

APOSTOLIC FUNCTION AND MISSION

Dr. Johnson

I view my address today for this inauguration of the J. Philip Hogan Chair of World Missions as an opportunity to initiate a public dialogue about missiology. Thinking about missions is a communal activity and one that requires continual reflection. While it is based on unchanging principles in Scripture, the world setting in which we operate is constantly changing, and this demands that we regularly think together about who we are and where we are going. The thoughts that I will share today represent the public and more carefully formulated version of meditations, conversations, readings, and writings that I have been doing over the past 20 years as a missionary in Thailand. The Hogan chair represents a wonderful connection between Assemblies of God World Missions and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary where in a proactive and catalytic fashion the process of engaging with subjects of missiological importance can be undertaken. The material that I lay out for public scrutiny and dialogue today grows out of my personal journey, but it represents more than simply personal reflections. It is my humble and serious attempt after 20 years in missions, study, and writing to assess current affairs in missions in our Assemblies of God context and to suggest lines for moving forward from this point in the future. I look forward to the days ahead where I can interact with others on the ideas that are presented here today.

Missions as a Contested Idea

I have entitled this address “Apostolic Function and Mission.” Seventeen years

after J. Philip Hogan left the Executive Director's chair, I want to suggest we are at a crossroads at the grassroots level of our worldwide movement. There is no longer clarity as to what we mean by missions and the practice of cross-cultural missions. I bring this issue up because I believe this lack of terminological and conceptual clarity can have serious consequences if not addressed. Let me quickly say that within Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) here in the States the leadership and veteran staff are very clear about who we are, what we are doing, why we are doing it, where we are going, and have a clearly articulated philosophy that guides them. However my point is that at the grassroots level—and here I am talking about local church members, pastors, churches, short term mission teams, those who are coming to our mission as potential candidates and some of the newer ones who have just come on board, as well as many of the national churches and their leaders that we relate to in other parts of the world—are not at all clear about the meaning of missions and how it is to be conducted. Here in the opening decades of the 21st century the notion of missions is a contested idea and its meaning within our constituency is up for grabs. It is my hope that this paper will help to bring to the foreground some of the issues that need to be discussed in order to gain conceptual clarification that will lead us into the future.

I want to frame my assertion in an idea that I first heard expressed by John York, which actually comes from Stephen Neill: “When everything is mission, nothing is mission.” In order to set the stage for the analysis that follows I will briefly set forth how the current confusion regarding missions is manifest. I will start with the most anecdotal evidence that is rooted in my own experience and move towards the more empirical

material.

At the most personal level, when I am associating with people in the States talking about “missions” I often feel like I am becoming a dinosaur; that I am some kind of strange and ungainly creature from another era intruding on a world that changed and no longer provides a supportive environment for my survival. When I was a 20-year-old university student God called me by a spoken voice to devote my life to preaching the Gospel. I had no clue about what shape that would take. While in Bible School I participated in missions conventions at my local church where actual field missionaries preached about reaching lost people, and was challenged by missiological writings about those who do not have a near-neighbor witness to share with them the Gospel. The burden became so great that my wife and I felt like the only way we could obey God was to step out in faith and go to work among a least-reached people. When I asked Wes Hurst, the Regional Director for Asia Pacific at that time, where he would send a young person without much experience who wanted to work in the unreached world he said without a moment’s hesitation he needed young families in Thailand. He said he wanted people to learn the language, plant churches, and develop those that were newly started. We went to Thailand, we learned Thai, we have tried to plant and develop churches, and Wes’ words have been the guiding principle that continues to shape what we do.

But things have changed. I have been in a missions convention where I was the only person who knew a foreign language, where I was the only field based worker, where I was the only person actually engaging lost people on a regular basis. During a year at one of our schools and in touring 10 of our colleges on a preaching and teaching tour sharing

the vision for the least-reached in Asia Pacific I have not yet once been approached by a person of any age who says, “I want to go to a place and spend the rest of my life where the church does not exist and preach the Gospel and plant the church of Jesus Christ.

People tell me they want to lead teams, that they want to travel to “lots of countries,” that they want to get a seminary degree and go teach somewhere, that they want to find a place that uses English to go pastor, that they want to travel and do crusades, or hold babies in an orphanage. The list goes on and on. These activities are not wrong in and of themselves. In the context of Assemblies of God missions we have always done these things, and for the most part they are good things. But at the same time we did not get to 50-plus million adherents world wide with a cross-cultural staff that saw any of these activities as the controlling center of what they were about. The center of our labors has always been evangelism, church planting, and the training of national ministers.

Let me move towards more empirical evidence now. I have run into a growing number of cases where it is clear that national church movements, of which I number our American church as one of them, are conflating the ideas of the evangelistic outreach of a local church or movement within its own sociocultural setting with missions. Thus any kind of outreach at all becomes missions, with the deadening effect of equalizing all types of evangelism. This idea is accompanied by concepts such as missions relating to the crossing of geographic borders, working with our own people in locations outside of our geopolitical borders, and where the term “missionary” is used, with the ubiquitous aphorism, “everyone is a missionary.” This results in people being sent outside of their country to preach the Gospel to their own people who are living abroad, while ignoring

within their own borders those groups of different religious, social, and linguistic background who do not have church movements at all. It also devalues the cross-cultural worker because since we are all missionaries our field is wherever we live, thus giving all places equal priority no matter what the strength of the church is within that sociocultural setting.

