

The Challenge of Unreached Peoples: Issues in Assemblies of God Missiology

Alan R. Johnson*

Introduction

The material in this paper was originally prepared for an Assemblies of God World Missions (USA) (AGWM) global conference focused on a large bloc of unreached people groups. The invitation from the conference organizers was to look specifically at issues within the AGWM environment that arise when we begin to address unreached peoples in the various circumstances they are in around the world. I framed the presentation of the paper around three of our mission realities and then asked a guiding question that flows from them. The key features of the mission reality that we operate in are: a). Over two billion people, primarily Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist peoples who have the least access to the Gospel in the world, b). our AGWM agency has the bulk of its personnel working among Christians outside of that unreached world, and c). a massive Pentecostal harvest force in the broader World Assemblies of God Fellowship where general councils¹ are moving forward in intentional cross-cultural sending and building structures to facilitate this. My question then based on these three realities is “If this is our situation collectively as an Assemblies of God (AG) fraternally related worldwide fellowship, what should we be doing?” The answer to that question on the surface is both obvious and simple. We have a great potential Pentecostal harvest force with a harvest field of great need. It is impossible from all that we know in the Bible about God and his love for the world that He would not want us to concern ourselves with the peoples who have the fewest Christians and the least witness of Christ.

* Johnson (Ph.D., Oxford Centre for Mission Studies: University of Wales) is a veteran missionary to Thailand, having served there since 1986. In 2009, he authored *Leadership in a Slum: A Bangkok Case Study*, based on his dissertation. In addition to his adjunct teaching assignment at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, he works with small churches in the Bangkok region and in ministry with urban poor.

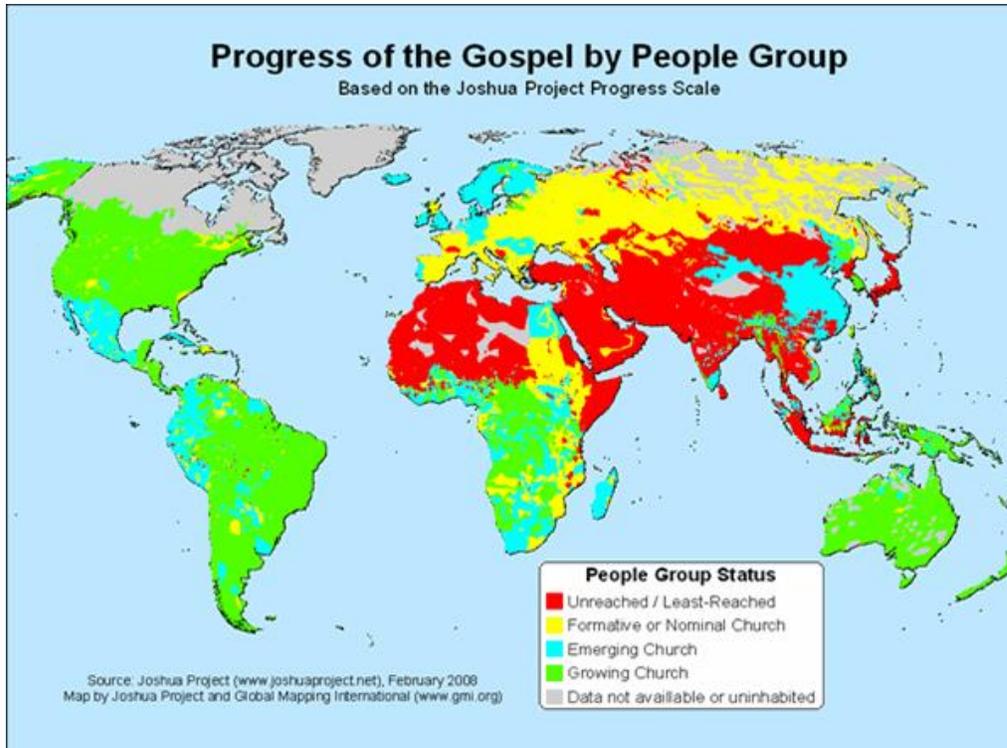


Figure 1. The Red Zone of the Unreached and Least Reached²

However, if the answer is simple, moving from the idea to implementation is not. The unreached of the red zone in the Joshua project progress chart (see Figure 1) represent the last and most difficult challenge for the church. If it was easy it would have been done already. While there are a number of issues that could be addressed as it relates to AGWM and taking the Gospel to the unreached, I will focus in this essay on three that I think are of particular import. The conceptual challenge has to do with missionary placement and the role of the call of the Spirit when brought into contact with the empirical reality of the unreached. The challenge at the level of mission practice is the people blindness that disables both us and national church movements we work with to “see” those who are unreached, even when geographically proximate. The last challenge is an organizational and philosophical one where I examine some of the complexities that arise when we attempt to plant a church among an unreached people group within the same geopolitical boundary where an AG national church already exists in a different people group.

Data, Strategy and the Holy Spirit

You cannot read the history of the AG and the early Pentecostal movement in North America without being impressed with the constant tension that is exhibited at all points that have to do with the interface between things that are generally considered to be of human origin (with organization and education being prominent) and the leading of the Spirit. Wrestling with the balance between these two areas has been part of what has made the AG a great worldwide movement and allowed it to have the dynamism of people being led and anointed by the Spirit and structures to preserve the fruit. While there are many points that could be discussed in terms of this tension inside of the mission, I want to focus here on how we make decisions where we put personnel. My context here is within the American (USA) AG mission. A major value for us as a Pentecostal mission is that in all we do we seek to be led by the Spirit. One of the priority functions of a mission agency is placing people, making decisions as to what areas you will put staff in and so on. This has two particular dimensions, one is with people coming to the mission and deciding where they go, and the other is where the agency itself decides to throw its weight in emphases. My phrasing here reflects one of the realities of the process of how people end up discerning where they are called to go. The primary factor is personal calling, but many who come to the agency have a sense of being called to mission but it is not connected to any particular location or people. For those who do not come to the agency with a specific people or place in mind, the normal process is for leadership to share about current opportunities and needs in various parts of the world. Accepting this as a critical principle that we value (although imperfectly applied) I want to juxtapose it with the way that 'people group' thinking (as represented in movements which embrace frontier mission thinking) are seen by some Pentecostal mission agencies. Oversimplifying the issues the two positions can be contrasted like this:

- The Spirit led view is represented by sending people where they say they are called, and going places where the Spirit is moving and people are responding.

