them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1–3).

**After God raised him from the dead, Jesus spent forty days with his followers. There is no mention of establishing a new religion with structure and tenets—only Jesus instructing them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1–3).**

Jesus called Paul to follow him and sent him “far away to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21). Gentiles were outside the Jewish religion and in religions of their own, where the emperor was worshipped and circumcision was forbidden. The Jews, the people of God, were “the Circumcision;” non-Jews were “the Uncircumcision”—religious identity was clear. Yet Paul, following in the way of Jesus, declared that religious identity, Circumcision or Uncircumcision,



<sup>3</sup> Perry, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Mazhar Mallouhi, “Comments on the Insider Movement,” in *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus Within Diverse Religious Communities*, eds. Harley Talman and John J. Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 111.



means nothing. Instead, it is the kingdom of God (Acts 28:31), where God is the God of people in both religious identities (Rom 3:29–30), and God is worshipped in Spirit (Phil 3:3) just as Jesus declared to the Samaritan woman. Though religious identity differs, those in Christ have access in one Spirit to God (Eph 2:18) and are one new humanity (Eph 2:15).

If religious identity counts for nothing, what does count? A new creation—a new humanity—is everything (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). Obeying God's commandments is what matters (1 Cor 7:19; Acts 10:34–35). The only thing

that counts is faith working through love (Gal 5:6)—kingdom yeast working through batches of dough, though hidden at first (Matt 13:33).

In *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, mission theologian David Bosch wrote, “I have suggested that Jesus had no intention of founding a new religion.” Rather, “the community around Jesus was to function as a community for the sake of all others... Never, however, was this community to sever itself from the others.”<sup>5</sup> Bosch adds that Jesus gave his followers no religious name, specialized language, distinctive clothing, or geographical center. Sadly, “in the course of time the Jesus community simply became a new religion, Christianity, a new principle of division among humankind. And so it has remained to this day.”<sup>6</sup>

What if God sees the peoples of the world, in their various groups and religious identities, like batches of dough, into which the yeast of the kingdom must be worked so the whole lump rises and is transformed? Could it be that people in groups known as non-

Christian might remain in the religious identity where they were raised (1 Cor 7:17–19), living obediently to God, and putting their faith in Christ? Might the fluidity within religious groups that Perry notes point to a way for kingdom transformation from within? Is it possible that God intentionally causes people to be born into various social and religious identities (Acts 17:26) so that he can show mercy to all (Acts 17:27; Rom 11:32), and that they can remain without compromise (James 1:27) as salt and light (Matt 5:13–16)?

**Sadly, “in the course of time the Jesus community simply became a new religion, Christianity, a new principle of division among humankind. And so it has remained to this day.**

## The Kingdom for Realists in Muslim Contexts

The October 2025 edition of *Mission Frontiers* features “Transformation from Within: Christ-Centered Movements in Muslim Societies” by Steve and Kitty Holloway, where we read accounts of networks or communities of Muslims transformed by Christ who do not adopt foreign religious forms or identities. This theme also appeared in the October 2024 Fuller Theological Seminary missiological lectures honoring Dudley Woodberry, who in his research encountered groups of Muslims following Jesus from within their own religious communities.<sup>7</sup>

One panelist in the lectures, Nursen Ahmed, PhD, a self-described Muslim follower of Jesus, spoke about following Jesus and obeying the Bible while remaining part of the Muslim community. Five principles are discernable in his lecture: regeneration, remaining, reinterpreting, rejecting, and retaining.

**Regeneration** (spiritual transformation). Nursen clearly described his transformation in Jesus: “When I accepted Jesus as my Savior and my Lord... Jesus brought me into the new kingdom, the kingdom of God.”

<sup>5</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, 51.

<sup>7</sup> October 2024 Fuller Theological Seminary missiological lectures honoring Dudley Woodberry. A complete version of this lecture will be published, ed. Jose Abraham.



**Remaining.** Even as he follows Jesus and holds beliefs differing from most fellow Muslims, Nursen still self-identifies as Muslim, “a Muslim who follows Jesus.”

**Reinterpreting.** He reinterprets certain Muslim practices, such as ritual prayer:

The ritual of bowing in prayer (salat) is found in the Bible in Nehemiah 8:5–6. However, my understanding of prayer is a little bit different from that of many Muslims. For me, prayer is not limited to just five times per day. For me, the salat prayer is meant to be a time to connect with God. However, this connection with God should not just be during the five prayer times. Our connection with the living God should be 24 hours per day.

**May God cause increasing numbers of Muslims to enter his kingdom—as Nursen Ahmed, Mazhar Mallouhi, and those described by the Holloways have—without rejecting the family, community, culture, and religious identity of their birth.**

**Rejecting.** Nursen also points out religious and cultural beliefs and practices that he personally rejects. For example, most Muslims teach that the holy books of the Jews and Christians (i.e., the Old and New Testament, that is, *Taurat, Zabur and Injil*) have been corrupted over the centuries. Nursen however rejects this common Muslim belief. He stated:


So how do I follow Jesus and his teaching? For me, it is primarily through studying and following the words of Jesus in the Bible. Because I don’t believe the Bible has been corrupted or changed over time, I am convinced it is authoritative and is an accurate guide for our lives.

He also rejects folk practices involving demons or the occult. He knows that Islam officially rejects these practices also, yet when he was younger, he was involved in many of them. He stated:

That’s why when I accepted Jesus as my Savior and my Lord, I needed deliverance ministry. Evil spirits were attached to me, and influenced me spiritually, mentally and physically... but when I believed in Jesus, Jesus brought me into the new kingdom, the kingdom of God. I experienced wonderful freedom.

**Retaining.** Nursen retains Muslim practices he sees as biblically affirmed, such as fasting (*sawm*) and giving to the poor (*zakat*), noting their parallels in Scripture. He continues to perform the regular prayers but rejects or reinterprets any aspect not aligned with the Bible.

## Conclusion

Perry’s research shows that religion primarily defines “bonds of community rather than what people in those communities believe.”<sup>8</sup> Field accounts from the Holloways’ article show that Jesus-centered groups are multiplying within Muslim communities. Scripture shows that it is not religious identity that counts, but rather faith expressed through love in the kingdom of God. Therefore, let us gladly welcome expressions of biblical faith that do not require Muslims to change their religious identity to follow Jesus. The five-fold pattern of regeneration, remaining, reinterpreting, rejecting and retaining, seen in the testimony of Nursen, shows the way Muslims can remain in their community, experience transformation and stay biblically focused. May God cause increasing numbers of Muslims to enter his kingdom—as Nursen Ahmed, Mazhar Mallouhi, and those described by the Holloways have—without rejecting the family, community, culture, and religious identity of their birth. 

<sup>8</sup> Perry (2024), 44.

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# Rethinking Syncretism

## Focusing on Buddhist Contexts

By **CLAIRE TC CHONG**

**Claire TC Chong** (PhD OCMS) lived in Cambodia for 15 years. She is presently a research and training associate with the Singapore Center for Global Missions and a research tutor for Fuller Seminary's Doctor of Global Leadership program.

Are not the observers quickest to slap the label 'syncretic' on phenomena precisely those who are least interested in capturing 'the native's point of view?'

—David N. Gellner<sup>1</sup>

**R**ethinking syncretism is not about condoning multiple allegiances, in which one worships Christ and another god. Rather, it calls for a critical reflection on the paradigms through which we evaluate phenomena labelled as syncretistic. In this article, *syncretic* is used neutrally to describe the synthesis of divergent cultural elements to generate hybrid forms, whereas *syncretistic* carries a pejorative connotation, implying disapproval of such mixing. Here, I employ *syncretistic* specifically to denote a condition of the heart, in which one's faith and devotion to Christ is divided. This article examines syncretic expressions that have been deemed as syncretistic, submitting that misjudgments not only hinder in-depth understanding of another's culture but also undermine Christian witness.

Consider the two portraits on the right.<sup>2</sup> What do you think of the abstract piece?

If we were to assess it using Leonardo da Vinci's artistic techniques, we might consider the former as substandard—lacking proportion, three-dimensionality, and lifelikeness. However, such a judgment tells us more about the evaluative framework of the observer than the artwork itself. How we appraise depends on the parameters we use.

<sup>1</sup> David N. Gellner, "For Syncretism: The Position of Buddhism in Nepal and Japan Compared," *Social Anthropology* 5, no.3 (1997): 277–291.

<sup>2</sup> Pictures are taken from Wikimedia Commons: The abstract painting is by Dagaw, accessible at: [commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Category:Portrait\\_paintings&filefrom=Sir+John+Evelyn+of+Wotton+2nd+Bt+MP.jpg#/media/File:Sjalvportratt\\_2014.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Category:Portrait_paintings&filefrom=Sir+John+Evelyn+of+Wotton+2nd+Bt+MP.jpg#/media/File:Sjalvportratt_2014.jpg). Mona Lisa is accessible at: [upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6a/Mona\\_Lisa.jpg/1354px-Mona\\_Lisa.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6a/Mona_Lisa.jpg/1354px-Mona_Lisa.jpg)



Now, consider these religious phenomena on the right.<sup>3</sup> What do you think of them?

Many Westernized<sup>4</sup> outside observers have described such mixing of religious elements as syncretistic. This assessment presupposes a definition of religion as a pristine and mutually exclusive system of beliefs and practices, and that intermingling from different religions amounts to corruption and illegitimacy. However, as repeatedly noted by various anthropologists,<sup>5</sup> the adherents themselves do not self-consciously draw boundaries between traditions nor see their practice as improper. Does this mean that the local people have a lapse of rationality? Or, does the dissonance point to a different logic and conceptual framework of “religion?” Employing a social science methodology, Samuel Perry contends in *Religion for Realists* that the conception of religion is not monolithic. Here, I focus on Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism as a “religion” and show how an emic (internal) frame of reference can produce a less disparaging view of another culture’s way of life.

## Religion: A Contested Category

Indeed, several anthropologists who have studied non-Western societies, have maintained that religion is an “essentially contested category.”<sup>6</sup> Let me explain this by way of an analogy.

What is a tomato—a vegetable or a fruit? According to scientific classification, tomatoes are fruit because they grow out of flowers and have seeds. However, they are legally classified as a vegetable in the USA. In 1893, the US government had imposed a tariff on imported vegetables, but a certain importer argued that tomatoes are fruit and refused to pay the taxes. However, the Supreme Court ruled against him, explaining that tomatoes may be fruit in the textbooks but in everyday culinary practices, they are consumed as a vegetable. So, is tomato a vegetable or fruit? It really depends on who decides. Tomato is thus an essentially contested category.

Similarly, what is religion? It really depends on who decides what the defining parameters are.

In modern Western societies, religion is a discrete, coherent system of hermeneutically derived doctrinal beliefs and scripturally aligned



Harihara, a fused image of Shiva and Vishnu



A ritual with Buddhist & Brahmanical elements



Iconography of a Buddhist bodhisattva surrounded by Hindu deities

3 Pictures are taken from Wikimedia Commons: Harihara is accessible at [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vishnu\\_and\\_Shiva\\_in\\_a\\_combined\\_form,\\_as\\_%22Harihara,%22.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vishnu_and_Shiva_in_a_combined_form,_as_%22Harihara,%22.jpg). The monk's blessing is accessible at: [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ban\\_Huahat05.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ban_Huahat05.jpg). The Golden Window is accessible at: [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Golden\\_window,\\_Patan\\_Museum,\\_Patan\\_Durbar\\_Square1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Golden_window,_Patan_Museum,_Patan_Durbar_Square1.jpg).

4 This term does not refer to just Westerners but includes non-Westerners who have been largely influenced by the European Enlightenment intellectual tradition through education and media.

