

A faint, light gray world map is visible in the background, composed of a pattern of dots of varying sizes that form the outlines of the continents.

QUARTERLY REPORT

APRIL 2026 EDITION



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Converging Peoples, Nodes, and Villages



QUICK SUMMARY

Ministry strategy focused exclusively on urban ministry, village saturation, or people groups each have real strengths but notable blind spots. A "Peoples, Nodes, and Villages" framework integrates all three. Missionary teams map a people group's key nodes (cities, towns, digital platforms) where cultural barriers are lowest, deploy E2/E3 workers there catalytically, and measure success by gospel saturation through E1 evangelists into every segment and location.

Rapid urbanization, globalization, migration, and digital communication have complicated people group-focused strategies and swayed some mission agencies to focus on either broad city ministry or "church in every village" saturation models. We need convergence among these models as each focus has its own set of strengths and weaknesses.



URBAN FOCUS

Strength: Rightly engages the world as it is becoming networked, urban, and rapidly changing.

Weakness: Can quietly follow the path of least resistance, focusing ministry primarily among those already predisposed to Christian influence, while resistant communities (often Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist background peoples) remain untouched.



SATURATION (CHURCH IN EVERY VILLAGE) FOCUS

Strength: Insists that no place be overlooked, pressing toward gospel presence in every village.

Weakness: Can suffer "people blindness," assuming that a church in a location equals effective access for every community in that location, even when the church is not credible to a particular people group or related to the dominant culture in the village.



PEOPLE GROUP FOCUS

Strength: Aims at breakthrough churches in people groups who have strong understanding or acceptance barriers to the gospel.

Weakness: Can miss the importance of the gospel's spread into every population segment and location. Can also miss the importance of leveraging urban gateways for influencing a wider society.

CONVERGENCE OF PEOPLES, NODES, AND VILLAGES

These three strategies can be integrated into a single Peoples, Nodes, and Villages framework.

In this paradigm, nodes are primary gathering points where relationships and communication within a people group intersect, becoming launching spaces for gospel advance. Nodes are often cities or large towns, but can also be digital platforms, including websites and social media channels.

Missionary teams are deployed not by assuming the geographic heartland is always the best entry point, but by mapping the major nodes of a people group and prioritizing locations where cultural distance is lowest and relational connectivity is highest across every segment.

Building on Ralph Winter's E1, E2, and E3 categories, breakthroughs that once required distant-culture (E3) engagement may increasingly occur through near-culture (E2) labor, especially as the cultures and

languages of unreached people groups diversify and become more layered through globalization and urbanization, and the Christian labor force continues to spread to become more geographically and culturally proximate to unreached peoples. E3 workers can play catalytic roles in and through the major nodes of a people group. This becomes especially potent when paired with digital engagement, where initial exposure and investigation is increasingly happening before in-person contact. Most evangelism and church planting into every village will happen through E1 (same-culture) evangelists.

In the Peoples, Nodes, and Villages paradigm, E2 and E3 workers focus on people groups but anchor their focus in and through urban and digital nodes where barriers are often already softened. Their success is then measured by saturation of the gospel through E1 and E2 evangelists into all segments of a people group and into every place.

For a full article that describes this paradigm, see Chris Clayman and Rotimi Akinpelu, "[Converging Peoples, Nodes, and Villages](#)," International Journal of Frontier Missiology (41:1-2 Spring-Summer 2024), 57-64.

With Joshua Project, we are increasingly emphasizing the People Group Across Country view of people groups to emphasize connectivity, and we have plans to help identify the major nodes of frontier people groups.

SCAN HERE TO DOWNLOAD



SUMMARY

Top Line Numbers

+ PGACs added 22

— PGACs removed 5

+ PGICs added 30

— PGICs removed 5

PGAC People Groups
Across Countries

Added (22 total)

Three newly differentiated Jewish subgroups account for most additions — Jewish, Hasidic (22664), Jewish, Litvish/Yeshivish (22663), and Jewish, Chabad-Lubavitch (22665) — along with Berber, Tmagourt (22662).

Removed (5)

Detribalized Pidgen (19637), All Ijaw (61457) [Ijaw Southeast (15024), Ijaw Eastern (13953), Ijaw Northeast Central (11043)], and Sinhalese (21437).

PGIC People Groups
In Country

Added (30 total)

The same Jewish subgroups (Litvish/Yeshivish, Hasidic, Chabad-Lubavitch) were added across multiple countries, including South Africa, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, France, Canada, Israel, the UK, and the US. Additional adds include Lahu Shi Balan, Hkahku, and Vet in Myanmar; Berber Tmagourt in Tunisia; Rohingya in India and Pakistan; Berber Kabyle in the US and UK; and Drukpa in Australia.

Removed (5)

Arab Hadrami, Arab Omani, and Arab Yemeni (all in Kenya); Rohingya in Thailand; and Hkauri in China.

Population updates **70**
Updates to % Christian Adherent **52**
Updates to % Evangelical **58**

Language resource additions **72**
New full Bible translations **13**
New NT translations **22**
New scripture "Portions" translations **38**

Not Frontier → became Frontier **7**
All other status changes **0**

STATUS CHANGE

7 groups moved from "Not Frontier" to Frontier status, all in Russia except one:

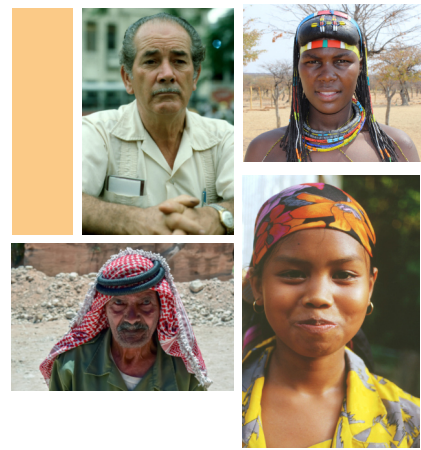
- Abkhaz, Archi, Ginukh, Ossette, Tabasaran, and Chirag/Amuq — all in **Russia**
- En — in **Vietnam**

No groups moved in the other direction (Frontier → UPG or non-UPG).

The dominant story this quarter is the addition of newly differentiated Jewish subgroups across many countries, plus 7 groups reclassified as Frontier People Groups — 6 of them in Russia.

SCAN TO VIEW

[Click to view the latest database updates](#)



1.2 Billion People, 52 Clusters

A New Lens on the Remaining Task



QUICK SUMMARY

Over **1.2 billion people** live within **52 Frontier People Clusters** where the average Christian presence is less than one believer for every thousand individuals. These 52 clusters contain 1,078 people groups, and they represent the most concentrated area of remaining need for pioneer cross-cultural missions.

PEOPLE GROUPS REMAIN THE TARGET

Let us be clear: the individual people group remains the foundational unit for church planting strategy. People groups are where the gospel takes root, where churches are planted, and where indigenous movements multiply. Nothing about the cluster framework changes that.

However, with over 3,200 frontier people groups (from a People Group Across Countries perspective) still lacking a meaningful gospel witness, the complexity of the remaining task creates a real coordination challenge. Leaders need a way

to see the bigger picture without losing focus on the people group. That is what Frontier People Clusters provide: a strategic layer above the people group that helps agencies organize, collaborates, and allocates resources where the need is greatest.

Over **half** the world's frontier people groups, measured by population, live within these clusters making the 52 Frontier People Clusters. That concentration is not random. It is an opportunity for focused, coordinated action.



WHAT IS A PEOPLE CLUSTER?

A **people cluster** groups together people groups that share similar cultural, linguistic, geographic, or ethnic characteristics. Building on the Ethnic Peoples Tree framework developed by Patrick Johnstone and others, people clusters sit between broad Affinity Blocs and individual people groups.