- The people group advocate view is that you use information to find out where there are those who do not have the Gospel and then you try and mobilize the Body of Christ to take up the challenge. A major component is thus dissemination of the information among the potential harvest force.

The kind of practice represented by people group advocates rubs against the grain of the *ethos* of Pentecostals with their strong focus on the leading of the Holy Spirit as the primary factor in decision-making.³ Even non-Pentecostals have reacted negatively, leveling the critique that it is “managerial missiology.”⁴ This raises the question of how we as Pentecostals should think about and relate to the use of information. Is there a way that we can affirm and practice our value of being led by the Holy Spirit and at the same time work with the empirical information of these people group databases?

I want to suggest that the charge of managerial missiology versus being Spirit-led accentuates differences between the two positions for the purpose of argument. If you look at actual practice you find more common points than the critique allows. Pentecostals engage in much planning, thinking, and pragmatic action, while non-Pentecostals in the people group thinking movement as believers have the Spirit living within them and are exercising their giftings and abilities from the Spirit. At the very least we all need to be open to the possibility that some of the ideas suggested for tackling the challenge of the unreached are indeed from the Holy Spirit. I consider both the perspective that generated the pursuit of the data, and the sharing of that data to be a prophetic word to the Body of Christ to not neglect their role of bringing blessing of the Gospel to the nations.

A second point is that we Pentecostals need to be careful in not rejecting the powerful concepts that come from people group thinking simply because some of the proposed methodologies (such as assigning groups from a list) may not be the best. We need to maintain space between the concepts themselves and the way they are sometimes applied. If we do not like a particular application for a concept, then it should be incumbent upon us to keep the concept if it has biblical warrant and seek an application more in keeping with our understanding of Scripture.

A third point is that it is impossible to go back and pretend that we do not know something that we already know. The database is very clear now, we know who these groups are, where they reside, and have an approximation of the status of the Christian faith among them. It is not guesswork. So we cannot proceed in our participation in the mission of God as if we did not know these things. A corollary of this is that knowing something does not preclude the supernatural work of the Spirit, it just changes the kind of information the Spirit will give to us.

The Challenge of People Blindness

In this section I focus on a challenge to our practice of missions. "People blindness" in frontier mission missiology is the spiritual blindness that prevents Christians from being able to see those around them who are different culturally than themselves and results in not seeing them as in need of a hearing of the Gospel. Specifically, I examine how, in our ways of doing missions, we become susceptible both as national church movements and mission teams to being unable to "see" people groups that do not have the Gospel. I propose the idea that missionaries pursue an "amphibian" role; rooted in the local church as well as in a lost world.

When Ralph D. Winter first began to think in terms of reaching peoples by expanding on some of Donald McGavran's work, he framed the idea in terms of the peoples being "hidden" from view. This goes back to the notion of "one mode of Christianity fits all." It was Winter's observation that you could have robust church movements in one people group but nothing within another group that was geographically proximate to the first group. Their being close to each other did not help the Gospel move from those who had it to those who did not have it because for various reasons they were blind to seeing them. To put it another way, the very sociological factors that make near neighbor witness so very powerful also work to keep us from seeing those who are different from us.

In reflecting on this particular phenomena as it concerns our practice of missions I have developed what I call the "trap of the double blind" to illustrate how this affects us (see Figure 2). In our system most of us expatriate workers are in countries that have an

existing national church (NC in the Figure). Sometimes this church is among the majority people, but in other instances it is found among minority groups. In our missiology we have two lenses that traditionally structure how we determine where to send people. One is the call of the Holy Spirit upon the worker, and the other is the needs of the existing national church. Thus two major pillars of our missiology are represented in the way we think about how workers end up in their particular field of labor. Both of these principles have served us very well over the past nearly 100 years.

However, in general using these two lenses alone have created a situation where people blindness manifests itself. The first is among local church movements, and this is only natural because often times there are historically strained relations between different groups. When people of one group become Christians it is often a very difficult and long process for them to begin to see that the other group should be within the scope of their ministry to proclaim Christ. So this classical sense of people blindness is present. A second level of blindness happens with the mission team as the commitment to work with this local church organization and its multitude of needs for all practical purposes pushes the unreached group right off the strategic radar. Although the missionary does not share the same prejudices or barriers towards this other group, what ends up happening is that they become so absorbed in the work of that church that they never “see” them. Thus you have a double blind situation where neither the church nor the mission team can see an unreached group as an evangelistic priority.

