

## REACHING THE NATIONS THROUGH OUR CITIES

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### ***Abstract***

While the American public perceives New York City to be a post-Christian environment, reality is that the city is moving into a post-secular existence largely influenced by religious immigrants. These immigrants are symbolic of a new era in pioneer missions—one in which migration, transnationalism, globalization, and urbanization pose newer challenges and opportunities than uncharted geographies, isolated societies, and foreign cultures. “Reaching the Nations Through Our Cities” proposes that the next challenge for missionary pioneers is reaching busy, hidden, influential unreached peoples who have migrated to cities. Based on several years of research on the immigrant populations in Metro New York, this paper will seek to answer the question, “What will it take to reach the unreached peoples in our cities?”

### **INTRODUCTION**

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American Christians are much better at missions among unreached peoples overseas than in our own homeland. The Himalayas present some of the harshest terrain in the world, yet Western missionaries have dotted the Himalayan landscape for centuries. While Americans have many missionaries on the ground in the region, Sherpa and representatives of other Himalayan peoples have left their home and migrated to places like New York City where little of focused evangelism and church planting has taken place among them. To punctuate this reality, a Sherpa association bought a Christian church build-

ing in Queens in 2011 for over a million dollars that formerly housed around seven Christian congregations. They have converted the building into a Buddhist temple. Some American Christians prefer to describe such proceedings as invasions. Nevertheless, the diversity and influx of immigrants into America over the last few decades, coupled with technological developments making international communication cheap and easy, have presented American Christians with an unparalleled opportunity in missions to spread the gospel among unreached peoples from our own homeland back to their country of origin.

## IMMIGRANTS AND THE POST-SECULAR CITY

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Due to the influence of finance, culture, and media that spreads out from cities, urban areas such as New York City have obtained reputations as bastions of secular humanism that are hostile to the religiously inclined. Such views are simplistic and ignore the multi-layered complexity of the city. While such realities exist, New York City has been transforming over the last few decades into a post-secular existence—one in which religious adherence and devotion is normative for the average New Yorker. The transformation is largely due to the influx of religious immigrants. Upon U.S. immigration law changes in 1965 which opened up immigration opportunities to the non-European world, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs and—more than any other group—Christians, migrated to the city in masses. What was once a post-Christian culture now has devout Christians that are gaining influence in society. Since the U.S. census does not track religious data, this story goes largely untold. Not helping the matter, non-government census information that exists on religious adherents and congregations in America (provided by The Association of Religious Data Archives, ARDA), only counts figures provided by participating denominations—overlooking most immigrants in the city that make up a majority of New York City's religious population. Therefore, the census information becomes subject to misuse and misrepresentation by others in portraying the reality of religious America.<sup>1</sup> For example, although the ARDA numbers increased in 2010 over their previous census due to more participation from denominations, they only list 357,056 evangelical Protestants and 1,456 evangelical Protestant churches in New York City.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Tony Carnes, who has con-

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<sup>1</sup> "NYC and the 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS)," A Journey Through NYC Religions, last modified August 4, 2010, accessed February 16, 2014, <http://www.nycreligion.info/?p=349>.

<sup>2</sup> "U.S. Congregational Membership," The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2010 Report, accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/select-County.asp?state=36&county=01001>. ARDA 2010 also provided Black Protestant numbers (which would include some individuals and churches with evangelical beliefs) in NYC as 103,695 adherents and 250 churches.

ducted a thorough census of New York City through the Values Research Institute and [nycreligion.info](http://nycreligion.info), counts 1.4–1.8 million evangelicals and 7,109 evangelical churches in New York City (2004).<sup>3</sup> Such discrepancies are reflective of the current milieu in U.S. cities—one in which the religiosity of immigrants is slowly transforming the culture of the city while being grossly understated or unnoticed in popular media.

## STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR GLOBAL MISSIONS

As of February 2014, roughly 42% of the world's ethnic groups are still considered unreached.<sup>4</sup> Over the last few decades, God has been opening the door for new means of contact with the unreached peoples of the world. Acts 17:26–27 says, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (ESV). God has been bringing representatives of some of the most unreached peoples of the world to the United States for a purpose far greater than the “American dream.” As early as 1914, even before the great diversity of immigration we experience today, Edward Judson, the pastor of a Manhattan church and son of pioneer missionary Adoniram Judson remarked,

Indeed, I am often thrilled by the thought that the long, healing shadow of my father's life touches City Missions and falls upon the foreigners that come in such vast throngs from the ends of the earth to settle in our great cities. We used to think of them as a menace, but have learned to regard them as an opportunity. It would seem as if our heavenly Father, perceiving that we Christians of America were so vitally interested in foreign races as to send our best men and women to them with the gospel, paying their traveling expenses and maintenance, deemed it wise to put in the hearts of the heathen to come from all parts of the world to our shores, paying their own expenses.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Carnes, email message to author, February 17, 2014. Carnes indicated he will be updating his NYC religious census numbers by spring 2014 and that the evangelical numbers have increased.

<sup>4</sup> “Great Commission Statistics,” Joshua Project, accessed February 16, 2014, <http://joshuaproject.net/great-commission-statistics.php>. Joshua Project defines an unreached ethnic group as one that is less than 2% evangelical Christian and less than 5% Christian adherent to any other form of Christianity.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Judson, “Address,” in *The Judson Centennial: 1814–1914*, eds. Howard B. Grose and Fred P. Haggard (Philadelphia, PA: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1914), 157.

What has changed drastically from 1914 compared to today is that immigrants are now coming to America from the least-evangelized areas of the world while retaining strong relationships with their homeland in ways that were not technologically possible before. The world has become much smaller and connected. Modern immigrants are symbolic of a new era in pioneer missions—one in which today's migration, transnationalism, globalization, and urbanization pose greater challenges and opportunities than uncharted geographies, isolated societies, and foreign cultures. Most church and mission organization paradigms in America have not adjusted to the reality that the frontier of reaching unreached peoples is not necessarily geographically distant but is sometimes available through relational networks in their own homeland through influential immigrants. Personally, I used to live in a middle-class neighborhood in a West African capital city but never met a homeowner in the neighborhood due to lack of access. While living in New York City, I have met up to ten people who have owned homes back in that same neighborhood in Africa. I have more access to these homeowners—and thus the entire household—by living in New York rather than in Africa! With the world becoming deeply urban and connected, the pioneer missionary of the twenty-first century will look much different from previous centuries. They will focus on reaching busy, hidden, influential unreached peoples who have migrated to cities and will spread the gospel through these migrants' networks throughout the world.

#### **WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO REACH THE UNREACHED IN OUR CITIES?**

While migration into cities presents great opportunities for the gospel, it also presents many challenges. How does one know what the needs are? How does one know what peoples exist, where they live, and how to reach them? Will efforts of planting multiethnic churches suffice for reaching the city? How does one go about evangelizing, discipling, and planting churches among unreached peoples when they work and commute long hours? While the questions could keep going, below are some ideas and possible solutions toward what it will take to reach the unreached in our cities.

#### **RESEARCH**

Without research, people are not aware; and without being aware, people do not feel responsible. While the city might be teeming with Christians, most of them are not aware of the strategic opportunities they have around them to be a part of God's larger plan of redeeming the nations to Himself. They are not aware of who the unreached peoples are around them! In New York City, I was challenged to lead research on the ethnic groups of Metro New York because it was said that churches, denominations, and mission boards in

the city were very reactive in their mission efforts (i.e., most mission efforts consisted of responding to whoever walked in the door instead of actively knowing the lost peoples around them and proactively reaching out). As a result, an effort was made to give “a face to lostness” in the city through several years of research. Out of the research came a book called *ethNYcity: The Nations, Tongues, and Faiths of Metropolitan New York* that profiles 82 different peoples in the area and a website ([www.unreachednewyork.com](http://www.unreachednewyork.com)) that provides information on different peoples and ways to get involved. These mobilization pieces have helped in not only identifying peoples, their needs, and status of Christian witness, but have also helped local Christians organize prayer and ministry efforts and have provided information for people to know how to connect to the other cultures around them.

