

Research: Outreach to First-Generation Immigrants Succeeding, Needs Improvement
by Brooklyn Lowery on Monday, March 29, 2010

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — A North American Mission Board (NAMB)/LifeWay Research study found that while ministries across North America are reaching out to a significant portion of first-generation immigrants, much work remains to be done. Still, while evangelistic growth among these groups has been slow, the potential is promising, with immigrants from most countries considered somewhat receptive to the gospel.

NAMB contracted with LifeWay Research to conduct the study between July 21 and Sept. 2, 2009. The scope of the project included a qualitative phase and quantitative surveys available in 20 languages to missionaries, pastors and laity who work among first-generation immigrants in North America. National and regional organizations and professors who teach immigrant missions and evangelism also were surveyed. The statistics in this article focus only on responses from the 74 national and regional organizations, representing a variety of evangelical denominations and groups, that participated.

First-generation immigrants were defined in the study as residents of North America who were born in a foreign country.

"For us to be faithful in assisting our churches in the tasks of evangelism and church planting, we need an awareness of what work is underway so believers, churches, denominations and ministries can support and participate in these missions efforts here in North America," explained Richard Harris, interim president of NAMB. "We will not make significant progress in fulfilling the Great Commission in North America until we take seriously the mandate to reach more of the millions of immigrants and hundreds of people groups in our communities with the gospel."

The 74 Christian organizations included in the study have 3,757 missionaries and church planters working among first-generation immigrants. While a few of the largest organizations have many missionaries, the median number of missionaries among these organizations is 12.

Participating organizations report having the highest number of first-generation immigrant believers from Mexico. The next highest numbers of believers involved in their churches or ministries, in descending order, are immigrants from Haiti (a distant second), South Korea, Cuba and China.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate, by country, changes in the number of immigrants involved in the organizations over the last year. On a scale of one to five, with five representing a "10 percent or more" increase in participation and one being a "10 percent or more" decrease in participation, the mean response was 3.4 or just more than "about the same." Only Myanmar's, Vietnam's and Cambodia's immigrants average at or above "more total participants than one year ago."

"The opportunity here is great," explained Ken Weathersby, vice president of church planting at NAMB. "Many immigrants come from places where preaching the gospel is illegal, but they can hear the gospel in their new home. In turn, those believers can impact their families here in North America and in their country of origin, more easily crossing language and cultural barriers [than non-native believers]."

Significantly, despite the slow growth of immigrants participating in these organizations, respondents said that overall, immigrants from most countries are considered somewhat receptive to the gospel. Receptivity was defined as the speed and ease with which someone who hears the gospel responds with belief and repentance. Again using the five-point scale, with five being "very receptive" and one being "not receptive at all," the mean response was 3.4.

Immigrants from Ecuador, Guatemala, Liberia, Honduras, El Salvador, Myanmar, Brazil, Costa Rica, Kenya and Mexico appear most receptive with an average response of 4.0 or higher.

Surveyed organizations currently minister to immigrants from 151 of a possible 202 countries considered in the analysis. This number includes countries such as the Vatican and Taiwan, which are not always counted among the world's official countries.

That means that 25 percent of possible countries of origin, including nations of Europe, Africa and the South Pacific, have no organizations ministering to their immigrants in North America. Another 26 percent have only one or two national or regional organizations ministering to them.

"Things are changing in the U.S. and Canada," said Ed Stetzer, vice president of LifeWay Research and Ministry Development. "By 2050, there will be no majority race or ethnicity in the United States. Already, in Toronto, the majority of residents were born outside of Canada. This is a wake-up call to the Church in North America. The nations of the world are living right here, yet many are not hearing the gospel in an intentional, organized way. We can do better."

Among countries with at least one organization ministering to immigrants in North America, many have "very few" missionaries or church planters. Countries with five or fewer missionaries include Germany, France, Italy and Poland as well as Middle Eastern, African and Eurasian countries, among others.

"Generations of believers around the world prayed that the former Soviet bloc nations would be free to hear the gospel," Stetzer notes. "Now, as they move into our neighborhoods, few are proactively welcoming them with the Good News. We can and must do better."

The survey found that first-generation immigrants from 24 countries have more than 50 missionaries or church planters in North America. Immigrant groups from Mexico, South Korea, Guatemala, China, Cuba, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras and Venezuela each had more than 100 missionaries and/or church planters serving them, with Mexico leading all groups at 1,715.

Twenty-four "heart" (first) languages were tested in the survey. Spanish-speaking heart-language immigrants had the highest number of organizations serving them (55), followed by Chinese (30), Korean (25), Arabic (22) and Japanese (21).

"Believers in North America need to stop waiting for a 'melting pot' to impact immigrants and instead make personal efforts to engage the first-generation immigrants around them with the gospel," Stetzer said.

Footnotes

***Methodology:** LifeWay Research called and e-mailed denominations and parachurch ministries, inviting them to participate in the online survey. The survey was conducted between July 21 and Sept. 2, 2009. Additional versions of the survey were also administered among missionaries, professors, pastors and laity.*

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