

## Enhancing our Sending Model: A Response to Alan R. Johnson's paper entitled "The Challenge of Unreached Peoples: Issues in Assemblies of God Missiology"

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The old adage that our strengths may also be our weaknesses seems appropriate to the discussion of the Assemblies of God World Fellowship (AGWF) and the task of reaching the unreached. Alan Johnson rightly points to the great potential for many workers to send into the harvest that are available in the worldwide fraternity of the AGWF. We are now the fourth largest Christian communion worldwide, after Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism.<sup>1</sup> The broader Pentecostal Movement with its potential partners in mission, comprises one-quarter of the world's two billion Christians according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; one out of every twelve people on the planet is a Pentecostal and the WAGF is the leading member of this larger fraternity.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we recognize that we Pentecostals are not as active amongst unreached people groups as we should be and perhaps it is our strengths that are limiting our potential for pioneer church planting in these new frontiers.

Our strengths are the values and strategies of mission that have built a robust church worldwide through the establishment of local churches that support, govern and propagate themselves. These have traditionally been formed into associations based on geo-political boundaries and the work of many missionaries today is to work alongside and strengthen these national associations of churches. Working in partnership, mission agency with national church, has been a key value and strength, but may have inadvertently led to the loss of our early pioneer edge which is now needed to reach the unreached.

Johnson asks a great question! What should the AGWF be doing today to bring the gospel to this final frontier of unreached, unengaged peoples around the world? His suggested solution is not to dismantle our current models and values, but to allow for greater flexibility through the refinement of our mission methods and strategies. He suggests that we need some adjustments in four areas; in our understanding of the national church so that we are not confined

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by geo-political borders; in our understanding of how local autonomous churches are associated so that local culture is adequately reflected; in our understanding of mission agency/national church relationship so that there is freedom to have workers cross cultural boundaries within nations with a measure of autonomy from the national church; and by creating space for apostolic bands to operate outside/alongside of the traditional national church/mission agency relationship. His call is that we be an increasingly permission giving fraternity of Pentecostal believers where our frontline workers, empowered by the Spirit, follow the Spirit's leading into new opportunities, using all means available. In order to recapture the vital apostolic pioneer spirit, we need more flexible structures in which to operate.

In considering these suggestions, I am reminded of the words of the apostle Paul who for the sake of the gospel, subverted his own interests in the interest of the lost. "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor 9: 22-23 NIV)." While ground rules for relationships are important, we must be careful not to create limitations that restrict God's calling and keep potential missionaries to the unreached from serving in 'our backyard.'

Let me note three initial positive comments about this call for increasing room for the apostolic bands to operate and then offer two additional refinements to our mission models for consideration. First, Johnson has rightly identified some significant limitations in our current models. In particular, the concept of "people blindness" is very helpful. In a world where the national geo-political boundaries often contain many ethno-linguistic groups of people, it is possible that near neighbors are not hearing the gospel, even though they live in proximity to a thriving national church. In my own experience on the field, the nations of East and Southern Africa have large populations of Asian peoples amongst whom there has been little progress in evangelism and church planting despite thriving, healthy indigenous churches. In addition, the Muslim population of nations like Kenya and Tanzania remain largely unreached. If our structures limit the work of missionaries to partnership with national churches that suffer a measure of 'people blindness' we may miss the Spirit-led opportunity to engage the unreached.

My own nation of Canada is waking up late to the reality that large populations of immigrants from unreached people groups have moved into our neighborhoods. Our local churches have not proactively engaged with large blocks of Somalis, Iranians, Pakistanis and

Sikhs that now dominate whole neighborhoods in our major cities. Our model of church and evangelism has not always been well-suited to reaching these people and our "people blindness" has kept the church from reaching its full missional potential. In response we are creating new ways for 'missionaries' to engage with these people groups within our own nation.

Second, Johnson seeks to find a healthy balance between Spirit dependency and strategic thinking with respect to the deployment of missionary personnel. He notes that God calls intelligent people who, called and enlightened by the Spirit, can assess the needs and make strategic, thoughtful decisions about the mission of the church. We cannot excuse our inactivity in the unreached nations of the world by suggesting that God by His Spirit has not yet called people to those nations because they are not yet receptive. The apostle Paul used clear and thoughtful strategies as he fulfilled his calling while leaving room for flexibility and adjustment in both destination and method as the Spirit led.

