



Partnering to love the world next door

For Such a Time and Place

Introducing Near Frontiers

By Robert Rasmussen, Executive Director

Beginning with the right question sets us on a right course. So as I seek to clarify the ministry of Near Frontiers, I intentionally begin with this two-part question:

*How does God want to use the United States at this time to fulfill His mission,
and what part does He want Near Frontiers to play?*

In asking this question, we acknowledge that God's work is primary. We affirm that the USA continues to have a vital role in world mission even as, praise God, many other nations have joined the task. And the question also indicates that there are many groups seeking to cooperate with God's work. We are happy to find our God-assigned role and fulfill it to full capacity.

Hence, we write this paper to define our understanding at this stage of our existence, and invite you to consider how God may want you to partner with us. I'll organize my thoughts around four questions:

- Why Here?
- Why Now?
- Why Us?
- How?

WHY HERE?

Please allow me to answer this question out of my own story. I began serving God vocationally in the 1980s as a pastor in California. My first experience discouraged me to the point of wanting to quit. An earthquake destroyed our building and neither our fledgling congregation nor the denomination could

envision rebuilding it. So the church folded. I moved to a second pastorate, which was much better. The congregation grew in numbers, unity, and maturity. But after five years I became unsettled in my heart. You see, I had been a missionary kid and, even during seminary, considered with my wife going overseas. I knew that church leaders in the third world lacked the kind of seminars, literature and training that were abundant to the American pastor. Before long, I could not stand the inequality any longer. We prayed for direction, and God led us to Kenya with OC International to train church leaders.

After ten good (but hard) years, we became convinced that God was leading us back to the U.S. However, we did not feel we were to leave the realm of mission work. In light of our motivation in leaving the USA, it is ironic that we are now back in America! But God changed us during our decade in Africa, such that now we serve in the former geography but with a very different philosophy.

Let me show you the difference. Yesterday I went online and ordered a copy of the book Biblical Preaching by Haddon Robinson. I first bought a copy during seminary, and referred to it often during my pastoring days. Why? To help me be a more effective preacher. The copy I ordered yesterday is destined for a different purpose. I now travel annually to Ethiopia to train church leaders in preaching. I teach out of the book's concepts, and I bring a copy of the book to leave with the local trainer.

What makes this story significant is that my going to Ethiopia is at the invitation of an Ethiopian pastor who for many years has served in the U.S. city where I live. His vision is to train hundreds of church leaders in his homeland through a mobile Bible school, partnering with Americans like you and me.

So today, I and many others are missionaries in the United States, not in spite of, but *because* of where we live. But when I was a pastor twenty years ago, I didn't see this reality. I was like many church leaders—so busy with the activities of local church life that I didn't realize the opportunity to participate in God's mission was right under my nose.

So, my personal story is a reflection of why we believe the U.S. is a strategic place for mission. The primary command which Jesus gave us is to make disciples; not merely "converts" but devoted followers and learners (Matt. 28:18-20). The disciples we make are to obey everything Jesus taught, which includes making other disciples. So the core of our mission is to make reproducing disciples.

We should not think that this mission can only, or primarily, have effect overseas. Jesus' command was quite specific. He said to make disciples of all "ethne," a Greek word that can be translated "nations" or "peoples." Yes, we need to send missionaries to other nations, but we should also recognize that God has brought many "peoples" to us here in America.

We believe a primary aspect of our calling is to boldly raise awareness in the Church in America that our mandate to make disciples both calls us to "the uttermost part of the earth" and to our "Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria" (cp. Acts 1:8).

We rejoice in the fact that God is raising up droves of missionaries from Asia, Latin America and Africa! Those very missionaries will tell you that they need the continued involvement through partnership of the North American missions endeavors.

