

# Reflecting on Organizational Change: Frontiers as a Case Study

EMQ » April – July 2025 » Volume 61 Issue 2



## Topic: New Models of Mission

**Summary:** Frontiers started as a new organization focusing on reaching Muslim peoples through team ministry more than 40 years ago. The Holloways outline changes Frontiers has made over the years as they have responded to interpersonal and ministry challenges, and the strain of growing larger as an organization. This has included developing a specific approach to conflict management, changing mission and goal statements, and a significant change in ministry approach across the organization.

### By Steve and Kitty Holloway

More than 40 years ago, during a soul-searching walk on a California beach, Greg Livingstone sensed God asking him to start a new mission agency. “Why, Lord?” he asked. “There are already so many good ones.”

At this point, Greg had served in several agencies which he highly respected. Greg recognized that one barrier to the gospel reaching Muslim peoples was the lack of sufficient Christian message-bearers willing to live out the gospel on Muslim soil. So, Frontiers was formed to focus solely on Muslim peoples, engaging with them in their homelands.

In the 1980s there were no agencies focused solely on sending teams to plant churches among Muslim peoples in Muslim-majority countries throughout the world. God gave Greg a vision to start an effort with this wide yet single-minded focus. He believed he could recruit young Christians, inexperienced yet willing to follow God’s leading, with a desire to implant the gospel in the heart of Muslim societies. He trusted God would work through them even though there was no roadmap to follow.

## Frontiers as a Case Study 2

Other principles quickly became clear as Greg and early team leaders established Frontiers:

- We would be a network of **semi-autonomous teams**. Teams provide mini committed communities with diverse gifts which can allow continuity and perseverance in a setting. Greg encouraged teams to pursue their own approaches. Each team became an experimental laboratory as they sought to communicate and live out the gospel. These teams would collaborate and be committed to oversight.
- Our goal: to **plant reproducing churches**. We believed that unless our work resulted in communities of Muslim background Jesus followers, empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey God's commands (including the Great Commission), with biblically informed elders, we would not have done what Jesus commissioned us to do.
- We would be **grace-oriented**, a community affirming the breadth of theology and practice within biblical and evangelical parameters. We welcomed field members from across the evangelical spectrum – from charismatic to reformed. Field teams were encouraged to choose lifestyles that removed barriers to the message as they lived among the people they served.
- We would **be committed to accountability and eager to grow** in our calling. We wanted to mature in character and competence, individually and corporately. While each of our sending bases would provide pre-field candidate training, we recognized that the most effective learning happens on-field, amid ministry, where field members discover what the vital questions are.
- We would be **field-governed**. Team leaders engaged on the “front lines” gathered as a council with final authority to shape the organization to best serve the reality being experienced on the ground.

Brave ideals, but how would they be reshaped within the crucible of cross-cultural ministry that commonly entailed sacrifice and suffering? At first, we called ourselves *the new breed, the unstoppable*. Of course, it didn't take long to realize that these labels were mere hubris. Frontiers' early teams faced stresses, temptations, and threats exposing our individual and corporate vulnerabilities.

The grueling nature of the work brought moral weaknesses to the surface: unhealthy ambition, abusive leadership behaviors, deception, betrayal and dysfunctional family and team dynamics – all of which could undermine God's work through us.

By God's grace, we gained glimmers of humility on the anvil of reality. These trials forced us to be more honest with one another. One of our early leaders called us the “cut the crap agency” as we increasingly brought difficult issues into the light. We confronted our habits of denying, rationalizing, and blame-shifting. Instead, we learned to encourage honest dialog, constructive questioning, even productive disagreement and debate that led us to a deeper understanding of issues. We have learned to not allow competence or personal charisma to excuse poor character.

