

Classical Pentecostal Mission Agencies and Frontier Mission Missiology: 10 years after Tokyo 2010

When I think back to my presentation at Tokyo 2010, in some respects from where things stand now, I wonder if I were asked to present something on this topic now if it would even cross my mind to develop the theme that I did ten years ago. Within the context of the organization that I work in, Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM), there have been changes of seismic proportions when it comes to explicit engagement with peoples that have little access to the Gospel. That fact alone would likely have steered me in a different direction when thinking about classical Pentecostal mission agencies and frontier mission missiology. On top of that my involvement in the Missions Commission of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship (<https://worldagfellowship.org/>) gives me a window to see things happening among a segment of Pentecostals in the majority world who are in various stages of sending and moving towards sending Pentecostal cross-cultural workers. As I write today I am rejoicing in what is happening in missions through classical Pentecostals and filled with hope for increasing engagement with the unreached in the days ahead.

While the impact of Pentecostal missions has been on the radar of missions scholars for many years, there is not much reflection either externally or internally concerning Pentecostal missions and their response to the demographic challenge of unreached people groups. My initial interest in this topic grew out of regular praying through *Operation World* in its various editions over three decades. It is my habit to always look at all the country information before the prayer request segments, and at some point it dawned on me that, in terms of my own organization, as general rule we had more missionaries where the church was largest and the fewest where the church was smaller or non-existent. Similarly, the national church movements we connect with were large in places that have lots of evangelical Christians and small or non-existent where evangelicals are few. So although my assertion was not grounded on a broad empirical study, it nonetheless was based on the broad brushstrokes provided by the statistical data in *Operation World*.

In my original work I looked at five classical Pentecostal missions organizations (three in North America and two in Europe; note that only the North American data was in the Tokyo 2010 presentation) and found that over nearly four decades there was not much increase in their personnel in one geographic region of the world known to have many discrete unreached ethnolinguistic groups. My working assumption was that if classical Pentecostal missions agencies had not added more workers from the numbers they had before the challenge of unreached peoples was widely known in the missions community, then it most likely meant that they were not promoting and focusing on the issue of Gospel access for these kinds of people groups.

In responding to the request to report on development of this topic ten years after the Tokyo meeting, I cannot speak to a broader segment of classical Pentecostal agencies since I have no new data to draw from to see if there has been any change. What I can do is share personal observations and reflections from within the organizational contexts that I am working in where there is a great deal of positive change.

Change was driven by individuals within the organization who have the vision and not just from the top down.

In my own mission agency a huge shift has started and continues to grow that explicitly embraces the challenge of church planting among people groups with little access to the Gospel. In 2019 missionaries working in teams or as individuals, and often laboring in conjunction with host church workers, are engaging 321 unreached people groups (using the Joshua Project definition of a UPG) with the goal of adding another 249 peoples by 2023. It is no secret that historic missions agencies have often wrestled with the missiology of unreached peoples when they have long standing relationships and commitments to national church movements that are not in the classic UPG worlds of Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists.

As a Pentecostal we see this shift as the work of the Holy Spirit among His people. What has been amazing to watch on the ground is the diversity of people that the Spirit has used to affect change in our organizational setting. This was not a top-down process where a decision was made and mandated across the organization. Rather, particularly in the decade leading up to 2010 there were several practitioner voices who had responded to the call of the Spirit to work among the unreached that began to ask hard questions and share their personal burden and vision. These voices came from different levels of the organization, many on the ground working among the unreached and others in various levels of leadership. It was also interesting to see the role of personal study and research; one key leader that paved the way for what is happening now concluded that the unreached must be a focus for our mission through his own doctoral work looking at needs in the region of the world he labored in. Some at the regional level of leadership made space for the voices of field workers to cast vision into the region which eventually led to structural changes to better address those who lack access to the Gospel.

The Live Dead movement (<https://www.livedead.org/>), which was birthed in a time of prayer among some of our missionaries in east Africa, formally started in 2011 and now has spread to eight initiatives on four continents with 76 church planting teams working among unreached peoples. These are multicultural teams drawing workers not only from our organization, but from other sending countries within the World Assemblies of God World (WAGF). In addition to this ten of those teams are led by and consist of people who are not a part of either AGWM or WAGF.