- *People A cannot “see” people B
- *The mission working with the church in people A loses sight of people B as well

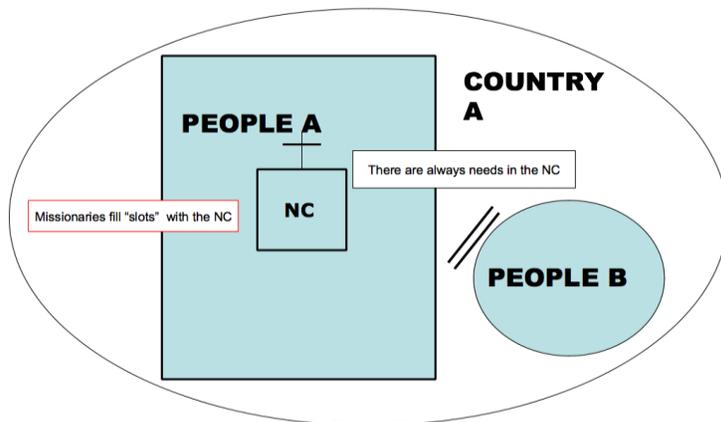


Figure 2. The Trap of the Double Blind

The trap of the double blind presents a challenge to our conception of partnership with the national church. I will look at this issue in more detail in the final section on structural challenges. At this point let me just observe that it appears that our historic and well-known commitment to work in partnership with the national church has inadvertently made it very difficult for our mission teams to function as the apostolic bands of the New Testament and take the Gospel to where Christ is not known. If we look at this situation in terms of the extremes of the poles, working completely independent of the existing church on one end and working only with the national church on the other end, I think that wisdom is to find some kind of position more towards the middle.

I believe that ultimately it is best to help national church bodies come full-cycle and have their own vision for missions that embrace unreached peoples both near and far. However, in many current situations to simply wait for a local church movement to catch the vision is to abdicate our responsibility as an apostolic band. This speaks to the importance of the amphibian role of not working only at one end of the pole or the other, but endeavoring to maintain the unique distinctive of the mission band to take the Gospel where it is not known and to act as loving advocates and mentors in the ways of mission so that a vision can be nurtured in the national church over the long haul.

In practical terms in a world where churches exist, cross-cultural workers are already in place, and at the same time there may be people groups geographically near who do not have a viable and culturally relevant witnessing church in their society, what might functioning like a Pauline apostolic band look like for the mission agency and team?

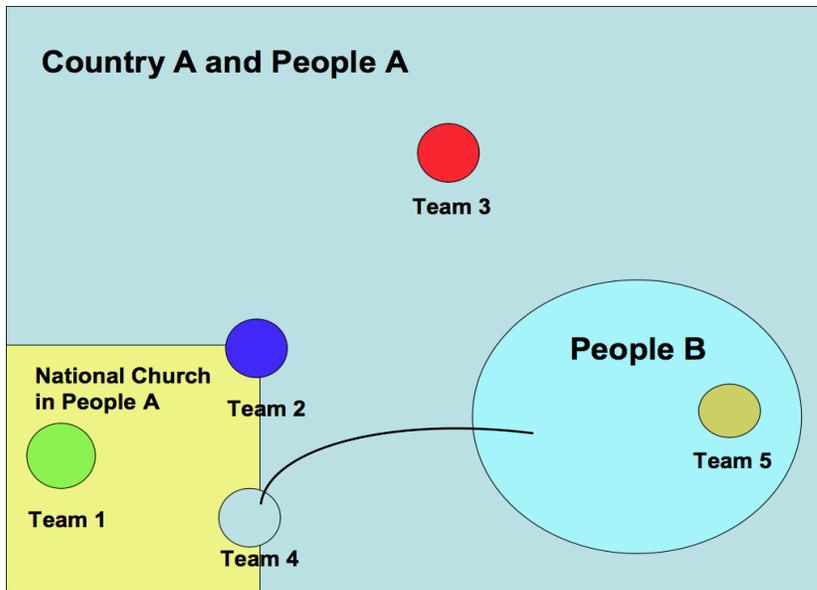


Figure 3. Illustrations of Varieties of Apostolic Function

There are three major ways in which a team that seeks to function in an apostolic role could approach their work (illustrated in Figure 3). The first (team 1) would be to work within the context of the existing national church to help implant apostolic and missional DNA so that those churches and believers would become the laborers that would cross into the unreached people group.

A second style (teams 2 and 4), is particularly appropriate if there is some natural resistance or prejudice on the part of the national church to the unreached group, would be to work both with the national church and the unreached group, living in both worlds. In this approach, the mission team shows its solidarity and interest with the goals of the national church and yet maintains its own role as a mission sodality to proclaim Christ among the unreached. The style here is not to move out unilaterally, but to attempt to build bridges for evangelism into the unreached people and to the national church in terms of their own mission responsibility and to endeavor to bring along local Christians into ministry with them among the unreached group. Team 2 illustrates this process in trying to bridge Christians in the national church to do innovative outreach to their own people group (the lost of people A in this case), while team 4 illustrates the process of trying to bridge local Christians to work in unreached people B.

The third approach (teams 3 and 5) is for the expatriate team to, by design, work independently from the national church to do pioneer planting among the unreached. With team 3 this is happening in the people group A among which a small church movement already exists, and with team 5 it is happening in people B which has no church movement at all. The circumstances may require an outside group to work on the initial breakthrough, or the national church may completely refuse involvement. Depending on the situation, it could be possible for a mission agency to have all three of these approaches happening at the same time.

This discussion of how what I call apostolic function⁵ can play out at the agency and team level illustrates an important point for all the participants in global mission: there are many ways to accomplish preaching the Gospel and planting the church among unreached people groups, and the participants at every level can have a part in it. It has been an unfortunate unintended consequence of the promotion of the needs of the unreached that it has come to be associated with the idea that a) all existing personnel and resources should be immediately moved into unreached groups, and b) any team or mission remaining working in a place where the church is established is somehow missing God's will. The primary questions of the apostolic team, center on how best to accomplish the pioneer task, and determining one's calling and giftings. Asking these questions means a wide variety of paths could provide satisfactory answers, but such answers should always have the role of existing church movements in mind. All the participants in God's global mission have a vital and strategic role to play.

