

# “Seeing the unreached”: A Response to “The Challenge of Unreached Peoples: Issues in Assemblies of God Missiology” by Alan Johnson

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## Introduction

The key tensions Alan Johnson deals with seem to revolve around “People blindness” and “National church.” There is at least a three way perspective to consider – the Sending agency with its ‘new’ missionary (vis-à-vis American/Western), the Receptor (National) church[es] and Unreached People Groups (UPGs) - all within complex cultural contexts and attitudes.

Are we as Westerners so individualized in our concept of calling that a joint strategy with National churches is not possible? In our concern for UPGs have ‘we’ (as Westerners) seen the world in terms of single people groups, all neatly isolatable, homogenous? Should we not see the world as interwoven people groups in that so many of the worlds’ metropolises are full of every nationality in the world? We can now ‘find’ UPGs listed thanks to Todd Johnstone with his Atlas, to the Joshua Project, and all the preceding books of *Operation World* and of Wagner’s editions of Unreached People books in the late 70s- early 80s? If we find them how do we start to communicate and relate to them? Who indeed are the ‘we’? Specialist missionaries? Or can we think in terms of missional communities small and large, some as churches already planted aeons ago, inherited church; some are new ‘Emerging churches’ commenced in recent decades. Is the tension over wanting to be a Spirit-led movement yet living amidst a cultural milieu of a semi-globalized technologically-filled, information-run society? The Spirit of God surely understands each culture, language and even technology and can use each in tandem with the Church for the sake of God’s Kingdom. He just needs listening followers.

So Johnson’s question of the challenge of seeing unreached peoples has many nuances. He is concerned with the majority of the missionary force of the Assemblies of God (AG) being placed among Christians. Which Christians may I ask? What

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purposes have they with these Christians? Moreover, what has God called them to do? The Spirit leads, Pentecostals believe and yet there is the constant tension between organizational principles and that 'leading.' I will start with Vocation within the British AG mission history since that is my area of knowledge. From there I hope to show how the present understanding of vocation works in the light of how missionaries perceive God calling them to serve in his Kingdom for its extension?

#### Vocation in the History of AG Great Britain missions – placement policies?

In the West we have been trained that missionary life is a 'Vocation', no simple vocation but one specifically made by God to His specific followers. Western Pentecostals are prone to 'pneumatological individualism'; the Holy Spirit speaks to 'me.' Often is used to be regarding a location somewhere in the world, highlighting it to our prayer interest and furthering it by stimulating our availability. Then we have an interest in our own individual giftings and then personality types. How and where 'I' fit in and expect to live for God maybe colored by our own Western individualist cultures.

Therefore our processes in strategies are not geared to a 'big picture' so much as our own small pictures; but we can deceive ourselves into thinking our little picture is almost as important as the bigger picture—the picture seen by God. Who wants to be a tassel protruding from the overall carpet when the pattern cannot be perceived from underneath? Does that not imply faith in the great weaver is necessary?

We process our calling in planning individually. It is not apparently an alternative to strategic planning overall and fitting in. When the British AG (AG GB) planned a strategy of centralized designations, only making available certain geographic fields, applicants were not so numerous; it was too restrictive and many did their own thing apart from the AG mission department. Those with a geographical call to a Brazil, for example, could not go there with AG GB; they tried the AG USA as a means and still failed to go.<sup>1</sup> After 1950 AG GB applicants could only go to three existing fields—Japan, India, and Congo. By the 1960s that was enlarged to include Malaysia, and Tanzania/Kenya.<sup>2</sup> Centralized money donations petered out during the 1970s; individuals could not officially raise support for themselves to go to other nations and even then church giving waned.

