

DEMOGRAPHICS: A TOOL FOR TELLING THE GOSPEL STORY

I'm not a psychologist, social scientist, or public opinion researcher. However I have read and studied some from those experts because they do offer some important insights into why people are unchurched. One of those resources is Paul Hiebert's book *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. As a foreign missionary at the time of my first reading this book I enthusiastically agreed with Heibert's argument that missionaries must understand the people they serve in their historical and cultural settings. His book also helped me appreciate that as a communicator I must also understand my own historical and cultural settings. I believe Hiebert's book affirmed what I experienced as missionary; taking the time and effort to understand people groups is a valuable tool for telling the Gospel story. Ignoring and not using this tool may result in church planters proclaiming a meaningless and irrelevant message. Therefore, I want to help you develop appreciation for understanding people groups and skills in understanding people groups so that:

1. your evangelism, discipling, fellowshiping, ministering, and worshiping might become less disappointing and more effective
2. unchurched and irreligious people who are investigating the Christian faith will not face your man-made barriers to the Gospel message

How can you and your new church reach the unchurched in your area? How can you touch the irreligious people that really have doubts about God, Jesus, and especially those that really are anti-church? How can you focus your resources and efforts to reach non-Christians who don't even realize that they need a personal faith in Jesus for a right relationship to God? How can you as a church planter reach those who have been ignored or rejected by Jesus' church? Do you know someone that fits that description? Do you and your new church want to bring the Gospel to them, but you're not sure what to do, or what you have done wrong?

First you must **love the irreligious, unchurched, non-Christian people as much as you love God and your God ways.**

Matthew 22:34-40 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

1 Cor. 9:19-27 Paul loved those pagans passionately and purposefully. Jesus and Paul want you to love them into God's family, whatever it takes.

Acts 10 and 11 Peter and the Jewish circumcised believers had to give up their God ways so the Gospel story could be told to the non-Jewish "outsiders."

Second you need to appreciate the usefulness this tool enough to **develop some anthropology skills.** **Paul G. Hiebert in his book** argues for using this tool and provides church planters skills in using this tool for developing expertise in telling "The Gospel Story" to those of another culture. Hiebert wants church planters to understand their focus group or people group's cultural setting. He wants to convince missionaries and church planters that they must understand themselves, their personal cultural backgrounds, in order to avoid proclaiming a meaningless and irrelevant message that is not "The Gospel Story." The following material is adapted from *Anthropological Insightsfor Missionaries*.

Culture or world view: the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do.

A. There are five ways that anthropology can assist us in understanding today's world and its people so we effectively communicate the Gospel story.

1. bring understanding of cross-cultural communications
2. provide us with insights into contextualizing church planting tasks
3. help us understand the processes of conversion
4. help us make the Gospel story and the Bible relevant to our focus audience
5. help us relate to people of different cultures by assisting us in strategies for building relational bridges between cultures

B. There are three theological assumptions that Christian anthropology takes if we are to contextualize the Bible and the Gospel story.

1. The priesthood of all believers meaning those new converts in our target or focus group have as much right as we to read and interpret the Scriptures.
2. The theology of the church planter must come from having one foot in biblical revelation and the other in the cultural context of the people hearing the Gospel story.
3. Although the Gospel story and the message of the Bible is supracultural—above all cultures—it must be understood by people living within their own heritage, time frame, and world view.

C. There are four anthropological assumptions that the church planter needs to accept if they are to properly contextualize the Bible and the Gospel story.

1. Each culture seems to have its own world view, or fundamental way of looking at things.
2. Cross-cultural communication at the deepest level is possible only when we understand the world views of the people to whom we minister.
3. People will understand the Bible and the Gospel story from the perspective of their own world view.
4. Church planters must understand not only the explicit symbols but also the implicit beliefs in a culture if they are to communicate the gospel to its people with a minimum of distortion.

The Gospel Story calls us to see people of our focus group, or target population as human beings needing Jesus, and any effective church planting action begins by building relationships, not programs or strategies.

Thirdly you need to **develop the skill of discovering people's world views by asking some questions and observing them in their non-church environment.** How can you build relationships with the unchurched in your area? How do you identify and describe them? How do you know when you have made contact with one of them?

1. What are they doing for a living?

Government or charitable support

Teachers, Housewives, Construction workers
Small business owner/managers, Commuters, College students
Professional: Dentist, Doctor, Nurse, Accountant, Lawyer
Skilled Mechanic, Plumber, Electrician

2. What are they doing for leisure?

Costly Fun activities: Hunting or Fishing seriously, Farming or Giant Gardening, Gaming Industry or Gambling

Watching: TV, computer screens, movies screens, sale aisles

Playing Sports: baseball, softball, soccer, swimming, football, basketball, volleyball, golf

Extreme Sports: skate boarding, white watering, dirt bikes, skydiving, mountain climbing

3. What are they relating to or not relating to?

To: TV, CABLE, RADIO, MTV, ESPN, DISCOVERY CHANNEL
NASCAR, NHRA, INDY CARS, PGA, NFL – AFC – NFC, NL or AL
WALMART, KMART, FAMOUS

Not to: TIES, TITHES, TESTIMONIES OR CHRISTIAN LINGO

4. What are they thinking about your Baptist Church?

Going to Church is so intimidating because they don't know how to behave in your new church.
They don't know how to dress in your church.