The Challenge of the Existing National Church

With the shift from a focus on nation states to people groups it brings to the forefront an issue that we as missionaries in AGWM in general have not had to broach in the past. The assumed "normal" procedure was to see a national church movement planted within the boundaries of a given nation-state and then partner with that church. In much of the least-reached world the nation-states that have an AG national church movement are made up of numerous ethnolinguistic groups. The national churches in such cases are usually strongest in one (often but not always in the largest people group

that is dominant politically). This means that multiple significant peoples will be very unreached within the boundaries of that nation-state. However, the realities of people blindness discussed above signifies that in many cases those existing national churches have not yet “seen” the unreached in different ethnic groups and/or are unwilling to reach out to them. The assumption that once the Gospel is rooted among one people, it will naturally flow to the rest turns out in the history of Christian mission to not be true. This is why unreached people groups require intentional cross-cultural church planting efforts.

The challenge that I want to examine here is what happens when AGWM mission teams want to reach out to unreached people groups in such scenarios, and what happens when they do and churches begin to be planted. Our idea of the national church is so common and assumed among us that we forget that the New Testament does not give us much help in thinking about how churches “associate” and relate to one another. What we do know is that when people believed in Jesus they formed into communities of faith. We also get a clear picture in Acts that there were radically different forms of the Christian faith represented by Jewish background believers and Gentile background believers. We also have a clear illustration of the complexities that accompany the movement of the Gospel from one cultural setting to another. Acts 15 highlights the difficulties encountered when the Gospel enters a new sociocultural sphere and the kinds of issues that can arise with how the new group relates to existing groups of believers. In contemporary mission language the coming of the Gospel into new cultural spheres gives rise to issues of contextualization, while how the new group of Christians relates to the broader body of Christ has to do with issues of “association.” It is this second aspect that I am concerned with in this section particularly as it relates to our key missiological concepts of national church and partnership when we seek to church plant among unreached people groups in countries with an already existing AG national church. I begin by looking at the idea of association as it has been handled in the modern mission era and then follow historically the development of the national church and partnership idea in AG missions. I then examine a number of issues that grow out of our current understandings and assumptions about these two key concepts. Finally I explore the both strengths and needed refinements in the national church/partnership concept and make

some suggestions for building AGWM-national church relations in the future that will facilitate church planting among unreached people groups.

The Issue of Association and the Development of the AG understanding of National Church and Partnership

In the history of the modern mission movement since 1792 the primary vehicle has been the voluntary missionary society, and the dominant form of connection has been that of three major denominational polities dominating: Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational.⁶ While some mission agencies attempted to be interdenominational, they soon gravitated towards a single denomination, and those missions who tried to preach the Gospel without pushing towards a certain polity discovered that the younger churches gravitated towards the forms of those who brought the Gospel to them.⁷ In terms of modern era missions sending structures, there are three major types which can be broadly represented as denominational, interdenominational, and non-denominational.⁸ What is important to my point that follows is no matter what the *ethos* of the sending structure is in terms either seeking to plant denominational churches, working interdenominationally, or rejecting the notion of denominations all together, at the level of practice on the ground virtually all of these forms utilize some kind of associational mechanism to connect converts and churches together.

In the mission history of the American AG the earliest round of missionaries were often people who had served in other organizations and after coming into the Pentecostal experience connected with the fledging AG movement. It was natural for them to think organizationally along the lines of the groups they had worked with.⁹ Thus this first wave of missionaries actually formed foreign district councils in China, India, Liberia, and Japan that were considered extensions of the American AG.¹⁰ The next step in the refinement of our missiological principles came in 1921 with the publication of three articles by Alice Luce where she laid out the biblical arguments for planting "apostolic churches" that support, govern, and propagate themselves.¹¹ In the first article she credits Roland Allen's 1912 book *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*¹² for having opened her eyes to the "diametrical distinction between our methods of working and those of the

New Testament”¹³ The 1915 General Council had already laid down the principle that the heathen were to be evangelized using New Testament methods, but at the 1921 General Council in St. Louis they formally adopted the goal of establishing three-self “native churches.”¹⁴

Gary B. McGee points out that in the beginning indigenous church planting was more of an ideal to aim for than something that was implemented immediately.¹⁵ It was not until the 1930s that indigenous self-governing national church organizations began to appear with El Salvador being one of the first.¹⁶ This period of time between the early 1920s and the mid-1930s reveals that the three-self idea was assumed to also imply aggregating these churches into a movement in similar fashion to the way the AG USA had been formed from individuals and churches that wanted to cooperate to further ministry goals. I have found nothing in our published missiological literature to indicate how these early missionaries came to think about how these individual churches in the plural are to relate to each other or be connected together.

Thinking about all this made me wonder if “national church” was a pre-existing concept that was already common which these early missionaries simply assumed. With my limited access to hardcopy resources and what is available on the internet I have searched in vain to find something that offers a definition of “national church”. The earliest reference I found was a citation in an essay by Andrew Walls where Henry Venn in 1868 talked about nations adopting the Christian religion as part of the national profession of faith and thus creating national churches.¹⁷ This was from an era before the modern nation state and thus no doubt is referring broadly to major political groups along language and cultural lines that were proto-nations in our sense of the word today. Allen himself in *Missionary Methods* skirts the issue of broader levels of organization other than noting that Paul recognized the unity of the Church at the province level, talking about churches of specific provinces.¹⁸ He sees Paul as beginning with the assumption of unity among the churches that must be contained, recognizes their connection to him and to each other, but makes no attempt to deal with the realities of how emerging churches should be connected.