5 e.g. Richard F. Gombrich, “Sinhalese Buddhism—Orthodox or Syncretistic?” in *Buddhist Precept and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 47–66; McGovern, Robert. *Holy Things: The Genealogy of the Sacred in Thai Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

6 W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955): 167–198.



practices. This historical construct emerged out of the departure from Roman Catholicism during the Reformation and a struggle against secularist rationality during the European Enlightenment. The separation of Church and State, which grew out of the secularization movement, was particularly expedient for the colonial enterprise to displace the traditional power structures of their colonies. Relegating religions as personal faiths in private worlds dismantled the indigenous relationship between religion and statecraft.

However, in non-Western civilizations, religion was not even a word in pre-colonial vocabularies; the words for religion in different Asian languages today are borrowed and modified or neologized. In Khmer, *sasna* in an 1878 dictionary was interchangeably translated into French as religion or race. Etymologically, it is derived from the Pali word *sāsana* which refers to the teachings—in this case of the Buddha—to be practiced, which form distinct characteristics of a race. In Myanmar, *batha*, which is derived from the Pali word *bhāsā*, meaning language or academic subject, was extended to refer to religion during the British rule. In Sinhalese, *agama* originally referred to things that were passed down through many generations, such as traditions or sacred texts. In Chinese and Japanese, the terms *zong jiao* and *shokyu* were neologized because of the need to compose Memorandums of Understanding with Westerners. Before the encounter with the West, religion was not dichotomized from the life of a society. A people's way of existence is based on sacred wisdom—traditional knowledge including “religious” teachings—passed down through generations. Life and society are inherently religious.

This non-dualistic understanding of a religious socio-political life was challenged during the colonial period when the British and French powers and American expansionists sought to modernize Burma, Indochine, and Siam through Western secularist ideologies. The local people, however, rejected such impositions. Instead, they turned to the *sāsana* and drew on its wisdom as a resource to rearticulate their identities, assert cultural sovereignty, and envision a religiously imbued, modern “nation-state.”<sup>7</sup> The colonial encounter awakened a distinct Buddhist consciousness, and Buddhist nationalism arose as

a resisting force against Western hegemony. Unlike the Western construct of religion, which emerged from internal conflict, the Theravada Southeast Asian conception of religion was forged in the struggle against external domination. The relationship between religion, culture, identity, and polity, which already existed in the pre-colonial era, became cemented.

This construal of “religion” is thus situated largely within the social domain, intimately intertwined with tradition, community, belonging, and identity, rather than scriptural texts and doctrinal beliefs. As the eminent Buddhist scholar, Richard Gombrich, comments, the Buddhism that was imagined by foreign academics intrigued by Pali texts is but a philosophical abstraction; lived Buddhism, by contrast, is a matter of group loyalty and national interest—“the social allegiance appears to be the true determinant of action and the religious language to be an obfuscation, the question of orthodoxy or orthopraxy a mere epiphenomenon [i.e. secondary by-product].”<sup>8</sup>

This analysis concurs with some dimensions of Perry's characterization of religion in reality. In Theravada Southeast Asia, religion does not primarily revolve around trans-national doctrinal beliefs but localized identities and belonging; it is not so much a personal faith as public practice; its locus does not lie in texts and the cognitive mind but in relational practices and inter-acting bodies.

This raises a crucial question: With differing conceptions of religion, whose framework do we use when examining other cultures' practices of life?

## Re-examining Religious Blending Through a Non-Dualistic Paradigm

When Westernized observers encounter religious practices composed of seemingly disparate elements from different traditions, we instinctively label them as syncretistic. Such judgments presuppose the existence of “pure” faiths, without realizing that Christianity itself is profoundly syncretic, with associations to many pagan practices.<sup>9</sup> The very concept of “world religions,” formulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emerged largely

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the geopolitical notion of “nation-states” had not existed prior to the colonial era, as ancient mandala polities were envisioned as a conglomeration of shifting kingdoms affiliated through tributary practices.

<sup>8</sup> Gombrich, Richard F. *Buddhist Precept and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 59; Gombrich, Richard F. *Theravada Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 15.

<sup>9</sup> e.g., Viola, Frank and George Barna. *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010).

from academic abstractions from texts rather than lived practices. This codification of religions reflects the broader scientific penchant for classification—differentiating things according to select criteria and grouping them within rigid boundaries. When this caricatured framework of religion is employed to analyze lived realities, numerous expressions fail to fit the textual mold—much like forcing a square peg into a round hole. Practices that do not align neatly are then dismissed as aberrations. Yet, if we adjust our lens and examine the same phenomena through different logics, the picture changes—like viewing stereograms through a different optical vergence. In the following paragraphs, I suggest how religious blending may be reinterpreted through a different paradigm.

As Shaw and Stewart have seminally shown, the religiously charged language of syncretism often obscures the socio-political dynamics in which such practices emerge.<sup>10</sup> Their study on the politics of religious synthesis highlights the importance to attend to the power dynamics underlying religious amalgamations and discourses. For example, the Harihara of Cambodia was not so much a blending of two religions as a calculated political strategy.<sup>11</sup> The hybrid Shiva-Vishnu image, which proliferated during the Zhenla period after the collapse of the Funan dynasty, served to unify rival sects and vassal states within a newly consolidated mandala. As religion, ethnicity, and statecraft were deeply entwined, Harihara was an emblem of a new polity. Similarly, the syncretic iconography of Buddhist and Hindu motifs represented “multivalent symbols” that were often deployed to be “all things to all people” in multi-religious contexts.<sup>12</sup> What appears as religious syncretism may in fact be political expediency rather than theological compromise. However, the notion of political expediency carries negative connotations and subtly reinforces the sacred-secular dichotomy—that rulers cunningly manipulate religion for political ends. Within a Buddhist framework, such actions may instead be understood through a non-dualistic moral logic.

In Theravada worlds, the *dhammarāja* or righteous king is guided by an ancient moral code called the

*Dasarajadhamma* (Ten Royal Virtues), which includes *maddava* (being kind and approachable), *ahimsā* (exercising non-violence), and *avirodha* (respecting diverse opinions). From this perspective, “syncretistic” behaviors may be reinterpreted as expressions of inclusiveness and promoting peace. As Peter Van der Veer suggests, syncretism need not signify impurity or heterodoxy but can belong to a discourse on communal harmony.<sup>13</sup> In societies where cohesion and stability are prioritized, doctrinal exclusivity is not the logic that drives and governs action.

Another Buddhist principle—*upaya* (skillfulness or adeptness)—may further reframe “syncretistic” practices. Originally describing the Buddha’s ability to adapt his teachings to his audience’s understanding, *upaya*, in the context of statecraft, refers to how *dhammarājas* skillfully engage with diverse polities—preserving peace and advancing prosperity, without undermining the distinctiveness of respective ethnoreligious communities. As Julia Esteve contends, when a king supports diverse religious establishments or incorporates their sacred wisdom into his governance, these acts do not reflect his personal faith but his impartial and magnanimous support of the diverse populations within his realm.<sup>14</sup> Within this interpretive framework, pluralism rather than syncretism better captures the ethos of these actions.

This Buddhist ethic of inclusivity and skillful discernment extends beyond human relations to the world of spirits. Buddhists routinely make offerings to ancestral, tutelary, and wandering hungry spirits, as well as Hindu deities such as Vishnu or Ganesh. While such acts are deemed as syncretistic from a Western standpoint, practitioners do not self-consciously see themselves as violating their own religious identities. How might we understand this?

In the Buddhist worldview, spirits, humans, and animals all belong to the same “scientific” category called *satta* (sentient beings). Spirits are just another life-form within a unified socio-cosmological universe, who should be treated with common decency,

10 Stewart, Charles and Rosalind Shaw (eds). *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994).

11 Paul A. Lavy, “As in Heaven, So on Earth: The Politics of Visnu, Siva and Harihara Images in Pre-Angkorian Khmer Civilization,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no.1 (2003): 21–39.

12 See footnote 1.

13 Peter Van der Veer, “Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance,” in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds) *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994), 185–199.

14 Julia Esteve, “Gods and Temples: The Nature(s) of Angkorian Religion,” in Mitch Hendrickson, Miriam T. Stark and Damian Evans (eds) *The Angkorian World* (London: Routledge, 2023), 423–434.

respect, and compassion. A person who offers a gift to a territorial guardian is no stranger than one who offers a gift to his village chief in order to seek a favor. To feed a hungry spirit is no stranger than feeding a stray dog—these are acts of compassion. As taught in the *Lovingkindness Sutta*, goodwill is extended to *all* beings (*sabbe satta sukhi hontu*).

**To feed a hungry spirit is no stranger than feeding a stray dog—these are acts of compassion.**


This non-dualistic worldview reshapes the way human-spirit interactions are understood. When Buddhists offer gifts to Hindu deities or tutelary spirits, these acts need not signify faith allegiance, and thus do not necessarily constitute polytheistic worship, in the Christian sense. Unlike the Christian's personal and exclusive relationship with God, the nature of the human-spirit relations in a moral cosmos is discernibly distinct—transactional yet ethical, not as endearing disciples of a deity. A man wishing to clear the shrubs in the backyard to build a shed would respectfully inform the spirits through ritual offerings. A woman visiting Angkor Wat would present flowers and incense before a Vishnu statue to honor his historical role in the Angkor Empire.

Deities and spirits—benevolent or malevolent—are not necessarily worshipped as personal gods; Cambodians do not pledge fidelity to them as Christians do to God. Human-spirit interactions are not framed as monogamous relationships but multivalent patron-client exchanges, akin to patron-client human-human networks. In Khmer, the word *preah* (“god”) is also understood as an adjective referring to a superlative quality.<sup>15</sup> Spirits or “gods” are thus just supranatural beings within a hierarchical cosmology, and are treated accordingly with appropriate decorum. This dynamic does not preclude the possibility of humans forming enduring commitments with particular spirits, which would then be tantamount to idolatry—no less than being consumed by worldly possessions or ambitions. As counterintuitive as this is to monotheist sensibilities, within this holistic *imaginaire* of the universe, enactments of gift-giving and reciprocal exchange are conceived in social rather than religious categories, as gestures of propriety rather than reified acts of sacrifice.

15 e.g. The moon (*preah zhan*) is the brightest light at night, and monks (*preah song*) are the best models of morality.

## More Robust Critique of “Syncretism”

This article is written from an anthropological perspective, offering a more nuanced and compassionate view of other peoples' ways of life through emic paradigms. Paul Hiebert, renowned for his work on critical contextualization, recommends us, first of all, to study local cultures phenomenologically. Central to the philosophical school of phenomenology is the reflexive examination of our assumptions and biases and the empathic understanding of cultural phenomena through indigenous logics rather than external critique. In this spirit, I have sought to reframe religious assimilations, or what we often call “syncretism,” through an emic conception of lived religion, in which religion and culture as well as earthly and cosmological worlds form a seamless whole. Instead of viewing religions as competitive systems, they might be considered as sacred wisdoms of civilizations, bearing traces of God's image and truth. Rather than dismissing mixtures as incoherent and illegitimate, they might be moral expressions of magnanimity, harmony, and astuteness. Additionally, reading cultural phenomena through indigenous paradigms may help remedy what Hiebert calls “the flaw of the excluded middle”—a cognitive gap prevalent among people with a “two-tiered view of reality” who dichotomize reality into rigidly separated spheres.<sup>16</sup>

Understandably, for those shaped by monotheistic and European Enlightenment traditions, any sympathetic analysis of “syncretism” naturally provokes uneasiness.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, this essay is not intended to compromise the gospel's integrity. On the contrary, it seeks to enhance Christian witness by remedying our disparaging views of others and abrasive mission approaches, that are increasingly problematic in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, which is multipolar and intercultural. By reflexively examining the interpretive frameworks we use to study other cultures, we may cultivate a more nuanced and in-depth understanding, as well as a more respectful and compassionate response toward non-Christian religious cultures. The abstract portrait is a work of Pablo Picasso, which was sold for \$103.4 million at Christie's auction.<sup>18</sup> 

16 Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” *Missiology* 10, no.1 (1982): 35–47.

17 Tippett, Alan R. *Slippery Paths in the Darkness: Papers of Syncretism: 1965–1988* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2014).