A **Frontier People Cluster** is a cluster where the weighted average of Christian presence across all constituent people groups falls below **0.1%**. These are families of peoples where the gospel has not yet gained a foothold for indigenous multiplication.

People groups within a cluster are connected by one or more of four characteristics: **shared language family, geographic proximity, ethnic kinship, or common religious context**. These connectors determine how gospel progress in one group might resonate in a neighboring group.

Groups within a cluster are not the same people, which is the critical distinction.

Real barriers exist between them, including distinct languages, social structures, and local identities. But they are near-culture to one another. Proximity enables lessons learned, resources developed, and relationships built, helping adapt more readily to neighboring groups within the same cluster.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

For organizational leaders, clusters change the strategic picture in two ways.

First, they reveal connections you may not be seeing. Your agency likely already has workers among people groups that belong to the same cluster without recognizing those engagements as related. When you view your portfolio through the cluster lens, isolated efforts become a coordinated footprint. Gaps become visible. Overlap with partner agencies becomes an opportunity for shared intelligence rather than duplicated effort.

Second, clusters shorten the distance between existing work and new breakthroughs. Resources developed for one group (translations, media, training materials, oral scripture) can often be adapted for a closely related group in the same cluster. This does not eliminate contextualization, but it means you are not starting from zero every time you engage a neighboring people.

THE NEAR-CULTURE MOBILIZATION OPPORTUNITY

Organizational leaders should pay close attention to the following. The majority of frontier people groups, measured by group count, live within clusters that also contain people groups who are no longer frontier. Even more striking, 25% of frontier people groups live in people clusters that are no longer unreached. Read that again: ***one in four frontier people groups already has near-culture neighbors where the church is established***. This is not a marginal finding. It reshapes how we think about mobilization strategy.

Believers from reached groups within the same cluster share linguistic, ethnic, or geographic proximity with frontier groups. They are near-culture neighbors who can cross barriers that Western workers struggle with. They understand the religious context, the social dynamics, and the cultural assumptions in ways that dramatically shorten the distance between the established church and the unreached.

Identifying these near-culture mobilization opportunities within your cluster strategy could be one of the most consequential decisions your organization makes in the next five years. The question is not just "where are the unreached?" but "*where are the unreached who have reached neighbors nearby?*"

WE NEED YOUR FIELD FEEDBACK

Joshua Project is currently conducting an initial review of all 52 Frontier People Clusters validating constituent people groups, populations, and engagement data. But data review alone is not enough. We need field practitioners to help us refine these groupings.

Some clusters are tightly bound by a single dominant connector, such as the Baloch cluster connected by shared ethnicity and geography across Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Others are more loosely related. Cluster boundaries may evolve as field data improves, and your teams have ground-level knowledge that no database can replicate.



*Where are the unreached
who have reached
neighbors nearby?*

HERE IS WHAT WE ARE ASKING

- Review the clusters where your organization is active and assess whether the groupings reflect the cultural and strategic realities your teams experience.
- Identify where near-culture mobilization opportunities exist within your clusters.
- Flag clusters that may need to be subdivided, merged, or reclassified based on field observation.

Fifty-two clusters are a manageable number for the global missions community to organize. Every cluster can have a coordinated strategy. Every people group within it can have an adopting church. Getting there requires your partnership.

Visit joshuaproject.net to explore the Frontier People Clusters and contribute your field perspective.

SCAN THIS



The Shuwa Arab Problem

What We Know, What We are Missing, and Why It Matters



QUICK SUMMARY

Joshua Project's single "Shuwa Arab" entry covers 4.6 million people across seven countries but masks dozens of distinct tribal communities with separate leadership, territories, and dialects. This confederation-level entry cannot support targeted church planting strategy. While tribal mapping exists for Chad and partially for Sudan, field verification across the broader Sahel is still needed. Practitioners working in the region are invited to contribute.

THE CORE PROBLEM

Joshua Project currently carries a single entry, "Shuwa Arab" (ID 14926), representing 4.6 million people across seven countries. The problem is structural: this entry functions as an umbrella over a dozen distinct tribal communities, each with separate leadership structures, territorial boundaries, migration patterns, and in some cases, mutually unintelligible dialects. For organizations allocating resources to unreached populations, a confederation-level entry cannot support targeted church planting strategy.

A DEEPER CLASSIFICATION ISSUE

The Shuwa Arab situation exposes a broader inconsistency in the database. Some entries represent confederations; some represent tribes; and some represent sub-tribes or clans. Without a standardized framework for determining which level constitutes an operationally meaningful "people group,"

strategy decisions rest on an uneven foundation.

This inconsistency was not the result of carelessness. It reflects Joshua Project's longstanding commitment to field responsiveness: when practitioners report a missing group, we add it; when they identify an over-split entry, we consolidate. In some cases, the original entry was built on linguistic data alone, without tribal distinctions. This tension between field responsiveness and data integrity is real, and navigating it is part of the work.

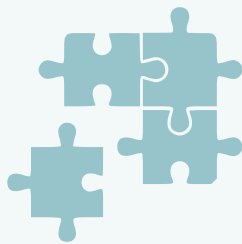
WHAT THE RESEARCH HAS ESTABLISHED

Through engagement with field linguists and review of French-language ethnographic literature (Pommerol, Carbou, Hagenbucher, Zeltner), Joshua Project has mapped the broad tribal landscape. In Chad alone, three major confederations (Jouhayna, Hassaouna, Wulaad Sliiman) contain 15 or more distinct tribal groups. In

Sudan, established tribes such as the Ta'aisha, Hawazma, and Beni Halba operate with their own nazirs and territorial boundaries.

The picture is different in Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. In such contexts, "Shuwa Arab" appears to function as the primary identity marker across

communities. Disaggregating those populations at the tribal level may not be appropriate and could misrepresent how these groups actually understand themselves.



WHAT IS STILL NEEDED

The research is incomplete, and Joshua Project is being transparent about that. Solid ethnographic mapping exists for Chad and partial coverage for Sudan, but current field verification across the broader Sahel is lacking. Population estimates for individual tribes remain rough ranges rather than confirmed figures.

The core question driving further research is straightforward: at what level do these communities actually function as distinct social units for church planting and approximately how many people identify at that level? Until field practitioners working in Chad, Sudan, Niger, Cameroon, CAR, and Nigeria can provide ground-level input; any proposed restructuring of this entry remains an informed hypothesis rather than a verified taxonomy.



THE ASK

If your organization works among Arabic-speaking pastoral communities in the Sahel, your field knowledge directly shapes whether this entry can be improved into a tool that serves strategic decision-making and resource allocation to some of the neediest groups of the Sahel.

Please contact our research team at research@joshuaproject.net to contribute to this ongoing research.

International Day of the Unreached and FPG Adoption



QUICK SUMMARY

Joshua Project is partnering with **A Third of Us Alliance** and **Missio Nexus** for the International Day of the Unreached to promote Frontier People Group adoption. Three tools support this: the ADOPT process acronym, a downloadable FPG Adoption Manual, and a Matching Tool connecting adopters with field organizations.

As part of the International Day of the Unreached, Joshua Project is partnering with A Third of Us Alliance (formerly known as Alliance for the Unreached) and Missio Nexus to promote Frontier People Group adoption through [Joshua Project's ADOPT process](#).

There are three key tools: the **FPG Adoption Process**, the **FPG Adoption Manual**, and the **FPG Adoption Matching Tool**.

FPG ADOPTION PROCESS

The FPG Adoption Process is summarized with the acronym **ADOPT**. This process could be utilized anywhere around the world to help individuals, small groups, churches, organizations, and networks begin playing a role in missions among FPGs.