Over time we developed a biblical model to resolve relational conflicts in a healthy way and have shared this model with other agencies. Peace Pursuit<sup>[1]</sup> is a Scripture-based approach to resolving interpersonal tensions. The process begins with all parties examining their own hearts for unacknowledged expectations and other factors – to remove one's own logs – rather than assuming sin has only been done by the other party. This often results in people valuing the relationships at

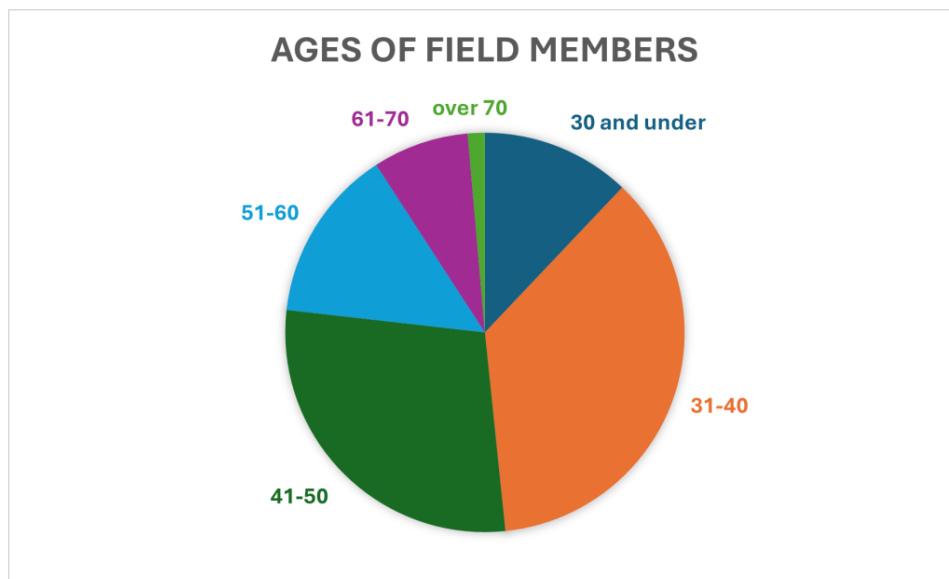
stake more highly than their personal agendas. It doesn't always work, of course; some hold onto their own grievances and are unwilling to engage in self-reflection.

We did, and still do, have more field attrition than we'd like. Through the decades we have learned how to better help those leaving to do so with honor, to welcome the continuing contributions of alumni, and to better prepare field workers to persevere amidst the many challenges of reaching the unreached today.

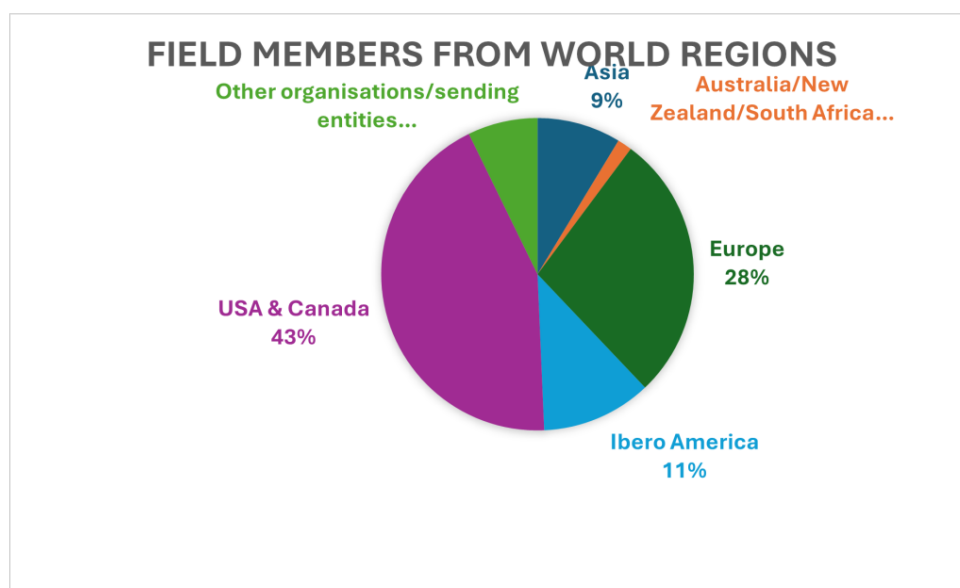
#### Ways that Frontiers has Changed

Frontiers has grown from a handful of American teams working in as many countries, to 284 teams today. There are 1,382 adult field workers from 59 nationalities working in 64 Muslim fields (as of December 2024); see figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1 – Frontiers Age Demographics**



**Figure 2 – Frontiers Team Locations**



Forty years have passed. How have the early vision and principles weathered the test of time?