18 [economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/picassos-painting-of-french-lover-sells-for-over-100-mn-at-auction/articleshow/82653745.cms?from=mdr](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/picassos-painting-of-french-lover-sells-for-over-100-mn-at-auction/articleshow/82653745.cms?from=mdr).





# 24:14

## Misconceptions about Disciple Making Movements

By **Rev. SHODANKEH JOHNSON**

**Shodankeh Johnson** is the leader of New Harvest Global Ministries in Sierra Leone. He is also a senior team member of New Generations and has been an active DMM practitioner for the past 30 years.

**D**uring 30 years of walking with the Lord in the work of disciple making movements (DMM), I've heard many questions, concerns, and criticisms. Some are sincere and many are rooted in misunderstanding. All of them deserve a thoughtful response.

DMM is not a new technique. It's a return to the ancient, Spirit-led pattern of Jesus—multiplying obedient disciples who make more disciples, forming churches that multiply churches. Yet, because it challenges traditional paradigms, DMM often arouses misconceptions. I would like to address a few of the most common ones I've encountered.

**1 DMM only works in rural areas.**  
This is simply not true. While many movements have emerged in rural settings, we've seen powerful breakthroughs in urban centers, refugee camps, universities, and even digital spaces. The principles of DMM—prayer, obedience, and relational discipleship—are not location-bound. They work wherever people are hungry for truth and willing to obey Jesus.



**2 DMM is simple.**  
DMM may look simple on the surface, but it is not easy. It requires deep prayer, strategic planning, team building, and spiritual endurance. We've labored through setbacks, persecution, and spiritual warfare. Movements don't happen by accident; they are birthed through sacrifice and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

**3 DMM lacks structure & leadership depth.**  
Every movement develops its own organic structure. We train leaders, build coaching systems, and create accountability pathways. Our goal is not to replicate Western models but to raise up ordinary people—fishermen, farmers, students—who lead with humility and power. DMM leadership is deep, decentralized, and Spirit-formed.

## 4 DMM only works in Africa & Asia.

God is not limited by geography. I've seen movements emerge in Europe, North America, and Latin America. Some are quiet because of security concerns, but they are real. Jesus said in Matthew 19:26, "With God all things are possible." Wherever his people obey, he moves. While security prevents wide advertisement of many movements' locations, we have evidence of God bringing movements in every part of the world, as can be seen at <https://2414now.net/resources/>.

## 5 DMM is opposed to legacy churches.

On the contrary, we honor the legacy church. Many of our movements have grown through partnerships with existing churches that are willing to embrace flexibility and mission. DMM is not anti-church—it's pro-Great Commission. We work best when legacy churches become catalytic hubs for multiplication.

## 6 DMM exaggerates its results.

We've heard this accusation before. But we've also seen thousands of lives transformed—drug addicts set free, families restored, communities changed. Our reporting is conservative, verified, and rooted in field realities. If anything, we underreport to protect the work. The fruit is real. The glory belongs to God.

## 7 DMM lacks theological depth.

If depth means seminary degrees, then yes—many of our leaders don't have them. But if depth means knowing Jesus, obeying his Word, and making disciples who multiply, then DMM is rich in theology. A quick look through the New Testament shows that God does not require formal theological education in a classroom to bring theological depth and spiritual maturity. DMM employs non-formal, hands-on, ongoing training on the job. We train continuously, using the Bible as our primary curriculum. Our leaders may not wear robes, but they carry fire.

## 8 DMM is against church buildings.


We're not against buildings. We're against dependency on buildings. Movements thrive when disciples can gather anywhere—under trees, in homes, in marketplaces. Buildings can serve the mission, but they must never define it. We want to major in the major things (loving the lost and discipling them to faith) and minor in minor things (including buildings). Our focus is on people, not property.

## 9 DMM excludes professionals.

Not at all. We welcome professionals—doctors, lawyers, teachers—if they're willing to embrace the simplicity of the kingdom. The challenge is not their credentials but their mindset. When professionals humble themselves, they become powerful disciple-makers. We've seen it again and again.

## Final Thoughts

DMM is not a trend. It's a Spirit-led return to the New Testament. It's messy, beautiful, and powerful. We don't claim perfection. We claim obedience. Our desire is to see Jesus worshiped everywhere—by everyone—through multiplying disciples who love him and live for him.

If you've misunderstood DMM, I invite you to take a closer look. Not at the model but at the fruit. God is moving. The harvest is ripe. And the time is now. 



# Accountability to the Cause

By **GREG H. PARSONS** | All scripture references from the NASB 2020, unless noted.

**Greg H. Parsons** and his wife have been on staff with Frontier Ventures since 1982. They live in Southern California.

About five years ago, I received an email invitation to join a heart study with Johnson & Johnson and Apple. After making sure it was legit, I signed up and received a watch as part of the study. I agreed to give them tracking data on my heart and health. In turn, they gave me things to read about heart health and goals for exercise, rest, eating... you get the idea. Those little activity circles on my new watch became part of my daily routine. I was rewarded when I moved or exercised or was otherwise involved in activity (not sitting at a computer like I am now!). Thankfully, I had already been very regular in exercise. But having the watch to track my efforts helped make me more consistent. Now friends can track with me on Strava also (you can follow me there too!).

Our motives and motivations in missions are many and varied. Why do we pursue *this* and not *that* makes this a crucial part of our lives to ponder and evaluate. We have all found times when we did not accomplish all of what we believed the Lord wanted of us. Yet, he is patient, loving, and provides grace abundantly. Thankfully, he puts *people* and *resources* into our lives to help, like my watch is for exercise.

What are the routines of your life related to missions? How can you be more accountable to them? Like you, I want to be consistent in my prayer for the world. I want to help others catch a vision for the spread of the kingdom. I desire people to better understand how to more effectively share Jesus with the unreached. Yet, I know I have lots of other areas in my ministry and life to prioritize, which means one can push out another. My hope for you is that the ones which get pushed out are not *always* those that relate to the spread of the gospel. That can happen easily because 1) for most of us, they are beyond our day-to-day view of the world, and 2) the enemy of our souls doesn't want us to give attention to such things.

The alarm on my phone and watch reminds me to pray at 8:38 am each day. (See Matthew 8:38 for what I am

praying!). In 1981, we created the *Global Prayer Digest* (now part of each *MF* issue), which provides fuel for our daily missions prayer. It takes discipline and time to develop as a pattern. The Unreached Peoples of the Day app helps me do that. For many, it helps to build these into lives through relationships. Relationships with the lost around us and with believers who need to be mobilized toward involvement.

These goals are best accomplished when we have others who can check up on us and us on them. These are the people who give us permission to ask how it is going, as we do the same with them.

When I was working on my PhD, an older man in our church would often ask me how I was coming along. It helped motivate me to keep making progress. A very good friend and I often reflect on ideas together, and I bounce important decisions off of him and others. As an elder at my local church and one of the older mission leaders at events around the world, others ask me for advice on connections with others in missions. Just two weeks ago, I was with one of the global mission leaders I mentor, who told me a practical life suggestion I made a year ago had impacted his perspective. He created new habits in that area of discipline and was thankful for my words.

As readers of *MF*, you are already involved in global missions in many ways. Perhaps the best question for you to ponder is: *Who can you help to further engage in our world?* Consider how God has prepared and gifted you to fit into his kingdom service. Are there resources that might help? Perhaps it is related to prayer or learning from someone of a different culture. Perhaps it is related to giving of your time, gifts, and resources.

Finally, is there someone in your life who encourages you in your goals and challenges you when you don't measure up? Are you doing that for others? ■■



# Unfiltered: De-Influencing Our Picture of Life on the Field

By **IRENE SPRINGFIELD** (Pseudonym)

**Irene Springfield** and her husband have been field workers in North Africa since 2018 and team leaders since 2022. Their ministry is focused on sharing the gospel with high-identity Muslims. They have three children.

There's a trend on social media where people give you an "unfiltered" tour of their houses, revealing baskets piled with laundry and sinks stacked with dirty dishes. It's a response to years of Internet "influencers" displaying sparkling clean homes with Pinterest-perfect decor, leaving the rest of us feeling like lazy slob.

Some people call it "de-influencing." We watch them and say, "Oh good, it's not just me!" And we give ourselves permission to relax a little. In the same way, I'd like to pull back the curtain on my life as a field worker and dispel some commonly held myths about missionaries.



## Misconception #1: Missionaries Are Fearless

This one came up a lot for me when we first moved overseas. Friends would say, "You're so *brave* for moving overseas. I could *never* do that."

It's true there are a handful of things I'm *not* afraid of that make me more suited than the average person to move abroad: flying, strange food, talking to strangers, large insects. (OK, I lied. I'm terrified of cockroaches.)

But there is a *long* list of things I am afraid of that challenge my trust in the Lord every day: being detained by the authorities, traumatizing my kids, and having to return home without having experienced "success" are some of them.

Moving to the field does not mean I am fearless. It means I took one big leap of faith followed by many small daily steps of faith.

## Misconception #2: Missionaries Are Super Christians

When I picture the ideal missionary woman, I imagine someone who rises before dawn to pray, eagerly commits to multi-day fasts, and organizes all-night prayer sessions.

While I have participated in all those activities at times, my current daily routine looks more like this: attempt to wake up before my kids to read and pray, but get interrupted by my kindergartner who needs help in the bathroom and then needs to tell me a *very* long story about robots. Participating in any of the other above listed activities requires both personal pep talks and major scheduling gymnastics.

Moral of the story: We all need to give ourselves grace for the season we're in! Just as my time with friends looked different when my kids were toddlers than it does now, my time with the Lord has looked different in every season of my life.

## Misconception #3: Missionaries Are Fluent in the Local Language—and So Are Their Kids

If I had a dollar for every time someone said, "Kids are like sponges. They learn so fast!" I could afford a subscription to Super Duolingo. And it's true, they do learn quickly—

but not as quickly as I expected. Within a year of moving to our new country, my oldest could carry on a basic conversation, but that has more to do with her outgoing personality than anything else. My middle child is an introvert. It took years before he was comfortable sharing his thoughts and feelings with locals.

As for us adults, while we were able to engage in basic conversations pretty quickly, reaching “fluency” has been a long, slow journey. After eight years on the field, we still haven’t arrived! In the early days, we learned quickly because we were able to spend a lot of time studying. But as our responsibilities increased, there was less time available for studying. We’ve come to accept that fluency is a lifelong pursuit, and we’re able to focus on it more in some seasons than in others.



#### **Misconception #4: Missionaries Spend Most of Their Time Sharing the Gospel**

Coming from a culture that values productivity and time management, this one is the most painful for me to admit. If I were to make a pie chart of all the hours and activities in my typical week, the biggest piece would be dedicated to taking care of my family and my house. This slice is even bigger than it would be if I were in the US because so many tasks take longer than they do back home. Even the hours of my week that are dedicated to “ministry” are carved up with team meetings, training, and administrative tasks.

Don’t get me wrong. These are all good and meaningful things. But it’s taken time for me to perceive them as contributing to our vision rather than taking away from it. I think the most important lesson I’m learning right now is that faithfulness matters just as much—if not more—than fruitfulness. My job is to pursue the Lord’s calling on my life with as much grace and humility as I can manage. Whether or not my faithfulness will lead to fruitfulness is in God’s hands.



#### **Now What?**

Now that we’ve busted some myths, how do we move forward? I think one of the most important questions we can ask is: “Who is God calling me to be in this season of my life?” If you are feeling pulled towards the field, but you’re afraid you won’t be able to live up to the picture in your head of the “perfect missionary,” I’m here to tell you that there’s no such person! Move ahead in confidence that God will equip you with all you need to do what he’s calling you to do.

If you are on the field and wondering if anyone else is struggling to juggle all the responsibilities and expectations (real or imagined) of missionary life, I hope you hear 1) You are not alone, and 2) It might be OK to put some of those things down, even if it’s just for a time.

Take a deep breath. Relax a little. My sink is full of dirty dishes, too.

