

“UPGs, Strategy, and the European Context”:

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

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Data, Strategy, and the Holy Spirit

The European Pentecostal/Evangelical church environment is unique for a number of reasons. First, Europe has only recently (in terms of global history) been recognized as a place missionaries are sent to, rather than a place missionaries come from. This means that using missiological principles like cultural analysis and talking about indigenous forms of church-planting are relatively new in Europe, and, at the same time, complicated by Europe’s long history of structural Christianity. Second, Europe’s dominant, indigenous cultural groups are majority secular and resistant to the gospel. Third, the continent is also increasingly filled with “new Europeans”, i.e. recent immigrants from the global south, or descendants of these immigrants, who often form their own cultural groups both inside and outside churches.

While Europe has a well-known history of Christianity, very few people today have a saving knowledge of Jesus. Of the 66 million people in France, for example, 1% or less are evangelical believers, and this is true for many other nations, from Spain to Denmark. Even the nations considered most “reached,” like Sweden, report only 6.5 % evangelical believers.¹ It’s difficult to find the right words to express the worldview and spiritual condition of average Europeans: secular, post-Christian, neo-pagan, etc. It is true that Europeans have access to the Bible and full legal rights to pursue any religion they wish, yet apathetic agnosticism and radical secularism have proved more persuasive as worldviews than any religious option. The combined forces of pride, wealth, self-idolatry, and spiritual blindness, along with the complicated history of European Christianity, are very strong barriers against the gospel.

The label “nominal Christian” is sometimes used to describe large parts of Europe in places with historic State churches, like the Roman Catholic background countries or Lutheran

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Scandinavia. This term can be misleading, as it conjures up a picture of Christians who simply need to be “stirred up” or “fanned into flame.” But we would argue that the Operation World/ Joshua Project guidelines which count a country as “engaged” if it has at least 5% nominal Christians are not at all helpful to the cause of church-planting in Europe. In areas with high rates of infant baptism (which gives us no information about living faith), this designation leads to a false sense of compatibility and religious understanding, and it keeps us from doing the deeper work of immersing ourselves in current European worldviews and developing persuasive evangelization tools. When we don’t accurately describe the particular, local, cultural/spiritual environment of the group we are trying to reach, we end up defaulting to “regular church” models which primarily attract immigrants from nations where Christianity is thriving.

As missionaries, we are called to reach people, not the political nation-states of Europe, and thus the Joshua Project can be an important tool, since it attempts to describe people inside nations based on ethnolinguistic groups. Yet thinking about “people groups” is tricky in the European context. From the secular perspective, categorizing people based on ethnicity is a tool which can be used for oppression—as it has been in the past. Also, Europe’s open borders and intertwined history mean that “ethnicity” is not always the best lens through which to understand the majority of people. We would argue that while language has been and still is very important, today, the other important concept is worldview. For example, Europeans of different ethnic backgrounds who work together in the same megacity could very well share a strong worldview, belong to the same clubs, and intermarry among themselves.

In fact, in relative global terms, the majority of Europeans today are urban, educated, not poor, and they share a secular worldview. Many new immigrants who don’t share this worldview have children who will adopt the secular culture as they grow up (with some exceptions). This should have important implications for church-planting and witness. Europe is facing a social crisis because its governmental policies, rooted in historic Christian concepts of compassion, justice, and human rights, have made it a haven for immigrants seeking a better life. Yet because the present worldview of secularism does not offer a secure foundation for these principles, ethnic pride and xenophobia are on the rise. Only people changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ can break down barriers and lead the way out of this tragic situation.

Our goal as apostolic workers is to unite people in Christ, not to divide them. Therefore, if we are to use people group language and speak of indigenous churches, especially among

secular Europeans, we must have a biblical reason to do so. We believe Paul's reasoning in I Cor 9:20-22 is sound: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews . . . I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." (ESV) The reason we need better information about least-reached people-groups in Europe is because churches rooted in indigenous communities are the best hope for real, lasting, spiritual and societal transformation. Churches that can preach the gospel in the appropriate language, sensitive to cultural understanding, will more easily gain access to open hearts. However, without basic information about who attends the existing national churches in Europe (and who do not attend these churches), we are hampered in our ability to plan strategically. And, though new churches may be planted, they will not necessarily be planted among the least-reached peoples.

