



Finding the Hidden Harvesters

By CYNTHIA ANDERSON

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NOTE: Names have been changed to protect identities.

Helpful answers to our problems are often hidden in plain sight. Jesus said, *The harvest is ripe but the laborers are few* (Matt. 9:37). Where do we find those laborers?

Mobilizing cross-cultural workers takes a great deal of time, energy, and money. That is not to say we shouldn't continue to call them forth. The Great Commission is for everyone, and all must be mobilized and challenged with this task. We also need to grapple with the reality that after they are mobilized, those who go cross-culturally need finances, visas, and significant training. New cross-cultural workers must learn the language and ways of the people they are reaching out to as well. My point in this article is not to say we don't need more cross-cultural workers. It is important to state that there remain many people groups who will not be reached without outside, cross-cultural workers going to them. We have an important role to play.

But what if there were hidden harvesters, who lived near the harvest fields already, or were actually *within* them? What if we could identify, then mobilize those harvesters to start movements of disciples in culturally and linguistically *near* people groups? Or what if we could find people from that unreached group who know Jesus but have never been discipled to make disciples? They have never been challenged or encouraged to reach their own people in a multiplicative way. We must ask the "what-ifs" about this.

The harvest is ripe and the workers are few. We are to pray and ask God to send them out. How do we find those people who are *in* or *near* the fields?

A cross-cultural worker myself, let me say frankly—the *most quickly effective* workers are in or near the harvest—not those of us who come from afar. We need to find those *in-* and *near-*culture harvesters. Then we need to envision, equip, and enable them to fulfill the Great Commission. A key to finishing the task in our generation will be to find the "hidden harvesters."

Could She Be a Hidden Harvester?

Not long ago, we celebrated Easter with friends we've been doing a regular Discovery Bible Study with. They came to our home for a meal, games, and a time of worship. A new couple joined our group that warm April evening. We'd not had a chance to interact much with this couple, though I'd seen on a social media group photo they'd attended while I was out of the country.

As they walked through our door, carrying food they'd brought to contribute to the meal, I immediately noticed they didn't look like typical Thais. I wondered what ethnic group they were from as I arranged the delicious pomelo fruit they'd brought to our serving table.

Later, we got a chance to hear more. The wife was from a Muslim background. She shared her testimony of coming to faith. They were both from the southern part of Thailand. Her husband was Chinese Thai and had previously been a Jehovah's Witness.

As she shared more about her testimony, a few questions circled in my mind—buzzing around like bothersome bees. Unlike the insects, though, these brought excitement not frustration. Could she be a hidden harvester? An undiscovered yet powerful resource for reaching the Muslims of Thailand? Could she be a key person called by God to reach her own people?

The Muslim Thai (one million + and zero percent Christian) and the Pattani Malay (1.5 million and .01% Christian) are unreached groups our mission had long attempted to begin work amongst. We have run mobilization campaigns and promoted the groups, trying to find cross-cultural workers to come and focus on them. Could it be that right here in my living room sat God's answer to this mobilization need?

Perhaps she has never been envisioned, equipped, or enabled to reach her family and people. I'm going to soon find out!

So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields (Matt. 9:38 NLT).

The Nature of Quickly Effective Harvesters

As we pray for harvesters (remembering that prayer itself is an important ministry), we must not stop there. We also must actively search for *appropriate and quickly effective* people that God is choosing to bring in the harvest. Who are those people? Above, I stated that the most quickly effective workers are in or near the harvest. Let's unpack that a bit. Then we'll look at what we need to do once we identify these potential people.

1. The best harvesters may not yet be believers. To mobilize them, we must first reach them.

I constantly need to remind myself that *God has prepared people to do His work* from among the harvest fields. He is a great mobilizer, and He is working already! He has Pauls, Timothys, Priscillas and Phobes out there waiting to hear His message, believe, and then be equipped to reach their own people groups and nations.

How does this play out in my daily life? When I meet someone who isn't yet a Christian, I ask God to help me see them with His eyes. They may be a Buddhist monk offering sacrifices in a temple today. Tomorrow, they could be used by God to reach thousands. When I share Jesus with them, I'm not only thinking about them coming to salvation, I'm thinking about reaching their entire people group.

We have to train our eyes to see people as not simply unsaved people we are wanting to convert. We must see them as potential apostles for their people group. They are pre-disciples who may one day make many more disciples.

2. We often underutilize and underestimate the ability of pre- and new believers for Gospel spread.

Again, we need to change how we think about where to find harvesters. Some of them may not yet be Christians. Yet they can be Gospel spreaders. In the New Testament, the Samaritan woman is a good example. She met Jesus, and before she'd fully decided if He was the Messiah, she called the entire village to learn about Him. *Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?* (John 4:29 NIV).