In 2012 the Executive Director of AGWM formed a missiology think-tank and one of the first assignments was to look at our response to the challenge of unreached peoples. From the work of the missiology writing group a publication series for practitioners is underway. In 2020 the volume on UPGs comes out and in it we have delineated a rubric to help our regions develop strategic priorities to take the Gospel to those who have little access. These groups can be ethnolinguistic, a geographic region with few Christians within a reached country, or marginalized sociological subgroups:

- a. Any ethnolinguistic people or nation state with 1% percent or less Evangelical Christian becomes the top priority for developing and deploying new church planting teams. Within this category those having no Bible, no Christian media, no Christians or church movements should receive the most immediate attention in terms of planning for getting church planting teams on the ground.

b. Peoples that are more than 1% percent Evangelical but are in the framework of the Joshua Project definition of less than 2% percent Evangelical and with less than 5% percent of any form of the Christian faith would be the next priority for church planting teams.

c. In people groups that are more than 2% percent Evangelical but have geographic areas that are less than that number AGWM workers should seek to catalyze local Christians and partner with them to empower church planting efforts.

d. In every nation there are sociological subgroups that are not being touched by existing church movements. AGWM has workers in these populations and seeks to mobilize national church movements to engage them through their local churches as well.

Rather than focusing on one particular part of the world, this rubric helps regional leadership and the missionaries in their countries to think strategically around the idea of access to the Gospel wherever they find themselves and no matter the size of the national church they are partnering with. By accepting the Joshua Project definition of unreached but not being bound by it, the 1% or less Evangelical threshold brings around 20 countries in Post-Christian Europe as a top priority for church planting. This was always a tension point with the Joshua Project operationalization of “unreached” with its “less than 5% of any form of the Christian faith” bar that kept Europe from being seen as a place needing pioneer church planting.

Change can come through working for alignment with the trajectory of God’s redemptive mission-There are many ways to get the Gospel to the unreached.

There has been a conscious effort to try and bring all of our missionaries into alignment with the big trajectory of God’s glory among the tribes, tongues peoples and nations of the world. So rather than church planting among UPGs being the domain only of specialists, we want every missionary to find ways to participate so that all ministries have as their ultimate goal the vision of seeing the Gospel penetrate to all the diversity of humanity. Whether in hands-on direct ministry like pioneer church planting or in a more indirect fashion through strengthening, envisioning, mobilizing and training local believers to reach the unreached geographically near and far, the work of every missionary can participate in the big trajectory of God’s redemptive mission.

Change is coming through networking and connecting missions leaders-casting missiological vision through different kinds of gatherings.

The Missions Commission of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship (WAGF) has as two of its primary goals that every general council connected with WAGF develop some kind of appropriate cross-cultural missionary sending structure, and that when they do send to prioritize going to unreached peoples to plant the church where it does not yet exist. Starting in 2007 and gaining more traction in the last decade the Commission has hosted regional World Missions Congresses and sought to strengthen and encourage regional networks of missions leaders in these councils. In 2007 when there were 45 general councils in WAGF with a sending structure, a goal was set to have 100 within 10 years. The second triennial missions survey conducted in 2017 showed 107 general councils with sending structures in 102 nations. Congresses, regional

network meetings and pre or post missions leaders meetings after Triennial gatherings are all places where the vision for the unreached is passed on. Workshops on how to reach the unreached and who are the unreached at the Congresses have been well attended.

Change can come through intentional education-Pentecostal engagement of the unreached is not automatic.

One of the things we learned from the regional Missions Congresses and other events the Missions Commission hosted was the constant need for missiological education. The whole notion of “unreached” is constantly contested; there is an ever-present temptation to coopt the term for whatever particular group someone is working in or a place they want to go. At one of our events after an hour-long presentation on the issue of Gospel access and reviewing definitions our leaders got a request from a church movement leader who wanted to show a video about their unreached which was defined as towns where there was not yet church of their denomination. If the spiritual need of the unreached is not continually trumpeted church movements will always gravitate to the easier tasks of working where the church exists.

We have also seen the impact of explicit missions education in shaping where personnel land. In WAGF one of the newer senders is the Romanian Pentecostal Union. A group of visionary pastors formed a two-year training program and together with an AGWM worker they have developed a curriculum that exposes students to frontier missions missiology and the Muslim and Buddhist world as well as encouraging internships in places where there are classical Joshua Project unreached groups. The result is that a high percentage of the people the agency sends, most who come through this training program, are working among unreached peoples.