The Challenge of People Blindness

We concur that people blindness is a problem inside and outside the church, because we naturally only "see" the group to which we already belong. As missionaries and Pentecostal churches in Europe, we have made some recent progress—at least a start!—in "seeing" various groups that exist within national boundaries but need targeted, creative witness and/or special, compassionate attention: diverse kinds of immigrants, victims of human trafficking, and Muslims, for example. We are beginning to deploy missionaries who target these particular peoples, some of whom will naturally filter into existing churches, and others who will need their own faith communities. However, we suspect that people-blindness as it pertains to the Christian community may take a unique form in Europe, because the majority European culture is not easily responsive to the gospel, since they are wealthy in global terms. And they look a lot like the "reached" American communities we have left behind, it is in fact difficult to see their desperate spiritual need. National believers who were persecuted in the past by these majority groups also have particular barriers to seeing them as a harvest field.

Speaking specifically to the issue of identifying the least-reached peoples in Europe, we (mission agency and national churches) would all benefit from knowing if growth in Pentecostal churches in the last 20 years has come from immigration or from reaching the majority people groups in our countries. If our churches are filled with new immigrants or particular subgroups, we can celebrate this while admitting that our work is not done. We should be part of mobilizing believers in these churches to take the gospel outside their own communities. As people called to

the apostolic task of sharing Christ with those who don't have an adequate witness of the gospel, we must begin with facing who, exactly, are the least-reached in Europe. We would argue that in many cases, Pentecostal churches are successfully being planting among certain minority groups, while the majority secular peoples continue mainly unevangelized.

As immigrants from nations in Africa and Latin America with strong, growing Pentecostal churches have entered Europe, local churches, historically very small, have enjoyed quick growth. (Of course, not all churches have welcomed immigrants, due to the above-mentioned problem of xenophobia). Some European churches, responding naturally and positively to the needs of their growing immigrant congregations, have changed their styles to the point of de-indigenization. As an example, using unofficial observations due to the lack of data, our largest Pentecostal churches in Spain are 80-95% non-Spanish. While in themselves, these churches have great potential to be forces for good in Europe, the danger is that they often stop "seeing" the lost majority-culture Europeans around them. They can continue to grow successfully among non-Spaniards and to even plant other churches, using the same style and structure, which will also attract the same kind of audience. Large and lively immigrant churches exist within cities where the majority-culture peoples are still 1% or less Christian, and these two worlds may remain completely separate. This is a call for both "seeing" the harvest field with fresh eyes, and for courageous church planters from both missionary teams and the national churches to once again do the primary work of evangelizing lost people in culturally sensitive ways.

The Challenge of the Existing National Church

Historically, many Pentecostal church networks in Europe do not have North American roots; they were birthed at the same time as the Assemblies of God (USA) or were planted by other Europeans. This means that the church development process outlined by Johnson (foreign missionaries planting congregations, raising up leaders, setting up a national-church system, then stepping back, etc.) followed a very different path in Europe, country by country. Many European Pentecostal churches, however small, have always had indigenous leadership.

Given this history, when foreign missionaries began arriving in Europe from the USA and other nations, they sought to form respectful partnerships where possible with local existing Pentecostal groups. In some regions, missionaries became co-workers with freedom to

evangelize and plant churches. In other places, missionaries accepted a narrowly defined support role right from the start of the partnership. In a very few cases, missionaries were asked to only plant churches among minority groups in the nation (reaching English-speakers, for example). Today Assemblies of God World Missions (USA) (AGWM) enjoys a positive relationship with most of our AG-fellowship churches in Europe, and there has been much fruit as a result. However, in a spirit of humility and partnership, occasionally, we have limited our own freedom to listen to the voice of God as we make decisions concerning the missionary role, assignment, and strategy.