Third, Johnson's call to see the whole church, every national association, engaged in sending cross-cultural workers is important if we are going to see unreached people have access to the gospel. Sending workers from proximate cultural-linguistic groups will help reduce the barriers to understanding the gospel. However, this will require increased flexibility in national church/sending agency relationships as there will be many more players at the table. In addition, as I will note later, a new sending model may be needed to maximize the potential of these new sending nations. They may have many workers, but limited funds for the task and the traditional model of fully funded missionaries may not provide the best sending platform.

In offering two additional refinements to our sending model, let me ask the following questions! Does our traditional sending model hamper our ability to engage many of the unreached people of the world? And are we perpetuating this same model with the same limitation in the new sending nations? It is my view that the use of primarily professional clergy as our missionaries has left us with a significant access problem with respect to the nations where most of the unreached peoples reside today. We need personnel with non-missionary profiles. The redeployment of current personnel from open to closed nations is problematic in that missionaries need to be retrained<sup>3</sup> and their profiles need to be completely overhauled or they will not be welcome. In our recruitment strategies, we need to look to our universities rather than our theological colleges for potential workers. The clergy-laity divide has left us unprepared to utilize the gifts of businesspersons and professional members of the church for whom access to

the nations in question will not be as big a problem. We ‘professionalized’ the missionary enterprise as a primarily clergy role and in so doing have marginalized the business and secular professionals that may be a significant key to engaging the unreached people’s today.

In the Assemblies of God fraternity around the world, there is an army of businesspersons and professionals who, if disciplined and trained in the mission of God, can significantly impact the nations of the world. Consider Africa for a moment. There are many Africans with excellent educational and professional qualifications who are finding work in the Middle East and North Africa. They spend their days working and contributing to the economic and social life of unreached people. They wake up every day and rub shoulders with people who need Jesus and through them God can bring his good news and life transforming message to people. They can and are already serving as church planters amongst the unreached.

However, if we are to make these professionals and businesspersons effective, they must be disciplined to live out God’s mission and reflect his character as light and salt in their new communities. They must be people who reflect integrity, generosity, compassion, diligence and good stewardship. The work of the kingdom takes place in the world of work and the people of God are to be disciplined in the local church by pastors and teachers for works of service. ‘Gospel transformed disciples’ must live out God’s plan as they integrate faith and work, and influence the domains of family life, business and commerce, the creative arts, the sciences, communication and media, education and civil, political and military service.

Currently in Ethiopia, there are over 40,000 Pentecostal believers studying in the Universities of that nation, who are members of the Christian Student Union. The traditional sending model is not going to serve this potential harvest force. They need to be disciplined to see their vocation as God’s calling to impact the world. Doctors, lawyers, businesspersons, economists and aid workers are just a few of the many professions available to the Lord as he calls and sends these young people amongst the unreached peoples of the world. The ‘apostolic bands’ that Johnson suggests need some creative room, may actually be teams of professional and businesspersons who evangelize and plant churches where traditional missionaries cannot go.

Take Somalia for example. Here is a nation described as inaccessible and unreached. Our traditional model will not allow for the placement of ‘traditional missionaries’ to evangelize and plant churches. Yet present in the nation are Christian professionals from Kenya and Ethiopia

who have access every day to be witnesses for Christ and potentially see the church of Jesus Christ developed amongst their everyday contacts. Is it possible to see these 'gospel transformed' businesspersons and Professionals as a primary rather than secondary strategy to reach the unreached? Take Somalia for example. Here is a nation described as inaccessible and unreached. Our traditional model will not allow for the placement of 'traditional missionaries' to evangelize and plant churches. Yet present in the nation are Christian professionals from Kenya and Ethiopia who have access every day to be witnesses for Christ and potentially see the church of Jesus Christ developed amongst their everyday contacts. Is it possible to see these 'gospel transformed' businesspersons and Professionals as a primary rather than secondary strategy to reach the unreached?