By 1980 there was a new council with more entrepreneurial people (e.g. John Wildrienne, Ray Belfield). They decided to contact a range of people beyond the existing designated nations. Ray took a trip around Asia and Latin America. The result was that the whole world was banded into Action Areas and anyone sensing a call to missionary work could go anywhere as long as they could raise their own funds once 'accepted' by the Overseas Missionary Council (OMC) of the AG GB.<sup>3</sup> Individualism had won out for good or otherwise. A survey of the AG mission history has shown that there is then a scattered approach, no coordinated world strategy, even when there was any attempt at coordinating with other agencies or local churches on the same field.<sup>4</sup>

### Vocation and its development

What is calling? The concept of 'Vocation' goes back to when people sensed that God wanted them in a role in the church or monastery. Calvin considered people should stay in the 'vocation' in which they were born, a butcher's or a lawyer's or a noble family. In Protestantism that did not mean that 'clerical ministry' was not possible in generations of families otherwise employed. It became a habit of the educated classes that of three sons, one was to inherit the estate or business, the next went to the army and last 'went into the church.' It became a safe position for those within the system of a state church. Vocation still remained in the 'being' rather than 'doing' category of service, to include teaching and nursing, altruistic 'callings.'<sup>5</sup> Obviously the historic development in Britain and Europe was different to the United States of America where a 'church-state' system was deliberately avoided and freedom of choice for the individual was valued. The pioneer, entrepreneur was the hero of society. In Britain it was less so. Missionaries were not often derived from among the noble of the land until the Cambridge Seven: landed gentry, famous for sports [cricket] and money, these seven gave up their inheritances to serve the Chinese with the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> They had sensed a 'call' from God and obeyed it. This sort of calling was highly admired in the churches. Spiritual status was attributed. More people from the educated spectrum began applying for missionary work. The missionary had also become the hero in the pre-1945 years at least. However in the post-1945 years in Britain at least, and probably the USA, and other 'western nations' there was a surge of new agencies being formed and many missionary volunteers; the

AG GB as one agency, was flooded with applications.<sup>7</sup> Was this status appreciation part of the motive? Many a woman applied to go overseas as there were little opportunities for ministry in an official sense at home not just in the mainline traditional churches but the AG as well.<sup>8</sup>

What triggered their 'call'? I tested it with a survey of 70 contactable retired and active AG missionaries. I wanted to see if their calling was triggered and confirmed by one or more factors - Scripture, The Holy Spirit and specific gifts, a dream or vision; few if any had any 'pentecostal' character to their call. Most stated it was from the Holy Spirit pointing out scriptures, or an encounter with other missionaries and less so from book testimonies. It was focused geographically until 1990s when a later age of calling provided a gifting orientation for service anywhere needed.

Having ascertained a call through a variety of methods, the candidates would then go through a confirmation process through home churches, and the agency leaders. The processes changed over the years with AG GB; I worked out that there were 5 models for the Pentecostals in Britain since the first Pentecostal Missionary union members of 1909 left Britain. Within that came adaptations of designations. As Johnson states "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." As of 1980 in Britain, the AG missionaries place themselves in their preferred location. Perhaps in AG USA, they are in submission with respect to the agency's needs and then in consultation on their preferences. So the strategy can be stabilized and arranged with some respect for long-term goals, sending those most likely to achieve the goals due to their giftings natural and spiritual. Corporate vision is then possible to fulfil. If of course, the Holy Spirit really is 'pulling the strings' of the missionary agency then all will fit in with an overall concept of God's plan in the world - 'that they may be ONE' as Jesus prayed and therefore His sending will achieve His plan! Human discernment of that plan is necessary.

If there was an overall AG plan for all AG Americans to the Ukrainians, from Australians to the AG Zimbabweans, from Brazilians to the Japanese and all in between, it would take massive oversight. So individual nations sending missionaries would then need to cooperate through the local churches of the receptor nation with each other. A focus on gifting, usually defined in Eph 4:11 terms, not geographic calling is then easier to manage to send them to appropriately strategic areas.

Determining their gifting for the younger group is not always easy but sometimes teamwork can at least be enhanced through determining personality types. Introverts I found were sent for pioneer situations whereas extroverts work better with existing teams or form their own but the AG GB seems to keep extrovert males in home pastorates; women extroverts are sent to other fields.<sup>9</sup>

Information of the individual's strengths plus spiritual insight and calling working into factual and statistical information on UPGs can add up to the best designation for the new missionaries. The main question is on a mutually recognized discernment from the Holy Spirit among the individuals and agency leaders *and* receptor nations.