A Awaken: Awaken to the reality of Frontier People Groups (FPGs) and why they are the highest priority in missions.

D Decide: Decide on a Frontier People Group to adopt as a family, small group, or church, or decide on multiple FPGs to adopt as a larger network or mission organization.

O Orient: Orient yourself to the world of your adopted Frontier People Group to understand who they are, what they believe, and what their lives are like.

P Pray: Pray consistently and strategically for open doors, gospel laborers, and spiritual breakthroughs among your adopted group.

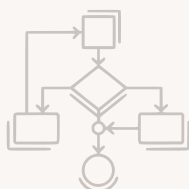
T Team Up and Take Action: Team Up with those who will help fill the gaps for effective evangelism and church planting to take place among this FPG. Take Action by clarifying your role and specific action steps.

THE FPG ADOPTION MANUAL



The FPG Adoption Manual is a stand-alone document that explains the process of FPG adoption. It is available initially in a global and Africa-specific version, which will be available in English, Arabic, and French. The digital version is available online, and partner organizations may use this manual as they please, including adding their own logo to promotion.

THE FPG ADOPTION MATCHING TOOL



The FPG Adoption Matching Tool will connect organizations and networks that could facilitate or potentially facilitate adoption for specific FPGs with adoptions of FPGs made by individuals, small groups, churches, and other entities. Participating is encouraged around the world. Participating organizations provide what they could help facilitate: prayer requests, receiving donations, providing more information about the FPG, providing training, or facilitating service opportunities. After some security filtering and vetting, Joshua Project matches and sends adopter information to organizations that have the same focused FPG and initial alignment in scope of work, theological/missiological distinctives, etc.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Joshua Project can leverage our usage around the world to help strengthen the work of your organization among FPGs by matching you with FPG adopters. To get started, fill out this participating organization form today. For more information, visit joshuaproject.net/adopt or email adopt@joshuaproject.net.



[Download Adoption Manual](#)

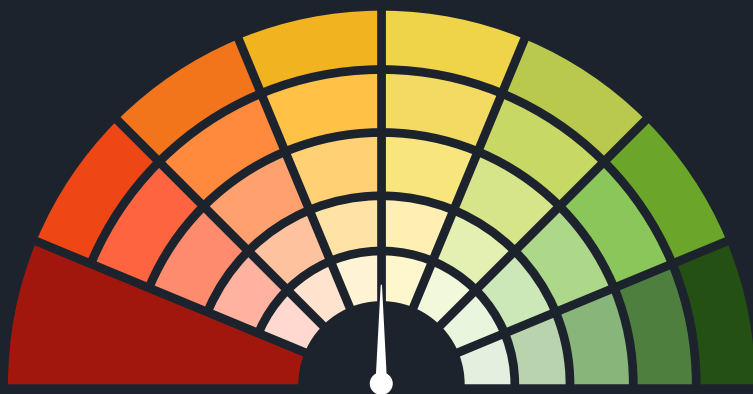


[Matching: Adopters](#)



[Matching: Facilitators](#)

From Percentage to Progress



QUICK SUMMARY

Percentage-based metrics can't distinguish between a people group with multiplying indigenous churches and one with sporadic contact. Joshua Project and five partner organizations are launching three complementary frameworks: **Phases of Engagement** (eight developmental milestones), **Engagement Strength** (five levels of momentum), and **Engagement Accelerators** (twelve strategic diagnostics). Together they answer what percentages cannot: where a group stands, how strong current engagement is, and what could move things forward.

Joshua Project, in collaboration with Frontiers, IMB, Engage Network, Vision 5:9, and Accelerate, is launching two new frameworks to give mission leaders a more actionable picture of gospel progress among unreached peoples.

For decades, organizations have tracked unreached peoples through percentage Christian and percentage Evangelical. These numbers look precise, but they obscure a fundamental reality: two people groups can both show 0.5% Evangelical while facing completely different situations. One may have multiplying churches led by indigenous believers; the other may have sporadic contact with no ongoing witness. Current metrics cannot distinguish between these realities. More importantly, they cannot answer the strategic question that drives resource allocation. What needs to happen next for the gospel to take root and spread?

WINTER'S VISION: CHURCH STATE, NOT JUST STATISTICS

Dr. Ralph Winter consistently argued that raw percentages miss the point. In his foundational writing on people group thinking, Winter asked qualitative questions: Do churches exist? Are they led by insiders? Can they multiply without external resources? ("Unreached Peoples: The Development of the Concept," Ralph D. Winter, 1979, Lausanne Occasional Paper). A people group with 1% Christian and no functioning churches faces entirely different barriers than one with 1% Christian organized into reproducing congregations. The percentage measures population saturation. Church state measures sustainability and transferability of the gospel witness.

BIBLICAL PRECEDENT: PAUL MEASURED PHASES, NOT PERCENTAGES

Paul never calculated what percentage of a region had become Christian before moving on. In Romans 15:19-24, he declared his work complete "from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum," not because

these regions were fully evangelized, but because churches had been planted, leaders raised up, and the gospel entrusted to communities capable of carrying it forward. Scripture consistently tracks qualitative milestones (establishing elders, sound doctrine, multiplying congregations) rather than demographic percentages.

TRACK, STEWARD, AND ACCELERATE PROGRESS

The new system is built around three functions that work together.



PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT (eight phases, from Waiting to Sustained Gospel Presence) tracks progress by mapping developmental milestones: whether anyone is engaged in church planting, whether evangelism is happening, whether churches have formed, and whether those churches are reproducing.



ENGAGEMENT STRENGTH (five levels, from Unknown to Flourishing) gives leaders what they need to steward that progress responsibly. A people group can be "engaged" for years with no visible momentum. Engagement Strength makes stagnation visible, prevents mistaking presence for progress, and helps organizations determine whether current investment is yielding results or merely maintaining activity.



ENGAGEMENT ACCELERATORS are a companion diagnostic tool across twelve strategic domains (prayer, Scripture access, training, collaboration, multi-node engagement, and others). Accelerators are not tracked by Joshua Project. They function as strategic prompts for field teams: once you know a group's phase and engagement strength, accelerators help identify what could accelerate progress to the next phase. They bridge observation and action.

Together, these three tools answer what percentages cannot: Where is this people group in the journey toward sustained gospel presence? How strong is current engagement? And what strategic investments could move things forward?

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

These frameworks directly improve how leaders deploy resources. Knowing where a people group stands in its phase and how strong current engagement is means decisions about mobilization, recruitment, and funding are guided by field reality rather than demographic snapshots.

Early phases require pioneers focused on access, culture and language learning, and gospel engagement.

Later phases need leadership development, theological training, and systems that sustain healthy reproducing churches.

Stalled engagement becomes visible, prompting reassessment rather than continued investment without progress.

Emerging Senders become visible too: groups that no longer need outside church planters and now need partnership for sending their own workers.

The framework also creates a shared language across organizations. When multiple agencies are working among the same people, aligning around phase and engagement strength enables better coordination, reduces duplication, and surfaces gaps that no single organization can see alone.

WE NEED YOUR INTELLIGENCE

Accurate assessment across 10,400+ (PGAC) people groups requires the intelligence of the whole body of Christ. Field workers, regional coordinators, and indigenous leaders hold pieces of the picture that no single organization can see. Technology now enables secure data aggregation, anonymization, and visibility controls that protect workers while enabling collaboration at an unprecedented scale.