This perspective affects how missions is perceived when Western missionaries mobilize non-western church movements to do cross-cultural missions. One person working in an African context told me that believers in the movement he is working with think that being a missionary means going to a Bible school. Years of seeing westerners come from the outside to work with an existing church movement has left this national church without any conception of pioneer work where there is no preexisting church movement. Thus missions becomes going to some town or village of the same group and reaching out there, while Muslim and animist groups without any church movements at all in their group are completely ignored.

Within AGWM itself, our commitment to building indigenous national churches and to partnering with them has naturally led most of our career cross-cultural missions staff at this point in our history to work where the church already exists and with the primary focus of that work being connected with those national church movements in some way. One result of this is that people repeatedly exposed to missionaries who work in Christian contexts in a supportive fashion begin to conceive of missions in these terms.

Finally, the reflections of then Executive Director of AGWM, Loren Triplett, in his November of 1995 monthly letter to the missionary family, marked the beginning of my

own journey in starting to think seriously about missiological issues within our own movement. The letter ended with a request for ideas, and I responded with a detailed letter where I spelled out in writing for the first time some of the ideas that I am sharing with you today. Since it is so critical to the point I am making I am citing Brother Triplett's thoughts in full here.

The list of nations [we have missionaries in] continues to grow, but oh, so very slowly. I am headed back to the office wondering if the King could say "well done" regarding Assemblies of God Missions.

Our missionary presence in some lands is agonizingly thin. Yes, we can say we are there, but we know in our hearts that it is only with token presence. Beyond that is the list of nations where we have never "raised the flag" and begun the battle. Could it be true that we are more apt to pursue offices, titles, and organizational turf than new frontiers in reaching the lost? Are roots, security, and place more attractive than pioneering for the King? Are capital cities more acceptable than unreached regions within the lands where we are working?

The challenging reality of missionary placement never goes too far away. Our nagging concern is, "What is missionary work all about?" Aren't we supposed to be always moving toward "the regions beyond?" Do we have the courage to honestly assess our positions? Do we have less-than-fully-challenged missionaries working with well-developed national churches?

All this suggests that the understanding of the term missionary and missions at grassroots levels within our context is confused. My argument here is that the current confusion on these ideas represents a move away from the much sharper sense that existed among the handful of people who began this movement at the turn of the century. I will illustrate here with some material from our history.

One of the reasons cited for organizing as a movement was given by E. N. Bell, editor of the Word and Witness in 1912: "our people are tired, sick, and ashamed of traveling, sight-seeing, experimenting missionaries, who expect to make a trip around the

world and come home ... We want missionaries who go out to live and die on foreign fields.” In 1915 at the third General Council it was noted that we promote the evangelization of the heathen according to New Testament methods.” In 1920 J. Roswell Flower said, “the vision of our Pentecostal missionaries is becoming more clarified and it is realized we have a distinctive mission in the world, differing from that of all other people. An apostolic ministry in apostolic power and fullness is the aim of our Pentecostal Missionaries.” Then in 1921 at the General Council in St. Louis the Council delineated to the Foreign Missions Department the nature of the New Testament practices they were to follow in six key principles. The second stated, “The Pauline example will be followed so far as possible, by seeking out neglected regions where the gospel has not yet been preached, lest we build upon another’s foundation (Romans 15:20).”

An Analysis of Why Views of Missions Have Changed

These comments from the first years of our history show an emphasis on sending long term cross-cultural workers whose work is evangelization in neglected regions. The question that needs to be raised at this point is how did from there to where we are today? While there are a number of possible reasons, I suggest that many people now view missions as supportive roles to already existing national churches as a result of the success of our cross-cultural endeavors on a scale unimaginable to those who founded the movement.

In January 2006 Randy Hurst published an article on the growth of the Assemblies of God worldwide in the Pentecostal Evangel. It includes an amazing graph that documents

the number of Assemblies of God adherents starting with 300 pastors and their congregations in 1914 to some 53 million total adherents worldwide in 2005. That graph makes clear that growth started in the decade of the 1960s but it exploded from the 1970s and beyond. Let me make some observations about this growth. First, I do not think anyone would disagree with me when I say that the explosive growth since the 1970s is based in certain values and practices of our missionary team. There was a pioneer ethos, people went to places where there were few Christians, preached the Gospel with the intention of creating an indigenous local movement capable of governing, supporting and propagating itself, and did the kind of generic work in evangelism, church planting, discipling, and training of ministers that built church movements capable of reaching their own people. The Pentecostal fire within these early pioneers was passed on into the spiritual DNA of the converts and leaders they trained by both teaching and modeling.

My second observation is that any missionary going out before 1970 was almost by definition going to be somewhere where the church movement was relatively small, and probably by a rigorous definition of indigeneity not yet fully capable of functioning without outside help to evangelize their sociocultural setting. In 1960 half of all the Assemblies of God adherents were still in America, and by 1970 it was still 25 percent. In this sense the pioneer generalist work of reaching, planting, and training was by definition going to be what these missionaries were involved in.