Just watch out for cockroaches. 🦋

# The Unreached Within Our Reach

By **ROME WILLIAMS** Scripture references are taken from the NIV.

**Rome Williams** is a graduate student at Wheaton College, holding a BA in Theology and Communication. He writes and speaks on next generation leadership and the relevance of faith. Find him at [romewmacy@gmail.com](mailto:romewmacy@gmail.com).

I don't know about you, but asking others to care about missions can feel like pulling teeth. It isn't uncommon that I catch a flash of fear—or guilt—in a friend's eyes when I ask if they've considered serving God overseas. As a writer and speaker, I'm used to making asks, calling audiences to action, or inviting them to adopt a different perspective. And there's a pattern here that I've noticed: the bigger the ask, the stronger the resistance. A life on mission is a significant commitment, and persuading others to even consider that God could be calling them into it has been an uphill climb. But what if missions wasn't as big of an ask as it may seem?

## Attitudes Toward Missions

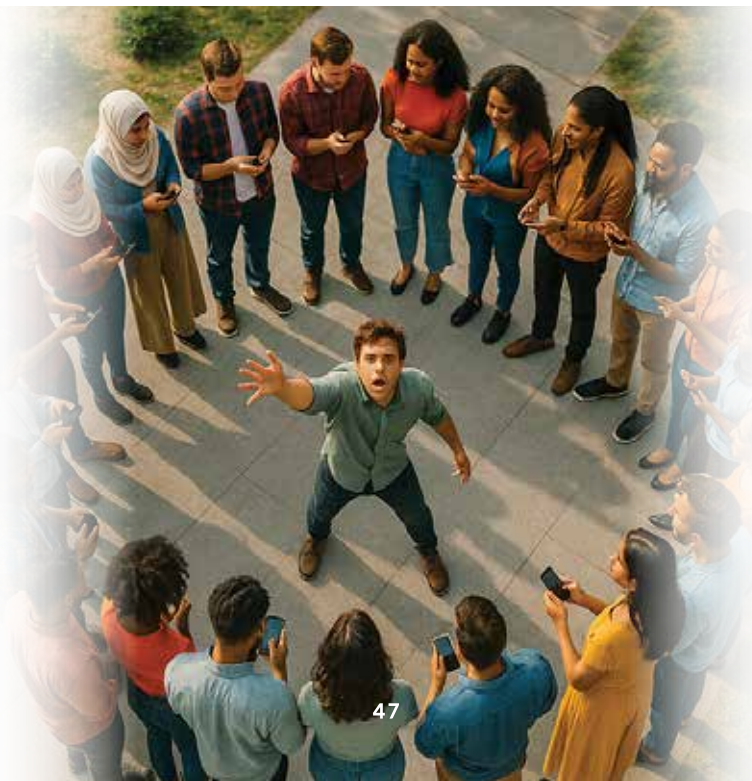
The first question to answer when advocating for missions in any form is the question of need: Is missions necessary? Readers of a missions magazine such as this one probably don't need convincing, but in case you're on the fence, there are around 3.5 billion people who haven't heard the gospel yet—about 42% of the world's population.<sup>1</sup> As Jesus said, “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Matt 9:37). I don't think many of us are unaware of this need, but there's plenty of contention surrounding who should be sent and how these peoples should be reached.

A 2020 Barna study found that one in three American Christians believe that missions has been “unethical in the past,” and two in five

that missions has been “tainted by its association with colonialism.” Commenting on these stats, International Mission Board (IMB) President Paul Chitwood observed that “we can no longer expect that future generations of Protestants will inherently engage in missions education and missions action.” Fortunately, that same study found that over half of engaged Christian respondents (defined as churchgoers who participate in their church's ministry) between ages 18 and 34 see themselves as “potential missionaries.”<sup>2</sup> In short, Americans are aware of the need for missions, and are simultaneously hesitant and open to the idea of jumping in.

## Hesitant Behind Missions

Why are we hesitant about the idea of missions? Besides the above associations of missions with harm and colonialism, a study from MissioNexus identified a few primary factors that dissuade people from participating: materialism, global danger, and debt.<sup>3</sup> Materialism here can be associated with the high living standards enjoyed by the average American; global danger with the privileges of general public safety, and healthcare, and policing infrastructure; and debt with the financial instability perceived in missions work.



<sup>2</sup> “Millennial, Gen Z Christians Support Missions—with Reservations.” *Baptist News Global*, October 24, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Thornton, and Judith Thornton. “Why They Don't Go: Surveying the Next Generation of Mission Workers.” *MissioNexus*, April 1, 2008.

<sup>1</sup> Project42. *Stats*. 2025.



Typical articles I've read on the obstacles to missions often explore ways that fears and tensions such as these can be theologized away or otherwise mitigated by robust calls to faith in God over the idols of material and social comfort, physical security, and financial stability. I'm not against these calls to faithfulness, should any of these things become idols in our hearts. But comfort, security, and financial peace aren't necessarily evil either, and I believe that persuasive appeals such as these, while appropriate, miss a vital piece of the puzzle: Overseas missions is costly, and not all of us are in positions to pay that cost. But what if we didn't have to?

## A New Mission

I stumbled onto the concept of diaspora missions purely by accident while volunteering at a missions conference, where I was introduced to the Lausanne Movement's Global Diaspora Network (GDN). For reference, a "diaspora" is "any group of ethnic people that lives outside of their native land."<sup>4</sup> I knew that Lausanne was committed to helping leaders fulfill the Great Commission but hadn't realized that they were committed to reaching more than just the 10/40 window or distant peoples who had never heard the gospel. Diasporas of unreached and unevangelized peoples exist all around the world, and they need the good news just as much as those who still live in far off places. This opened my eyes to a new idea: We don't have to cross the globe to reach the world, because the world has come to us.

The GDN describes this opportunity by observing that in an increasingly global world, "Local congregations are strategically positioned to engage in cross-cultural mission in their immediate neighborhoods."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the mission is the same, but the map has changed. This may be truer in the United States than anywhere else, as we host the world's largest immigrant population—around 52 million people. For reference, Germany, in second place, has an immigrant population of just 17 million.<sup>6</sup> These populations also present many opportunities to engage with unreached peoples, and UPG North America has identified hubs

of over 120 unreached diaspora peoples across the US and Canada, spanning from Afghans in Montreal to Somalis in Columbus to Gujaratis in Dallas.<sup>7</sup> For more information about how you can engage diaspora communities, check out UPG North America's website and find a community near you.

## The Appeal of Diaspora Missions

Working to fulfill the Great Commission amongst diaspora peoples provides the opportunity for impactful cross-cultural missions work in our own communities. It also presents a way to participate in missions while avoiding many of the aforementioned obstacles that make overseas missions a hard ask. My goal here is not to argue how we can overcome common barriers to missions, but to assert that diaspora missions a) does not exacerbate and b) may more easily bypass these barriers than global missions.

**Colonialism and Harm:** In reaching out to immigrants and refugees, there is always the danger that established Americans will seek to "help" others from a position of superiority, assuming a stance reminiscent of historic colonizers. However, immigrants in the US have real needs that we can help with, and any concerns about improper heart postures should not stop us from meeting those needs. For example, 50% of immigrants live below the poverty line, many lack access to adequate food, housing, and health care. And many face a disparity of opportunity due to low English proficiency.<sup>8</sup> These are all needs that the average American Christian can meet in some way, either by providing resources, helping navigate legal bureaucracy, or providing exposure and practice with the English language. While these intentions to help are right and good both in the US and abroad, helping our own cities and towns should in no way raise alarm bells of colonialism or harm, like efforts to evangelize overseas have in the past.

**Materialism:** While we as Christians ought to oppose materialism (the rich young ruler comes to mind), this vice cannot act as an excuse not to pursue domestic missions, as it may with global missions. Because local missions doesn't necessitate moving from one's home

4 Ken Cook, "When the Nations Become Our Neighbors: Understanding Diaspora Missions," *Center for Great Commission Studies*, September 27, 2019.

5 Global Diaspora Network, "Scattered to Gather: Embracing the Global Trend of Diaspora," *Global Diaspora Network*, April 9, 2025.

6 Stephanie Kramer and Jeffrey S. Passel. "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants." *Pew Research Center*, August 21, 2025.

7 UPG North America. *The Unreached People Groups of North America*. n.d.

8 Judith Ballard, Elizabeth Wieling, Carol Solheim, and Linda Dwanyen, "4.2 Access to Necessities," *Immigrant and Refugee Families*, 2nd ed. Open Textbook Library, 2019.

to a new country and culture, this form of fulfilling the Great Commission doesn't even require a sacrifice of material comforts in the mission pursuit.

**Global Danger:** Environments in diaspora missions are the same environments where we live, work, and play in our home countries. Like any place, some areas may be more dangerous than others, but access to dependable police and hospital services are not a concern as they may be in global contexts. The ability to participate in diaspora missions while living at home also means that no danger is presented to our families that wouldn't already be present in our everyday lives.

**Debt:** Local cross-cultural work doesn't require either support raising or sacrificing a salary to pursue, so debt should not be a barrier to serving in this capacity.

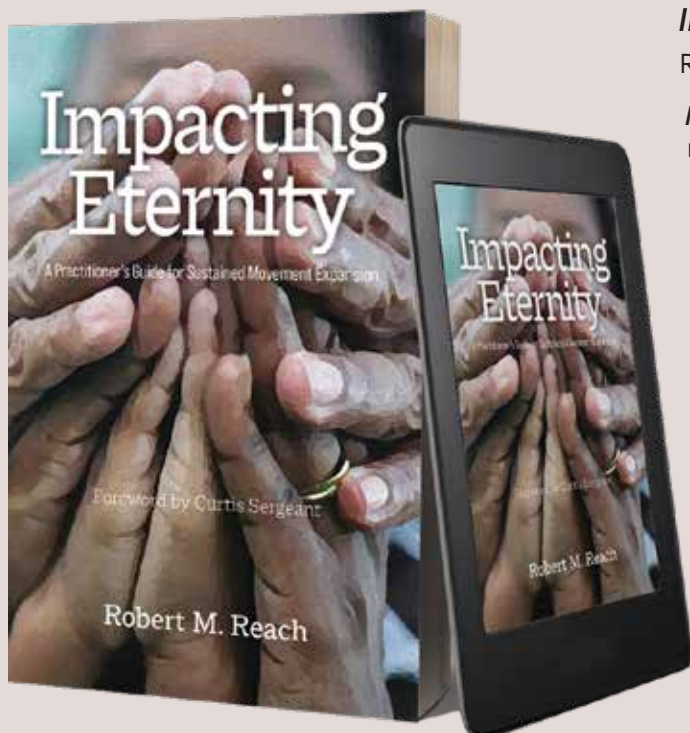
### Living Missions

Before concluding, I'd like to address a reaction some of you may have had while reading these responses—that although I've identified why people hesitate to consider or go into full-time overseas missions, rather than

advocate for costly obedience or explain why missions is worth sacrificing for, I've outlined an "easy way out." I disagree, and would hazard that diaspora missions may be *more* costly than traditional overseas missions. There are a thousand reasons besides the few I listed above for not going into global missions, many of them valid, good, and faithful. I can understand why we wouldn't want to pay the cost of moving overseas, but I can find no excuse not to invest in loving our neighbors.

In the end, it's impossible to adequately discuss the challenges of calling believers into cross-cultural foreign missions, the obstacles that potential missionaries face, and the opportunities of diaspora missions in one article. I hope that these ideas will start new conversations, and open new doors to obedience to God in our own communities, mirroring Isaiah as he declared, "Here I am. Send me!" (Isa 6:8). The command to go and make disciples of all nations remains the same—only now the nations have come to us. I pray we will be given the eyes to see and the willingness to seek the unreached within our reach, to be sent to the nations next door. 📖

## LEARN MORE



### Impacting Eternity

Robert M. Reach with Foreword by Curtis Sergeant

*Impacting Eternity* builds on multi-dimensional research performed over a period of years. Its findings have been refined in practice within three different movements that the author helped to facilitate. Robert Reach gives seven concrete, root principles that bear kingdom fruit. This is not merely information that might work; it has proven effective in the trenches of movement life resulting in miraculous growth. Reach has found that his 5-5-5 methodology is very effective, but instead of promoting it, he helps readers think about the underlying leadership dynamics that spark and sustain a movement.