Our partnerships may be decades old or a century old, but the essential fact is that today, in Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Belgium, Albania, Greece, the Czech Republic, Austria, and many other countries, the number of evangelical believers of all kinds is still 1% or less²; therefore, the idea that apostolic workers should remain in support roles makes very little sense. We believe both missionaries and existing churches should move beyond this history and be willing to break new ground where necessary. Alan Johnson's presentation has potential to influence our efforts and spur us on toward better thinking and practice.

As we look to the future of the AGWM work in Europe, we must also recognize the fact that young urban Europeans, like Americans, are not brand-loyal when it comes to church membership or denomination. We may honor agreements made with national AG church leaders decades ago, but young, internet-savvy pastors who are eager to reach their peers are connecting with whatever partnerships, methods, or materials they believe look promising (i.e. Hillsong church plants, direct church plants from North or South American megachurches, Small Church Movement, etc.). Though AGWM has resources, passion, and a deep commitment, if we don't do what we are called to do in Europe by every means available, we may miss our God-given opportunity.

Johnson says that "the assumption that once the gospel is rooted among one people, it will flow naturally 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." (12) We see this to be true across Europe. Just because a church exists in Paris doesn't mean that, inevitably, the gospel will be preached to the Muslim communities in Paris suburbs. Just because a thriving immigrant church exists in Spain does not mean that the gospel will inevitably be preached to the Catalan-speaking middle-class communities in Barcelona. Someone has to hear

the call, respond, and go. This is where we find Johnson's illustration of various strategies for "Pauline apostolic bands" to be very helpful. We want to continue in partnership with our national Pentecostal churches in Europe, and where it is appropriate and useful, continue to teach, train, and cooperate in church-planting. But we cannot give up the apostolic call to preach the gospel to those who haven't heard.

Therefore, if we identify groups who have very little witness, even the amorphous, large group called "secular Europeans," we should consider sending teams who (as in the illustration of teams 2 and 4) straddle the divide between national church and the unreached people groups, building bridges between them while planting indigenous faith communities. Ideally (and this is already happening in some places), these teams would have both foreign and national workers who share one vision and specific call to a local people-group, use good missiological principles of cultural analysis and appropriate communication, and embrace their freedom to develop new strategies for the sake of gospel witness. Apostolic teams with no relation to the existing national church (as in illustration of teams 3 and 5) (Johnson, 10-11) should be the very last resort. For example, these teams may be deployed in cases where the unreached group is so different from the dominant cultural group of the national church that they would never be welcomed without significant cultural adaptation. Or, sadly, working outside the national church may be necessary if the existing church has no interest in evangelism and church-planting. We have several examples in Europe of Pentecostal organizations that have arisen outside of the traditional AG national church structure. The Gypsy Evangelical Church (also known as Philadelphia) has tens of thousands of believers stretched across Europe, and the International Church Network uses English to reach out to expatriate, multicultural communities. Both organizations relate in a fraternal way to the leadership of the national Pentecostal churches in their countries, and their networks cross national boundaries.

If, in Europe, we include secularists among the least-reached people groups and form teams to target them, it has to be said that this presents a unique challenge. While it may be obvious that they do not fit well into many existing national churches and are not responding to current evangelistic strategies, we will still confront skepticism and resistance to the idea that their worldview and cultural situation are sufficiently unique to warrant new approaches, and, in some cases, new styles of church (not necessarily new organizations). Yet we must try to do this

persuasive work, for the sake of the millions of lost people on the continent with no near-neighbor witness.

In conclusion, we agree with the way forward suggested by Johnson. "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" (23). In Europe, we are thankful for the many examples of generous and mutually satisfying partnerships between national Pentecostal churches and AGWM. Yet, as apostolic workers called to the harvest field, when we identify people-groups without adequate witness, whether they are Algerian-background Muslims in southern France or educated secularists in Madrid, we must be willing to pioneer new approaches and re-organize existing partnerships in order to see "every tribe and tongue" know Christ.

¹ All the statistics in this essay are from Joshua Project, see www.joshuaproject.net.

² Ibid.