On the other hand missionaries going out after 1970 were confronted with a new situation, national church movements that were increasingly large, robust and powerful. No longer needed in evangelism and church planting, and even first-tier Bible training,

missionaries became advanced education specialists, managed (and helped finance) various institutions, became conduits to connect short-term teams from the west, supervised various construction efforts, and worked in various forms of media and communications. Our doctrine of indigeneity valued and predicted strong, robust, Pentecostal, zealous, evangelistic, national church movements. But from a mission standpoint, we were literally caught off guard by our success. Being surprised so to speak by our success means that it is rather natural that two missiological points did not arise in our thinking.

The first is that we never developed a missiology of success. By this I mean how we respond as a mission to the successful formation of strong indigenous national churches which is our stated goal. Let me illustrate for a moment the nature of indigenous national church movements, of which we in America are one. Think of any local church anywhere in the world, and you will find that a). there are still many lost people within their geographical spheres of ministry and b). there is always a shortage of workers. Indigenous national churches are inherently needy. This is precisely why those of us who are cross-cultural workers at various times are called upon to explain why we have left ministry in the States to go to another place. Well-meaning people argue with us that there is so much to do here.

Without a theology of success we have no decision-making tools to help us decide what needs to be done and how to respond to the demands of national churches long after they are fully indigenous or as they are in last stages of the transition time moving towards it. The result is that over time the New Testament dimension of crossing cultural boundaries to present that Gospel and the Pauline theme of going where the Gospel is not yet present

becomes obscured.

A second point is that one reason for the success we have enjoyed in mission is because we have targeted responsive populations, going where the Spirit is working sovereignly and bringing in the harvest. With national churches springing into being all over the globe, and a value of being responsive to the work of the Spirit, it again seems natural that we did not foresee the resistant and those separated from the Gospel by barriers of language, religion, and social standing. As I noted above, our original missiology was forged in the idea of going to reach the lost. It did not have to be much more refined than that simply because in 1914 large parts of the world still lacked indigenous church movements that were faithful to Jesus and the Bible. This juxtaposition between our original missiology and the circumstances in which we now live illustrates the need for a dynamic missiology based on unchanging principles but responsive to the changing missiological terrain as the church grows. What we now require is a missiology that is in harmony with our original vision but that expands the notion to include going where the church does not exist and challenging indigenous national churches to not simply reach their own, but to join us in this apostolic and cross-cultural task.

Shaping Our Missiology in the 21st Century

To this point I have made the assertion that at the grassroots level understanding of missions and the role of the missionary is no longer as clear as it was at the founding of our movement. I have also offered a partial account of how that problem concerning the meaning of missions came about. Now it is time to look at how we can address this lack of

conceptual clarity. Let me review where we stand at this moment in our history as a movement. Here in October 2006 our missiological reality is as follows:

1. We exist as a worldwide fellowship of over 54 million people aggregated into entities that we call national churches, many of which are indigenous in our classic sense of being self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing. These adherents reflect the global shift of Christianity towards the south out of the north and west. Only around five percent of these AG believers reside in America.
2. There are major blocks of humanity woven across and through the tapestry of nation-states and national churches that have no relevant witness of the Gospel within their sociocultural setting. They have no near neighbor to tell them of Christ because no Christians exist there or if there are believers, they are only a tiny minority in that setting.
3. There are large segments in our worldwide fellowship where the concept of missions and missionary are increasingly unclear, and where missions is seen primarily as Christians working with other Christians rather than the planting of the church where it does not exist.

How should we respond to this moment? I want to suggest that we need to ask for the Holy Spirit's help to listen to and be moved by three powerful sources that shape our practice of mission: Scripture, our founders and forerunners in mission, and the missiological data of the present. I will not do this in separate points, but rather will weave these three things together around the theme of apostolic function and mission. I am choosing the idea of apostolic function intentionally because: in Scripture it represents the work of the apostles who proclaimed the Gospel; our Pentecostal forefathers understood their experience as a restoration of apostolic power and practice; and because apostolic

function is what the missiological data calls us to today as major blocks of humanity continue to live without a near-neighbor witness.

What do I mean by apostolic function and mission? Let me first say that I have carefully chosen my terminology here to sidestep some sticky issues that are associated with the use of the term apostle and apostolic. Unfortunately these fine words from the Bible have often been appropriated by some as a cloak to lend legitimacy to their efforts to exercise authority over others. I do not want to make any commentary here on the myriad of issues ranging from whether or not there are apostles today, arguments about the contemporary use of the five-fold ministry terminology of Ephesians 4, to the “apostolic networks” being heralded by some as the next answer to the growth of the church.

By apostolic function I mean that at both the level of the individual cross-cultural worker and the sending agency there is a focus on the apostolic task of preaching the Gospel where it has not been heard, planting the church where it does not exist, and leading people to the obedience of faith so that they will express Jesus Christ in their social worlds and participate in God’s global mission. It is a catalytic and comprehensive function that shapes cross-cultural work so that whatever local expression it may take, the ultimate goal is to see the church planted where it does not exist and to see local bodies of believers become fully obedient to Christ and missional themselves. Apostolic function has to do with both practice and the sense of self-identity of cross-cultural workers and their sending agencies that forms the wellspring for what they do.

In the sections that follow I am going to expand and explain what I mean by apostolic function and look at some of the implications that this view holds for our

missions practice.