By the time we reach the 1950s when Melvin Hodges is writing *The Indigenous Church*, we find that a number of unwritten assumptions have been crystallized into the

concept of national church so that there is no feeling of need to even define it. After nearly two decades in Central America working with and watching churches organize into movements at the nation-state level organized around indigenous principles, Hodges was asked to put the practical steps of this process into book form.¹⁹

The book itself is dedicated to the subject of planting three-self local churches. Only six pages of text are dedicated to the formation of a national church organization.²⁰ The theological rationale for broader units of organization is the same as Allen's in *Missionary Methods*, drawing on Paul's references to the church in larger units at the province level. To this are added three pragmatic concerns related to fellowship, stability and corrective influence for local congregations, and the ability to work together on special projects. The patterning is done in general after District Councils in the AG structure in the USA.²¹

It is not entirely clear in my reading of what comes next as to whether or not Hodges envisioned the possibility of a single national political entity having more than one "national church organization." He allows for the needs of geographical features, political boundaries, differences of language, and transportation facilities to be accommodated. "When distance, language or political barriers make it impractical to unite the churches into one district, it is advisable to divide the district into smaller units with a sectional conference or council in each area."²² He begins by using the term for an association of churches as a "conference" and notes that it is similar to the Districts of the AG USA, but then primarily uses the term "district" with subdivisions being "sections" or "sectional conferences."²³ On the next page the word "national church" appears for the first time without definition. Writing 25 years later he again assumes the notion of national church, noting that it starts with a handful of churches that form some kind of council or conference.²⁴ This historical overview shows that by the 1950s the idea of national church was assumed as a goal of planting individual local churches, and was coterminous with the nation-state where it was started. It was not on the radar to explore what happens where you have multiple ethnic groups and languages coming to faith in a single nation-state or if having multiple national churches related to language, ethnicity and culture was even possible.

As our mission theology grew and developed there was a natural movement from the idea of the missionary planting the first individual churches and facilitating the development of an indigenous national church movement to partnering with that movement.²⁵ There is a logical shift in role from the pioneering work that established the church to working with the young organization to strengthen it and pursue its agendas. What is interesting is that while Allen's ideas regarding the responsible nature of the New Testament church were picked up in regards to governance, finance and propagation, his observations about the exit strategy of Paul's retirement from the new churches was not.²⁶

By the end of the J. Philip Hogan era in the late 1980s, the idea of "national church" and the related concept of partnership were so foundational to AG USA and AGWM conceptions of mission that the vast majority of our missionaries were involved with the church rather than pioneering church planting among groups with least access to the Gospel. Partnership as it was unproblematically conceived left no room for discussions about what to do with people groups outside the vision of willingness of the existing national church.

Problems with the Current Notions of National Church and Partnership

The conventional way that we have conceived of national church leaves an ambiguity about the meaning of "national." The assumption is that this means nation-state, and the hegemony of the national church ideals along nation-state lines was further solidified by developing the notion of partnership. Partnership came to mean working with these existing movements which were generally based among the major group holding political power within that geopolitical boundary, or in some cases in a significant minority group without political power. It was not a partnership *in* mission together, but partnership to fulfill the goals of the national church. When we begin to tackle the realities of reaching the unreached in contexts where there is an existing AG movement, these understandings of national church and partnership often create difficulties.

First, the combined impact of these understandings of national church and partnership created an environment to marginalize the pioneering *ethos* of the mission

among groups which did not have the Gospel. The unintended consequence of linking the missionary role to the existing church led over time to the pioneering dimensions of Pentecostal mission that were so salient at the beginning of the movement to become subordinated to the importance of working in partnership with the national church. It is interesting to note that when Hodges did talk about the need for redistribution of missionaries because there were too many in one locale, it was not for the purposes of pioneer church planting among the unreached, but for the good of the indigenous church.²⁷ My own personal speculation at this point is that the shift in primary emphasis from proclamation-oriented pioneer church planting to partnership with existing church movements was never planned, it was a natural shift of attention to what was happening as new movements blossomed. It was something akin to the "frog in the kettle" with the water being heated gradually—we never knew what was happening. My guess is that this may have been aided by an assumption that the Pentecostal experience would always lend towards urgency in proclamation and thus it was not something that needed to be worried about. What the passage of time has now revealed is that it is quite possible to remain doctrinally and stylistically Pentecostal and yet lose evangelistic fervor.

A second impact is that in some situations the hardening of the notion of national church along nation-states lines has marginalized ethnolinguistic groups outside that of the primary group within the existing national church. While in some places a larger umbrella council easily embraces ethnolinguistic diversity under a big tent, in others to reach a group outside of the existing church entails that those outside the dominant ethnolinguistic leadership culture are joining not just the movement but a "version" of faith as well. This mirrors the problems that many minority groups experience under nation-states constructing a central identity based on the majority people. In order to become part of the "nation" they must exchange their own ethnic identity and its key markers for the constructs of the nation-state. In our mission setting, this process means that new churches must assimilate to the type and style of the majority people, creating major barriers to evangelism and church planting. While this is a natural tendency of the national church to want converts from other groups to be like them in the way they "do church" and organize themselves, it effectively limits the ability of the existing local

churches and the missionaries they expect to be working in partnership with them, to reach unreached peoples and see indigenous churches planted in such groups.

A third issue has to do with people who are coming into our mission who have been influenced by a post-denominational environment in the West or the teaching of Church Planting Movements. Sometimes people will come to feel that national church denominational structures are unbiblical and an obstacle to church planting and rapid multiplication among the unreached. This results in new missionary church planters wanting to work completely outside the scope of the national church and to keep any converts and churches separate from the established national church. At best the national church is conceived as a nuisance that must be worked around, and at worst an enemy.