Instead of leaning on trained professionals and cross-cultural workers, let's intentionally look for ways to encourage and empower new believers and seekers to

share the stories of the Bible and what they are learning about Jesus with friends and family.

3. In-culture harvesters who are new to faith are effective because they already have natural bridges and relationships with lost people. Don't remove those by extracting them.

Speaking at one of our supporting churches in the USA, I ran across a young Marathi (Indian) man who had become a believer. His parents, devout Hindus, were greatly disturbed by his recent conversion to Christianity. The church pastor asked me to meet with him and for input on how to disciple him.

While I was happy to know of a young Marathi who had come to faith, I also felt sad about what I saw happening. The church had pulled him into their social circles and extracted him from his own. They had unintentionally created barriers and obstacles that would make it difficult for his family to accept his new faith or in any way be attracted to it. Encouraging him to eat beef (an important prohibition for Hindus) and stopping him from attending Hindu festival parties for fear that he would compromise his faith were a few of the things they'd done. The family, I guessed, was quite naturally angry and hurt. They would feel the church was stealing their beloved son. If they'd been open to Christianity at all, this would cause them to resist any Gospel message in the future.

My heart ached at the lost opportunity for this church to have an impact not only on one young man but on an entire family and community of unreached people in their area.

4. Near-culture harvesters need training, practice, and mentoring but can often quickly become effective.

With just-in-time training and the opportunity to practice disciple-making with a mentor, near-culture workers can quickly become fruitful. They live in the context already and have familiarity with the culture. A common language can be used initially while they are encouraged to also begin to learn the heart language of those they are reaching out to. Though there may be misconceptions and even some prejudice to address, once those things are dealt with, they can rapidly start making an impact.

The role of the foreign missionary, or as Ralph Winter called them, E3 workers, is to find these people and come

alongside them by modeling, training, and through a loving, deep relationship. By doing this the foreigner also shares in their fruitful labor in very effective ways.

Finding the Hidden Ones

Now that we've established the importance of finding these hidden harvesters, let's look briefly at how to go about this task. Like a beach-comber sweeping the sand, we must get our tools ready and be willing to search in various places.

Local churches

Hidden harvesters can sometimes be found in existing local churches. Talk to pastors and leaders in your area. Ask them if they have any believers or seekers in their congregation who are from the Unreached People Groups in your region. Form a cooperative effort of several churches to together adopt an unreached group and work together to find hidden harvesters. Don't steal their members, but be upfront about the potential of equipping them to start a movement (separate from the local church that is of a different culture) among their own people.

Divine appointments

As you pray for the unreached in your city and region, don't be surprised if God answers your prayers by putting someone in your living room or bumping into someone in a shopping mall who is from that group. God is more committed to reaching the unreached and finding these harvesters than we are! Be watchful and take notice. Don't miss the people He might be sending across your path.

Social media and online training

As our ministry does with the *Getting Started in Disciple Making Movements* course, envision and equip local believers to reach out to the unreached around them. Our course offers a bonus module on how to invite Muslims to follow Jesus. Many Nigerians, for example, have found us on social media, been attracted to learning about discipleship, then had their eyes opened to how they could have an impact on the unreached in their own nation. If you are working in a Western nation with immigrants, join their social media groups and make friends. Look for those who are already interested in Jesus or have a relative who is a believer.

Three Es—Envision, Equip, Enable

After you find them, there are three things we must do with these hidden harvesters. If they are not yet followers of Jesus, we must of course first evangelize them. Share the good news and invite them to read God's Word with you. Start a discovery group with them and their friends and family.

1. Envision

As they begin to study God's Word and your relationship grows, cast a vision for what God is longing to do among their people. Many will not feel they are well enough trained or worthy. They may feel that ministry is only for professional full-time workers. Fear also can be a factor preventing them from even considering reaching their own people. Teach them about the royal priesthood and who they are in Christ. Pray with them for their family and people to know the Lord.

2. Equip

Use simple, just-in-time training to equip them to begin to reach out to those in their *oikos* (household or network of relationships). Often, if they have been extracted or persecuted, you may need to also equip them on how to reconcile with family or rebuild bridges that were torn down. Teach them how to share their testimony and help them gain confidence in sharing it with others in the common people group around them. Next, assist them in contextualizing their testimony so it will make sense to people from the target people group.

Another way to equip those who are in-culture and near-culture workers is by connecting them to contextual resources such as those made by Create International. They may not be familiar with what is available for sharing Christ in a relevant way.

3. Enable

As these hidden harvesters begin to gain skill, confidence, and vision, be a partner not a leader for them. Release authority as well as responsibility. As the insider or close-cultural worker, let them "call the shots." Enable and empower them by trusting them to be in the front leading the way forward while you assist in the background.

What can you do to find the hidden harvesters in your area? The harvest is ripe, the laborers are few. Let's find, evangelize, envision, equip-and enable them! 📌