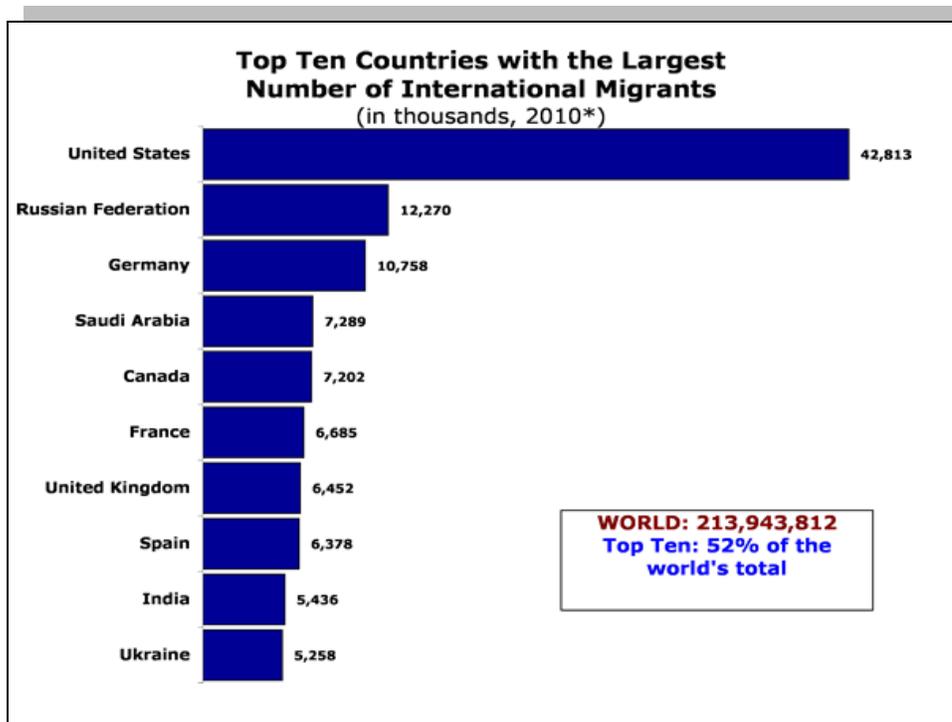
But let us add a second question. Is there a timing issue to consider? Is there an urgency about our calling, or is this an opportunity that will exist for a long time?

WHY NOW?

We are bold to say that we are in the midst of an unprecedented convergence of realities in the history of the Great Commission. Because of this, we believe that America is one of the most amazing, God-given countries for doing mission today. There is no other country which is now experiencing the convergence of three realities in the scope we see in the USA today. What are these three realities?

The first reality is that American cities are treasure chests of religions and cultures, unmatched by any other nation in the world. Here are some statistics which bear this out.

- The USA accounts for over 20% of the worlds migrants (Strangers Next Door, JD Payne, p.40)



(Source: For 2013 data see http://esa.un.org/unmigration/documents/The_number_of_international_migrants.pdf. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Population Facts" No. 2013/2, September 2013; www.unpopulation.org)

- Since 1992, an estimated 1.7 million Muslims, approximately 1 million Hindus, and approximately 1 million Buddhists have immigrated legally to the United States. (Accessed 12/31/2013 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_States)
- According to J.D.Payne, there are members of 361 unreached people groups living in the United States. (He defines a UPG as a people group of which less than 2% are evangelical; see Payne, Strangers Next Door, IVP, 2012, p.59)

We agree with Payne, “Something is missiologically malignant when we are willing to send people across the oceans, risking life and limb and spending enormous amounts of money, but we are not willing to walk next door and minister to the strangers living there” (Payne, Strangers Next Door, p. 33)

Prior waves of migration have coupled with economic realities to produce many people who, though not recent arrivals, are “underserved.” In particular I would mention Native American, Hispanic, and African-American peoples as those coping with the consequences of historic injustices which have perpetrated harm such that generational poverty afflicts huge segments of our society.

Jesus brought good news of blessing for the poor, liberty for captives, sight for the blind. (Luke 4:18-19)
We believe that justice, compassion, and empowerment are core elements of our good news.

If God put a billboard in the skies, it would say, “Reach the nations I have brought to you!” I do not know of any clearer message than that. The gathering of the nations in America is a modern-day phenomenon!