Besides initial demographic information on peoples in a specific geographic region, those reaching out to a specific people group need to conduct further research on the worldview of their people. Often, when people begin work among a diaspora community, they can obtain worldview information about the people group in their homeland. However, once migration takes place, the new context has an influence on the immigrant community that begins modifying their worldview—and especially their children’s worldview! If the mission work is going to be effective in transforming the diaspora community’s worldview, then the missionary needs to understand the community’s worldview in its new context. What was effective in reaching this community in their homeland might be different from what will be effective in the new context. For instance, Muslim men in West Africa spend much time during the day sitting and talking while drinking tea. The women in West Africa have very defined roles in a male-dominated society. In New York, West African Muslim men work 60–80 hours a week, often leave their wife (or wives) back in Africa. When they do have their wife (or wives) with them in New York, divorce is very common due to difficulties in adjusting to different gender roles and relationships in America. Such differences affect strategies to reach them with the gospel. Sometimes missionaries among the diaspora community that have had experience working with the same group in their homeland have had difficulty adapting methods to the new context.

## **RAISING THE MISSIONS CLIMATE IN OUR CITIES**

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Over the last couple of decades, individual churches throughout America have increased their direct involvement in mission work among the unreached overseas. It is common, for instance, to hear of churches “adopting” unreached people groups around the world and sending short-term and long-term workers among these people groups. However, in New York City and in most dense urban centers around America, very few churches have

“adopted” unreached people, and most are otherwise uninvolved in work among unreached ethnic groups. Ironically, even though urban churches have more access to unreached people groups within their own geographical setting, they are much less directly involved with unreached ethnic groups than suburban or even rural churches—who spend billions of dollars each year on short-term mission trips around the world.<sup>6</sup> Having members with busier schedules and commute times, and often challenged with ministering to a variety of social ills around them, urban churches are intrinsically more inclined to cope and minister to the proximate struggles around them. As a result, in terms of strategic mission work among unreached peoples, there is not much of a missions climate in urban areas.

To illustrate, the most widely used program for educating American Christians about missions is the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* book and course. Each year, around 200 Perspectives classes take place around the country. Despite being the most strategic city in America for missions among the unreached—which is the heartbeat of the Perspectives course—only two Perspectives classes were held in New York City during my first six years in the city. In contrast, I traveled to a small town in New Hampshire to teach a Perspectives class during the same time period which had more students in one class than both of the New York City classes combined—and they held classes every year! If we are going to see the unreached ethnic groups engaged and reached in our cities, we need to raise the missions climate in our cities. We need to increase Perspectives and other missions curriculum classes (we are expecting up to four Perspectives classes in New York City this year). Pastors, church leaders, denominations, and mission boards need to beat the drum more intensely for urban Christians to advance the kingdom among the unreached in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. When Christians talk about reaching the city, they need to expand their understanding of city reaching beyond reaching elites, culture shapers, and the poor. They need to talk about reaching the nations that God has brought to our cities.

## MOBILIZATION

One advantage of seeking to reach unreached peoples in America is the large amount of Christians that can be mobilized to get involved in the work. Ralph Winters, the most influential missiologist of our generation, was fiercely adamant on the importance of mobilization. He would often

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Swanson, “Increasing the Effectiveness of Short-Term Missions,” Leadership Network, accessed February 22, 2014, [http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/increasing\\_the\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_short\\_term\\_missions-swanson.pdf](http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/increasing_the_effectiveness_of_short_term_missions-swanson.pdf).

ask, “Wouldn’t it be better to awaken 100 sleeping firemen than to hopelessly throw your own little bucket of water on a huge fire yourself?”<sup>7</sup> Our cities are full of sleeping firemen, but when they are awakened, many of them do not know what to do or how to relate to the different unreached groups around them. As a result, it is important that people become connected to existing networks that are already seeking to reach out to different groups. For example, if someone discovers Iraqi Kurds in their city and begins reaching out to them, their work will be greatly enhanced by connecting with a network of other people in America reaching out to Kurds, as well as networks of missionaries and churches from America reaching out to Kurds around the world. Often, these networks will have conferences together, share resources with one another, and share contacts with each other when there are connections with an ethnic group.

