

Response to “The Challenge of Unreached Peoples:  
Issues in Assemblies of God Missiology” by Alan Johnson

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This twenty-six page article is very thorough on the treatise on the missiological challenge facing the Assemblies of God (AG) of unreached people groups. As Johnson points out, by and large the AG did not start out consciously targeting unreached people groups. The term that Ralph D. Winter would use is that there was more a focus on *Church Mission* rather than *Kingdom Mission*. Church mission refers to doing missions for the purpose of church growth. Kingdom mission is all-encompassing which may not always result in conversion but certainly in transformation. Just as the yeast works through the dough, so does the Kingdom of God work in this world for changes the LORD wants.

Johnson points out that missionary placement of AG missionaries has been in mission fields where there is an established AG movement. He says this is “One of the priority functions of a mission agency is placing people...” (3). A missionary has a specific call and is led by the Spirit. Most AG missionaries will want to go where they want to go and not necessarily where AG World Missions will want to place them. It is unlike Evangelical and mainline churches mission agencies whose mission leadership places their missionaries by matching the missionaries’ giftings to where they feel the greatest need is.

Indeed the Spirit of God is speaking to people. He is speaking to missionaries and mission leaders. So mission leaders should be respected in their decisions as to where to place missionaries as well as missionaries hearing from Him where to go. He is the Director of Mission so there should be a coordination of His guidance for all parties concerned.

Concerning mission strategy, Johnson is right to state that Pentecostals should be careful not to reject people-group thinking. It may seem like planning and strategizing are juxtaposed to being led by the Spirit. But this is not true. In fact the Bible has much to say about planning and the plans of God. He also expects His people to plan strategies to reach people groups.

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There is value in databases. There are groups such as Joshua Project and the Barna group that make it their ministry to collect useful data to feed to missionaries and other church leaders so that they would be informed about the people groups. This will give them adequate profiles on each people group. Under the inspiration of the Spirit and as they cover these databases with much prayer, they may have creative ways to evangelize. Yet note that some information is sensitive and these groups need to be careful of the level of sensitivity and confidentiality. These profiles may give missionaries redemptive analogies, keys into the culture and effective ways of communicating the gospel.

"People blindness" may be one aspect of the challenge of reaching the unreached people groups but I think that prior challenges are getting over the "color bar" and ethnocentricity that exist among missionaries as well as national church members. Some of these are so steeped into people by their cultures. For example, it could have been instilled in a person by their upbringing. I can remember I had a fear of men with turbans because of my mother threatening me as a child that such a man would kidnap me if I misbehaved. When I first was to go to Bangladesh, and the people of the country were called Bengalis, I thought there would be mainly men with turbans there. In Malaysia we wrongly called Sikhs Bengalis, and in fact they are Punjabis. I was gripped with an irrational fear of going to Bangladesh until I actually got there. This personal vignette illustrates that there may be prejudices that run deep from one people group to another.

There could be another reason a national church maybe resistant to reaching out to an unreached people group and that could be the restriction in the country for Christians to proselytize those are not Christians. In such cases, it could be wiser for the missionaries to work independently of the national church so that they are not implicated should there be a crack-down. It would be unfair to endanger the existing national church. An illustration of this would be in countries where believers of a certain religious background have to remain as secret believers. Another scenario is when the names and locations of believers must be kept under strict confidence who would be in fear for their lives once revealed.

The AG has been known to establish national AG churches. It is a matter of traditional pride. It is the raising of the AG flag. However, in more recent times there has been a trend in some countries to no longer name national churches with the words "Assemblies of God." The church names commonly are with the descriptors: Community Center, Christian Fellowship, Full

Gospel Church or Convention Center. Thus although there may be an affiliation by these churches, there is not necessarily a clear denominational identification. Besides this, going back into AG history, the AG began as a movement and churches within that movement were part of the fellowship. The coming together of the churches was voluntary. There was mutual respect and encouragement but not central control. In a sense it was a reaction to denominationalism. Leadership positions with the titles such as “bishops” were resisted, but this seems to be changing. Today, some AG ministers may even accept the title “apostle.”