Apostolic Function Means There are Some Things We Choose Not to Do

Recently while doing some work in I Corinthians I was captivated by a statement that Paul made at 1:17: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” This verse lies near the beginning of a very complex section running from 1:10 to 4:21 where division is merely a symptom, and the underlying problem has to do with the nature of the Gospel, the church, and apostolic ministry. Fee points out that Paul is not denigrating in any way baptism, but rather the expression of his calling in a negative fashion is dictated by the nature of the argument he is making. Fee reconstructs the setting for this section as most likely being a situation where Christian teachers are seen as purveyors of divine wisdom and the Christian faith is seen as an expression of wisdom (*sophia*). Corinthian presuppositions about both baptism and the use of “words of human wisdom” led them to call attention to the agency and status of the minister and thus, as Fee points out, looking at leaders from this human perspective made both Paul and the Gospel look poorly. Paul argues from being an apostle—a sent one of Christ—that what he was sent to do was proclaim the Good News, which draws attention to God and not the agent.

What I want to highlight here is Paul’s understanding of the work of an apostle as focused on “gospelizing;” it carries the sense of being very narrow and focused. Here are a few more of Paul’s statements that show a narrow focus on his sense of task:

Romans 15:20 “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.”

Romans 15:23 “But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, ...”

II Corinthians 10:16 “ ... so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man’s territory ...”

Now let me link this with some of our own history. Our movement drew heavily upon the idea of the restoration of the apostolic church and the proclamation of the Gospel with signs and wonders. In November 1914 the early leaders of the Assemblies of God met in Chicago and made this declaration: “As a Council...we commit ourselves and the Movement to Him for the greatest evangelism that the world has ever seen.” I have already noted the 1921 General Council statement of principle that the Pauline example be pursued.

If Paul were with us today, where the Church exists so powerfully in so many settings and is so weak or non-existent in other settings, is it not possible that he might develop another ad hoc argument like he did in I Corinthians chapter 1? In Corinth it concerned the nature of the Gospel, the church, and apostolic ministry, but today it concerns the very nature of what missions and the missionary task is all about. I can see Paul arguing again that he does not do certain things, and does not go certain places, because that is not what he was sent to do. Paul’s understanding of the apostolic task as proclaiming the Good News, our movement’s commitment to evangelism, and the call to imitate Paul in seeking out the neglected regions requires that there be some things that we do not do. These things are good, proper, and biblical, and yet are better left up to Christians within their own social setting to lead the charge, so that we can get on with the task of preaching Christ where he is unknown.

Apostolic Function Owns All of Acts 1:8 and the Distinctions it Implies

What I have developed in the point above makes absolutely no sense and is of no strategic value unless it is linked with a clear definition of the different types of evangelism. Pentecostals we have long enjoyed the “Ye shall receive power when the Spirit comes” part of Acts 1:8, but we have not fully explored or applied what the latter part of the verse implies. Jesus says that we are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Traditionally this has been understood in a geographic sense and thus has led us to think of “missions” as something that happens away from our own “Jerusalem.” However, mission thinkers have begun to see in this verse not simply the crossing of geographic boundaries, but sociocultural ones as well. This shift from a geographic to a sociocultural sense has huge implications for evangelism.

If you take a geographic sense of evangelism then all evangelism is equal in two senses. The first is that you can approach it in the same fashion and use the same methods—it does not matter if you are talking to someone in Tibet or Toledo. The second is that all people are of equal priority since all are equally lost. Now let me hasten to say that the first is true in a qualified sense since the message does indeed remain the same, and the second is true in a theological sense, because all people are indeed lost and separated from God. However from the sociocultural perspective, all evangelism is manifestly not equal. Again, there are two senses to this statement. The first is that the greater the sociocultural distance between the gospel messenger and the listener, the more difficult and complex the task. The second is that for missionaries and the specialized role they have in the body of

Christ people who do not have the potential for access to the message must remain a higher priority than those living in sociocultural settings where a culturally relevant indigenous church exists that is capable of reaching its own people. I will make my second point clearer in what follows here.

Taking these distinctions to heart means that we can talk very clearly and precisely about two different kinds of evangelism. One happens within a monocultural context and is a natural part of the outreach of local bodies of believers and is done by near-neighbor witnesses—meaning that the witness is from the same cultural background as the listener. The second happens in a cultural setting that is not only different from that of the gospel messenger but also does not have a culturally relevant near-neighbor witness within it. This very specific kind of cross-cultural evangelism is best reserved to refer to the apostolic task of preaching Christ where he is not known.

In my mind this is a simple but crucial distinction that brings a powerful focus to our evangelism efforts and holds the potential to clear up our current confusion about missions and missionaries. Once you accept this distinction then it automatically changes the nature of the condition that we call lostness or the state of being unreached. Let me illustrate my point in the form of a question. “Why are the non-Christians Irem, a Turk, Ahmet, a Banjar and Tin Sau, a Bama, lost or unreached in a way that the non-Christians John in Springfield, José in Costa Rica and Sun Yung in South Korea are not lost or unreached?”