Not only do we need to mobilize more workers, but if we are going to be effective, we also need to mobilize different types of people to do mission work in cities compared to those we mobilize to reach rural areas around the world. The needs of immigrants in the city and the challenges in reaching them are often different than they are overseas. For instance, if one is doing mission work in an African village, the physical needs of the people often relate to health, education, and other development issues. In the city, immigrant needs usually deal with visa or legal status, navigating linguistic and cultural barriers, and developing cultural and social organizations to assist the immigrant community. In the African village, the challenge is maintaining enough rapport with gatekeepers to the community—such as village chiefs—in order to have access to the community to share the gospel. In an immigrant, urban setting, such gatekeepers are less important, and the missionary has to share the gospel quickly and more boldly due to the fast pace, size, and transience of the city in order to know on whom to focus in building relationships.

Indeed, mission work among immigrants in the city sometimes even involves creating community. Newer diaspora communities—especially those involving individual units with families left back home (e.g., international students and ethnic communities consisting of individual males who migrated away from their families for work)—often do not have a strong sense of community. In these cases, mission work can actually be enhanced by meeting a felt need of community by creating one for otherwise disconnected people. In working with international students, for instance, new students might look to a missionary, English class, or some sort of organization to connect them with others to make friends.

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Winters, “Editorial Comment,” *Mission Frontiers* (Jan–Feb 1995), accessed March 2, 2014, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/editorial-comment74>.



## **COOPERATION AND PRAYER**

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Among the unreached in the U.S., there are so few workers and so many needs. Fortunately, in pioneering mission efforts, there tends to be much more cooperation and partnership between missionaries, mission agencies, and churches from different evangelical streams than normally take place between American Christians. At the forefront of partnership is the need to unite in prayer—for more laborers, for breakthroughs in different communities, and for mission efforts and events. Although I personally have an affiliation with a denomination, when people ask me who is “on our team,” they receive a much more complicated answer than anticipated when I begin to explain all the different layers of partnership and teaming with Christ-followers from different entities and denominations. If we are going to see the kingdom advance among resistant peoples, we need to be united with other Christians for the common cause of advancing God’s kingdom and put aside petty differences and motivations of building the kingdom of our own church, organization, or denomination.

## **STRUCTURES TO RAISE UP AND NURTURE CROSS- CULTURAL MISSIONARIES IN NORTH AMERICA**

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Doing cross-cultural mission work among the unreached in America is different than doing cross-cultural mission work overseas. When working among the unreached overseas, the missionary is most often within a structure that is supportive and of the same vision as the missionary. In North America, missionaries who work among the unreached often work within, or collaborate with, organizations and churches that do not completely understand, if not critical of, the missionary’s effort to work among unreached immigrants. Cross-cultural missionaries throughout the world often feel isolated, but one feels a different type of social isolation in America when the missionary’s own organization is indifferent or critical of the focus on reaching unreached peoples. Christians all around do not fully understand why the missionary is not overseas “on the mission field.” As a result, if laborers are going to increase among the unreached in America, structures and platforms within mission organizations and churches need to support and facilitate work among the unreached.

## **WITHIN MISSION ORGANIZATIONS**

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While American cities are increasingly immigrant infused and globalized in nature, our American mission organizations are largely structured for a bygone era that have not adapted to globalization and the world’s transnational relationships. For instance, in one American denomination, there are two large mission boards—one for North America and one for the rest of



the world. These two mission boards have very different visions and understanding of missions. The mission board in North America is doing great work in evangelism and church planting, but it does not have a priority or focus on reaching unreached people groups. The mission board of the same denomination focused on work outside of North America has a singular focus on reaching unreached peoples. Furthermore, both organizations have clear parameters on their territory of responsibility. This delineation worked fine until the peoples around the world started moving! As a result, when unreached peoples migrate to America, neither mission organization feels a strong responsibility for reaching them (in part because of a difference in vision and missiology and in part because it is not their assigned territory). The result is an “excluded middle” of missions between the organizations in which unreached peoples in America are largely left out of strategic planning. The same reality also exists with other denominational mission structures.