### Focus on Muslim Homelands

In 1983, few Muslim societies granted missionary visas. We therefore found many creative means to gain residency and live incarnationally among Muslim peoples in their homelands.

Years of experience across a wide variety of Muslim cultures has given us a deep understanding of the multi-colored world of Islam. In 2007, as a result, we felt the need to re-express our mission statement – capturing the heart of what we do in simple terms: *“With love and respect, inviting all Muslim peoples to follow Jesus, prioritizing those with least access to the gospel.”*

We have retained our focus of living within Muslim majority cultures. However, with the increasing flow of refugees from these same cultures, many of our field workers choose to minister to these groups in home or nearby cultures when they leave the field.

### Semi-Autonomous Teams

Greg believed teams of young people could be given tactical responsibility and authority to make decisions closest to the scene of action while being accountable to an overall strategy. In the early years, some leaders of other groups derided this approach as “a new children’s crusade.” Yet, this idea of decentralized decision-making is not unique to Frontiers. Other groups have long expected young leaders to pursue innovative approaches aligned with greater goals, including the United States military, tech companies, entrepreneurs, the arts, and emergency services.

Because historical examples of successful implantation of the gospel in Muslim communities are rare, our teams have functioned as laboratories. Allowing failures to be our teachers, we evaluate mistakes and test new approaches. Surprising discoveries have persuaded us to make paradigm shifts in how we approach our ministry. These shifts include: the nature of the gospel message, how churches form, the impact new believers can have on their communities, and roles of foreigners.

Being a network of semi-autonomous teams means our organizational structure has remained relatively flat. While this can be chaotic at times, working relationally rather than through centrally directed policies has allowed us to collaborate deeply, which in turn empowers field workers to adapt and innovate.

Generally, our teams work in difficult environments. This has prompted us to develop robust member care to foster resiliency. We are leadership-rich, so we invest in leadership development of team members as well as team leaders through peer coaching, mentoring structures, and on-field training.

The freedom to make decisions close to the scene of action also extends to Frontiers’ dozens of sending bases scattered throughout the world. They carry out their roles (recruiting, pre-field training and sending) in ways relevant to their unique cultural contexts.

Sending bases do not assign candidates to teams. Instead, candidates may approach several team leaders to be invited to join their teams, filling gaps they may have in gifting or skills.

Some tensions arise when there are crises or conflicts within a team, because multiple sending groups from diverse cultures expect to be involved in finding a resolution. This is an area of ongoing learning for us, since it does not always work out satisfactorily for everyone involved.

As we have grown numerically, the value of teams has been proven at even our most senior levels, with regions now being overseen by Field Leadership Teams. Frontiers has been led by a three-person International Director Team since 2018. We've found that this team model provides checks and balances, a plurality of gifts, variety of perspectives, shared wisdom, greater resilience and stability, and reduced dominance of any one person's point of view.

### Our Goal

Our original goal to plant reproducing churches was reworded in 2000 as: *"To plant churches among Muslim peoples that lead to movements."* Over time we realized we still had it wrong.

Some churches did emerge in the first decades. However, they did not reproduce. Commonly these were gatherings made up of unrelated individual believers with a foreigner as their hub. They became static, not attracting others – much less reproducing. We realized this was unfruitful in societies where people have trouble trusting one another. Instead, we learned the critical importance of working within relational networks where trust already exists, allowing these bonds to continue as the networks journey together into Jesus' kingdom.