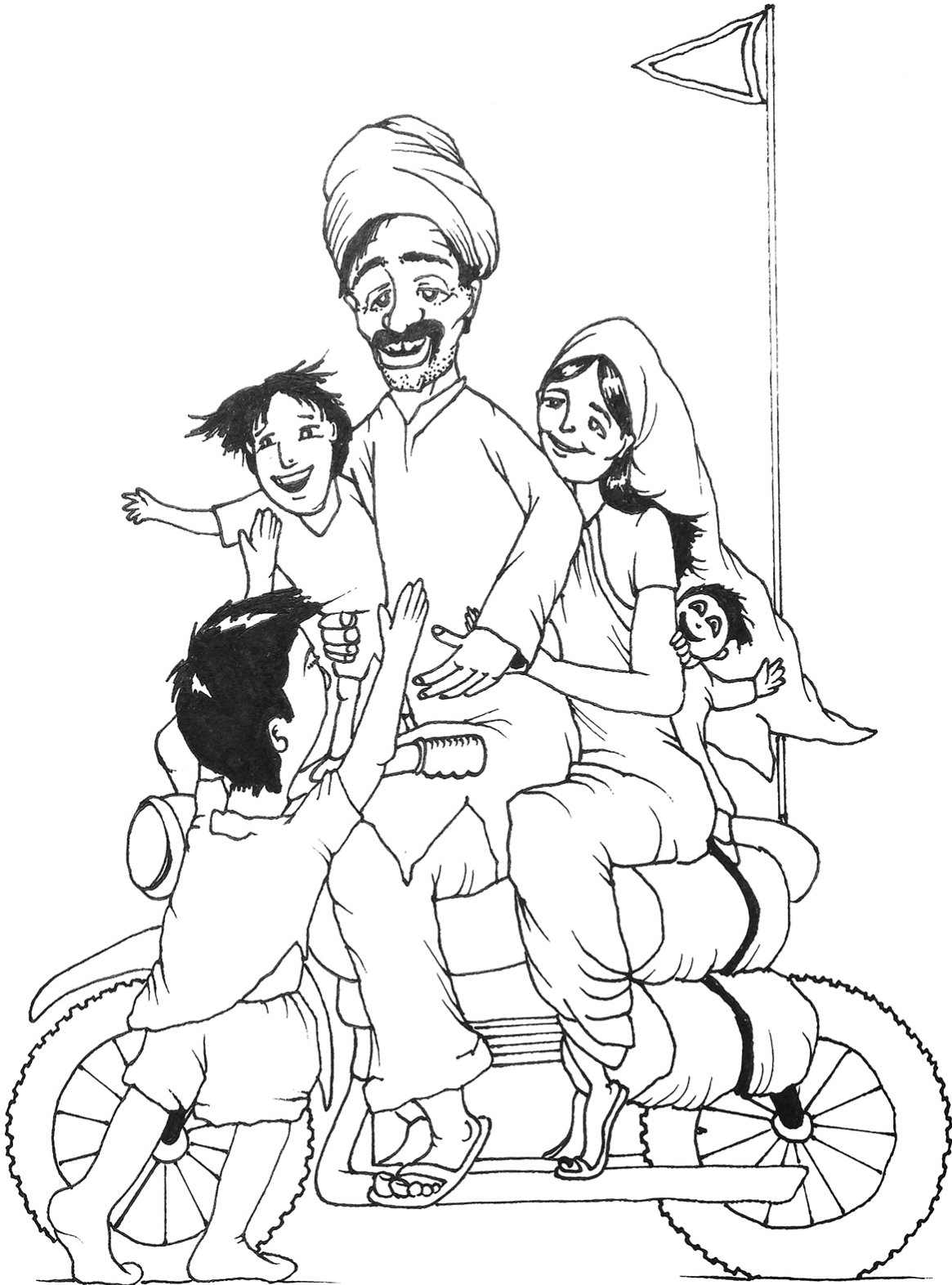


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# Color the World: Family and Belonging

Artwork by **Kody Friesen**, an artist who especially enjoys using Middle Eastern and Persian art forms to highlight the beauty of Jesus. He and his wife Amy are creators who have spent 20 years among Middle Eastern communities. They now live in Canada with their four children. You can find their work at [www.akfriesen.com](http://www.akfriesen.com).

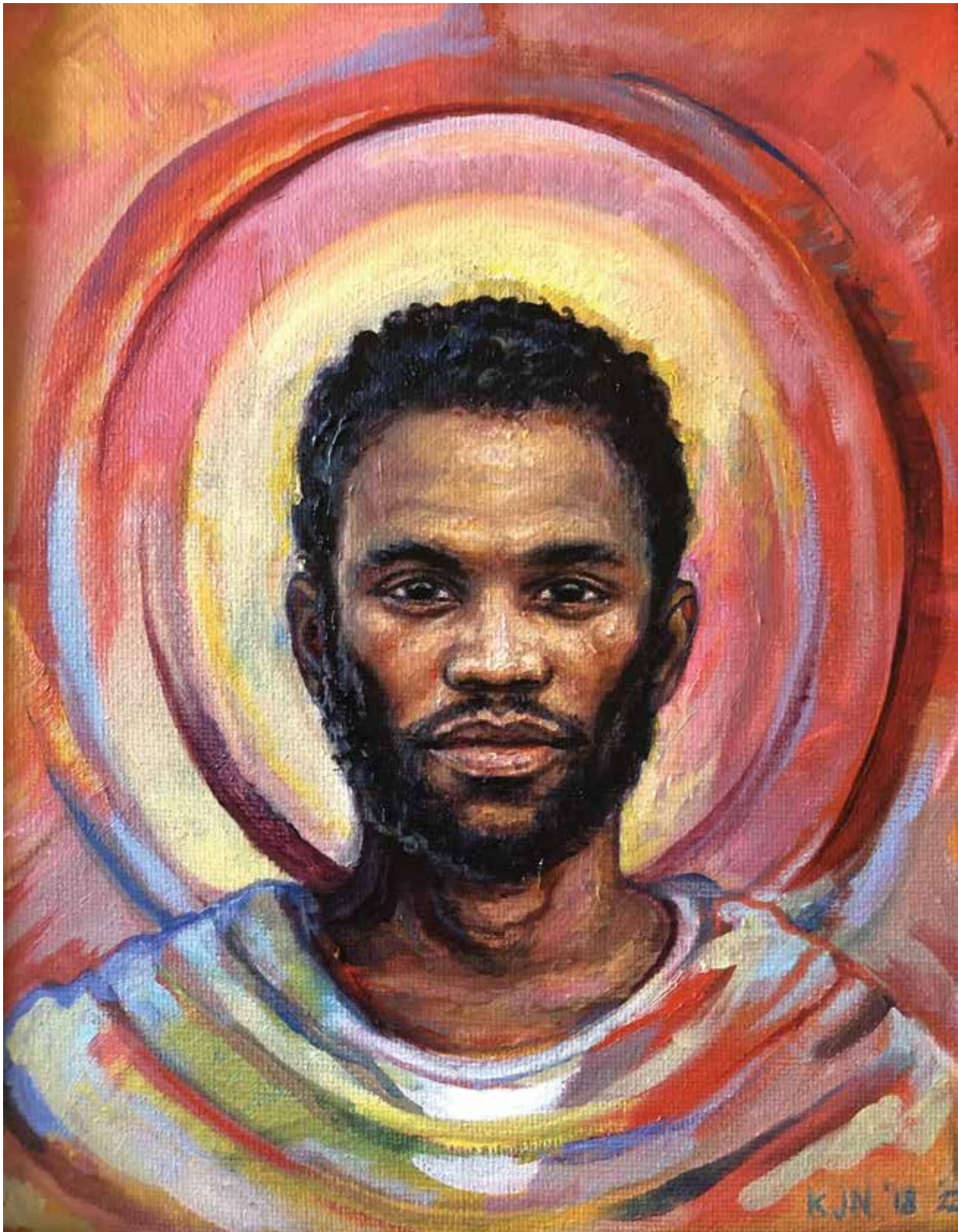
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## Saint Stephen by Katie Joy Nellis, oil on panel 2018–2022

**Katie Joy Nellis** lives and paints in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. She studied painting at Gordon College in Massachusetts and in Orvieto, Italy. Since graduating in 2013 she has worked as a self-employed artist, illustrator, and art tutor. She specializes in oil portraits on wood. | [katiejoynellisart.net/paintings/oilpaintings?itemId=4cff217nopn0ghk6lpxkq5dtbjalrl](http://katiejoynellisart.net/paintings/oilpaintings?itemId=4cff217nopn0ghk6lpxkq5dtbjalrl)



Images marked with an asterisk (\*) come from the International Mission Board (IMB) and are used with permission. Thank you, IMB!

## JANUARY

### ■ 1 Muslim Chamar

The Chamar name derives from Chamakara, meaning “a worker in leather.” In South Asia, people say the Chamars, whether Hindu or Muslim, are criminally minded and unintelligent. Their work is considered degrading, and it involves dealing with foul odors and dead animals. This is not the kind of work people would choose, but the caste system keeps them there, even in Muslim Pakistan.

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. —Genesis 1:1*

- Pray that the church will begin reaching out to the Chamar Muslims.
- Pray that the Lord will open the minds and hearts of the Chamar Muslims to the claims of Christ.
- Pray that this people group will be in awe of the Lord for His creation and realize that He is the only one worthy of worship and devotion.

### ■ 2 Tai Khang

The Tai Khang live in a land of palm trees, banana trees, and bamboo, which grow in abundance in Southeast Asian forests inhabited by animals. Many of them follow folk religions. They add elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism to their spiritual beliefs in hopes of maintaining spiritual harmony.

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. —Genesis 1:27*

- Pray that the Holy Spirit will free the Tai Khang from fear through deliverance and new life in Jesus Christ.
- Pray that laborers, led by the Spirit, will share Christ’s love with the Khang people.
- Pray that God will save key leaders who will boldly declare the gospel.
- Pray that this people group will realize that they were meant to be in God’s image, and they need to change their ways to get back to Him.

### ■ 3 Hmong Dlex Nchab

Historically, the Chinese have viewed the Hmong with contempt, believing them to be “uncivilized barbarians.” Visitors to the minority peoples of China, however, have generally found them to be extremely warm and hospitable people. Generations of Hmong Dlex Nchab have perished without receiving news of the sacrifice of Christ for their sins. Chinese authorities tightly control their area.

*And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. —Genesis 12:2–3*

- Pray they may be able to understand the gospel and respond to Christ.
- Pray that the Hmong Dlex Nchab people will have a spiritual hunger that will open their hearts to the King of kings.
- Pray for many leaders in today’s people group to seek and find God’s blessings, which He intended to give to them since the beginning of time.

### ■ 4 Adi Dravida

Do you know the origin of the word pariah? The Adi Dravida of India were once called the Paraiyar (or Pariah in English), so their leaders requested that their name become Adi Dravida or “original Dravidians.” Today, most work on farms, either as farmhands or as small landowners. Others dig graves and arrange funerals.

*And he brought him outside and said, Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. —Genesis 15:5–6*

- Pray that the small number of Adi Dravida Christ followers would be discipled and share the gospel with their brothers and sisters.
- Pray that both Christian nurture and gospel outreach be available via radio, television, and the internet in their language.
- Pray that members of today’s people group will understand that they can become part of God’s holy family and experience His goodness.



## ■ 5 Tajik Afghan

One social tradition of Tajik Afghans involves offering extraordinary hospitality. Hosting guests is considered an honor and an occasion for a fine meal. Tajik Afghan men prepare a special dish called "osh." It contains rice, lamb, spices, and vegetables, and may be served with flat bread.