Exploring Strengths and Needed Refinements in the Conception of National Church and Partnership

What We Need to Hold Fast

Before I begin looking at each of these sets of challenges, I want to caveat my remarks by saying that these are not issues that have easy answers, or even one right answer. What I want to do is help to clarify what is at stake and provide some basis for making decisions as we work through these areas. I begin with those who for whatever reasons want to jettison the national church concept. I am going to argue that there is great power in our concept of the national church and that, rather than moving away from it, we need to refine and build upon it as we move into the future. I believe that we should hold on to the broader notion of AG as local autonomous expressions formed around national church organizations and with a fraternal bond as a worldwide fellowship.

1. Let me begin with a few of my own assumptions as it relates to human organization of which “national church” is one type. Human organization is an inescapable reality, the Bible does not privilege one form over another, in other words there is no single “biblical” form for how we decide to organize for specific needs and purposes, and, as human constructs, human organizations can be tools that God can

work through or they can hinder that work. In this view "denominational national church" is a human construct that we offer as a tool to the Lord and we do not assume that it is the only organization doing Kingdom work in the world.

2. Having said that, human organizational constructs are necessary and therefore to jettison them for an alleged "biblical" form that does not exist is merely to trade one form for another. So we need to be clear that the argument is not *for* organization and/or *against* organization, but rather for the type of organization we will settle on.
3. It seems to me that arguments against the denominational national church concept founder at two points. The first is that the suggested alternatives, networks or apostolic figures and associated churches, are themselves forms of organization that, while different, have a great deal of overlap with the forms that they are supposedly rejecting. The key choice is not between having an organization or not, but between different styles. At the end of the day the kind of leadership and values present are more important than whether it is a network or a denomination. Both types of organization have better and worse expressions, and flatter networks can become more hierarchical and top-down denominations can become flatter.
4. While we are aware of the weaknesses of denominational structures that become unwieldy, hierarchical, bureaucratic, maintenance-oriented, and overly concerned with internal political issues, it is probably naïve to assume that newer and flatter movements like church planting movements (CPMs), house church movements, or various types of networks will be able to avoid the same internal transformations that have historically happened in denominational structures. Recently I was in a meeting with a worker from Germany where the topic was CPMs among Buddhist peoples. Her comment gave me a new perspective on rapidly reproducing movements in flatter house church networks that are now so often touted as "the answer" to the problem of mission among the unreached. She said that in her country it was very difficult to talk CPM language because people say, "500 years ago at the Reformation we did have a church planting movement with a church in every village and look where we are today." A longer time horizon reminds us that dynamism at one point in our organizational history is no assurance that it will last. Mechanisms must be in place that allow for the preservation and transmission of

spiritual DNA and which make room for continued dynamic working of the Spirit. A macro-view of AG missions shows that it is precisely our “denominational national church” structures with its weak spots and ambiguities that have provided mechanisms through associations of local churches, training functions through a vast network of various forms of theological institutions, and a long haul commitment on the part of the mission to see robust local church movements flourish with a stability that preserves and transmits spiritual dynamism.

5. Another strength of our current national church concept is that it is a critical vector for evangelism and church planting both within its own cultural setting and beyond. At their very best, national church organizations resemble the rapidity of expansion of CPMs but also have an inherent stability in them. They offer boundaries in terms of doctrine and practice, ongoing training for leaders, the context for the development of central institutions that can strengthen the movement, and an overall structure that goes beyond the leadership of key individuals. Vibrant national church structures also have the potential for powerful impact across near cultural boundaries if they can be mobilized around vision for the mission of God outside their own people. While in some cases it may actually be harder for a local person from one group to be the carrier of the Gospel to a culture near group, for the most part there are fewer cultural barriers for them than for those coming from more distant cultural backgrounds. The various already existing national churches around the world that are fraternally related to the AG represent millions of potential laborers who can love neighbors who are part of unreached people groups that are geographically and often culturally near to them.
6. My previous point highlights the tremendous power in collective action. The national church structure as we conceive it means that there are things that we can do precisely because we are worldwide and 60 plus million strong. If we turned the clock back 100 years and did mission by evangelizing and just encouraging converts and new churches to associate with whoever they wanted, or creating no associations at all, what would exist today? The opportunity before us to mobilize a large fraternal body of related autonomous national churches around the task of

reaching unreached people groups is in large part due to our national church concept.

7. Here is not the place to debate the merits of starting new structures versus working with the framework of already existing ones. Clearly there are times when the Holy Spirit leads people to start new initiatives that require new forms or organization. Having said that, I find it somewhat ironic that people who hold a Pentecostal view of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit can at the same time frequently be pessimistic about the ability of the same Spirit to renew, refresh, and work anew through existing structures. I have a native discomfort with any suggested strategy that leaves the vast majority of God's people and existing structures outside the pale of what "God is doing" and asserts everything has to be new. That is a historically naïve view of human organizations and very limiting to power of God. I also find it strange that in the realm of business, without any supernatural element present, there are multiple voices and examples where large organizational structures are successfully reshaped to take on the challenges of a changed environment. Yet among God's people the single solution seems to be "start again from scratch." Perhaps this has to do more with our own inability to get along and our significance needs than it does for the need of new structures for the task.

What We Need to Refine

For missions organizations that do not think "national church" like we do, the existence of national church movements do not pose any difficulty at all when trying to church plant among the unreached. You simply target the unreached group and seek to build a church among that group, and more or less ignore other groups with interests outside your target people. However in our case, partnership with a national church is a critical value, so when starting to work with an unreached people group we immediately run into two problems. The first is that in many cases the national church in that country will not be happy that we are taking time, personnel, and finances away from them, and secondly, if a group does emerge the sticky question arises of how it is going to relate to the already existing AG movement.