Three ways to contribute:

Connected Apps:

Syncing activity data from existing ministry tracking tools

Field Survey

Forms: Submitting structured field snapshots, usable offline

Batch Uploads:

Bulk-updating data across many people groups

Learn more and choose your submission method at

joshuaproject.net/data/submit



[Learn more here](https://joshuaproject.net/data/submit)



[View the Toolkit](#)

The Labor Shortage that could reshape Global Missions



QUICK SUMMARY

A demographic divide is reshaping global missions. Aging economies need labor; young, largely unreached nations have a surplus. The result is massive migration from the 10/40 Window into reached and restricted nations alike, creating organic gospel proximity where none existed before. Diaspora believers become bridges to their home communities. But diaspora ministry supplements frontier missions, it doesn't replace it. The harvest is moving.

An Ethiopian nurse in Riyadh builds trust with her Saudi neighbors over shared meals. A Somali family in Minneapolis explores questions of faith they could never voice in Mogadishu. A Pakistani engineer in Dubai discovers a Bible app and starts reading in secret. A Nigerian professional in London plants a house church among West African migrants.

None of them moved for religious reasons. They moved for jobs. The force reshaping global missions over the next 50 years will not just be where people are, but where they are going, driven by an unprecedented demographic divide.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDE

The world is split into two distinct demographic realities.

On one side: **the Graying World**. Across the industrialized West and East Asia, birth rates have collapsed below replacement levels. Japan, Germany, Italy, and now China face a crisis no policy can quickly fix: too few workers to sustain their economies. China's population fell for a fourth straight year in 2025, with its lowest birthrate since 1949, and UN projections estimate the

country could lose more than half its population by 2100. This is not a cultural trend. It is an economic emergency.

On the other side: **the Youth Wave**. Sub-Saharan Africa and South and Central Asia are experiencing an explosion in their young populations. In countries like Niger, Afghanistan, and Nigeria, the median age hovers around 18. These nations are home to energetic, capable people who face limited economic prospects. There are more workers than jobs.

This polarization creates an economic engine that will drive migration for decades. The aging world has a labor vacuum. The unreached world has a labor surplus. Supply and demand will do what it always does: massive, sustained migration from the 10/40 Window into the "reached" world. This is not because anyone planned it as a mission strategy, but because economics is pulling people across borders.

WHO IS SENDING, WHO IS RECEIVING

The senders are concentrated in the 10/40 Window. Nigeria will add more people to the global workforce than any other country in the coming decades. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Egypt face similar pressures. These nations overlap heavily with the world's least-reached peoples. But the senders also include nations with significant Christian populations, such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Philippines, whose believers are riding the same economic currents into some of the hardest-to-reach places on earth.

The receivers fall into two categories. First, wealthy aging nations are desperate for labor. Japan, Germany, South Korea, and now China need caregivers, nurses, construction workers, and engineers. They will get them from wherever they can.

Second, the Gulf States; the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait have built their economies on imported labor. Dubai's population is nearly 90% foreign-born. The indigenous populations of these nations remain among the most unreached on earth. But the economic demand for labor has drawn millions of workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and increasingly from East Africa, including large numbers of Ethiopian and Filipino believers. The result is an unprecedented dynamic: unreached Arab populations now live and work alongside Christians from the Global South in daily, organic proximity. A South Asian Muslim laborer who would never encounter the gospel in his home village may share a dormitory with an Ethiopian believer or work alongside a Filipino Christian. This is not planned church planting. It is providential proximity created by economic forces.

The clearest migration corridors are South Asia to the Gulf and Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and the Middle East, Southeast Asia to East Asia and the Gulf; each corridor represents millions from unreached backgrounds moving into contexts where gospel witness already exists.

THE STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY (AND THE TEMPTATION)

When a Somali family moves to Minneapolis or a Syrian student move to Berlin, something shifts. They gain the freedom to explore faith that was impossible in their home context. If they encounter the gospel in the diaspora, they do not just become converts. They become bridges, with access to their home village that a foreign missionary can only dream of. They know the language, the family networks, and the cultural codes.

But here is where organizational leaders need clarity: diaspora ministry is not a replacement for frontier missions. It is an addition. While millions are moving, billions remain behind. The Youth Wave means the population of unreached regions is growing, not shrinking. The need for pioneer missionaries is greater than ever.

STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS FOR MISSION LEADERS

This shift requires organizational leaders to rethink strategy on at least three fronts.

First, diaspora engagement must be integrated as a key node in multi-node strategy. Effective engagement with unreached peoples is rarely a single-point effort. It requires coordinated presence across multiple nodes: the homeland, the migration corridor, and the diaspora destination. A diaspora believer can return for weddings and funerals with credibility that takes outsiders decades to build and navigate cultural codes no training program can fully replicate. Organizations that disciple diaspora believers with this vision are building indigenous channels that connect what is happening in the field with what God is doing in the diaspora, creating feedback loops of gospel witness across multiple locations simultaneously.

Second, migration corridors must inform field strategy. If your organization focuses on South Asian Muslims, the Gulf States may be as strategic as Karachi. If you prioritize West African peoples, Paris or London may matter as much as Abidjan. Mapping

these corridors against your priority peoples will reveal access points that did not exist a generation ago.

Third, the marketplace is now a front line. Christian professionals from Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Brazil are entering restricted nations and secularized Western cities not as religious workers but as essential economic assets. Organizations that integrate Business as Mission into their core strategy, rather than treating it as a sidebar, will be positioned to leverage the largest labor migration in human history.

Demographics are driving economics. Economics are driving migration. Migration is reshaping the mission field. The harvest is moving. The question for every mission leader is whether their strategy is positioned to move with it.

Poverty and Opportunity in the Hindi Belt

The Case for Catalyzing Work Among Other Backwards Class (OBCs)



QUICK SUMMARY

India's Hindi Belt has roughly 275 million unreached OBCs, the largest unreached bloc in the region, yet they remain the most neglected in mission strategy. Though poverty rates are lower than Scheduled Castes, their sheer population size produces the largest poverty headcount. Crucially, OBC communities have social capital and dignity, requiring business-as-mission and relational approaches rather than relief-oriented models designed for tribal or Dalit contexts.

THE STRATEGIC TENSION

The roughly 600 million people living in unreached groups across India's Hindi Heartland (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan) face a double barrier. Between 150 and 210 million of them live in multidimensional poverty. This is not coincidental; the same social structures that

have resisted the gospel for centuries are often the same ones that keep communities trapped in poverty.

Understanding how these realities intersect reveals both where the need is most acute and where the most significant strategic gaps remain.

WHERE POVERTY LIVES: HINDI BELT UNREACHED POPULATION

Note on Data: Most analysis draws from the 2023 Bihar Caste Survey (the only official caste census since 1931), NITI Aayog's MPI 2023, and 2011 Census projections. Bihar is used as a regional ceiling; neighboring states are marginally better off.

Population Bloc	% of Population	Poverty Rate	Millions in Poverty
Scheduled Tribes	5%	50%	~15 million
Scheduled Castes	19%	40%	45-50 million
Other Backward Classes	46%	28%	75-80 million (largest headcount)
Forward Castes	15%	15%	~15 million
Muslims	15%	32%	~30 million

The critical insight: OBCs have a lower poverty rate than Scheduled Castes or Tribals, but they represent the **largest poverty headcount by sheer population size**. Approximately 75-80 million poor OBCs live in the Hindi Belt alone.

This figure may itself be an undercount. OBC identity is politically sensitive, and researchers broadly agree that caste-based surveys consistently underreport OBC populations and poverty rates. The actual gap is likely larger than the data shows.

THE OBC GAP: 275 MILLION PEOPLE BEING SKIPPED

OBCs represent roughly 46% of the Hindi Heartland (275 million people) organized into

hundreds of caste-based people groups. Despite decades of church-planting work in northern India, sustained movements among OBC communities remain elusive.