Ralph Winter’s original insight remains incredibly relevant and brings clarity to the development of missions strategy.

As we close in on the 50th anniversary of Winter’s 1974 presentation at Lausanne on cross-cultural evangelism as the highest priority, there is an accumulation of voices old and new who are critical of the whole enterprise of frontier mission missiology or who are calling for reassessment of the notion of “unreached peoples.” On the whole this is a good exercise and concepts grow in utility as they are refined by thoughtful critique. However, I am concerned that assertions that “unreached peoples” are no longer relevant in a globalized, urbanized world shaped by migration are based on a less than careful reading of Winter’s early work.¹ In my own experiences I have often found that people react to a misapplication of an idea about unreached peoples rather than the central concepts Winter proposed back in early 1970s and 1980s. The meaning of missiological ideas and concepts, like any other idea or concept in a discipline, cannot be controlled by the authors/originators once it is made public. People will do with it and understand (or misunderstand it); misapplication however does not invalidate the concepts.

¹ These three articles are an excellent place to start looking at Winter’s core ideas and some of the critical issues and contested points in developing definitions in the early days of frontier mission missiology: Datema, Dave. “Defining Unreached: A Short History.” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 33.2 (Summer 2016): 45-71; Gill, Brad. “The Unfortunate Unmarketability of ‘Unincorporable.’” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 33.2 (2016): 72-76; and Gill, Brad. “Beyond Groupism: Refining Our Analysis of Ethnicity and Groups.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 35.4 (2018): 179-184.

I have found the central ideas of Winter's original insight to be very valuable precisely in settings that are globalized, urbanized and shaped by migration. Listen to Winter's own reflection on the insight he had on McGavran's idea of bridge people that led him to raise a question McGavran never asked:

[McGavran] came to believe that cultural factors were even more important than language ones in Christian work, I began to realize that if it is true that even minor cultural differences can separate people and keep them from going to the same congregation, etc., then this fact has horrendous implications for the existing mission movement. ... Missions find it hard to take seriously cultural differences within a country. They do not expect nor seek to have two or more different forms of Christianity; the form that develops in their first major beachhead tends to be considered good enough for all the other groups....So what about the other groups for which there existed no bridge? He didn't have a good answer....Furthermore, statistically speaking, I found that from this perspective a very large proportion of world population is sealed off, as it were. This additional, negative, insight, then, defined a huge frontier, which it took a few years for McGavran himself to accept. It meant that precisely those hermetically-sealed pockets of people around the world that had not yet had any kind of a penetration *constituted by themselves the major remaining frontier of Christian mission.*²

It is important to understand that his notion of people being sealed off was not in the social sense but from the perspective of their ability to have access the Good News in a culturally relevant way from an existing expression of the church. His four illustrations in his 1974 Lausanne presentation are all scenarios where the Church exists, and Christians are geographically near neighbors.³ It was cultural differences between these existing Christian movements and their non-Christian neighbors that was the barrier that kept these unbelievers from being able to hear and assess the Gospel, even when there was a shared language. Winter's concern was not about finding the smallest segments of human society or trying to define "people" or "groupness" in an anthropologic sense, rather it was evangelistic. It requires boots-on-the-ground workers who can see and experience the barriers of acceptance and understanding to existing versions of the faith and in this way know where a new cross-cultural church planting effort is needed.

In a globalized, urbanized world with populations on the move and mixing as never before, these insights about the need for access to a culturally relevant presentation of the gospel are as critical now as they were in 1974. These central ideas about access and cultural difference are critical to Pentecostal missionaries because they hold our feet to the fire to have the humility to acknowledge that our versions of faith are just that, culturally embedded versions; and not everyone will be able to see Jesus in them. Pentecostal missions need to celebrate growth but continually ask the questions that grow out of frontier mission missiology---who is not responding to our version of the faith and why.

² Ralph Winter, "Part I: Eleven Frontiers of Perspective," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 77-78.

³ Ralph Winter, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne Switzerland*, ed. J. D. Douglas, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: World Wide Publications, 1975), 213-215.