

The Center of Global Missions Need

By TED ESLER, PhD

Ted Esler served in the Balkans during the 1990s. He held various leadership roles with Pioneers before being appointed the President of Missio Nexus in 2015. Ted has a PhD in Intercultural Studies (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2012).

The Shifting Center of Global Christianity

A 2004 paper by Todd Johnson and Sun Young Chung details an approach to understanding the changing nature of the global church.

They write,

Christians, at any given time in history, have definable geographic locations and a demographic or statistical centre. A single geographic point is here identified as the statistical “centre of gravity” of Christianity.¹

They plotted the growth of Christianity starting in AD 33 and projected where it is heading out to 2100.²

Map 1. Trajectory of the Statistical Center of Gravity of Global Christianity, AD 33–AD 2100



This map has had a profound and helpful impact on how we understand the growth of Christianity in what is called “the Global South” and a concurrent decline in

“the Global North.” First reported by David Barrett in 1970, this shift is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.³ Popularized by Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom*, it has helped many people understand this important religious trend that is ongoing.⁴

The phrase “The Center of Gravity for Global Christianity” has also had a profound impact on missiology. It highlights the need for the increased sending of missionaries from the Global South. It forces us to consider the ramifications of a diminishing missionary force from the Global North. It influences our foundational understanding of missions, developed mostly from Western Christianity. It has informed our understanding of Jesus’ command to take the gospel to the nations.

Where the Church Is Not Is the Primary Concern for Missionaries

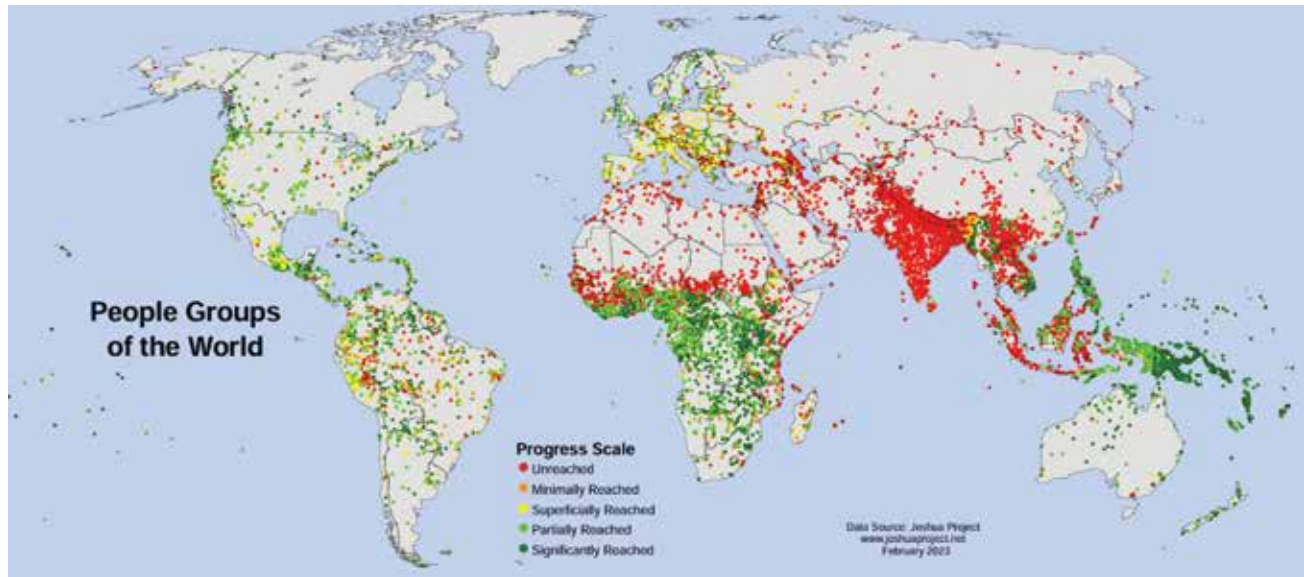
The shifting center of global Christianity focuses our attention on where the church *is*. It tells us where Christians currently live. It highlights the “supply side” of missionary work (i.e., the sources of people, money, prayer, and other resources to carry out the missionary task). Missionaries ask the opposite question. They ask, “Where are there no Christians?” They are more concerned about the “demand side” of the Great Commission task. These are the cultures in the world with the fewest Christians and the least access to the gospel.

1 Todd M. Johnson and Sun Young Chung, “Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33–AD 2100,” *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 369 (2004): 166–81.