Two assumptions drive this blind spot:

- **"OBC" sounds like a welfare category, not a missiological one.** In reality, it covers hundreds of distinct people groups; each with its own social identity, origin mythology, and barriers to the gospel.
- **Reservation policies create a "creamy layer" perception.** The Bihar data explodes from this assumption.

OBC Caste Group	Poverty Rate (Bihar)	Primary Livelihood
Yadavs (~60M in Hindi Belt)	35.8%	Land-poor cultivators
Kurmis	29.9%	Educated, capital-poor youth
Artisan castes (Telis, Gadariyas, etc.)	Varies	Occupations collapsed due to industrialization

The Yadavs alone number about 60 million across this region. They have political clout, but 35.8% live in poverty. These are land-poor cultivators and landless laborers, not the empowered middle class the "OBC" label implies. The term masks a massive internal hierarchy: dominant castes like Yadavs alongside lower artisan groups who share the economic reality of the Scheduled Castes.

OBC POVERTY IS DIFFERENT FROM SCHEDULED TRIBAL OR SCHEDULED CASTE POVERTY

This matters strategically. Approaches that work in one context often backfire in another.

- **Scheduled Tribes:** Geographical isolation, subsistence-level poverty, displacement from development projects.
- **Scheduled Castes:** Structural exclusion from land and social capital. Centuries of forced marginalization.

- **OBCs:** Varied poverty profile, including land-poor cultivators, unemployed youth with some education but no capital, and artisan castes which traditional occupations collapsed under industrialization. These communities have social networks, political representation, and cultural confidence.

Key implication: A Yadav farmer with three acres and caste pride has fundamentally different felt needs than a Musahar laborer with nothing. Development-heavy approaches that work in tribal contexts may actively backfire among OBCs, implying deficiency where communities perceive dignity. OBCs are not communities in existential crisis looking for a new identity. They are not looking for rescue.

STRATEGIC ENTRY POINTS FOR OBC ENGAGEMENT

OBC poverty creates unique openings that remain largely unexplored:

- **Business and employment pathways:** OBC poverty is often driven by lack of

capital, not lack of skills. Business-as-mission, vocational training, and marketplace engagement respect community dignity while addressing real needs.

- **Educational aspirations:** Many OBC families have some education and want more for their children. Educational partnerships and skill development avoid the paternalism of relief work.
- **Relational depth over material intervention:** In communities with social stability, gospel access comes through long-term presence and genuine friendship, not crisis response.
- **Caste-specific segmentation:** Yadavs require different approaches than Kurmis. Telis need different strategies than Gadariyas. Generic "peasant caste" approaches will fail. Each jati has distinct origin stories, occupational traditions, and social networks.

MATCHING APPROACH TO CONTEXT

This is not an argument against integrated development and church planting. It is an argument for a context-matched strategy.

Context	Poverty Profile	Best Entry Points
Tribals / Scheduled Castes (Red Zone)	40-50%+ poverty; subsistence level; geographically isolated	Integrated dev + church planting; relief-oriented partnerships
OBCs (Hindi Belt)	25-35% poverty; social capital intact; aspirational	Business-as-mission; education partnerships; relational presence
Forward Castes / Professionals	15% poverty; educated; urban	Intellectual engagement; marketplace presence

Segment your benevolence strategy the same way you segment your church planting. A poverty program designed for tribal contexts (subsistence agriculture, basic literacy) will fail among aspirational OBCs with different needs and a different sense of dignity.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The data reveals a clear paradox for mission leaders:

- Roughly 30% of the Hindi Heartland's unreached lives in multidimensional poverty (150-210 million people). For them, spiritual isolation and material destitution create double jeopardy requiring an integrated strategy.
- 70% of the unreached are not poor. They are software engineers, land farmers, government employees, and business owners. The Brahmin developer in Noida is just as unreached as the Musahar laborer in Bihar.

OBCs sit at the center of this tension. They include both the land-poor laborer and the aspiring entrepreneur. Both the marginalized artisan and the politically connected landowner. They represent:

- The largest unreached population bloc in the Hindi Belt (46%)
- The largest poverty headcount of any single bloc (75-80 million)
- The largest strategic gap in the majority of current mission engagement.

We have spent decades focused on Brahmins (cultural influence, hard to reach) and Scheduled Castes (receptive, justice angle). Nearly half the population, the OBCs, continue to be skipped. The data demands a reallocation of attention.

Data Sources: 2023 Bihar Caste Survey; NITI Aayog Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023; 2011 Census (state-level SC/ST data for UP, MP, Rajasthan); NSSO OBC surveys. Bihar poverty rates serve as a regional ceiling. The 2021 Census has not been released; all figures are estimates based on 2011 data with projected growth.

From **Sparse** to **Strategic**: A New Era of Mission Data

How new tools are turning isolated field reports into confident, triangulated intelligence for the global Church

QUICK SUMMARY

Joshua Project has launched new data infrastructure at joshuaproject.net/data to improve the reliability of mission intelligence through triangulation. Field teams can now submit updates through connected apps, field survey forms, or batch uploads. The most needed contribution is Phase of Engagement data. Better data requires the global Church to contribute.

For 30 years, Joshua Project has aggregated people group data from mission agencies, research networks, and field workers to help the global Church prioritize prayer and action among unreached people groups. That model has produced an extraordinary resource. But it has also carried a persistent weakness: **data volume**.

Historically, most updates came from large periodic datasets or occasional individual corrections. The inputs were valuable but infrequent. When you receive only one or two reports on a people group, you publish what you have. This limits the ability to assess confidence or detect shifts in conditions on the ground. You are working with the best available estimate but without the volume to assess its reliability.

That is changing. Joshua Project has launched two new pages (joshuaproject.net/data and joshuaproject.net/data/submit) that represent a fundamental shift in how field intelligence flows into the database

and, ultimately, into practitioners' hands. The first is a transparency page that explains where our data comes from, its limitations, and how we validate and protect it. The second provides structured pathways for contributing data back to Joshua Project.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

The core concept is **triangulation**: comparing multiple independent sources before accepting a data point as reliable. In the past, Joshua Project often lacked the input volume to triangulate effectively. If one agency reported 0.5% Evangelical for a people group and no other source existed, 0.5% became the published figure. There was no mechanism to cross-check, no way to flag low confidence, and no system to invite additional observations.

The new data submission infrastructure changes this equation. Every submission is now stored as a timestamped observation, normalized to a common schema, and

compared against other or existing sources before publication. Agreement across inputs increases confidence. Conflicts trigger review. Over time, this creates a living, layered picture of each people group rather than a static snapshot from a single source.

For mission leaders, this means the data you rely on for strategic decisions will become increasingly trustworthy, with limitations more transparent, but only if the global community contributes to it.

THREE PATHWAYS, ONE GOAL

The submit page offers three contribution methods designed for different organizational workflows. **Connected Apps** (such as GAPP by Ta Ethni) allow teams already using activity-tracking platforms to sync their ongoing data directly with Joshua Project. **Field Survey Forms** work offline and are ideal for periodic field snapshots, updates, and corrections. **Batch Uploads** serve organizations that maintain their own databases and want to sync at scale.

This is a significant expansion. Previously, we relied on sporadic spreadsheets coming in and email correspondences.

THE SINGLE MOST NEEDED DATA POINT

Of everything Joshua Project tracks, **Phase of Engagement** may be the most strategically critical data point and the one with the largest gaps. Phases of Engagement have never been tracked globally before. This metric captures where a people group stands on the journey from waiting on the gospel to sustained gospel presence. It is also one of the easiest data points for field teams to report, because you already know the answer. If your team is working among a people group, you know whether evangelism has begun, whether there are believing communities, and whether local churches are multiplying.