*The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.*  
—Exodus 15:2

- Pray for a movement to Christ among Tajik Afghans that will bless them abundantly.
- Ask God to call Christian workers who are trained in the Dari language to take the gospel to the Tajik Afghans.
- Pray for the Lord to send dreams of Christ to Tajik Afghan fathers and grandfathers.
- Pray that members of today's people group will look to the Lord alone for strength and victory.

## ■ 6 Hira

The Hira potter community is known for its traditional occupation in earthenware pottery. They practice ancient hand-molding techniques without using wheels, preserving one of the oldest methods of pottery-making. All the Hira people are Hindu. When something wrong happens in their homes, they immediately offer something to their gods.

*Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?* —Exodus 15:11

- Pray for greater penetration of the Christian faith and for widespread access to gospel materials.
- Pray for the Lord to give them economic and spiritual prosperity, and that they know Christ is Lord of all.
- Pray for Hira disciples who will make more disciples.
- Pray that today's people group will understand that glory, holiness, and power come only from our Lord and King.



## ■ 7 Hindu Rangrez

Many Rangrez are leaving their original career of dyeing and printing fabric. Cheap chemical dyes have replaced the natural dyes used by the Rangrez, which tend to fade after washing. Rich colors play a significant role in Indian rituals, such as weddings. Other Rangrez have become involved in trade and other small businesses.

*Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.* —Exodus 18:11

- Ask God for a strong movement toward Jesus to bring whole Rangrez families and communities into a rich experience of God's blessings.
- Pray that members of caste councils would become Christ followers and lead their families to the only Savior.
- Pray that non-believers among this people group will be convinced to follow the Lord because of His miracles.

## ■ 8 Selim Baggara

Most Selim Baggaras of Sudan observe a nomadic lifestyle without a permanent home. Aligning with this lifestyle, Selim Baggara marriages are often polygamous. If a man has two wives, one of the women may live in a pastoral camp, while the other woman lives in a farming village. The two households exchange products and labor, thereby increasing the family's collective income and meeting their needs. Islam is central to their identity, and it will be difficult for them to allow Jesus into their lives.

*You shall have no other gods before me.* —Exodus 20:3

- Pray that God will establish long-term workers to travel and minister among this Baggara subgroup.
- Pray for this people group to understand and obey this essential and central command.



### ■ 9 Tidikelt Berber

For North African Berbers, life revolves around important ceremonies such as births, marriages, and deaths. Their male-dominated society maintains pre-Islamic cultural and ritual traditions. Berbers are more likely to accept Christ than Arabs, who hold Islam as central to their identity.

*You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.* —Exodus 23:25–26

- Pray for the Tidikelt to put their faith and hope in Christ, paving the way for a movement to Christ.
- Pray for a spiritual hunger among the Tidikelt that will lead them to the cross and the empty grave.
- Pray for workers to go to the Tidikelt and find persons of peace who will welcome them into their communities with the gospel.
- Pray that many from this people group will serve the Lord and receive His abundant blessings.

### ■ 10 Dahait

Dahaits have traditionally been village watchmen in India, but now some possess land and serve in various vocations. “Dahait” is often used as a surname. Their community council typically meets once a year to discuss and address community issues. They worship Hindu deities, especially Shiva (the god of destruction), and Hanuman, the monkey god.

*See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship.* —Exodus 31:2–3

- Pray that the Lord will open their minds to understand and believe in Jesus.
- Pray for God to raise up his ambassadors to go to the Dahait people with the good news of Christ’s power to save sinners.
- Pray that they will make room in their hearts for Jesus.
- Pray that as members of this people group become part of God’s holy family that they will also find His purposes for them.

### ■ 11 Arabic-speaking Algerian

In modern Algeria, Arab youths are increasingly drawn to Western music, films, and fashion, often to the concern of Islamic leaders. The younger generation frequently favors Western-style clothing over traditional Arab dress. Marriages are still commonly arranged by families.

*And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.* —Exodus 34:8–9

- Pray that the JESUS Film and audio materials would be used effectively among them.
- Pray that Algerian Arab believers would grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus and the Bible.
- Pray that those who want to know Christ will be given the courage and boldness to follow in the faith despite the backlash from their community.
- Pray that members of this people group will soon have as rich an understanding of the need for God’s presence as Moses did.

### ■ 12 Ansari

Ansaris of South Asia are noted for their friendliness and helpfulness. They are predominantly artisans by trade, mostly poor, and cannot read. Although traditionally weavers and textile sellers, the Ansaris are now involved in a wide range of small business enterprises.

*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* —Exodus 40:34–35

- Ask God to give the Ansaris a sincere desire and hunger for righteousness and holiness so that they may learn the way to Christ.
- Ask God to make a way for workers to be sent to and remain among the Ansari.
- Ask the Lord to bless the Ansaris in such a way that they will know he is the one to follow.
- Pray for many from this people group to experience the glory of the Lord and allow Him to transform them forever.



### ■ 13 Waimiri-Atroari

The Waimiri-Atroari tribe of Brazil needs to learn new skills so they can adapt to their changing situation of encounters with the outside world. Christ followers can train them in these skills. They need someone to advocate for them. They have a long, tragic history of contact with outsiders who want to use their land. All that the Waimiri-Atroari people have left is their religion. Most will feel that accepting Christ is one more demand from outsiders.

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. —Leviticus 19:1–2*

- Pray for the Lord to bless this community economically and spiritually.
- Pray for Christian advocates to assist them in relating to the outside world.
- Pray that new believers among this people group will seek holiness by allowing the Holy Spirit to transform them from the inside out.

### ■ 14 Shikaki

The Shikaki are part of a much greater Kurdish population. Kurdish people feel a group identity. Shikakis live primarily in the mountainous area where the borders of Turkey and Iran meet.

*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. —Numbers 6:24–26*

- Pray that the sheer wonder of knowing Jesus and the impact he has on their lives and the joy he brings changes the Shikakis.
- Pray that the hearts of the Shikaki people would be stirred by a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit to hear and accept the gospel message.
- Pray for an unstoppable movement to Christ among Shikaki Kurds.

### ■ 15 Antiti

The Antiti people of Sudan are Muslim. If you had been taught by those who believe that the Koran is 100 percent accurate and the Bible is corrupted, would you be likely to read the Bible? They have been taught to believe that the Koran is foolproof and accurate.

*He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. —Deuteronomy 10:21*

- Pray for the Holy Spirit to instill in the Antiti people the desire to seek the truth of the one true Savior, Jesus Christ, regardless of the cost.
- Pray for Antiti leaders to have dreams of the risen Christ and to share those dreams with others.
- Pray that Antitis will spread Christ's fame to other Muslims throughout Sudan.
- Pray that many from this people group will make the Lord their only God.

### ■ 16 Kuwala

The Kuwala people group lives in seven main villages in the remote Nuba Mountains in the state of South Kordofan, Sudan. Their religion is Sunni Islam, following the teachings of the Koran. The Kuwala people believe that Jesus is only a prophet, not the only way to salvation. They seek daily benefits from the spirit world, not understanding that it is God who can provide for all their needs.

*This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. —Joshua 1:8*

- Pray for spiritual openness to Jesus Christ, which cannot be hindered.
- Pray for peace in the Kuwala homeland. Pray for them to respond to Christ's miracles.
- Pray that many from this people group will not only study but apply what God teaches through His word.

## ■ 17 Hela

The Hela cultural and religious identity is closely tied to Hindu practices, making openness to the gospel a spiritual and social challenge. Such a situation causes most to balk at accepting Christ's lordship.

*So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever. —Joshua 4:24*

- Pray for the Holy Spirit to open the hearts of the Hela people to the truth and love of Jesus.
- Ask God to send compassionate, Spirit-led workers who will build relationships and live out the gospel among them.
- Pray that entire families would come to faith and be empowered to reach others, sparking a movement of disciples who make more disciples.
- Pray that the "nation" we are praying for today will know that the Lord's hand is powerful and will give Him praise.

## ■ 18 Hadrami Arab

While few Hadramis today maintain the nomadic lifestyle of their ancestors, they have a long history of seafaring, trade, and migration across the Indian Ocean. Hadrami communities are prominent in the Arab States of the Persian Gulf and Red Sea trading ports. Many are influential merchants or money changers, especially in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Known for their strong family networks, religious scholarship, and business acumen, the Hadramis have played a key role in spreading Islam and commerce. It is doubtful whether there are any followers of Jesus among the Hadramis today.

*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge! —Ruth 2:12*

- Pray that the Lord will arrange for encounters between Christian believers and Hadrami Arabs.
- Pray for today's people group to seek and find refuge with the Lord and be rewarded.



## ■ 19 —Northern Yemeni Arab

The Northern Yemeni Arabs reside in the northern mountains and northeastern deserts. In rural areas, growing khat, a plant chewed for its stimulant effects, has become a mainstay. The Northern Yemenis have put their identity in the Islamic religious system. It will take the work of the Holy Spirit to get them to question what they have believed for many centuries.

*There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God. —1 Samuel 2:2*

- Pray for Yemeni families to increasingly experience the righteousness and forgiveness found only in Jesus Christ.
- Pray for Northern Yemeni Arabs to receive biblical resources in their heart language.
- Pray for influential members of this people group to understand that there is no solid rock like our God!

## ■ 20 Karko

The Karko people of Sudan have no schools or health care facilities. They live on a simple diet from the sorghum and corn they grow, as well as beef, mutton, and goat from the livestock they raise. The Karko people are Muslims who are still waiting for someone to explain Christ's redemption. Who will go?

*But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. —1 Samuel 5:4*

- Ask the Lord to give Karko family leaders dreams of the holy and risen Christ, and that they will share their dreams with many others.
- Pray that these dreams will prompt them to seek out believers who can help them understand the dreams.
- Pray that many from this people group will understand that their gods have failed them, but the Lord God never fails!



## ■ 21 Bagvalal

Snow covers the Bagvalal villages in Russia typically from October until the end of April. For the cattle and sheep to survive the winter, the Bagvalal must accomplish massive hay gathering from the nearby hillsides in the summer. The residents hope that 4-wheel drive vehicles can successfully navigate in and out of the region several times during the winter for resupply. None have dared to stray from Islam's dictates. Their culture allows for little or no variation from the norm. Believing in Christ as the only savior would not be tolerated.

*Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."*  
—1 Samuel 17:45

- Pray for musical and linguistic efforts to develop gospel materials in the Bagvalal language.
- Pray that the nations will know that they cannot defy the Lord.

## ■ 22 Lamira

The Lamira people group is a small tribe in the remote Nuba Mountains in the state of South Kordofan, Sudan. Roads are almost nonexistent in their area, and transporting goods and services is a challenge. How can Christ's ambassadors get to them? It will take those who are willing to live in discomfort to reach these Muslims.

*And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word.*  
—1 Kings 18:21

- Pray for compassionate, dedicated, and hearty workers to serve the Lamira people.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to open the hearts of the Lamira people to accept the message and teachings of Jesus Christ.
- Pray that today's people group will indeed see the vast difference between the Lord and any other deity.
- Pray that they will follow Him.

## ■ 23 Mahamid

The Mahamids live in Chad. There has been a continuing conflict between farmers and herdsmen, and, to a lesser degree, between Christians and Muslims. Most of the conflict centers on economic issues and water rights rather than religious ones. Anyone reaching out to share the truth with this people group should prepare to live for years in a spiritually dry land of violence and danger.

*And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.*  
—1 Kings 18:39

- Pray for a spiritual hunger that will lead the Mahamid people out of darkness into the light of Christ.
- May they show the world that when the Holy Spirit acts, communities are transformed in a wonderful way.
- Pray that today's people group will understand the vast power and goodness of the Lord.

## ■ 24 Koussountou

How would you feel if yours was a dying language like that of the Koussountou? Most likely, there would be no one to speak your language in 100 years. Language and culture are key elements of peoples' identity, so this might be a hard time for those who speak this language.