Para-church mission organizations among the unreached often only send workers overseas, and if they have workers in the U.S. at all, they are usually in a fundraising, mobilizing, recruiting, training, supporting, or administering role. For these organizations, their structure communicates that the mission field among the unreached is only overseas. Granted, looking at sheer numbers, the needs are far greater among the unreached outside of America. However, there are areas of the world that are very difficult politically or religiously for an American to openly share the gospel—or even to visit. Despite this fact, influential people from these countries that have extensive networks in their homeland are often coming to study and work in America. The world is connected in ways that were not possible decades ago when many of our largest mission organizations were founded. Businesses, which are more economically forced to adjust their structures to make a profit, have become so transnational in nature that it is common for even small businesses in America to be directly connected somewhere overseas. Our mission organizations need to adjust, and new mission organizations need to be started, to meet the needs of reaching an increasingly interconnected world.

Sensing a need to address the above issues, we started Global Gates—based in New York City—in 2012, to catalyze mission work among the unreached in America and to follow through doors these peoples opened up for the gospel back in their homeland. Providing such a vision, structure, and platform, we have seen strategic work among the unreached in Metro New York greatly increase over the last couple of years, and expect to see this happening in other parts of the U.S., as well. In order to provide greater support and teamwork in our work in New York, we have established a church for the cross-cultural missionary community. Beforehand, many of us were very focused on our mission work and simply attended worship services. We were doing precisely what we were telling our disciples not to do!

Starting a church of missionaries has enabled us to live in covenant with one another, but to also have flexibility and support unique to our work. We have also been starting discipleship and missionary development groups with workers in New York as well as with workers in other parts of the U.S. through video conferencing. This has helped many workers who were feeling isolated and needing guidance and coaching in order to be more effective in their work.

When I researched the status of Christian witness among the myriad of unreached peoples in Metro New York for several years, I was shocked that almost all people reaching out to the unreached in the city fit into one of two categories. Either they were Americans trained as missionaries overseas who came back to the U.S. due to family or health issues, or they were members of unreached people groups who had come to Christ and were reaching out to their own people. The exceptions to these two categories were few. If we are going to see the unreached know Christ in America, we need to start raising up missionaries in our context. One way we have started doing this in New York is through a one-year missionary training program called Equip, which multiple mission agencies and denominations have worked together to produce. We had four full-time people our first year, eight our second year, and eighteen full-time people in the third year. Some of these students go overseas afterwards and some remain in the U.S. to carry on work among the unreached. All of them receive excellent training by learning while doing, and their training fits into a larger strategy to reach the city.<sup>8</sup> The process has been made possible through mission organizations allowing flexibility and innovation in their structures.

## **WITHIN CHURCHES**

One cannot ignore the diversity of a place like New York City. Therefore, churches in the city often talk about the need to be multi-cultural or multi-ethnic to reach their city. While these efforts need to happen, they rarely, if ever, gain a significant presence of unreached ethnic groups in their churches or reduce lostness among unreached peoples. The reason is that churches will talk about reaching the city, but they often want those efforts to fit into their current structure. The church may succeed in being multi-ethnic, but most members of unreached people groups would not set foot in a church building. One Muslim friend in the Bronx once asked me sincerely, “What is this church nearby here? This is not religion. They play loud music, the women do not wear many clothes, and they dance and wave their hands

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about Equip, visit [www.globalgates.info](http://www.globalgates.info) and [www.nycinternationalproject.org](http://www.nycinternationalproject.org). Other missionary training programs have begun developing throughout America. A few include Toag (<http://toag.net>), Global Frontier Missions (<http://www.globalfrontiermissions.org>), and The Guild (<http://www.uscwm.org/theguild>).

around as if they are at a party. This is not religion! This is discotheque!” If we are going to see the unreached come to Christ in America, churches need to be strategically involved. Most of the time that will involve releasing their members, starting new churches and ministries, and trying things that do not fit into the general structure or location of the church.

Some churches throughout America are beginning to start missional communities as their small group entities in the church. Basically, a group of believers begin to unite around a common purpose or mission and seek to be community with one another while living on mission together. Such developments are healthy signs that the church is moving toward a form that can be effective in reaching the unreached. However, the concept of missional communities needs to be more defined if it is going to be effective in reaching the unreached. Because there are often significant linguistic and cultural barriers in reaching the unreached, an effective missional community to the unreached would need to focus on a specific people group or, sometimes, geographic location (such as an apartment complex full of several different refugee groups). Furthermore, the group would need to have a strong calling to reach out and relate cross-culturally as there will need to be significant sacrifices made.