Before I answer that question I must clarify what I mean by “lost” and “unreached.” We take the idea of lost from Jesus who talked about coming to seek and save the lost (see

Luke 15:1-10, 19:10). In a theological sense you cannot get “loster” so no matter where you are from in the world geographically or what religious system you adhere to, when you are not reconciled to God through Jesus Christ you are in a state of lostness. “Unreached” are those who are not yet reached with the Gospel, but also the terms “unreached” and “reached” have become technical terms in missiology to refer to very specific conditions and circumstances. We run into difficulty, as in any field where a term of common parlance is also used with a technical meaning, because it becomes extremely likely that the technical term will be picked up and applied outside of its narrow definition and employed as a buzzword. In my question here I am using “unreached” in the popular sense.

So what is the answer to this query? If all six of these people are equally lost theologically, what other perspective is there to consider? Here is where another important subtle point about the distinction between evangelism within a sociocultural setting and cross-cultural evangelism needs to be made. The implication is that in Jerusalem and Judea there are already those who believe, thus there are potential near-neighbor witnesses who can tell the story of Jesus. The answer then to the question is that Irem, Ahmet, and Tin Sau live in sociocultural settings where there are no Christians or very few, thus there is not even the potential for hearing the Gospel. That is the basis for the critical need for a true cross-cultural effort to bring Christ to them. By way of contrast, for John, José, and Sun Yung, although they are lost as well, there is potential for them to hear the Gospel because a powerful indigenous church movement exists in their culture. It becomes an issue of access, while all people are equally lost, not all people have equal access to the Gospel.

Apostolic function in the 21st century means that there will be people called

primarily to reach their own people as Peter was, the apostle to the Jews, and there will be those called to reach those who are different than them in different sociocultural settings, where the church does not yet exist. I think Paul's statements about going where Christ is not known and not building on another's foundation means that were he assessing the terrain today he would rejoice in the powerful indigenous churches that exist in many settings and focus his sites on going to sociocultural settings where the church is non-existent or a tiny, enclaved minority.

If we as a movement are to stay true to the vision of the founders expressed in doing great evangelism and following the Pauline model, then we will need to grapple with the implications of Acts 1:8 for drawing distinctions between evangelism and cross-cultural evangelism and working where the church exists and where it does not exist. In my thinking these distinctions are critically important for our movement both for a refocused vision of what we are doing cross-culturally outside of the borders of the United States, and for what we do among our own national and indigenous church movement, the Assemblies of God, USA.

Rather than trying to argue for the importance of outreach in America using "unreached" as a buzzword and missing its technical definition in missiology, it would be more effective in the long run to embrace this distinction between the evangelistic outreach of a local church within its sociocultural setting and the essential missionary task of cross-cultural evangelism planting the church in sociocultural settings without a church movement. This would bring the challenge to a fresh experience of Pentecost leading to two critical fronts. The first is turning our 12,000 plus local churches into lighthouses within

their own Jerusalem, and the second is challenging these same churches to the truly immense cross-cultural task wherever it confronts us, whether it is with Muslims in Dearborn or Khartoum, or Buddhists in Denver or Mongolia.

This has the benefit of preserving evangelistic passion for outreach to Americans without attempting to pit it against the truly critical cross-cultural evangelistic task of bringing pioneer breakthrough where there is no church movement. While 200 million Americans are lost theologically and are unreached in the sense of not yet belonging to Christ, their potential access to the Gospel is a completely different issue compared to the large blocks of ethnolinguistic peoples that have either no church movements or exist as small and embattled minorities.

Let me illustrate another area where the distinctions of Acts 1:8 bring clarity to our cross-cultural work. I have often heard people say in one form or another that nationals do things like evangelism better than missionaries. If we are talking about evangelism in their own sociocultural setting to people who are like them, then that is an absolutely correct concept. The problem is when this idea is applied across the board to everything, including cross-cultural evangelism. It can become a barrier to our own involvement and sense of responsibility. It is quite possible for us to be equipping group A to reach their own people, and never deal with the stereotypes, racism, hatred, and misunderstanding that keep them from seeing group B, who reside within the borders of their own nation state, as being those who Christ loves and died for and in need of the gospel message. Once you truly cross a cultural boundary you are no longer “national” even if it is within your own nation-state. When an American, Korean, Brazilian, Angolan, or Indian crosses a cultural

boundary to proclaim the Christ the advantages derived from being “national” and thus a near-neighbor witness disappears for all of them. Thus apostolic function does not mean that we alone do the proclamation of the Gospel, but that we also work as catalyzing agents to help Christians in one setting “see” the others who are around them who are different than them and have not heard the message of Christ. It means that we as cross-cultural workers should be grabbing the hands of local believers and taking them with us as we seek out those who do not have near-neighbor witness. The concept of the nationals doing it better cannot be used to justify our own inertia in reaching the least-reached simply because when it comes to crossing cultural boundaries, most of the time they are not doing that type of work.

Apostolic Function is a Heuristic that Defines for us What, Why, and How We Work

There is a natural objection that flows from my first two points. By suggesting a narrow definition of missions as being cross-cultural evangelism, and going a step farther to assert that such evangelism should be based in the Pauline sense of going where Christ is not known, I have suddenly problematized the labors of cross-cultural workers who are not directly involved in such activity and who work in indigenous church movements. This is an issue that needs to be answered clearly and carefully.