Estimated and field-reported phase data will serve as the foundation of the newly launched Phases of Engagement. Without it, the framework remains theoretical. With it, the global Church gains an unprecedented picture of where gospel progress is advancing and where it has stalled.

WHAT LEADERS CAN DO NOW

If you lead an organization with field teams among unreached peoples, consider two practical steps.

First, identify which people groups your teams are actively engaging, and report their Phase of Engagement [here](#).

Second, if none of these pathways fit your needs, contact us at research@joshuaproject.net, and we can explore other ways to receive your data.

Joshua Project data has always been built on the collective intelligence of the Body of Christ. These new tools make contributing easier and the resulting intelligence more reliable.

SCAN TO REPORT



Tech Upgrades



QUICK SUMMARY

Joshua Project is rolling out major tech upgrades in 2026: a modernized database supporting richer people group data and partner integrations; an improved API delivering geographic polygons and low-bandwidth experiences; a CRM tool matching churches and organizations with Frontier People Groups; a multilingual website launching in Portuguese and Spanish; and user logins enabling personalized experiences. All upgrades aim to make JP's data more accessible and actionable.

Joshua Project is moving quickly on tech upgrades in 2026.
A brief summary is below:



Completing migration to a modern database framework. This will allow us to ingest data pushed up from missionary software; incorporate nuanced information on people groups such as geographic, generational, and people group segment differences; implement stronger security parameters; and integrate better with our website, apps, partner data-sharing tools, mapping systems, and other software tools.



A more robust API for partners to access data. In our API now, for instance, only a latitude/longitude point is given for a people group, but the upgrade on our API will allow polygons (geographic shapes showing the areas where people groups are found) rather than just a single point on a map. The upgrades will also allow us, for example, to send a lower-bandwidth and user-friendly JP experience to budget phones.



Frontier People Group ADOPT matching Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool is available now and provides automation and custom matching to connect organizations, churches, small groups, and individuals with the FPGs they seek to pray for, fund, or engage directly. Matching is based on an organization's current or potential work among FPGs, with strong security parameters built into the process.

[Fill out the Facilitating Organization form today!](#)



Infrastructure development for having a multi-lingual website with the first translations of the website finished in Portuguese and Spanish. Korean, Chinese, Indonesian, Hindi, Arabic, and French are next on the list, however, not necessarily in any specific order. With around 25,000 pages on JP's website, this is a significant project!

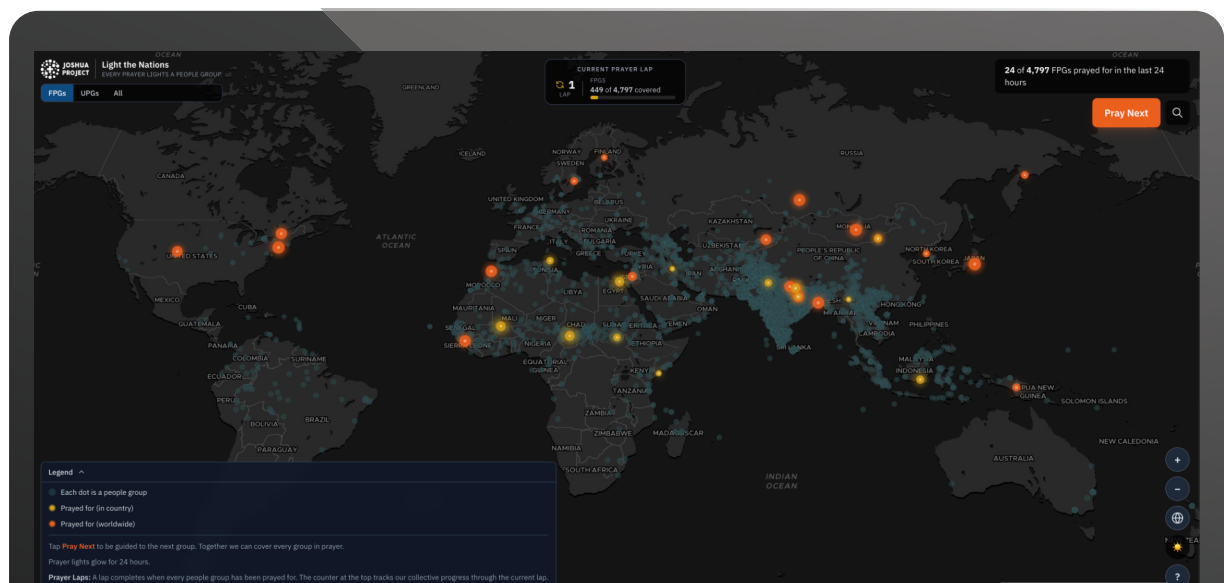


User logins to begin the process of providing customized information for JP users.



Continued web development to provide better user experience on the website, especially with an influx of new data coming in and content being developed.

Light the Nations Prayer Map



Light the Nations is an interactive prayer map from Joshua Project. It gives anyone a simple, visual way to pray for unreached people groups around the world.

The map is free to use and requires no account. Organizations can embed it directly on their website using a simple embed code. Joshua Project Core Partners can also customize their default view to highlight the specific people groups they want their audience to see.

[Click here to view](#)

[Click to embed on your site](#)

Getting More from JP+

What the Core Partnership Offers



QUICK SUMMARY

If your organization already uses JP+, you know the value of having current, nuanced data on people groups and missiological strategy. The Core Partnership takes that relationship a step further. It is designed for missions entities that want deeper access, direct input, and a stronger connection to the people and intelligence behind the platform.

HERE IS WHAT CORE PARTNERS RECEIVE:



QUARTERLY STRATEGIC BRIEFINGS

Four times a year, up to three representatives from your organization join an exclusive video call with Joshua Project leadership. These are not general webinars. They are focused sessions built around your needs as a missions leader.

Each briefing includes:

- Key updates in the database that you may want deeper insights into

- Strategic insights drawn from global Unreached People Group (UPG) engagement data
- Early access to new research and findings
- Open Q&A on emerging trends and opportunities

Most organizations only see the data. Core Partners get to talk with the people interpreting it.



DIRECT ACCESS TO JP LEADERSHIP

Core Partners can bring JP leaders into their organizational planning conversations.

More than nuances in data, this includes strategic consulting on UPG related decisions. In-person meetings are also available, with

travel and lodging covered by the partner organization.

For organizations making complex, long-range deployment decisions, having access to JP's research team as a thinking partner is a meaningful advantage.



PRIORITY MATCHING IN THE FRONTIER PEOPLE GROUP ADOPTION TOOL

Joshua Project is working toward 100,000 Frontier People Group (FPG) adoptions by the end of 2028. The FPG Adoption Matching Tool connects adopters such as individuals, small groups, churches, mission organizations, or networks with organizations and networks already directly engaged with FPGs.

Core Partners receive preferred status in that matching process.

Adopter profiles are built from commitment level, demographics, and ministry goals. Partners are then matched based on geographic focus, ministry approach, capacity, and FPGs engaged. While other organizations/networks facilitating FPG work will be matched with adopters, Core Partners are prioritized in that queue according to their preferences. For sending organizations, this is a direct pipeline to motivated, informed churches and networks ready to engage.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

Core Partners also receive:

Web-listed sponsor recognition on JP's FPG adoption page

Access to JP-branded slide decks and presentation materials for use in church visits, conferences, donor meetings, and strategy sessions

Optional participation in the JP+ Steering Committee, giving your organization direct input into which features get built next

PARTNERSHIP DETAILS

The Core Partnership is a 12-month commitment at **\$10,000** annually. Funding goes directly toward ongoing JP+ technology development, which benefits the broader missions community.

To explore whether this is the right fit for your organization, email kelly@joshuaproject.net or scan the QR code for the partnership overview sheet.