### National church?

The next issue is the receptor national churches. Much of what Johnson debates is the issue of a *national* church and how they respond. First of all we need a definition. 'National' means different things. Is it a trans-cultural but geopolitically based church? He seems to consider the AG in each nation as *the* national church. That takes a very small exclusive view in nations where many cultures [PGs] co-exist. Can we re-term it? The indigenous, dominant, linguistically cultural AG? Surely today, the American AG is not the colonialist mission agency to run their own pioneer program apart from the existing church. Some AG churches were not actually founded by American AG—not many perhaps. Are they now indigenous or not? Are they becoming self-theologizers or not? Hodges would be horrified if they were not. To say outsiders (E3?<sup>10</sup>) have a 'superior' view of the possibilities of UPG work in 'their' (E1) nations strikes me as neo-colonialist. Strong words? Instead, any non-national missionary, Brazilian, Korean, British, American, Australian... should be partnering, serving, facilitating but not commanding the national church.

Supposing the 'national AG church' had arrangements with an AG mission agency, is their policy to accept facilitators or pioneers? If it is the latter, evangelistic pioneers, then they can facilitate their language and cultural learning, and send them out to support local outreach. If the former as facilitators, they might be appointed to administration, education, social action aid resourcing, etc.

Logical ideas like that, however, do not often work out so easily. National churches may have a say in what they want to do and which personnel should do it.

One successful missionary<sup>11</sup> from AG GB in Thailand for over 25 years now, was connected to the national Thai AG and he was designated under their auspices to minister with Thai. He formed his own team from among the Thai, saw miracles, grew a main church and now trains and facilitates more and more locals in church planting, even reaching—thanks to the Tsunami in 2006—fishing villages where not only Thai live but those of an UPG (Orag Luoi). How this vision is passed on will be interesting but one key aspect is learning the local language.

So if the national churches are apparently have 'people blindness,' what about the UPGs in their geographic areas? The missionaries with the vision for that people group would still need to work with and through the national church in the national language to pray through to healing of the blindness. Modelling discipleship even as they learn language and culture, assisting, watching and being catalysts for new ministries by may be a better way than doing the work as leaders themselves. What needs shaping in training days are the expectations of being a missionary to enable servant-leadership.

### Language

One of the key issues Johnson highlights is that AG Missionaries were largely based among the existing churches, not among UPGs. Does that imply they are dependent on interpreters or does their calling motivate them through language learning? Missionary dependency linguistically may limit the use of missionary teams going further beyond national churches. More questions are implied: how then are the missionaries equipping the churches to do the work among their own people *and* other groups in a way that missionaries themselves could not do without fluency in numerous languages? It may then be more effective to facilitate local multi-language using Christians to go wherever needed among UPGs, even to the extent of learning another language.

If missionaries are not able to use the national language, let alone the localized languages, they will find themselves in a labyrinth of misunderstandings of a cultural and linguistic nature. The Western World is more concerned with quick results; the American entrepreneurial spirit at work to see success. The Europeans are a little more willing to think in longer terms perhaps, especially those already trilingual as with the Swiss. The Brits, however, are less apt to learn more languages. The use of

trade languages whether English, Spanish, Swahili or Mandarin might be an issue for some among the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission<sup>12</sup> but there can be checks and balances placed for ensuring right understanding among two sets of bilingual/trilingual peoples. The missionary can learn the national language; the local can use the national language but have a knowledge of other dialects too.<sup>13</sup> Certainly language study has to be a major foundation of understanding other cultural groups around the world.

#### Near neighbors –the UPGs

Who should do the reaching of the national church's near neighbors? Many groups are blind to their neighbors. Outsiders can see things differently. Can it then take a member of an E3 group to help the E1s see the E2s? Therefore being in a geopolitical area where an AG 'national' church already exists in a different people group is not necessarily a problem as stated by Johnson (4). It could be the facilitation of vision. Peter and John were somewhat taken aback by Philip the Hellenist deacon evangelist seeing the people movement among the Samaritans; Peter and John had been trained culturally not to regard Samaritans as worthwhile, despite Jesus' training in relating to Samaritans (Lk 10:27-37; 17:11-19; Jn 4). People blindness occurs in key leaders. Peter had to learn the lesson again with Cornelius (Acts 10).