Let me begin by saying that I believe the extremely difficult and complex work of proclaiming the Gospel, gathering disciples into churches, and training leadership so that an indigenous church movement can be formed where one did not previously exist is a work that demands all the gifts in the body. The body metaphor used by Paul in I Corinthians

12:12-26 is just as true in a cross-cultural setting as it is inside of one's own culture. Paul concludes that section in 12:27-31 by asking rhetorically, "Are all apostles?" with the answer being of course no! So what is my argument then about apostolic function if not everyone has the same gifts and functions in the body of Christ? I have advocated an understanding of the missionary task that is tight, narrow, and focused on cross-cultural evangelism where the church does not exist. I now want to root that view of cross-cultural evangelism in an apparently contradictory omnibus concept of cross-cultural worker activity. I will argue here that apostolic function serves as a heuristic for individual cross-cultural workers, and as the ethos for the apostolic band or team of workers that sees itself performing the Pauline task of missiological breakthrough whether by doing it themselves, doing it in conjunction with a national church movement, or envisioning and equipping a national church movement to do it on their own.

Let me back up and review some ideas to set the stage for my arguments here. I noted above that beginning in the 1970s and particularly since the 1980s to the present the phenomenal growth of the national churches we work with has meant that our cross-cultural workers have increasingly come to see themselves and are seen by our constituents as serving the national church in some capacity. There has been a concomitant move from generalist-type work to more specialist-type functions, particularly as these national churches have grown and become more fully indigenous. I want to suggest here that specialist workers tend to have a different ethos from generalist pioneers who adapt to meet the need in a context where the church is being birthed or nurtured in its early stages. This is not bad, nor does it call into question their sincerity or commitment to the work they do,

but it is a much different ethos than our founders or people like Brother Hogan had about what a missionary should be and do.

Listen to his response to the debate in the early 1960s about whether to split the terminology and call “fraternal workers” those going to work with already existing church movements, reserving the term missionary for those going to plant the Gospel among the non-Christian peoples of the world:

Today, in some ecclesiastical circles, ... The missionary that is needed now, they say, is really a worker in some technical or pedagogical skills; and, really a helper to the indigenous church. Instead of being called a “missionary,” he is called a “fraternal worker.” This emphasis would put the Great Commission in storage while the church adopts a kind of “buddy” system, and the real heroes of the Cross are not men who confront heathen religions with the message of Calvary, but specialists who teach contour farming. The Assemblies of God does not believe this!

While the 1963 proposal to make a distinction between fraternal workers and missionaries was not widely adopted, I think that Brother Hogan would be concerned to see that 40 years later, while still using the terminology of a divine call to missions, increasing numbers of our missionary team do indeed function as fraternal workers to very powerful indigenous churches.

How do we rescue Paul’s, our founder’s and forerunner’s in mission, and Brother Hogan’s view of missionary service in our context today with powerful national churches in existence and many that are in the final stages of becoming so? I want to suggest that apostolic function in the sense I have described it above should become the heuristic for our work. I am using “heuristic” here in the sense of an interpretive rubric for helping us to understand what we do, why we do it, and how we operate. I see a number of advantages in this. First, it recognizes that not all are apostles and that there are a variety of different

callings that are critical to the functioning of the body of Christ. It affirms the giftings and callings that people have, does not force everyone into the same mold, and yet as a heuristic it shapes the identity of the worker which in turn shapes practice. However it also means that every individual cross-cultural worker owns the apostolic vision of making sure the Gospel is preached where it is not heard. When this kind of spiritual DNA gets inside of people the “what” may continue to be the same—printing, media, teacher training, Bible school teaching, curriculum development, children’s ministry, training youth leaders—but the “why” is radically altered as the worker sees their role as bringing the believers, local churches, and the entire national church movement they are working with and among to embrace the vision of reaching not only every person in their sociocultural setting but of taking the Gospel to places where it has never been. This also changes the “how” in our work because it puts each worker in the catalytic role of making sure that cross-cultural evangelism does happen among the least-reached as all their efforts are bent in this direction and with this ultimate goal. Stirring up apostolic function does not mean redeploying already existing cross-cultural workers but rather bending their expertise, giftings, and passion so that a church movement in all of its parts can be mobilized for both evangelism in its sociocultural setting and cross-cultural evangelism. Thus apostolic function can best be expressed through a missionary fellowship that has multiple giftings that are all committed to either bringing about an initial breakthrough if it is needed, challenging and modeling a national church to step out in such work, or teaching and training so that the national church can send their own cross-cultural workers. In the sense that I am using it, apostolic function requires that individual cross-cultural workers and missionary

fellowships are guided in their work by a “big picture” vision of how what they are doing relates to the overall scheme of seeing missiological breakthrough among the least-reached of our world.

Apostolic function leads us to address the imbalance of missionary placement in the world.

In my previous point I argued the apostolic function as a heuristic helps us to focus the work of already existing cross-cultural workers. Here I want to suggest that stirring up apostolic function at the agency level means addressing the imbalance that exists in terms of where cross-cultural workers are located in the world. This is not done by moving around those already serving, but believing God for a new generation of harvest workers to go where church movements do not exist. It is inherent in Paul’s vision of what being an apostle meant that there were priorities for him to go where the Gospel had not yet been rooted. His statements about going where Christ is not known (Romans 15:20), there being no more work for him in the region (Romans 15:23), and going to the regions beyond so as not to build on another’s foundation (II Corinthians 10:16-17) absolutely do not mean that everyone was already a Christian in these places. There still remained much work to be done by local congregations; there were many not yet “reached” with the Gospel and who were lost. Paul does not deny this but rather asserts that his apostolic calling means that he must go to places with no witness at all.