I like the phrase “planting apostolic churches” in Johnson’s essay. This is exactly what national churches must be doing. A friend of mine in Malaysia has caught on to this concept. He has been church planting among a tribal people group who make up one of the aboriginal peoples of West Malaysia. Although these aboriginal churches are not financially well off, they are spiritually rich. After just two years since the initial church plant, they are going out to plant their own churches among other tribes. They are using their own resources including people and money. This is an example of attaining the goal of apostolic churches.

Johnson does draw our attention to the fact that “movements in flatter house church networks that are now so often touted as “the answer” to the problem of mission among the unreached.” (19). This is true; it is not a hierarchy that is the way to control movements or networks. The Holy Spirit gives more freedom to human beings than human beings give to each other. There is a more controlling spirit in the church which tries to ensure that there is uniformity but not necessarily unity. In house church movements, leadership is joint and matters are discussed for making decisions for the common good. Another advantage is for security reasons. If one leader is arrested he or she may not endanger the whole fellowship.

Discipling is an important function of establishing a church among an unreached people group. The premise is that they do not have any contact with the gospel or Christians prior to conversion. It is building disciples from ground zero. The advantage is that the foundations will be laid fresh and not built upon any previously existing traditions. I have come across several discipleship systems which is a freshly emphasized key aspect of the church’s responsibility. With unreached people groups with whatever discipleship system that is *adopted*, it must also be *adapted* so that it fits that particular people group to produce effective disciples. Some of the discipleship groups must be gender and age based in order to be culturally appropriate. This also applies to the disciplers themselves. For example, men may or may not be able to disciple

women but women most likely in many cultures may not disciple men, and a younger person may not be a discipler for a group of older people.

The challenge for the missionaries is the timing of handing over the leadership of the newly planted church. Perhaps in order to do things as timely as possible, leaders should be identified early. It should not be one leader but as many as can be identified. Once this is done it is a continual training process. In this aspect, too, gender and age may play a part. However, it should not mean that women and younger leaders cannot be trained. The training may need take place separately but it should not be neglected. Also, a culturally appropriate way should be found as to how women and younger leaders can be involved in decision-making from the very beginning. Timing is crucial. Handing over leadership from missionaries to national leaders too soon may be pre-mature and may set up national leaders for failure. Handing over leadership too late may cause a culture of vying for power, and it may cause struggles among top leadership positions. Therefore, prayers should be said for a seamless changing of the guard under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." The church must guard against this.

It is important not to let money get in the way. The attitude has been even in the church that the one who holds the purse holds the power. That is the purpose of the three-self principle. But in some cases, it is not possible for the national church achieve that level of financial independence as quickly as projected. But if national leadership is already in place, then even though there is still missionary financial support, decision-making should be in the hands of the national church leaders. Money can corrupt. The Bible warns Christians that the love of money is the root of evil. Very efficient accountability systems are very important. This is not fool-proof; the Holy Spirit is fool-proof. In the Book of Acts, the case of Ananias and Sapphira illustrates how the Holy Spirit can reveal sin in the camp. It is wise that property, bank accounts and such are never in the control of one person. If it is possible, a trust should be established.

In his essay, Johnson calls for "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." (23) I think this is a timely

challenge to the AG to re-define their mission in terms of consciously reaching out to unreached people groups in partnership with national churches.

This means embracing contextualization. It is letting new churches take root in the local context. Such churches may not even look like the traditional AG church. It may not even carry the name AG. The church may not look as the traditional churches look. Believers may not even identify themselves as Christians. In Bible translations it may be the meanings that are translated. Thus hermeneutics may be dependent on how the community would give the meaning and application. Would this be too radical and liberal for the AG?

What does new partnership agreements between AG missionaries and national churches look like as they have the common goal of reaching the unreached? The terms and conditions should be clear but also with enough room for creativity and the work of the Holy Spirit to do new things. Pentecostalism is radical anyway and this is where dynamic strategies can be engaged.

Some may find Johnson a bit too radical but I wonder if he is radical enough. Certainly there is room to do new things in new ways. For example, there are Christians who are uncomfortable with radical contextualization. But without this way of contextualization there are groups of people that may not be touched with the message of the gospel because they are not able to understand the message. May the Holy Spirit lead and guide the AG into new dimensions!