2 Johnson and Chung, “Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity.”

3 David B. Barrett, “AD 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa,” *International Review of Mission* 59, no. 233 (1970): 39–54.

4 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).



The Geographic Center of Unreached People Groups Weighted by Population

(Source Data: Joshua Project, 2023)

A more significant question for missionaries to consider (and, in fact, all Christians, since all are charged with the task of taking the gospel to the nations) is: “Where is the center of global missions need?”

The Center of Global Missions Need

By mapping the point on the earth where the most people live in unreached people groups (UPGs),⁵ we get a much better understanding of the remaining missionary task. Using a similar approach that Barrett employed, it is possible to create a “centroid map,” which highlights that point on the earth that represents the greatest number of UPGs, weighted by population.

The map above, from Joshua Project, highlights the status of all UPGs at present.⁶ Each dot represents the approximate location of a UPG.⁷

Using this same data, the following centroid map reveals the geographic location of global missions need.

The spot on the earth with the greatest missionary need is located in Gujarat Province, India, in the city of Kharaghoda.⁸



⁵ Ralph Winter, “The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism,” lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/0213.pdf; lausanne.org/content/the-highest-priority-cross-cultural-evangelism.

⁶ Joshua Project, Datasets found under Resources, accessed 12/11/2023, joshuaproject.net/resources/datasets.

⁷ Joshua Project, accessed 2/1/2024, joshuaproject.net/assets/media/maps/progress-scale-map-plain.pdf.

⁸ The mapping services were provided by Joshua Project.

Winter Coordinates

The data used for this map is readily available on the Joshua Project website. The downloadable database includes additional information, such as the status of Bible translation, primary religion, and many other attributes. Because there is more than just unreached people group data, this same concept can be applied to other attributes as well. For example, one might be interested in a centroid map that shows the coordinates of unreached people groups weighted by population filtered to show only Islamic cultures. We will call this set of geographic coordinates the “Winter Coordinates.” This recognizes Ralph Winter’s emphasis on UPGs and the need to highlight them to the global church. The following, for example, is a map showing the Winter Coordinates for all unreached Muslim people groups:

Here we find the centroid on the edges of Muksat, Oman.



**The Geographic Center of Muslim Unreached People Groups
Weighted by Population**

(Source Data: Joshua Project, 2023)

This same concept of a weighted centroid map works for all religious blocs, as noted in the map on p. 11.

Summary

The center of global missions need highlights for the global Church where we must spend our efforts in reaching the nations for Christ. There are limitations in this representation. Unlike Barrett’s original map, a lack of historical data does not allow us to map the Winter Coordinates over time. The data set used here is among the best available, taken from the Joshua Project. The map will only be as accurate as this data allows. The map does not show the nuances of progress that might be happening among these groups (e.g., it does not differentiate between engaged and unengaged people groups).⁹

Despite these limitations, the center of global missions need gives us a fairly accurate picture of where missionaries should focus a significant part of their efforts. It provides an alternative paradigm to the center of the global Church concept which has been influential for decades. Winter Coordinates might be applied to a host of missiological challenges, including mapping by religious bloc, types of ministries (e.g., Bible translation or training on church planting), frontiers peoples, and similar missiological concepts.

I suggest that whenever missiologists discuss the shifting center of the global church, they also highlight the center of global missions need. It puts the focus on the command of Christ to take the gospel to the nations. While the former concept is about us, the Church, the latter is about others and the need for the gospel to enter these cultures. ❖

⁹ Unengaged UPGs have no indigenous or foreign Christians among them proclaiming Christ with intent to birth and nurture multiple communities of Jesus-followers.



Winter Coordinates of Various Religious Blocs
(Source Data: Joshua Project, 2023)

JOSHUA PROJECT

The Joshua Project brings definition to the unfinished task of completing the Great Commission by identifying and highlighting the over 7,400 people groups of the world that have the least Christian presence in their midst. To do this, we:

- Provide a “big-picture” view of the Great Commission
- Catalyze pioneer church planting among least reached peoples
- Encourage informed focused prayer on the unreached
- Stimulate vision for missions involvement
- Suggest avenues for engagement with unreached peoples



Explore www.joshuaproject.net for:

- People Profiles and Links
- Great Commission Status
- Progress Scale
- Unreached People of the Day

- User-Defined Querying
- Download Resources
- View Maps, Charts, and Videos
- PowerPoints, Maps, and Handouts