The database of the world’s least-reached people groups is increasingly clear and cries out as an indictment against the Christian world as to why we collectively in the body of Christ worldwide have been so slow to bring the message of the Gospel to these groups.

Some would argue that it is not the Pentecostal way to rely on data to determine what we do, that we must listen to the Spirit. Others have decried the call to go to the least-reached as managerial missiology. While there have indeed been excesses and much that is unwise and short-sighted propagated in the name of reaching the least-reached, we as Pentecostals need to tread carefully lest our assertion of being led by the Spirit does not end up to be mere rhetoric in the face of all the places we have manifestly not gone. It is inconceivable that the Holy Spirit, who loves all people and is not willing that any should perish, would not be calling laborer into the harvest fields of the least-reached. The imbalance in the world today reflects more our inability to hear, and our hardness of heart, than God the Father, Son, and Spirit overlooking millions of people who have no one in their sociocultural setting to tell them the story of salvation.

Listen to Brother Hogan again:

In time and resources, we have come a long way from Hot Springs and 1914. Nevertheless, we are united with our forefathers in our commitment to evangelize the world. There is something terribly wrong with the imbalance of preaching the gospel a thousand times to gospel-hardened sinners who have heard and rejected it again and again while one-third of the population of this planet is still without a single witness. My prayer is that the urgency to fulfill the Great Commission that fired the souls of those Pentecostals in 1914 will burn just as brightly within us...that the gospel may be preached where Christ is not known.

May God help us to link a fresh Pentecost in the lives of 50-plus million Assemblies of God Christians around the world with the Pauline insight of going where the church is not yet rooted. I cannot help but think that people like Paul and Brother Hogan would bristle at the thought of funneling the bulk of precious new personnel and financial resources to places where we have manifestly succeeded in our missions efforts.

Apostolic Function Means Teaching, Modeling and Practicing Care for the Weak.

It is interesting that the intense debate found among Christians who believe in the authority of Scripture regarding the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility was not problematic for either Jesus or Paul. You cannot pick up a book on missions without having to deal with the issue of evangelism and social action. McGee notes that:

Missionaries and church leaders have long struggled with the tension between preaching the gospel and establishing charitable ministries (schools, orphanages, and hospitals) overseas. Should the missionary focus on saving souls or saving lives? Can one be done without “lionizing” the importance of the other?

People of good will and firm commitment to Scripture come down on very different sides of the issue and sometimes the debate becomes rather acrimonious.

It seems much different to me when we come to Jesus and Paul. Both of them noticeably lack the compartmentalization and dichotomistic thinking that in my mind so readily characterizes both sides in the debate. It is never a case of either/or, of one before the other. I want to suggest that the concern in our movement about the erosion of evangelism in the face of taking care of physical needs grows out of our penchant for constructing institutional answers, seeing money as a single-vector answer, and our corresponding neglect of relationships with the poor. As one writer put it so memorably, when it is a case of family, you never would even think about choosing between evangelism and social action.

If you unpack that a bit, it becomes clear that the all the necessity for maintaining a distinction in order to make sure that the Gospel is preached disappears when the total

context is an ongoing relationship. In a relationship you do not have to make choices because you are there face-to-face over time and there is no fear that either caring or proclamation will be diminished, nor does one have to “set-up” the other. The relationship provides the context for the interpretation of any given deed. Where there is relationship there is the ability to explain the “why” of the deed, or for the deed to illuminate the proclaimed word. Listen to Paul again in Acts 20:34-35:

You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Paul’s concern for the Jerusalem poor (Galatians 2:10), his work on collecting an offering for them (I Corinthians 16:1-4), his concern that widows be cared for by the local church (I Timothy 5:3-16), and his admonition to help the weak (asthenes—the same word as in the Acts passage which can refer to economic weakness and poverty in both contexts) shows that he did not conduct himself in an either/or fashion. The experience of being reconciled to God, and living as a community under the rule of God, meant that these things were the natural expressions and implications worked out in human relationships of the message that he preached. The predication of an ongoing relationship makes the temporal relations of preaching and caring a moot point because in a relationship viewed as a whole you can be doing both all of the time, even though chronologically there are moments where you are proclaiming and moments where you are helping people.

Having said that, I want to follow by making a seemingly contradictory point. We need to listen very carefully when people like Brother Hogan and Melvin Hodges warn of

the pitfalls that come when there is a long-term focus on social improvement rather than the planting of indigenous church movements. Here again I think one of the underlying assumptions that makes their points much clearer is to see them related to a time horizon and institutionalism. A humanitarian institution can be started by its founders for excellent reasons and with a holistic ethos for presenting the Gospel and working it out in social relationships. However, as is well known, institutions can take on a life of their own and within a short time after the founder is gone begin to pursue an agenda that is far different than the original purpose and vision that led to its inception.

Where do we go from here? How do we chart a course and maintain apostolic function and apostolic balance in the Pauline fashion where proclamation and caring are lived out? I want to propose an incomplete and sketchy outline of how to bring about an integration of our values to show compassion in Jesus name with our other three core values of evangelizing, planting churches, and training leaders.