But this fact becomes even more amazing in light of a second reality.

The second reality is that there is no country on earth whose churches have greater capacity to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

America has hordes of dynamic churches and believers who possess the gospel. We have church buildings visible in every town and city. Believers are scattered throughout every neighborhood. We have Bibles, outreach events, Christian schools, TV and radio outlets in abundance. Just as God has been actively bringing the nations to this land of opportunity, He has been equipping His Church to seize this opportunity!

We could easily focus on the decline in church attendance and zeal. It is true, there is much to be concerned about in the church in America. And as we pray for revival, we should acknowledge that the further decline of the church places a greater urgency on the present opportunity. Perhaps God’s hand of favor continues to be on us so that we may reach the migrants coming our way. And perhaps those coming to us with a vibrant faith will be a part of God’s answer to our prayers for our own revival.

This brings us to a fact that is often overlooked.

The third reality is the Christians in America are legally allowed to share our faith with anyone.

No one is going to haul you into the police station for sharing your faith with your neighbor. Our right to share our beliefs with others is a privilege we should not take for granted.

Will restrictions come in years ahead? We do not know, but one thing is sure, our current freedoms should not be taken lightly.

Persecution of Christians is the reality of our times. According to Lausanne Global Analysis (Sep 2013; Executive Summary), Charles Tieszen writes,

“Two-thirds of the world’s population live in countries with high government restrictions, while over half live in countries with high social hostilities against religions. These statistics show that religious persecution is a global problem and that persecution is not only a Christian concern. Nevertheless, Christians are the single most widely persecuted religious group in the world today, with one source estimating that 75% of acts of religious intolerance are directed against Christians.”

How much more significant, then, that in America we are still free to share our faith.

Taken together, these three current realities present this generation with a historic situation.

Opportunity + Gospel + Freedom = Unprecedented Great Commission Opportunity

God is moving thousands of people from persecuted, unevangelized lands into America where the Church not only has freedom of religion but also the message of salvation by grace through faith. “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

We should not consider this phenomenon a mere result of globalization, natural disasters, or war. God’s pattern has long been to move people groups in order to accomplish His purposes. As the Apostle Paul reasoned in Athens, “He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27).

Why now? We maintain that God has presented this current generation with an opportunity on a scale not seen by our parents. And it is an opportunity which our children may not see to this extent. On a scope perhaps unmatched in history, now is the day of salvation.

This should be a general call to the entire Church. To understand the calling of Near Frontiers, we must ask a further question.

WHY US?

What does Near Frontiers bring to this huge ministry arena? I cannot forget that I was prompted to go overseas at least in part because of the amplitude of resources available in the USA. We are not trying to be the latest, greatest, biggest, or newest, but, as Paul said, “We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed to us” (2 Cor. 10:13). So what sphere do we believe God has appointed to us?

Our unfolding story

We are the U.S. expression of a global mission organization that has been ministering effectively for over 60 years, One Challenge International (formerly Overseas Crusades). Many of the characteristics which

God has blessed in many countries are those we know God will honor through us also. Let me share several of these distinctive to give you an idea of our “parentage.”

- We root our efforts in glorifying God. Our primary motivators are to love God, love our neighbor as ourselves, and to make disciples of all peoples.
- We are church-centric, believing that God is committed to fulfilling His work in and through the church. Most would call us “parachurch” but from the way we operate you wouldn’t know it. We are “pro-church,” always looking for ways to help the church fulfill its mission. And when we say “church” we mean the whole body of Christ, not merely a certain kind or “tribe.”
- We desire to keep a servant mentality. Barnabas, the son of encouragement, is a role model for us. We like to connect parts of the body of Christ that can serve better together, like mortar between the bricks. We sometimes say “We grow fruit on other’s trees.” We aspire to Paul’s attitude, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). That is why partnership, not competition, characterizes everything we do.
- We are a spiritual community. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we desire to move forward or stay put according to the leading of our field general, the living God. So we focus on prayerfulness and solitude. We seek to balance Being with Doing and reflect that balance in our work-rest cycles.
- We are grace-based. We shy away from legalism. We are flexible in our structures, and we prioritize personal and family health. We strive to be kind to each other. While we are committed to being highly productive, our “success” is less on results and more on doing what God leads us to do.
- We value unity and diversity. Cultures are created by God and useful not only for spreading the gospel but for maturing us as disciples. Our desire is to attract people of cultural, age and gender diversity into a transformative growing environment in which we can honor differences while displaying uncommon unity.