A Pentecostal should be at least as aware, if not more so, than Peter of the way God speaks, suddenly, in dreams, prophetic words and pictures. Staying alert to that Spirit led mode of being, should enable the embedding of 'apostolic genius and missional DNA' Johnson speaks of by modelling how a Spirit-led life, motivation and outreach coincide.

#### Conclusion

Rob Starner makes a poignant observation when he says, "the church's constant theological task is retrospection and repair."<sup>14</sup> So too missiologically: how do we repair the policies of placing missionaries? With some excuses for individualism, we have simply let people go anywhere they seemed to think they needed to go to obey God's calling on them individually. I challenge that and ask if individualism is too rife? Should an agency be motivated by information or the Spirit? Or are they incompatible? I think Johnson's issues and my research indicates that

there is a pendulum swing between the two in most agencies, including the AG’s own mission policies. On the one hand, organic Pentecostalism stresses being a Spirit-led intuitive locating of missionaries; on the other hand, organizational Pentecostalism with its over-centralizing strategies directed by statistical information can kill individual giftings if those individuals are sent to places unsuitable to their abilities. Motives and end goals are all very Western. ‘Success’ is very Western. It may be contagious and even partially due to a prosperity idea that we should multiply and cover the earth, not just Jesus’ command (Mt 28:19). Can we not learn from the national churches rather than just seek to motivate them to see how we see—even how we see UPGs? How do we trust God to move them to meet the UPGs? By being *with* them, incarnating God’s mission, and being the message. So, if God is in charge by his Spirit we would want to serve His Son in fulfilling the mission for which He was called and sent. Can we follow that—wherever that may be and in whatever mode of humble service it would take? Humility (Phil 2:5-11) is the method Jesus took onboard. Serving by being available to the body of Christ, Spirit-led *and* being well informed is not advocating mutually opposing methods of mission.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Overseas Missionary Council (OMC) Minutes (12 July 1946), regarding Mr J Philips’ approach to go to Brazil. OMC documents can be found at Donald Gee Centre archives at Mattersey Hall, and is digitally kept in the University of Southern California’s online Pentecostal archive collection: <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/search/collection/p15799coll14/searchterm/Donald%20Gee%20Centre%20Mattersey%20Hall%20UK!OMC%20Minutes/field/partall/mode/exactall/conn/and!and/order/nosort/ad/asc>

<sup>2</sup> OMC New fields proposal (14 June 1962).

<sup>3</sup> OMC Minutes (22 April 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Miss E. Thomas was seconded to the Swedish Free Mission from the AG Congo Field. OMC Minutes (22 April 1981). Other examples can be found.

<sup>5</sup> David Westcott, *Work Well: Live Well—Rediscovering a Biblical View of Work*, (London: Marshall Pickering, 1996), 43.

<sup>6</sup> In 1885, 7 men of wealth and aristocracy joined J. Hudson Taylor’s ground breaking faith mission the China Inland Mission.

<sup>7</sup> OMC Minutes 1945-1959: Only 17 were accepted from 74 applications.

<sup>8</sup> Anne E. Dyer, “A history of AG UK Missions 1945-1965” (MPhil thesis, University of Bangor, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Reasons for that need another essay.

<sup>10</sup> Note I reverse the ‘normal’ order of Westerner = E1 from the 1970s/80s angle.



<sup>11</sup> B. Burton, 'Transform our World', <http://www.transformourworld.org/en/blogs/424-god-moves-in-thailand> (accessed 04 May 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Jim Harries advocates the use of local languages by all missionaries—as did J.H. Taylor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—but this is to prevent misunderstandings with locals as much as teaching them the Bible. There is need for a mutual understanding and how to get the most from local language users is a vital skill in acquiring the cultural understanding that can help avoid dependency syndromes. Cf. <http://www.vulnerablemission.org/>

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Mandarin/English speaking Chinese Christians in Malaysia have to know Malay and yet in addition some are learning the related 'original' tribal languages to reach these UPGs and can do far faster than Westerners.

<sup>14</sup> Rob Starner, "Prosperity Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, edited by Stanley M. Burgess (New York: Routledge, 2006), 395.