We have observed that the Holy Spirit validates the message we communicate – giving dreams, healings or other divine interventions. These signs and wonders cause some Muslims to be drawn to Jesus. As they surrender their lives to Jesus, they begin to experience transformation from the inside out, becoming better family and community members. When others within relational networks linked to these new believers witness this transformation, they are impressed and motivated to understand how this happened. While our cross-cultural workers serve as catalysts, the resulting movements of relational networks to Jesus are more influenced by the lives of transformed Muslims who openly witness about their experience with Jesus. Rereading the New Testament, we realized that movements towards Christ preceded the formation of churches just as we were seeing on our fields.

Thus, in 2017, to reflect this greater understanding, Frontiers' International Council voted to re-express this goal as: "To pursue movements of disciples and churches." God has profoundly changed us as a community as we come to terms with this focus on movements rather than churches.<sup>[iii]</sup> This accompanies our equally important goal of pioneering among those with least access to the gospel.

### Grace Orientation

We believe that God likes to work in a variety of ways. This has given us a greater sensitivity to listen to diverse perspectives in our community. This careful attention fosters respect and trust, resulting in our structure being shaped more by relationships than policies.

Valuing grace towards one another gives us an openness to resolve potentially divisive issues. For example, we've found that schisms such as charismatic vs. non-charismatic and social action vs. evangelism are more helpfully viewed as *both/and* rather than *either/or* issues. This value has also helped us navigate recent controversies around cultural identities of Jesus-followers and how believers can best remain in and impact their home communities.

Over time, we have matured in several areas. By God's grace, now we ...

- Welcome women into all leadership roles.
- Expect God to demonstrate his power while the gospel is being communicated.

- Pay more attention to spiritual formation issues among our members and new believers.
- Encourage more holistic ministries.
- Empower new believers to develop contextual theologies aligned with biblical truth.

Although we began as an American group, we have benefited immeasurably from increasingly multicultural teams. We rely on grace as we learn to engage in genuine peer partnership, learning to draw the best from each culture's contribution.

As Frontiers has grown older, we've also become more multi-generational. We rely on grace to listen to each generation, developing relationships for mentoring and accountability which are mutually beneficial. This relational focus has opened the way for intentional succession of responsibility and authority to younger leaders who have fresh perspectives, while allowing older leaders to lead through influence.

### **Eager for Accountability and Growth**

Through the years, we've learned much through innovation, risk-taking, experimentation, observation, reflection, and evaluation. This has been a necessity, because – again – not many have *succeeded* in reaching Muslims with the gospel up to this point.

We often experience a *holy dissatisfaction* – when facing failure and frustrations – which pushes us to rely on God and take new risks by faith. We find many ways to openly facilitate sharing of lessons learned on our fields, rather than allowing expertise to remain siloed within a team or region. Teams have many opportunities to interact with each other through regional and international meetings, email forums, webinars, dedicated websites, and in-house news broadcasts.

As an organization, we have grappled with many paradigm shifts. Some examples of shifts that have reshaped us:

- We have learned to share the gospel using Jesus' kingdom narrative rather than religious narratives. God's overarching plan is to bless all peoples through establishing his reign in them and over all creation through Jesus Christ. Jesus calls people into transformational relationships with God increasingly marked by grace, concern for others, fruit of the Spirit, Spirit-empowered signs and gifts, and a deep commitment to God's message and work. They literally become a new kind of humanity (cf. Ephesians 2:15) unique to their *ethne*. This contrasts with religious narratives that may emphasize external conformity, human effort, and loyalty to specific cultural traditions.
- We encourage any gathering of believers to have the Word as its focal point (interacting with Jesus through inductive study of Scripture and listening prayer) rather than relying on an *expert* didactic teacher. More experienced biblical teachers serve a valuable role when they support an emerging contextualized church to develop their own hermeneutics for Bible interpretation. There are many ways they can do this, including pointing out how other cultures have addressed similar issues through redemptive history, without imprinting their own cultural biases.
- We encourage followers of Jesus to remain integrated in their home community, rather than becoming extracted from their people by aligning with a foreign culture. Through studying Scripture together, the new believers ask God to help them discern how he wants to transform

their culture's values, beliefs, and behaviors, so that they can become effective witnesses of the gospel there.