These characteristics give a sense of what we are like, and what one would expect if they were to work with us. But another important part of the “Why Us?” answer concerns what we do, or “How?” In other words, because the USA is a vital place to do mission, and because now is an unprecedented Great Commission opportunity, and because Near Frontiers has been crafted by God’s patient work, how has God led us to fulfill our part in His missional plan?

HOW?

We would like to follow Jesus into our Samaria, and bring many churches with us. Let me unpack that a bit.

Jesus' final sentence before ascending back to heaven promised that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we His disciples would tell the gospel "in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). Samaria, for the Jews, was like our multi-cultural American cities: geographically near and culturally distant. This, we believe, is God's doing.

Jesus intentionally departed from tradition and walked into the heart of Samaria, where he crossed social boundaries of religion, class, culture and gender in talking to a woman by a historic water well. From a town previously thought resistant, multitudes trusted Christ as their personal Savior. Jesus instructed the disciples, "life up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest" (John 4:35b)!

We believe there is a hidden harvest in our cities which Jesus wants to bring in. This is an overlooked and under-resourced opportunity. With all the means and personnel God supplies, Near Frontiers desires to raise awareness and mobilize action to the ripe harvest like that in Samaria.

Here are statements which capture this calling:

OUR VISION

The body of Christ in all its diversity united in making disciples of all peoples.

OUR MISSION

We exist to partner within the diverse body of Christ to stimulate intercultural unity and gospel transformation among diaspora and underserved peoples.

By "diversity" we refer to diversity in culture, age, economics and gender.

By "diaspora" (Greek for "scattering") we refer to immigrants, refugees, international students and professionals, generally those who are arriving in the last 25 years. Some are unreached, others bring vibrant commitment to Christ and need connections so they can strengthen U.S. churches.

By "underserved" we refer to those who are ethnically, culturally, or economically overlooked.

Discovering how to best do this has been consistent with our commitment to being led by God. We look for the opportunities, relationships, requests, and ideas which He gives to us. By this process, our efforts have increasingly focused on these few ministry avenues.

- We use and equip others with simple, reproducible ways to use Scripture to share the gospel. In so doing, God will make reproducing disciples and gather them into Christ-communities both simple and formal.
- We provide and connect believers to information about the peoples God has brought to their city so that they can see the hidden harvest nearby.
- We mobilize believers to practically serve migrants (refugees, immigrants, professionals, international students) and thus build relationships for the gospel's sake.

- We train believers to build friendships across cultures, and to welcome those of different cultures into accepting and culturally-informed fellowships.
- We live intentionally among underserved people in order to live out the good news among them.
- We seek to increase understanding and reconciliation on the pathway toward genuine intercultural unity in the Church.
- We connect American trainers and leaders into international ministry partnerships.

We clarify our intended sphere of ministry through a “sandbox” which clarifies Vision, Mission, Values, Guiding Principles, Central Ministry Focus, and Preferred Culture. Within this area of play, we encourage innovation in our missionaries. We would be happy to share this document with any who are interested.

AND YOU?

We are praying and watching for others whom God sends to partner with us. We desire to get to know self-starting, mission-energized adults who have a burden to serve. There are a variety of ways to do so.

- Join us in **praying** for God to accomplish a mighty work in America and beyond.
- **Contribute** financially as God directs you. Our staff are supported by gifts to their ministry.
- Get personally **involved** in our ministry as a full-time, part-time, associate missionary, or intern.

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