

How Many People Groups are There?

Larry Walker

Researchers have argued about the definition of a people group. How many are there, and how many are truly unreached? At the time of this writing, The Global Evangelization Database gives the number of ethnolinguistic peoples as 11,874. But within these are various dialects and other sub-groupings which may raise the number to 24,000 or more. Herein lies the confusion between the numbers of unreached peoples given by different researchers.

All the lists of peoples or estimates of the total number of peoples are based on "obtainable" second-hand data. While such lists and estimates are helpful for mobilizing mission resources and planning the initial phases of a people focused strategy, we never truly know just how many distinct peoples a name on a list represents until someone takes the plunge and lives long-term among them.

During the late '70s, my family and I moved into a Tzutujil (Sutuheal) Indian Village called Santiago Atitlan, in the highlands of Guatemala.

I will never forget my first plunge into Tzutujil culture. The first week I was there I went to the shore of the lake to fetch water. As I tried to push a plastic container under the water I lost my balance and fell into the lake. My daughters were screaming, "Are you all right, Daddy?" Tzutujil women were trying their best to hide their laughter at the lanky gringo trying to crawl out of an embarrassing situation.

I learned later that only women fetched water in that culture. That incident symbolizes how awkward I felt trying to navigate my way through a culture that was very different from my own.

My responsibility was to train leaders in 20 some churches located around Lake Atitlan. Those congregations spoke one of three Mayan languages—Cakchiquel, Quiche and Tzutujil. Among the Cakchiquel is where one of the most significant initial events of the modern mission movement took place. It was a Cakchiquel man who asked a young Cameron Townsend who was trying to sell him a Spanish Bible, "If your God is so smart, why can't he speak Cakchiquel?"

That question echoed in Townsend's mind until he finally translated the New Testament into Cakchiquel and eventually started Wycliffe Bible Translators to reach the other Bibleless peoples of the world. But as it turns out, after missionaries had lived among the Cakchiquels for a number of years, they began to realize that Cakchiquel was not just one



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of the Mayan languages in Guatemala, but it was really a cluster of six different dialects. As a result, Wycliffe is now doing a simultaneous translation of the New Testament so that our God will finally “speak” in all six written dialects of Cakchiquel.’

A very similar process occurred among the nearby Tzutujil people with whom I was working. Interestingly, Cameron Townsend was one of the first pioneer missionaries to bring the gospel to the Tzutujil people as well. One of the very first converts in Santiago Atitlan told me he remembers Townsend sleeping on the shore of the lake because the people would not let him sleep in the village. It was common for missionaries to be dragged through the streets by the hair, to be jailed, or have their homes burned, etc., in those early days.

The number of converts were very few at first. But there was a dramatic change in the lifestyle of the new believers. So even though the early believers were ostracized and persecuted, their positive testimony became the fuel that sparked the beginnings of a genuine people movement among the villages around the lake. Still the Tzutujil lacked the Bible in their own language.

In the early sixties, Jim and Judy Butler arrived to translate the New Testament into Tzutujil. They decided to live and do their translation work in San Pedrano de La Laguna because the Pedrano-Tzutujil were more progressive and assertive than Tzutujil in other villages. When we took the plunge into the Tzutujil world in the late 70s, the Butlers had just finished the New Testament.

I was delighted to have the New Testament in the Tzutujil language. But I very soon discovered that the Atitecos-Tzutujil (people of Santiago Atitlan) did not want to use the Tzutujil translation. The only thing that separated the two villages was a volcano. But as I soon learned, the languages of the two groups were quite different.

In time, I came to realize that the problem was not even a problem of one group not understanding the other. The Atitecos could understand 90% of the translation. The problem was that it was from San Pedro de La Laguna and it sounded foreign to them.

I came to understand that one of their core values is a pride in local traditions and a built-in resistance to anything foreign. Americans value progress and “building better mouse traps,” but this is totally contrary to the way the Tzutujil think. For example, if a teenage girl decides to wear sandals in public for the first time, she will have to suffer ridicule for at least a week from her peers. Each village has its own distinctive dress for men and women as well as many customs that give them their own separate identity.

I came to the conclusion that a New Testament for the Atiteco-Tzutujil villages would be necessary to maintain an indigenous people movement among these people. I recruited my language helper to begin the translation. After I left the field, Jim Butler continued to supervise the translation into the Atiteco-Tzutujil dialect. The translation was dedicated in September of 1993.

So what originally was thought to be one people group, came to be seen as really two, with two translations needed. The indigenous people movement continues to grow among these villages around the lake. Today, some 25-35% of the people are evangelicals. Translations in the various dialects will play an important role in maintaining that people movement for years to come, giving every individual the ability to hear the gospel and read the Bible in his or her own dialect.

This is just one example of what is going on around the world in hundreds of people groups. Missionaries will never really know how many people groups there are until they “take the plunge” and live among the people.

Study Questions

1. Based on Walker's experience what process is necessary to determine how many people groups are not yet reached?
2. Why is it important for every people group to have the Scriptures in their own language?