They don't want to be pressured into making a decision before they are really ready.

They don't know if you are Jesus' freaks or some sort of cult.

They don't know if your church is boring, hypocritical, money-grubbing, or totally irrelevant to their lives.

5. What are their ministry needs? Where do they hurt, what has gone wrong with their:

Relationships

Family life

Addictions

Finances

Jobs

Careers

6. Do they know who God really is?

Confused by the New Age movement or some other movement of the moment

Old and boring

Not intellectually possible

Not relevant for living in today's world

Not as powerful as witchcraft

7. What do we do with our understanding of their worldview or culture?

Compare the irreligious and unchurched people's worldview to the Christian, Biblical view of the Christian life.

Develop a list of similarities and barriers to the Gospel and to a Christian lifestyle.

Identify major issues that we will encounter that may be barriers or bridges for the Christian worldview.

Construct a people profile, UNCHURCHED HARRY & MARY

The following material is adapted from James P. Spradely's The Ethnographic Interview SIL World View Workshop Format document.

A worldview is a profile of the way the people within a specified culture live, act, think, work and relate. It is a "map" of a culture's social, religious, economic and political views and relationships. Anthropologists refer to the process of constructing a worldview as an "ethnographic interview" or ethnographic study of a people. An ethnography is a description of the behavior and lifestyle of a people—a community, a society, or a culture.

Seven general categories to be considered for inclusion in the ethnographic or worldview instrument.

1. Life Cycle

Birth
Naming
Weaning/separation
Engagement/special friend
Marriage/Living together
Separation/Divorce
Death/funeral/burial

2. The Supernatural

Fate of the dead
Spirits/Ghosts
Prophets/Reliable sources
Shrines/Special Places
Sacred Objects/Collections
Witchcraft/myths
God or gods

3. Forms of Ritual

Prayer
Charity/Offerings
Initiations/Ordeals
Sacred Promises/Oaths
Channeling Spirits/Divinations
Weddings
Gambling

4. Household Habits

Food/drinks
Personal Hygiene
Cleaning
Entertainment
Renting/owning
Appearance to others

5. Public Life

Language
Labor
Relationships
Politics
Schooling
Shopping

6. Instructions to Children

Danger
Taboos
Customs
Beliefs
Fears
Kinship

7. Cultural Structures

Housing
Architectural designs
Dress habits and rules
Cultivation/Manufacture/Business
Transportation
Contracts/Agreements

How will you use this tool? How do you conduct an ethnographic interview? Where and with whom do you conduct this kind of interview? Do you take a tape recorder or pen and pad? In Heibert's book is an article by Donald Larson in which Larson describes his three step approach with a new people group.

1. First become a learner. Learn their language, they know you mean business—they are worth something to you because you make an effort to communicate on their terms. Learn about the

way they live, how they make their living, what they do for enjoyment, how they hurt, and how they struggle for survival and satisfaction. Go out in public places and make whatever contacts are natural with local residents. Let them know you are there to learn from them. Learn to see the world through their eyes. Step outside the thought system of your own culture and think their way.

2. Second become a trader. Trade your experiences and insights with the people you have established relationships with out in those public places in ways that seem natural with the local residents. Trade your way of living, how you make your living, what you do for enjoyment, how you hurt, and how you struggle for survival and satisfaction.

3. Third become a story teller. Tell the story of the wanderings of the people of Israel, the coming of Christ, the beginnings of God's new people, the movement of the Church into all the world and ultimately into this very community, and finally, your own story of your encounter with Christ and your walk as a Christian.

Finally to help you apply what you learn by using this tool of demographics and ethnographic interviews you need **to read books like Lee Strobel's *Inside the mind of unchurched Harry & Mary*** which gives some observations about the unchurched in America today.

1. They have rejected church, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have rejected God.
2. They are morally adrift, but they secretly want an anchor.
3. They resist rules but respond to reasons.
4. They really don't understand Christianity, but they're also confused about what they claim to believe in.
5. They have legitimate questions about spiritual matters, but they don't expect answers from Christians.
6. They aren't asking, "Is Christianity true?" More often they're asking, "Does Christianity work?"
7. They don't just want to know something, they want to experience it.
8. They don't want to be somebody's project, but they would like to be somebody's friend.
9. They may distrust authority, but they're receptive to authentic biblical leadership.

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