*As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house.*  
—2 Chronicles 7:1–2

- Pray for African Christian believers to take gospel recordings and the JESUS Film to the Koussountou.
- Pray that this people group will have a spiritual hunger that will affect other people in their region.
- Pray for many to disciple others in the ways of Christ.
- Pray for today's people group to be in absolute awe of the Lord when they hear of His glorious presence.



## ■ 25 Hijazi Arab

Although the Hijazis of the Middle East have few possessions, their coffee pot is very important. It represents what makes life pleasurable: hospitality and friendship. They generally consider manual labor degrading. However, more and more Hijazi are accepting wage-paying jobs. The Hijazi strongly identify with the Islamic religious system. Some remain nomadic. These are key reasons why they have not yet been reached for Christ.

*Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. —2 Chronicles 7:15*

- Ask God for a concerted, strategic effort by caring followers of Christ to reach the Hijazi with the gospel.
- Pray for Christians to provide the Hijazi with gospel recordings, Bible radio broadcasts, and biblical stories of Jesus.
- Pray that you will be encouraged to pray, knowing that the Lord will hear your prayers that are in accordance with His will.

## ■ 26 Najdi Arab

Najdi culture in the Arab world values poetry and storytelling to preserve history and moral lessons. They weave, embroider, decorate tents, make clothing, and make camel saddles. Social life often includes coffee ceremonies and music played on the rebab—a single-stringed instrument. There is little or no Christian witness among them, nor any example of living Christianity for the Najdi Arabs to see or experience.

*Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. —Nehemiah 1:6*

- Pray for these remote Muslims to have dreams and visions of the risen Savior and be drawn to him.
- Pray for the rapid spread of the gospel among the Najdi Arabs.
- Pray that the Najdi Arabs would seek Christ as the only means of salvation.
- Pray for the Lord to raise up believers from among today's people group that will faithfully and fervently pray for their people.

## ■ 27 —Ghomara Berber

The Ghomara are one of many Berber groups of the North African countries. The name "Berber," derived from the Latin word "barbarian," was given to them by the Romans in the third century. Most Berbers refer to themselves as the Imazighen, which means "men of noble origin." Berbers are generally bilingual, speaking both their Berber dialect and Arabic.

*Then the king said to me, What are you requesting? So I prayed to the God of heaven. —Nehemiah 2:4*

- Pray for a spiritual hunger among Ghomara Berbers that will lead them to the cross and the empty grave.
- Pray for the Ghomara Berbers to put their faith and hope in Christ, paving the way for a movement to Christ.
- Pray that you will not pass up the chance for short but effective prayers when you intercede for the nations.

## ■ 28 Muslim Nat

Nat comes from the Sanskrit word nata, meaning dancer, a term associated with their acrobatic skills. They have historically been dancers, singers, and acrobats, often living as Romani, but presently are employed in a number of vocations, including livestock husbandry. This South Asian community is especially insular, not open to outside influences.

*And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. —Nehemiah 8:5–6*

- May this people group have Holy Spirit reverence for the Lord when they hear His word.
- Pray for the Nat people throughout South Asia to understand and embrace that Jesus wants to bless their families and neighborhoods.
- Pray for Holy Spirit-anointed believers from the Muslim Nat people to change their society from within.
- Pray for a movement in which the Holy Spirit leads and empowers disciples to make more disciples.



### ■ 29 Abai Sungai

The Abai Sungai primarily reside in Sabah, Malaysia, and are concentrated mainly in one village. There are no Christian materials in the Abai Sungai language. This means that they must hear the gospel message in someone else's language, which could make the gospel appear foreign to them.

*And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. —Nehemiah 8:1*

- Pray for dreams and visions among the Abai Sungai people that will lead them to seek and find Christ.
- Ask God to grant spiritual openness among these Muslims so that many might come together to learn of and obey the teachings of Jesus Christ.
- Pray for an eagerness to hear and heed God's word among this people group.

### ■ 30 Mamuju

The Mamuju home is simple, consisting of woven bamboo walls and a coconut leaf roof. The Mamuju live in peace with their neighbors, demonstrating mutual respect, much like they do within their own families. Mamuju young people make their own choices as to whom they will marry. Women typically marry around the ages of 16–17, while men usually marry between 18 and 20 years old.

*They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. —Nehemiah 8:8*

- Pray for the Mamuju people in Indonesia to experience God's glory and cling to him.
- Pray for loving workers to go to them.
- Pray for Mamuju elders to have dreams and visions of the risen Christ.
- Pray for this people group to understand God's word when they hear it.

### ■ 31 Giddikki

The Giddikki were traditionally fortune-tellers and alms-collectors, but now the selling of aluminum utensils and plastic boxes forms their primary occupation. A few own farm land. They mainly worship Durga, Lakshmi, Eswara, and Siddeswar. Their concept of a creator God is someone who stands outside his creation, not knowable as a loving heavenly father. They need a radical worldview change.

*And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God. —Nehemiah 9:3*

- Pray that they will become interested in gospel media via radio, television, and the internet.
- Pray for loving workers in India to go to them until many are discipled and sent out to others.
- Pray that hearing the word will lead to deep repentance.

## FEBRUARY

### ■ 1 Yemeni Arab

There is a division between Yemenis from the northern tribes and the southern ones. The North and the South were separate nations in the 70s and 80s. They merged for a couple of years, but now they are fighting once again. Iran backs one side using Shia Islam as their banner, while the other supports a Sunni Muslim head of state. The growing of the narcotic khat has become the mainstay. The drug trade uses up valuable water that they need to grow food. Much of their food is imported.

*You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. —Nehemiah 9:6*

- May the hearing of God's word lead to this people group understanding who God is and the fact that He gave them life.
- Pray for the Lord to make a way for the gospel to go forth into every Yemeni village.



## ■ 2 Muslim Arain

The Arain are Muslims who claim Arab origin and are thought to have migrated to the Indian subcontinent. When the British sought to develop land in the Punjab after its annexation, Arains were brought in to cultivate the land around the cities. The Arain were favored for their hard work, frugality, and sense of discipline. They have a legacy of contributions to politics and in the practice of law. They are well educated.

*And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. —Nehemiah 9:29*

- Ask God to send loving, committed workers to the Arain soon.
- Ask the Lord to start a movement of Arain families experiencing God's blessing and sharing it with other families.
- Pray that when this people group hears the word that they will respond with heart-felt obedience.

## ■ 3 Judeo-Berber Jewish

Can an entire population move from one country to another? They can, in the case of the Judeo-Berbers of Morocco. All of them are now in Israel. Some Jewish people settled in what is now Morocco as early as 600 BC. More came during the Roman Empire. They migrated to Israel when it became a nation in 1948.

*Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. —Psalm 2:8*

- Pray for the Lord to give the Judeo-Berber Jewish people hearts that desire to please God.
- May they look to the Lord for guidance, truth, and not be satisfied with cultural traditions.
- Ask Him for this people group to become part of His family.



## ■ 4 Bonan

The Bonan are considered a priority for outreach due to a probable lack of exposure to Christianity. The Bonan are originally Mongol troops sent to their present location on the edge of Chinese territory to act as watch guards against the fierce Tibetans. After decades of intermarriage with other peoples, a distinct people group formed who came to call themselves Bonan, which means "I protect you."

*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. —Psalm 8:1*

- Pray for bold workers, driven by the love of the Holy Spirit, to go to them.
- Pray for the authority of Christ to bind hindering spiritual forces, leading them from darkness to light.
- Help this people group to know from the heart and the head that the Lord is great!

## ■ 5 Harzani

Although the Harzani predominantly proclaim allegiance to Islam, some remnants of their pre-Islamic religion remain. For example, they have a great reverence for trees and groves; trees are among their most sacred sites. As Muslims, they consider Jesus to be a prophet, a teacher, and a good man, but not God's only way to eternal salvation. Those who turn their hearts to Jesus Christ are considered unpatriotic and traitors to Iran.

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. —Psalm 9:1*

- Pray for the Lord to send dreams so Harzani family leaders become more receptive to the gospel.
- Ask God to raise up workers to translate Christian materials into Harzani.
- Pray for many from today's people group to tell of God's marvelous deeds to their families.

## ■ 6 East Makian

As Muslims, the Makian practice Islamic rites. Traditional beliefs about the supernatural realm have a powerful influence on their daily lives. East Makians suffer from low levels of education. Teachers and educational resources could improve their standard of living, thus, helping them flourish.

*I say to the LORD, You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you. —Psalm 16:2*

- Pray for the Lord to intervene in their families, calling people to his side and blessing them.
- Pray for loving and dedicated workers. Pray for their hearts to be drawn to the Lord of lords. Pray that the Makian people will see that they can enjoy an abundant life if they put their trust in Jesus Christ.
- Pray that this people group will understand that they have many good things, all of which came only from God the creator.

## ■ 7 Muslim Sansi

Dispossessed of their homeland, the Sansi first migrated to Punjab and then to other regions, including Pakistan, at the time of partition. They are essentially a nomadic tribe seldom settling for long in any one place. That makes it difficult for gospel workers to stay with them long enough for the gospel to take hold. Additionally, Christian witness is very difficult and dangerous.

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. —Psalm 16:11*

- Pray for Jesus to be revealed to the Sansi religious leaders, opening the way for the gospel. Pray for spiritual discernment among the common people.
- Pray for signs and wonders to confirm Christ's goodness and power in the Sansi communities.
- Pray that many from today's people group will find joy in the Lord, and the pleasures of being with Him for eternity.

## ■ 8 Hindu Arora

There have been many times when the Arora people have been violently persecuted. Today, many of them are prominent in business, education, medicine, finance, technology, engineering, manufacturing, entertainment, and the armed forces. Why did they rise to the top? Most likely, it's because of their rigorous work ethic. It could also be because of their insistence on ensuring that their children receive a higher education.

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. —Psalm 19:1*

- Ask God to make a way for the prominent Aroras to find Jesus to be the only way to eternal life.
- Ask God to raise up Arora believers as his ambassadors to those without Christ.
- Pray that many from today's people group will look to the sky, see God's artwork, and commit themselves to following this awesome Savior!

## ■ 9 Awan

The Muslim Awan are known for being valiant warriors. They were recruited as soldiers by the British during South Asia's colonial period and in both world wars. Though they are also part of a landowning class, many still serve in the military.

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; —Psalm 19:7*

- Ask God to send loving workers to help raise up a body of believers among the Awan.
- Ask God to bless new believers in every way.
- Pray for peace in the area where the Awan live so the gospel can go forth.
- Pray that this people group will find the word of the Lord to be trustworthy and look to it for wisdom and spiritual guidance.





## ■ 10 Bhampta

Bhamptas, formerly known as thieves in India, now cultivate hemp, a material used for ropes, mats, and bags. Although this community is small, its members speak a variety of languages. Each language subgroup may require its own evangelistic effort.

*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. —Psalm 20:7*

- Pray for a massive turning to Christ.
- Pray for non-Christians to be amazed by what God does for this community, so that these yet-to-believe Bhamptas will join the family of God.
- Pray that soon, Bhampta disciples will make more disciples, transforming their community.
- Pray that many from this “nation” will boast only in the name of the Lord.

## ■ 11 Phunoi

Phunoi houses are built above the ground, allowing the family livestock—poultry, pigs, and goats—to run freely under them. Phunoi live in a part of Laos known for opium trafficking. This makes travel difficult and can hinder missionary work.

*O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults! —Psalm 21:1*

- Pray for Phunoi decision makers to open their communities to Christ’s ambassadors.
- Pray that the hearts of the Phunoi people will be stirred to hunger after the bread of life and thirst for the living water.
- Pray that a family-based movement to Christ will transform traditional Phunoi society, blessing them spiritually and economically.
- Pray that leaders from this people group will look to the Lord, and only Him for strength and guidance.

## ■ 12 Ghisadi

The Ghisadi have lived in India for centuries, primarily in the western states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Traditionally toolmakers, they now endure difficult lives as farmers in dry regions with limited agricultural opportunities, often traveling in search of work. They typically marry within their clans. The Ghisadi are devout Hindus, engaging in rituals and temple worship as they seek spiritual liberation.

*Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength! We will sing and praise your power. —Psalm 21:13*

- Pray that grace and truth would permeate Ghisadi society through the love and witness of Christian believers.
- Intercede for churches and Christians to be a blessing to the Ghisadi people, transforming them through God’s love as yeast leavens dough.
- Pray that this people group will rejoice in the Lord with singing and celebration when they see His mighty acts of mercy and salvation.

## ■ 13 Shughni

Shughni are found on both sides of the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, mostly in the Panir Mountains. Their religion is Ismaili Islam, and they shun other Islamic sects. There may be no Christian followers among the Shughni in Afghanistan, nor among their neighboring peoples, so they have little or no Christian influence. Although there is no mosque in the villages, one place is always set aside for worship, business, celebration, etc.

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. —Psalm 23:1*

- Pray for the Lord to do a mighty work among them in the coming years.
- Pray for them to hear, respond, and obey Jesus Christ.
- Pray that this people group will be satisfied with the Lord alone and turn to no other god.



## ■ 14 Bumthangpa

The Bumthangpa call themselves the People of Bumthang. Bumthang is believed to have been the first inhabited place in Bhutan. Many of the Bumthangpa immigrated to Bhutan from Tibet in the eighth century. Because of their history of isolation from other nations, they do not trust outsiders. They are conservative by nature and value their ancient traditions.

*He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. —Psalm 23:3*

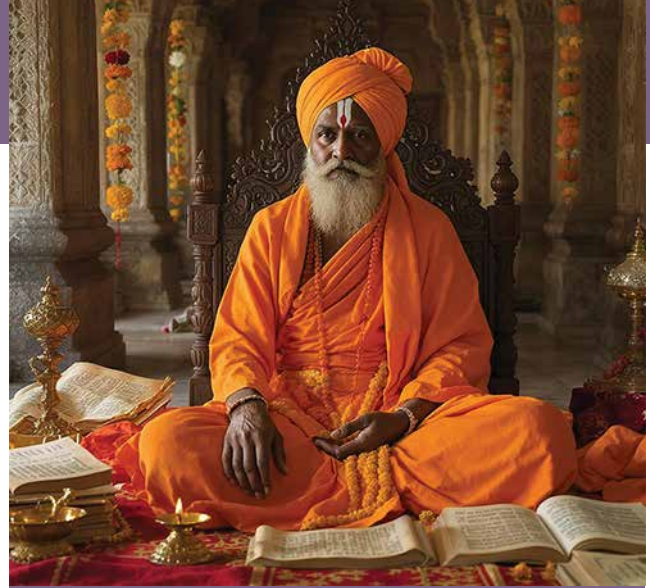
- Pray for gospel workers to catch a vision for reaching the Bumthangpa people for Jesus, and that in God's sovereign timing their hearts would be ready to follow him.
- Pray for Jesus movements to bless extended families so the gospel will spread rapidly.
- Pray that this people group will accept and follow the Lord's direction and thank Him for giving them strength.

## ■ 15 Hindu Badhai

Badhais are also known as the Vishwakarmas. Vishwakarma was the chief architect of Hindu temples. The building of temples, chariots, and war equipment was part of their wisdom and knowledge. The Badhais enjoyed high status. Today, the Badhai are usually employed in engineering, education, and industrial manufacturing. Some Badhai work in the areas of carpentry, stonework, and the timber trade.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. —Psalm 23:4*

- Ask God to deliver the Badhai people from any fear of Christianity and to embrace God's blessings through Christ.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to give the Badhai people a love for God's word and a desire to spread its influence.
- Fear is a liar! Pray that this people group will be fear-free when they decide to follow the Lord.



## ■ 16 Hindu Bairagi

The Bairagi are a group of gurus, or spiritual guides. A proper Bairagi is one whose principal deity is either Vishnu or any of his incarnations, like Rama and Krishna. Most are involved with Hindu religious instruction. They have disciples who are from the forward castes. To follow Christ is to risk disturbing the harmony within this Hindu community. Ideally, the gospel would first influence their leaders, who can open the door for others.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. —Psalm 23:6*

- Ask God to give the Bairagi true spiritual hunger that will lead them to the only Savior of all mankind.
- Pray for leaders of today's people group to put all their hope in the Lord just like King David did when he wrote this Psalm.

## ■ 17 Apapanthi

The Hindu Apapanthi's story is one of resilience and adaptation, as they maintain their customs while embracing necessary changes. The Apapanthis of India maintain a lively cultural life, marked by festivals, music, and traditional dances. They need better health care.

*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein... —Psalm 24:1*

- Pray for the Lord to provide for their medical needs.
- Pray for their elders and family leaders to embrace Christ and share Him with their families.
- Pray for the Lord to send them loving ambassadors to disciple them in Christ's ways.
- Pray that many from today's people group will recognize that they belong to the Lord, and they can rejoice in that fact!

## ■ 18 Tomini

The Tomini marriage system follows Islamic guidelines. An intermediary communicates with the bride's parents and plans the marriage based on the girl's social status. Marriage is allowed between first cousins. The couple usually stays with one of their families until the first child is born. They only live in Indonesia.

*To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me. —Psalm 25:1–2*

- Pray for the Lord to send them dreams and visions that will open their hearts to the King of kings.
- Pray for loving and dedicated workers.
- Pray for the Tomini people to experience and desire the Lord's unmatched glory.
- Pray for many from today's people group to give their entire lives to God.

## ■ 19 Bajania

War has far-reaching consequences. The Bajania people of Gujarat, India, know this very well. At one time, they all lived in Rajasthan and fought for Rajput kings. But when Islamic armies defeated them, some Bajania moved east. For a time, they suffered poverty. To obtain their basic daily food, they resorted to doing acrobatic tricks, dancing, and prostitution. The Bajania no longer practice prostitution. They still perform folk dances and acrobatic tricks for anyone willing to pay.

*Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long. —Psalm 25:5*

- Pray for a movement of Jesus to heal and strengthen Bajania communities.
- Pray that the Bajania tune in to Gujarati radio programs and learn about Christ.
- Pray that this very year many from this people group will seek the Lord for the right path to true righteousness and guidance.



## ■ 20 Dongola Nubian

Though Nubians converted to Christianity during the sixth century, the gradual process of Islamization took place from the 1300s to the 1600s. Today, the Nubians are almost all Muslims.

*Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. —Psalm 25:8–9*

- Ask the Lord to remember the prayers of Christian Nubians who lived long ago, who prayed for their descendants.
- Ask the Lord to raise up laborers willing to invest in long-term service among the Dongola Nubians.
- Ask the Lord to save key leaders among the Dongola Nubians.
- Pray for many from today's people group to have the humility to learn from the Lord and follow His ways.

## ■ 21 Tai Do

The Tai Do of Southeast Asia are animistic, and traditionally, they must appease spirits to gain blessings and avoid catastrophes. Young adults among the Tai Do typically choose their spouses with their parents' consent. The groom's family must pay the bride's family a dowry, and he must leave his family's household to become part of hers. He then helps to support his bride's family with his earnings.

*All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. —Psalm 25:10*

- Pray God would call the Tai Do believers to live strong, faithful, and fruitful lives among their lost relatives.
- Pray for the Tai Do people to have a hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Thank the Lord that He leads with love and faithfulness!
- Pray that many from today's people group will discover that and act upon it.



## ■ 22 Bania

The Bania community has gotras (clans), and many of their clan names are based on the place they are from. Their traditional occupations include business, trade, jewelry-making, and agriculture. Most live in India, but some live in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. Wealth impedes spiritual hunger. People, like the Bania, with much wealth are often numb to their spiritual needs.

*For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. —Psalm 25:11*

- Ask God to instill in the Bania a spiritual hunger that leads them to look to the gospels and find answers in Jesus Christ.
- Ask God to send several Christian workers, among them, to help Bania understand their need for the only Savior.
- Pray for many from today's people group to understand that they are sinful and need God as their savior.

## ■ 23 Agarwal Bania

The Agarwal belong to a trading and business community that holds a middle position in India's hierarchy. Many continue in their traditional role as merchants, while others in rural areas own farmland and practice agriculture. There are few, if any, followers of Christ among the Agarwal, meaning outreach must begin from the ground up.

*My foot stands on level ground; in the great assembly I will bless the LORD. —Psalm 26:12*

- Pray for God to stir a deep dissatisfaction with a faith that cannot offer life to the full.
- Ask the Lord to give Agarwals a hunger for truth that can only be satisfied in Jesus, who declared himself to be the way, the truth, and the life.
- Pray that many from today's people group will allow their spiritual lives to be transformed by the Lord, and that they will begin to publicly praise Him.

## ■ 24 Qixingmin

The identity of the Qixingmin is integrally linked with Buddhism. The cost of going against their culture and the threat of probable expulsion from their community if they should become a Christian has proven too great an obstacle. Most Chinese churches in the area no longer attempt to evangelize them.

*One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple. —Psalm 27:4*

- Pray that they would be able to go against the traditions of their culture to respond to the gospel.
- Pray for a great awakening in the hearts of the Qixingmin.
- Pray for a work in the hearts of the Qixingmin so that when they hear the gospel, they will recognize its worth and embrace Jesus.
- Pray for eternal salvation of many from today's people group.

## ■ 25 Mavilan

Traditionally, the Mavilans were hunters/gatherers, but as India's population continued to grow, they were often pushed off their land by those with greater political power. They often live in remote forested areas.

*You have said, Seek my face. My heart says to you, Your face, LORD, do I seek. —Psalm 27:8*

- Pray for justice and mercy for the Mavilans.
- Pray for the spiritual lives of the Mavilan people to become fruitful as they follow Christ.
- Pray for translation and oral storytelling efforts.
- Pray for Jesus movements to bless extended Mavilan families so the gospel will spread rapidly among this people group.
- Pray that many from today's people group will crave fellowship with the One True God.





## ■ 26 Broq-Pa

Broq-Pas of South Asia don't bathe often because they believe they will wash off good luck. The Broq-Pa commemorate the former unity with a dance that they believe will one day reunite them with the gods. Christian teachers can share how our forgiving God has made a way to reunite with them. Both men and women are fond of flowers as they believe adorning themselves daily with them pleases the gods.

*I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD! —Psalm 27:13–14*

- Pray for a redemptive analogy that shows how Christ unites the Broq-Pa to God.
- Pray for signs and wonders among them and for significant breakthroughs with a rapid multiplication of disciples and house churches.
- Pray for an unstoppable movement to Christ.
- Pray for many leaders from today's people group to put their confidence in the goodness of God and wait faithfully for His deliverance.

## ■ 27 Lolak

The Lolak homeland is fertile, with long black-sand beaches, flat grassy fields, coconut plantations, and rugged inland mountains. They live on Sulawesi Island in Indonesia. Opening new fields of employment is their greatest need. A Lolak person who graduates from a university often finds it challenging to gain employment in their field of study, so they frequently return to farming.

*The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him. —Psalm 28:7*

- May this be the attitude of many from today's people group.
- Pray for increased economic development in the Lolak villages.
- Pray that the Lord would use Jesus followers near the Lolak to reach them.
- Pray for the Lolak to seek spiritual answers found only in Christ, regardless of community pressures.

## ■ 28 Dhiman Brahmin

Dhiman are unlike any other Brahmin community. They have always been focused on architecture and construction rather than priestly duties. There is a deep aversion to religious propaganda among Dhiman Brahmins, and Christians are often seen as propagandists. Christianity is seen as problematic for Brahmins. Christ's ambassadors should approach Brahmins with love and respect.

*The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. —Psalm 29:10*

- Pray for vibrant Christians to befriend Dhiman Brahmins.
- Pray that the eyes of Brahmin hearts may be open to Jesus Christ as Lord and King.
- Pray for a movement to Christ to emerge among every Brahmin community.
- Pray for many to be prompted to pray for Brahmins faithfully.
- Pray that many will understand that God is the undisputed King of kings, and beside Him there is no other.

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