- We encourage our field workers to consider the multiple audiences watching everything we do (e.g., Muslims, sending churches, the secular world), as they communicate who they are. This prompts us to avoid culture-bound terminology (*Christianese*), while presenting an authentic identity integrating who we are and why we are here. We are learning to partner earlier and more fully with near-culture believers.

### Field-Governed

Having field team leaders function as the highest governing body in Frontiers has allowed us to, as Greg says, "Keep the main thing the main thing." More recently one of our leaders has expressed it, "Kingdom first, Frontiers second." This abiding conviction keeps us focused on our founding vision, rather than being distracted by lesser agendas. Field governance and a kingdom agenda has helped us resist passing fads, powerful individual personalities, political factions, or fossilization into a past version of Frontiers.

Empowering active field leaders to set our organizational course sometimes means decisions take longer to process but ensures wide ownership of those decisions once made.

Through the years, some sending bases have resented not having seats at the international council, since they serve as gatekeepers of recruits and finances. This has led to many discussions and highlighted the need to listen more intentionally to sending base input while retaining field governance.

As we have grown, the international council has also grown. A large council makes decision-making difficult. So, early on, the international council elected an executive committee from within itself to steer international council business. Because the executive committee draws its authority from the field team leaders, this helps the whole community continue to process issues deeply and with mutual respect using our mission statement and goals as the primary reference point. The executive committee also keeps field teams, sending bases and even the International Director Team accountable to our common kingdom agenda.

The process the executive committee facilitates, while they work with the international council, can be very slow as they listen to input representing all aspects of our community.

However, this process has consistently brought us all to a consensus of conviction on key issues, continuing to reshape our community. Most of the paradigm shifts described in this document have become integrated into the Frontiers community this way.

### Conclusion

Through the ages, those with heart allegiance to Jesus find the courage and means to obey his Commission. From early apostolic bands, monastic movements, missionary societies, to modern mission agencies, Jesus' people have formed special task forces to intentionally carry the message to cultures that have not yet heard. Each of these task forces is, of course, forged within a particular cultural, social, and philosophical context, at a particular moment in history. Predictably, each task force's relevance – the flexibility of its wineskin – diminishes over time. Then God provides a new wineskin.



Within Frontiers, ongoing choices have shaped an ethos which allows us, by God's grace, to continue deploying teams to some of the toughest places on earth while adapting to a changing world. One day, Frontier's wineskin will no longer be flexible enough to remain relevant. Until that day, we consider it a privilege to partner with God, with love and respect, implanting the message of Jesus in the heart of Muslim homelands, so that the gospel will blossom into movements of blessing and transformation.

We would like to thank **Robert Blincoe, John Shepherd, Abraham Durán, Teresa and Eric Dong, Dan and Christine Eitzen, Jonathan Holmberg, Fredrich and Martina Leonhardt, Rebecca Lewis, Greg Livingstone, and Jay Muller** for their contributions to this article.

---

**Steve and Kitty Holloway** have been with Frontiers since its beginning and have held a variety of leadership positions through the years. Currently they are investigating the dynamics of Christ-centered movements within Muslim societies. Kitty also helps field members in language acquisition, and Steve consults as a marine biologist and has published a novel ([Pelagia.net](http://Pelagia.net)). They live in England.

---

[i] "Home," *Peace Pursuit*, accessed January 29, 2025, <https://peacepursuit.org>.

[ii] Eric Adams and Laura Adams, "Pursuing Movements: An Organizational Paradigm Shift," in *Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations*, ed. Warrick Farah (William Carey Publishing, 2021).

---

Leader's Edge Copyright © 2025 by Missio Nexus.. All rights reserved. Not to be reproduced or copied in any form without written permission from Missio Nexus.

Used by permission from Missio Nexus, PO Box 398, Wheaton, IL 60187. Email: [Info@MissioNexus.org](mailto:Info@MissioNexus.org). Website: [www.MissioNexus.org/](http://www.MissioNexus.org/)