A Ready-to-Use Tool

for Mobilizing Churches Toward Frontier People Groups



You understand the urgency, yet the churches in your network may not.

The Church Media Kit gives you a practical way to change that. It is a free, shareable resource designed to help local churches understand Frontier People Groups (FPGs) and take their next step toward engagement.

WHAT'S INSIDE:

Videos that communicate the global need clearly

Slide presentations ready for Sunday services, classes, or small groups

Infographics that visualize the scale of unreached peoples

Brochures formatted for print and easy distribution

Maps showing where FPGs are located around the world

Pastors can drop the slides into a message. Small group leaders can spark conversation with the infographics. Missions committees can hand out the brochures at events. The content works across contexts, without extra preparation.

Over 1.9 billion people live in Frontier People Groups today. Most churchgoers have never heard that number. This kit helps your network understand why this matters, and what they can do about it.

Share it with the churches and leaders in your network.

To access the Church Media Kit:

[Click Here](#)

Scan QR Code





A Train Just Pierced One of the World's **Most Isolated** Unreached Peoples

QUICK SUMMARY

A new all-weather railway now connects the Kashmir Valley to the rest of India for the first time, ending the seasonal isolation that disrupted mission work for generations. For 7-8 million Frontier Unreached Kashmiri Muslims, this shifts tentmaking logistics, discipleship movement, and long-term presence from nearly impossible to viable. The barrier now isn't geography. It's identity, surveillance, and scripture in a script Muslims will read.

For centuries, the Kashmir Valley has been a fortress.

Not because of walls or armies (though there are plenty of both), but because of the mountains. The Pir Panjal and Great Himalayan ranges wrap this 135-kilometer oval basin like a geological siege. Getting in or out meant one treacherous highway that closes for weeks every winter due to snow and landslides.

That isolation ended last year.

The Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link is now operational. Its crown jewel is the Chenab Bridge, a steel arch standing 359 meters above the riverbed, higher than the Eiffel Tower. For the first time in history, the Kashmir Valley has reliable, all-weather surface access to the rest of India.

This matters for missions strategy. This is why.

THE FORTRESS WASN'T JUST PHYSICAL

The 7-8 million Kashmiri Muslims in the Valley are classified as Frontier Unreached. Christian adherents number less than 0.1%. There is no visible church planting movement, only small underground networks meeting in homes.

Christian missions here date back to the 1850s. The Church Missionary Society sent pioneers like Robert Clark. Medical missionaries like Dr. Arthur Neve built hospitals and schools that still operate today. They won enormous social respect.

They did not win a church movement.

Why? Because to be Kashmiri is to be Muslim. It's not just a religion. It's identity, politics, and resistance. The modern conflict traces back to 1846 when the British sold this Muslim-majority territory to a Hindu maharaja. Resentment exploded after Partition in 1947 and has not stopped burning since. Today, conversion is not just seen as apostasy. It is seen as treason against the Kashmiri struggle itself.

Add to this one of the highest surveillance grids in the world (thanks to decades of insurgency), and you have a place where foreigners are tracked, gatherings are suspicious, and traditional missionary presence is nearly impossible to sustain.

The mountains kept the Valley isolated. The conflict kept it closed. The surveillance kept it watched.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN THE TRAIN RUNS

Infrastructure shapes access. We know this intuitively, but we rarely think strategically about it.

An all-weather railway changes the following:

First, the "closed season" is over. For generations, mission work in the Valley operated on a seasonal calendar. Workers left when winter closed the highway. Relationships paused for months. Momentum died. On the other hand, the train now runs through snow. The prior cycle is broken.

Second, movement becomes normal. A Christian professional riding a train into Srinagar looks like everyone else: domestic tourists, migrant laborers, students, traders. The influx of general population movement

provides cover. You don't need a specialized vehicle or a flight manifest with your name on it.

Third, discipleship logistics transform. Previously, bringing interested seekers out of the Valley for training meant dangerous roads and military checkpoints. The train offers safe, reliable, anonymous passage to neutral ground. A young Kashmiri believer can travel to Delhi for intensive discipleship and return without raising suspicion.

Fourth, tentmaking becomes sustainable. The "hardship factor" in the Valley has always driven high attrition. Workers burn out when they are cut off from support systems for months at a time. Reliable rail access changes the math. Christian professionals can now maintain connection to the outside world while living inside the fortress.

ACCESS WITHOUT TOOLS

The uncomfortable truth is that the door is opening, but we are not ready to walk through.

Kashmiri Bible translations exist. Joshua Project lists a complete Bible with translation work spanning from 1813 to 2011. But there is a critical problem: script.

The first Kashmiri New Testament was printed in 1821 in Sharada script, an ancient writing system used by Hindu Pandits that was already nearly extinct. A missionary in 1838 noted the obvious flaw, "The majority of Kashmiris are Mohammedans who use the Persian script. Carey's version, though brilliant, was lost in translation."

Two centuries later, the same problem persists. Kashmiri Muslims read Perso-Arabic script. Much of the existing scripture is in Devanagari or archaic forms that are culturally irrelevant or even offensive to the very people who need it most. It is like translating a message perfectly but writing it in a code your audience can't read.

Meanwhile, mobile engagement is high. The 4G/5G bans of recent years have largely

lifted. Digital evangelism through WhatsApp and secure apps is currently the most effective entry point. Audio scripture exists through Global Recordings Network. The Jesus Film is available in Kashmiri.

The train brings bodies. The phones bring content. The question is whether we have the right content to share.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS



The Chenab Bridge is an engineering marvel. It is also a missiological inflection point.

For 175 years, the Kashmir Valley has resisted the gospel behind walls of geography, identity, and conflict. Geography has just changed. The other walls remain, but they are now more accessible than ever.

So, here is what I want missions strategists to wrestle with:

Are we ready to pivot toward rail-based tentmaking in South Asia's hardest places? Do we have workers who can blend into the normal flow of Indian domestic movement?

What would it take to prioritize Kashmiri scripture that Muslims will actually read in the script they actually use?

And perhaps most pressing: the train also brings secularism, consumerism, and increased state surveillance. How do we move quickly enough to leverage this window before the spiritual openness that sometimes accompanies rapid social change hardens into something else?

The mountains have been pierced. The question is whether the messengers will move.

JAPAN

Sometimes the Best Way-In is Not Through the Front Door



THE GOOD NEWS . . .

Japan has been no stranger to missionary efforts. Nearly five centuries ago, in 1549, a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, first brought the gospel to Japan after successful missionary efforts in India, Indonesia, and China. This “Apostle of the Far East” is considered by some to have been one of the greatest missionaries since the apostle Paul.

Protestants followed 324 years later with the entry of Presbyterian and Episcopal church planting efforts. Since that time, nearly every Protestant denomination has worked in Japan. Today, mission agencies estimate there are 2,000 – 3,000 foreign missionaries serving in Japan. Over time, and with many workers, these efforts have produced dozens of bible translations, 25 Christian universities and seminaries,

roughly 8,000 Protestant churches¹, and 500,000 – 700,000 Protestant believers.

Certainly, Japan has been the recipient of much missionary attention compared to frontier people groups that are characterized by having no bible, no church, less than one believer per thousand people, and no sustained Christian effort by any group to reach them with the gospel.

NOW FOR THE BAD NEWS . . .

Missionaries per Christian: Despite the efforts by Protestant missions in Japan, the heavy investments have produced limited results. Japan has approximately one missionary per 200-350 Christians. Compare that to Brazil, which has the average of one missionary per 5,000 – 10,000 Christians, or the Philippines, which has one missionary per 8,000 Christians.