While the missional community would likely be most effective in starting new small groups or churches that would be reproducible among their focused community, it can sometimes be strategic to invite unreached peoples to the missional community gatherings. Potential believers from an unreached ethnic group have an incredible barrier to work through in exploring a decision to follow Christ. To follow Him would most likely involve being cut off from their community. If such community is going to be cut off, it is difficult for a potential believer to make a decision to follow Christ—even if they believe the Scriptures—when they have not experienced a Christian community that would replace the community they would be losing. As a result, if missional communities shed some of their own cultural preferences and biases and adopt some cultural forms and comforts of the group they are trying to reach, the missional community becomes what I call a “middle group.” They meet the unreached people group half way. They not only have a mission, but are also willing to sacrifice their own comforts to model Christian community and worship in a way that would be welcoming and inclusive of someone from an unreached ethnic group. Whereas traditional churches, small groups, or even missional communities would have a culture too unfamiliar for unreached peoples to investigate Christian community, middle groups have strategic potential for helping unreached peoples overcome the giant barrier of experiencing a community of believers. I recently heard examples of such groups taking place in south France, where a majority of North African Muslims are apparently not coming to faith in Christ through the witness of missionaries, but through French Christians reaching out to Muslims through such

middle groups. Churches in America can be an integral part of reaching the unreached in the U.S., but they must think more about releasing members than gathering the unreached into their current structure.

## **DIFFERENT MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT**

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In reaching the unreached in our cities, engagement from both traditional missionaries and churches will be essential. However, other means of engagement with the unreached are strategic. When most Americans hear about churches engaging unreached peoples in America, they immediately picture an American church like the ones in which they are familiar. I believe the most strategic churches and individuals for engaging unreached peoples, however, will be immigrant(s). First-generation or even 1.5- or second-generation individuals and churches are better positioned to reach out to unreached peoples because of their cultural adaptability and awareness. The most effective churches and individuals will be those from the same culture, or a near culture, to unreached people groups. This effectiveness is two-fold. First, the evangelist does not have to cross significant cultural or linguistic barriers to relate, share the gospel, and disciple; and second, the potential believer will see conversion as more feasible if they see and experience a Christian community made up of people from their same or similar culture.

In New York, for example, most Tibetans come from India or Nepal and settle into South Asian neighborhoods. With many Indian Christians and churches in these neighborhoods, we began praying a couple of years ago for Indian Christians to lead Tibetans to Christ. Around a year ago, the first Tibetans in New York trusted in Christ. Not surprisingly, they were taught the gospel and led to the Lord by an Indian Christian immigrant. In Richmond Hill, Queens, an enclave of Punjabi Sikhs has developed right next to an enclave of Indo-Caribbeans. After a long history of being in countries like Guyana, a significant minority of Indo-Caribbeans are now Christian and perhaps the most strategic group for reaching out to Sikhs. The same could be said for Korean Christians reaching out to Korean-Chinese agnostics and Buddhists, or Hispanic Christians reaching out to African Muslims. Hispanics and Africans often work side-by-side many hours of the week. All the while, Hispanics have become more evangelical in New York City than in their homeland and have many socio-cultural characteristics in common with African Muslims—without the political and racial barriers that plague other ethnic groups. Immigrants are strategic for reaching unreached peoples in cities. A few will do it naturally, but as with most of us, a little nudge, vision, and guidance is needed to usher more into the mission.

One way immigrants and other Christians can strategically be engaged with unreached peoples is through kingdom businesses. These businesses are intentionally started and run by Christians to honor Christ in business dealings and with employees and customers. Beyond Christian ethics, these

businesses are focused intentionally on sharing Christ and discipling people in, and through, the business. One day when I was walking the streets of Harlem with my African pastor friend David (himself a former Muslim), he commented on the shock he experienced when he first came to “Christian” America. “I could not understand this,” he exclaimed. “Here I come to a country with so many Christians, in a neighborhood with so many churches, and you can’t even tell there are Christians here when you walk into the shops. But listen to me,” David continued while pointing a long index finger toward Muslim businesses around. “These Muslim shops are everywhere, and you know they are Muslim on the outside and inside. They use their stores to tell people about Islam, to point people to the mosque, to raise funds for the mosque, to teach people about Islam. Why do Christians not have stores like these?! They are not serious about these things. I thought this was a Christian country. No!!!” David said as his voice trailed off, eyes rolling in disgust.