Under the “normal” circumstances of working in partnership with an existing church, our idea of national church with all of its assumptions works fine. However, when pressed outside of these bounds, it is unable to help us answer the questions we face. Let me illustrate what I mean by this conventional understanding of “national church » and in so doing highlight some of the areas that are unexpressed assumptions that need further refinement and clarification.

1. In the history of our movement evangelism and discipling of converts leads to the formation of a local church. The goal of this church is to be indigenous along the three-self lines of self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. The conditions under which this happened though were that there were no existing AG churches for the most part among any of the ethnolinguistic groups represented in a given nation-state. So in this sense it was “pioneer” even when there may have been a strong existing non-Pentecostal church already among that people.
2. As local churches multiply they are formed into a national church organization. As I have pointed out above, the unwritten assumption that became our dominant position over time is that “national” here is related to the nation-state with the strong implication being that there is one “national church” per nation-state. This is certainly not required by the definition of national church and is an area where we need to hammer out a fresh position in order to open the door for planting new churches and associating them in people groups different from that of the existing AG church.
3. Once you have a national church in existence the mission agency then works in partnership with that entity. Again, although not required by the concept, it is assumed that when a mission sending arm from any AG source comes to that country that they will work with that national church exclusively.
4. The goal of partnership is to forward the agenda of the national church. What this means in practice is that if the national church has no interest or burden for other peoples that are present within the bounds of that nation-state, the mission agency will find it difficult relationally with them to pursue such ministry. The relational strain comes because the national church wants the mission team to work with them.

If the mission spends time and effort on working with a people group outside the normal orbit of ministry of the national church it can cause them to view the mission in a negative light.

When we look at the "normal" development of the national church and its relations with the mission agency, we find that we have two major assumptions that imperil work among unreached peoples. The first is the weakness of the one nation-state—one national church view. The problem comes when you begin to plant the church in a distinct ethnolinguistic group from that of the existing national church. How does the new group relate back to the existing church? Is the new under the old, fraternally related to the old, or independent from the old? These practical problems are not insignificant because they have the potential to hinder the development of the church among this new group. Examples of some of these problems include the existing church wanting to control the new group, to reproduce their leadership and governing forms and styles that may not be appropriate for the new group, difficulties in having joint fellowship, or a complete lack of interest on the part of the old church towards the new.

The second issue concerns the problems that pursuing an unreached people group can create between the mission agency and the national church. If the view of partnership held by the national church and/or the mission agency is so strong that the ability of the mission to do pioneer work is hindered, it can create a great deal of tension between the mission and church. This can create a scenario where various uses of power are introduced in order to try and force the hand of the mission to continue their work with the existing church.

I believe that if we are going to be serious about addressing unreached people groups, we need to hammer out a missions philosophy that allows for the mission agency to work *for* the advancement of the existing national church, *with* that church to reach out to the unreached peoples in different cultural settings, and to pioneer *outside* of the boundaries of that national church to see new associations formed that relate fraternally to the existing body when circumstances are such that they cannot pursue that goal together.

What We Can Do To Move Forward: Building AGWM-National Church Relations That Facilitates Church Planting Among the Unreached

In this final section I sketch briefly some of the components of national church and AG missionary fellowship team (of that country) relations that will facilitate and environment for planting the church among the unreached. This does no more than set the lines for future work that needs to be done in order to refine these key mission concepts.

1. Drawing on the work of Andrew Walls, I believe that it is theologically proper to have radically different expressions of faith in Jesus among varying socio-cultural settings.²⁸ What this means for the idea of national church is that it must be disconnected from the nation-state concept and allowed to flourish among different groups where a truly indigenous expression that includes our three-self formula and beyond to form an expression of faith that is truly rooted in that setting at all levels.²⁹ This means that within the bounds of a nation-state you can have different “national churches” that relate in the same fraternal fashion as those who are separated by geopolitical boundaries.
2. We need to bring to the forefront the notion of indigeneity in Hodges’ work that allows for the organizational structure of a group of churches to reflect its own cultural setting and not that from the sending agency. The cross-cultural worker needs to work carefully to help the new movement find its own feet in regard to its leadership and organizational patterns rather than imposing or suggesting an external pattern. Outside workers also can play an important role in helping the emerging church movement to understand and negotiate their way in a global world and to make connections with brothers and sisters of AG worldwide fellowship as well as others.
3. At the same time that we are disconnecting the national church concept from geopolitical boundaries, we also need to reorganize the ground rules for national church/mission agency relations. The purpose here is not to disconnect or separate but to add more potential configurations of relationship by reemphasizing a biblical idea. Winter’s observation that the functional equivalents of the apostolic band can

be traced through the history of the church³⁰ reminds us of the Spirit's work to call forth structures that will revive and reemphasize the unique priorities of the mission band, which is to proclaim Christ where he is not known. Without moving away from partnership to help build the church, I believe we need to strengthen our theological and missiological understandings to hone the focus on the unreached central to our understanding of the mission team. Creating theological space first would then lead to the space in practice to engage the unreached while at the same time maintaining positive relations with the existing national church.

4. Theological and missiological space for the unique work of the apostolic band brings many new creative options on the ground in national church/mission relations. If the mission is already working in relationship with that national organization, then there is a natural continuum of options that presents itself and which can be engaged in simultaneously as well. The logical first priority would be that the mission would have already seen to it that missional DNA was present in this church movement and they themselves would be sending workers to pioneer among an unreached people group. If that is not happening and there is no vision to do so, the next step is that the mission invites this church movement to join them in outreach to the unreached group in question. If there are impediments to such an arrangement then the mission as an apostolic band will make it clear that their priority is to proclaim Christ where he is not known and proceed to do this all the time with an open invitation to this national church to join them. The historic relations of the mission and this church can be preserved, workers can still partner with them, but the mission as an agency will pursue its priority to reach the unreached.