¹ <https://twr.org/story/reach-the-last-spreading-seeds-of-hope-among-the-japanese>

Clearly, the efforts in Japan have produced much smaller results. Joshua Project estimates the Protestant population to be less than 0.5% of the total Japanese population after 500 years of Christian presence.

Productivity of Churches: Though there are thousands of churches, they have had a limited impact on the larger population. The average-sized congregation is under 30 people. “According to 2016 data from the Japan Congress on Evangelism, 81% of Protestant churches in Japan have fewer than 50 attendees. About a third have fewer than 15.”² Most of the new attenders come from biological growth (children born to Christian parents) or transfer growth (those who came from other churches, but the most important form of growth, conversion growth, is almost non-existent.

Aging Congregations - Pastor Shortage: Fewer young people are preparing to take on pastoral roles, and the current pastors are aging. In 2016, one study found that three-fourths of pastors were over 60 years of age, so by now, if they are still working, they are in their 70s. A 2018 study found 6% of churches had no pastor, and a similar number shared a pastor with another church³. Small, aging congregations also force many pastors to be bi-vocational in order to survive, thus limiting the time they can devote to ministry.

A Matter of Receptivity

The topic of receptivity was much on the mind of the earliest missiologists. Around 1923, Donald McGavran (Disciples of

Christ) traveled with J. Wascom Picket (United Methodist) to northeastern India to study the phenomenon of how whole tribes were turning to Christ in large numbers. These “mass movements” were perplexing and viewed with suspicion by Western missionaries who were used to seeing a trickle of converts profess Christ as Lord through their missionary efforts. As McGavran studied how populations of people would alternatively open and close toward the gospel, he was intrigued by the theories on receptivity emerging from the field of sociology. He began to incorporate these insights into his mission strategies.

McGavran noticed that whole people groups (and smaller segments of people groups) traveled back and forth along an imaginary axis between resistance and receptivity due to a number of factors, such as events or trends happening in the context, or the clarity and perceived relevance of the message. Groups traditionally closed to the gospel may suddenly become more open. This very thing happened in Japan just after the end of World War II, when Japan was defeated, and the belief that the emperor was divine was placed in doubt. It happened in Indonesia in 1965, just after the failed coup d'état when 2.5 million Muslims came to Christ, or just after 9/11 in New York City, when every place of worship was packed with people seeking meaning. And just as a people group might become more receptive to the gospel, population groups can also become more resistant, as is evidenced by the decline in church attendance in Western Europe. What does

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/03/japan-christian-church-survival-faithful-remnant/>

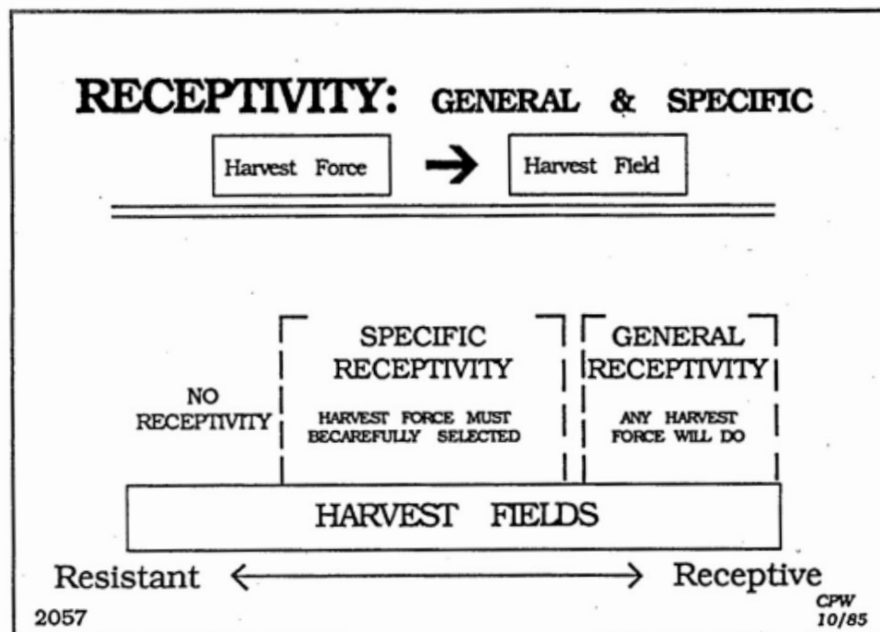
³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/03/japan-christian-church-survival-faithful-remnant/>

this mean for missionary deployment strategies?

McGavran's strategy is illustrated in the diagram below.

If there is **no (or low) receptivity**, McGavran would advise that we "occupy that area lightly." In other words, we

should not send many workers to a field where the fruit is not in harvest season, but we should deploy scouts or observers who can monitor the conditions and call in the laborers when the fruit is ripe. This may be the situation in Japan, where many have worked for years but with relatively meager results.



If there is **General Receptivity**, then there is an eagerness to accept the gospel and virtually every evangelism strategy, and every kind of evangelist is winsome and fruitful. In these situations, McGavran would encourage the deployment of many missionaries to work in the abundant harvest of souls while the gathering is good.

Where there is **Specific Receptivity**, it can be more of a puzzle. The general context appears to be unreceptive and unresponsive, but closer inspection reveals significant evangelistic success in unexpected places. For example, a white American evangelist handing out tracts on

a street corner in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, might be met with stiff resistance and soon be on a flight out of the country. However, the Christian Filipino housekeeper/nanny may be in a strategic position in the home of a sheik to share her faith in the family home without fear of repercussions. This is a frequent pattern throughout the Middle East, and many more examples can be found around the world.

In the case of Japan, it may not be the most effective to send in missionaries to use traditional evangelism and church planting strategies (a front-door strategy). Many have gone before and failed to launch a movement.

Instead, working with the Japanese diaspora in places like Sao Paulo, Brazil, which is home to the largest Japanese community outside of Japan (2 million), may be more fruitful (a side-door strategy). Liberdade Evangelical Church is one of the largest Japanese evangelical congregations outside of Japan, with over 1000 attenders. Large Japanese congregations are also found in Hawaii and the West Coast of the U.S., Thailand, and South Korea. Hospitality ministries such as those sponsored by churches ministering to relocated professionals have been fruitful for evangelism. Campus ministries (International Students, Inc., CRU, or InterVarsity) have been especially successful in winning Japanese college students studying abroad. Many Japanese find it easier to place their faith in Christ when they live outside their country than when they live in Japan.

Why is that? A key reason, often cited, is the freedom from social pressure. The Japanese famously value group harmony and social belonging. Those values place an enormous obligation on the individual to conform to the prevailing beliefs of the larger group. Becoming a Christian in that context is perceived to be disloyal to family and culture. When living abroad, many of them experience loneliness, dislocation, and stress, but find in these Christian communities new friends who genuinely love and accept them. They have new opportunities to think for themselves and to consider the faith that binds these new friends together. At some point, those who put their faith in Jesus may return to their families and friends in Japan as witnesses to God's saving power. Specific receptivity that is recognized and engaged by specialized teams can open a side-door entrance to reach an otherwise unresponsive people group.

MISSIOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER WHEN DEPLOYING WORKERS

1. When deploying workers, consider the results of the harvest and prioritize the places that:
 - a. never had an opportunity to hear the gospel (this is most important), or
 - b. where the gospel is not yet rooted, but where evangelism efforts are showing fruit, because of their General or Specific receptivity.
2. The absence of the church in a people group does not mean they are not receptive. We can't judge receptivity until they have been engaged by a gospel witness for a sufficient period of time.
3. Even people groups that have sustained resistance need an ongoing Christian presence. McGavran would say they should be "held lightly."
4. Given the scarcity of qualified workers, we should place them where the need is great and where they can be most productive for the kingdom.



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