Christians in America have created a false divide between sacred and secular. Most immigrants have not created such a divide. Businesses are sometimes the most strategic place to engage unreached peoples with the gospel, as they are sometimes the only natural platform from which to share the gospel with people from these groups. Whether it is a Christian sharing with an Orthodox Jew at a furniture wholesale show, a Christian purposefully starting a fast food restaurant in a Muslim neighborhood and hiring Muslim workers, a Christian business owner hiring bi-vocational missionaries and giving them flexible hours, or Christian business owners utilizing their space after hours for Bible studies, prayer meetings, or other ministry endeavors, kingdom businesses need to be started throughout the city.

## **INTENTIONALITY OF REACHING SPECIFIC PEOPLES**

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It is often said by churches in the city, “We don’t want to target any one group,” “We want to be a picture of heaven with all groups represented before the Throne,” or “We want to be accepting of everyone, and to have an emphasis on reaching a specific group is ethnocentric.” Other variations exist, and all of them miss the point. Unless there is some social movement that has made a particular unreached ethnic group inclined to leave their religion and join another (such as Iranians’ disenchantment with Islam after the Islamic Revolution), it takes a focused effort to reach unreached peoples. A founding member of a large church in New York City once told me, “We thought if we had a large, influential church in New York City that the influence would naturally trickle down and reach all people groups. We have realized we were wrong in our assumption, and we have hardly touched the unreached people groups in our city.” If churches only focus on whoever is most responsive, then unreached peoples will most likely

remain untouched. A focus on starting new churches, ministries, or small groups among the unreached is necessary. The goal is not to divide people from one another, but to reach an entire city. A 1982 Lausanne Committee Meeting in Chicago coined what has become a common definition for evangelization purposes of a people group, claiming a people group is, “The largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.” We must not be shortsighted in our church and mission strategy and ignore the significant barriers of understanding and acceptance that exist in our cities between unreached peoples and the existing Christian population.

## **CHRISTIANS MUST LIVE AS “FOREIGN” MISSIONARIES**

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### **WITHIN A NATIVE SETTING**

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One might be in America, but to be effective in working with unreached peoples, one will have to live as if they left. In some ways, it is easier for an American to be a missionary overseas with the unreached. When the missionary leaves to go overseas, he naturally feels the need to give up cultural comforts and adapt to a new culture for the sake of the gospel. While doing the same work in America, it is a lot more difficult to do this socially, especially when the missionary is from a majority culture reaching out to a minority culture. Nevertheless, the Christian focused on reaching the unreached will have to start living in a “non-American” way in order to relate well to the group he is trying to reach. Just as the immigrant has his feet in two worlds (their home country and America), so the Christian worker must have his feet in two worlds (America as well as being a “citizen of the diaspora”). By being a “citizen of the diaspora,” the Christian worker can begin constructing values, schedules, and ministry plans that look completely different from typical American ministry. For example, West Africans in New York have a different understanding of time and schedule than the typical American does. Invited to an event that started at 9 p.m., I showed up at 11 p.m.—only to find out that I was one of the first to arrive. The doors opened at 1 a.m., and the event ended at 6 a.m. This was not a nightclub; it was simply a social gathering! I have had Bible studies that consisted of arriving at someone’s home at 10 p.m.—an hour after they arrived at home from work. We would eat around 11 or 11:30 p.m. and start the Bible study around midnight. I would walk home at 1 or 1:30 a.m. We have had “baby naming ceremonies” for our children in places like African Muslim centers in which we naturally shared our faith and the joy of God in giving life through a familiar cultural form to Muslims. All of these events are strange as an American, but are perfectly normal when one becomes a citizen of the diaspora.