In my own nation, there are many Canadians, often "new" Canadians, who have business and family connections back in their home nations. They have access to unreached people groups that may not be available to the 'traditional missionary.' Therefore, we must refine and broaden our definition of 'missionary' if we are to significantly engage the unreached in nations where opportunity to bring the gospel is limited and therefore challenging. Can we see immigrants to the West who are called to return home as 'missionaries'? Can our understanding of the 'missionary call' include these immigrants and allow for them to be part of our mission strategy? If a Canadian Somali is called by God to return home, can we find room for such person in our mission strategies?

This call to include business persons and professionals as a primary strategy is particularly important for new sending nations. If we expect these new sending countries to only send out missionaries who are clergy and who are supported by the local churches in the traditional fashion, we will marginalize the potential of an incredibly strong laity with the capacity to reach the unreached. In addition we will tax the financial resources of these churches and limit their capacity for mission impact. We need to encourage national churches to establish sending models that may be significantly different from the traditional models used by Western churches. Once again, we are not setting aside our strengths, but enhancing our capacity with greater flexibility in definition and method.

A second refinement to our model is to make more room for those with concern for engagement in the social justice and community development issues of our world. Many of the unreached people groups are also found in the poorest and oppressed nations of the world. In

their study of Global Pentecostalism, Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori have adequately demonstrated that Pentecostals are already on the front lines of social engagement. Intuitively, we have responded to the social needs of those God has brought across our path. In their four-year study of growing international churches and ministries that are active in significant social ministries, they were surprised that 85% of the recommended churches for consideration were Pentecostal or Charismatic. As a result, they set out to determine what single element was empowering these Pentecostals to such significant compassionate engagement with their world. Their study led to the conclusion that the compelling motivator to mission is the “S” factor that appears to operate in the lives of Pentecostals. “The answer unequivocally is the energizing experience of worship. The driving force behind the social ministries of Pentecostals is their experience of the Spirit in moments of worship – both corporate and private.”<sup>4</sup> For Pentecostals, worship provides an opportunity to experience an alternate reality, a mysterious encounter with God through His Spirit that empowers, emboldens and releases God’s people into mission. Because we know our God to be all-powerful, there is the expectation that through His miraculous intervention and through the enlightenment of the Spirit, spiritually blind eyes will be opened and the lost will turn “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:18 NIV).”

When Miller and Yamamori visited St. Stephen’s Society in the Walled City in Hong Kong, they came face-to-face with the ministry of Jackie Pullinger and concluded that unconditional love and the expectation of miraculous intervention was at the heart of helping drug addicts overcome their addictions.<sup>5</sup> Pentecost and the Holy Spirit is not an entity or authority. It is not some magic Pentecostals tap into. The Holy Spirit is the empowering presence of God. He is present in weakness and He works best when humility is evident. The Spirit empowers for service and witness. The Spirit is always inclusive, not divisive. Pentecost was the undoing of the confusion of language, the breaking down of every wall in Christ. The Spirit creates and dwells in a loving, authentic community and from that presence the people of God are equipped and empowered for the Mission of God. To equip the saints for works of service is not to make them academically sound and credential them into denominational service; it is to disciple them into the empowering Presence of God so that they can walk in His power.

Empowered by the Spirit, the people of God are an instrument for the betterment of all of society.

Today, the Spirit is leading his people to social engagement and our mission strategies must make room for those He calls. This new focus of mission may also be key in reaching the unreached in nations where traditional evangelism and church planting is not an option. As we encourage the *whole church*, empowered by the Spirit to take the *whole gospel*, we will find ways to engage the *whole world*, particularly the unengaged and unreached.

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<sup>1</sup> Zylstra, Sarah Eekhoff, "The Season of Adventists," *Christianity Today* 59, no. 1 (January/February 2015): 18.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Spirit-and-Power.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> In order to place workers in Restricted Access Nations, Bible College degrees may actually be a hindrance. What is often needed are business degrees or professional designations that allow for work permits and access.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Miller and Tetsenao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 221.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.