Conclusion

How we think about missions matters. Acts 15 is eloquent testimony to that fact. I have attempted in this paper to foreground a number of issues that relate to our missions concepts, practices, and structures that will require attention if we are going to engage the unreached world at levels that go beyond just individual ministries. It is my prayer that

one day we will look back at this time here and see that God used this opportunity to thrust forth a wave of amphibian workers who became powerful prophetic voices back to their national church movements. I want to see the Holy Spirit use your efforts to lay the conceptual and structural groundwork for mission to the major blocs of unreached peoples that will result in a massive mobilization of laborers to enter their worlds and lovingly and boldly share the story of Jesus. I think it was Paul Hiebert who said that mission theology always disturbs the peace of the church. May God give you grace and power to do such unsettling work in the days ahead.

¹ In Assemblies of God church polity, each country (and at times more than one in a country) has its own 'indigenous' Assemblies of God. So the World Assemblies of God Fellowship is a volunteer association, and while the AG in the US is influential due to its mission's efforts and history, it is not the 'international head' of the AG.

² Joshua Project, February 2008. www.joshuaproject.net

³ J. Philip Hogan, the executive director of AGWM from 1959-1989, is a good example of this discomfort. Commenting on Hogan's feelings about church growth theory, Everett Wilson observed that Hogan "especially parted company with what he believed to be a reductionist view of missions as mechanics. Some extremes of church growth theory, he protested, made the guiding principles of missionary deployment into mere abstract coefficients of need—the relative per capita Christian population of a given country or the proportion of the total missionary force allocated to a given field"; Everett A. Wilson, *Strategy of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and the Growth of the Assemblies of God Worldwide 1960-1990* (Carlisle, UK: Regnum Books International, 1997), 64. In an address that Hogan gave to the Evangelical Fellowship of Missions Agencies in 1970, he makes clear his contrasting view of the work of the Spirit versus human management: "I have long since ceased to be interested in meetings where mission leaders are called together to a room filled with charts, maps, graphs, and statistics. All one needs to do to find plenteous harvest is simply to follow the leading of the Spirit"; *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴ See Samuel Escobar, "Evangelical Missiology: Peering in the Future," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 109-112; for a specific response to Escobar's criticisms see Levi T. DeCarvalho, "What's Wrong with the Label 'Managerial Missiology'," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18, no. 3 (2001): 141-46.

⁵ See my *Apostolic Function in 21st Century*. Pasadena, CA/Springfield, MO: William Carey Library Publishers/Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2009.

⁶ Arthur F Walls, "Societies for Mission." In *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley, John H. Y. Briggs, Robert D. Linder and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 549 (549-553).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁸ See Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions: From Hudson Taylor to Present Day Africa* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 1994), 11-27 for details and distinctions here. He categorizes the various types of mission structures and polities into pre-classical missions, classical missions, post-classical missions, and Pentecostal/Charismatic missions.

⁹ Gary McGee, "Pentecostal Strategies for Global Mission: A Historical Assessment," in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Murray A. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 210-211.

¹⁰ Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism*. Vol. 1 to 1941. 2 vols. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 294. Full membership in these districts was limited to the missionary, but it is interesting to see that the first associational attempts related back to the home base.

¹¹ Alice E. Luce, "Paul's Missionary Methods," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (Jan. 8 1921): 6-7; (Jan. 22, 1921): 6, 11; and (Feb. 5, 1921): 6-7. These are also collected in Paul W. Lewis, ed., *All the Gospel to All the World: 100 Years of Assemblies of God Missiology*, J. Philip Hogan World Missions Series (Springfield, MO: Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2014), 9-25.

¹² Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962 [1912]).

¹³ Luce, (Jan. 8 1921): 6.

¹⁴ Gary B. McGee, *This Gospel Shall Be Preached: A History and Theology of Assemblies of God Foreign Missions to 1959*, vol. 1 (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1986), 95-96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁷ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 48, see footnote 4.

¹⁸ Allen, 126.

¹⁹ Melvin L. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1976).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²² *Ibid.*, 94.

²³ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

²⁴ Melvin L. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church and the Missionary* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Morris Williams, *Partnership in Mission*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1986).

²⁶ Allen, 149-50, 158-59.

²⁷ Hodges, *The Indigenous Church*, 96.

²⁸ Walls sees Christian diversity not as something that is to be avoided but rather is a necessity. “The divine Word was expressed under the conditions of a particular human society; the divine Word was, as it were, *translated*. And since the divine Word is fall all humanity, he is translated again in terms of every culture where he finds acceptance among its people.” Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 47. While humanity is one, you cannot meet it in generalized form but only cultural specific ones; the cross “breaks down the wall around culture and ethnicity that separate the segments of humanity, but it does not annihilate culture and ethnicity.” Andrew F. Walls, “Evangelical and Ecumenical,” in *Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation: Essays in Honor of Wilbert Shenk*, ed. James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, and Charles Van Engen (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 34. This view controls his interpretation of Ephesians 2:20-22 so that it is the diversity of the various new lifestyles brought under Christ that form and are necessary for the construction of the new temple; no single version of the faith being capable of building it alone; *Ibid.*, 33-34.

²⁹ Harvey Talman proposes that a contextualization agenda should at a minimum include seven areas: Bible translation, language, evangelism, church planting, worship and music, theology, and leadership training, Harvey Talman, "Comprehensive Contextualization," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21, no. 1 (2004): 6.

³⁰ Ralph D. Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 220-230.