## **DEPLOYING MISSIONARIES IN RESPONSE TO SOCIAL STIRRINGS**

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Most people switch religions due to some sort of dissonance in their lives (i.e., their beliefs and values are no longer consistent with their actions and what they are coming to view as reality). One of the clearest examples in America is what happens to many people after they leave home and go to college. Although they thought they knew what they believed and valued, suddenly they are confronted with students and professors that value and believe different things. The student begins to wonder what reality is and either returns to the beliefs they began with through renewed personal conviction, or they switch religions because perceived reality and previous beliefs no longer mesh. Traumatic events, natural disasters, and dramatic shifts in a person's life all create the same effect of breaking up the routine and ritual patterns of thought and create a stirring within many people for reality, meaning, and truth. Such dissonance in peoples' lives creates windows of opportunity and openness to the gospel.

In working with the unreached, we need to recognize individuals and peoples within such states and lovingly come alongside them for Christ to attend to their physical, emotional, and spiritual need. Immigrants that come to America naturally experience some of this dissonance upon arrival, or perhaps they even came to America because of such dissonance or social disruption (e.g., refugees whose homes were taken away, young Japanese creative women that do not feel they have a place in Japanese society, etc.). These immigrants have a window that is most open to the gospel in their first year or two of arrival. After that time, they establish new patterns, community, and understandings of reality that are likely not to be shaken until another dramatic social shift occurs in their lives. For example, many Russian Jews came to America as blank slates. Communism had effectively driven out much belief. Upon arrival in America and confronted with many different beliefs around them, it was difficult for Russian Jews to remain passive on metaphysical convictions. As a result, many of them became more religious in religions they already adhered to, switched religions, or became more passionately agnostic. One church in Brooklyn baptized over six hundred Jews in six years because they were there to meet them upon first arrival when people were most open. Later, other denominations and churches saw the results and wanted to be part of the action, only to find that the window of opportunity had largely been closed as the community became more established. We need to strategically deploy missionaries among unreached peoples during windows of social stirring in their lives.

## **COLLABORATE WITH MISSION EFFORTS IN PEOPLE'S HOMELAND**

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Work among the unreached in America will be much more effective when there is collaboration with mission efforts in people's homeland. Without



these connections, one can miss incredible opportunities to know about Christians and seekers who have migrated to the city from the people one is trying to reach. One of our Global Gates missionaries has strong connections with mission work in South Asia. Through these contacts, he was made aware of a man who had started dozens of Muslim-background churches who was willing to come to America for a period of several months to see if he could stir up something among the diaspora community of people from his country. Having been a part of a movement of Muslims coming to Christ, this man had a great impact in finding interested seekers and mentoring our missionaries. Furthermore, the diaspora community often has incredible influence back home, and one of the greatest impacts of mission work among the diaspora will actually come through the doors these people open up for the gospel in their homeland. I used to live among an unreached ethnic group in West Africa that had no church and no known believers. Upon meeting a believer from that ethnic group in New York City (who was in America due to persecution), I returned to this man's village in Africa through the relational doors he opened up. His newfound status of being in America gave us great access in the village, and several years later, leaders reported forty Christians in their village. Connecting overseas will maximize the potential of diaspora ministry.

## CONCLUSION

With mission work among unreached peoples in the U.S. at a pioneering stage, new networks, initiatives, and innovations will need to be developed to move the work forward. A New York City pastor with a long tenure in the city once turned to me and commented on our work among unreached immigrants. He said, "It is an idea whose time has come." It was one hundred years ago that New York pastor Edward Judson said, "Our heavenly Father deemed it wise to put in the hearts of the heathen to come from all parts of the world to our shores, paying their own expenses." Thousands of immigrants flock into our cities every year in search of the American dream. May we not be so wrapped up in the American dream ourselves that we falter an unprecedented opportunity to walk across the street, move to the other side of town, or travel across country to welcome strangers—into our lives and into His kingdom.

## About the Author

Chris Clayman is the Director of Global Gates Network ([www.globalgates.info](http://www.globalgates.info)), an organization focused on making disciples among unreached peoples in U.S. cities. He has been involved in pioneer church planting in urban and rural West Africa among unreached Muslim peoples, and he is the author of *ethNYcity: The Nations, Tongues, and Faiths of Metropolitan New York* ([www.unreachednewyork.com](http://www.unreachednewyork.com)). Chris lives with his wife and three children in the Bronx.