First, let the prayer Jesus taught us be not only our prayer but our motivating passion and guiding principle in pursuing our work. We rarely unpack the implications of the first three imperatives of the Lord's Prayer in our prayer lives or our conduct. In part I think this is because "hallowed be your name" is not a common phrase used in English. This is an imperative that means "let your name be considered holy." Here is the concern that humans be reconciled to God, count his name holy, and bow their knee to him. But this is followed by two more imperatives to let the rule of God come and his will be done, that heaven might invade earth. This revolutionary prayer brilliantly weaves together Jesus' concern for all aspects of the human condition. Apostolic function means that in whatever

setting we find ourselves we are going to work for the hallowing of his name and the coming of his rule and will.

This leads naturally to a second point, the critical importance of local churches as the instruments of the Kingdom. Listen to Brother Hogan again:

If the missionary enterprise is to be instrumental in transmitting the life of the Spirit, an essential and everlasting aspect of this task must be the establishment of the church. If the New Testament teaches us any one thing, it teaches that the life of Christ must be taught and transmitted through the witness of the Church of the Living Christ.

The relief of suffering and aid to the impoverished are normal fruits of Christian love. The early church undertook the responsibility of feeding its own poor and supporting the widows and the unemployed who were not able to care for themselves. The material effect, however, were never the chief motive—they were only an important by-product of the greatest task of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

I think that what some of our leaders in the past were intimating in their writings in an age when we were doing pioneer work and helping struggling emerging national church movements has now become a reality. That is the doctrine implied in the indigenous church principle that the expression of compassion and the incarnating of Jesus in sociocultural settings should ultimately flow from the indigenous church. The aphorism “nationals can do things better” needs to be applied to humanitarian concerns as well.

Now I am not discounting partnership (our concept of indigeneity has never stopped us from working in evangelism and discipleship with other national churches), nor institutional or programmatic approaches entirely, but think for a moment of the power of 50-plus million people and over 280,000 churches worldwide being ignited to work individually and collectively to turn ourselves to caring for our own and our neighbors who

are the weak, poor, widows, aged, exploited, those suffering from HIV/AIDS, drought, famine, victims of war and violence.

Emphasizing the role of the local church leads to my final point: that as a missions agency we need to remain wary of institutionalism and a naïve view that simply throwing money from the West at the complex problems of poverty fulfills our duty and will solve the problem. Drive-by compassion, just as with drive-by evangelism, is a truncated version of the real thing, treating people as objects and imposing answers to problems generated from an outside perspective rather than from the perspective of the people purportedly being served. Johan Mostert told me at lunch one day that it is a nightmare financially and logistically to hire three eight-hour shifts of people to care for children. A loving family, or foster family can care for children 24 hours a day and do it joyfully, more effectively, and efficiently. There are inherent limitations to what institutions can do. I believe that it is an apostolic function to mobilize and catalyze the body of Christ whether it is in its early stages of existence or whether it is a powerful and numerically large movement to have an explosion of love and compassion so that as Jesus' hands and feet we can bring God's rule and will to the worlds of the poor and hurting.

There are many different types of Christian agencies in the world, and they all have different purposes and objectives according to their sense of calling. Some are devoted solely to evangelistic concerns; others are dedicated to transforming social settings. But in some cases there are agencies that by their very nature, in practice, if not in explicit philosophy, "do it all." Our four pillars—reach, plant, train, and touch—commit us to "doing it all," but as a mission agency and not a local church or national church movement.

As a missions agency with an apostolic calling, which is the way we have conceived of ourselves from the beginning, preaching the Gospel and caring for the weak flows out of who we are. Both are activities that must be led by the Spirit, and I would argue, need to evince a flexibility and mobility in a strategic sense. Where you start may not be where you want to finish. Because our goal is to plant church movements we need to infect those movements with the same apostolic vision that we have—to reach, plant, train, and touch. Institutional and programmatic functions that grow out of the vision and initiative and concern of local churches (and partnering with the worldwide body of Christ as well) are of a completely different nature than similar functions that are founded by the mission and must be sustained by the mission virtually without an end in sight.

We have done and are doing today wonderful and incredible work meeting physical needs around the world through individual missionaries, local churches, institutions, programs, and national church movements. Keeping in focus the first three imperatives of the Lord's Prayer, emphasizing the role of the local church, and keeping a light hold on expatriate-driven institutions while moving to partner with national church-initiated social action will keep us firmly rooted in apostolic function that includes proclamation and caring.

Apostolic Function Means Staying a Long Time

My previous point on caring for the weak leads me naturally to a final point. Paul said in Romans 1:5 that his apostolic calling involved bringing the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. Jesus told us not to make converts but disciples, and to teach them to

obey all that he commanded us. Cross-cultural evangelism is incredibly complex, and what the Pauline example implies is that it takes a long time. In Paul's context he moved about planting churches within the Mediterranean world where there was a common language and the presence of both Jews and God-fearers who became the first converts. Today, when we go to peoples that require us to learn new and complex languages with deeply-entrenched religious systems, who have no background in a biblical worldview, planting an indigenous national church movement can be hard labor over decades.

Listen to Brother Hogan in the early 1970s:

Today we can get all the prospective missionaries we want who say, "I want to touch my toe in the water to see if I like it." This gospel was not planted in 91 countries of the world by people like that. It was presented, prayed over, plowed under by people who burned their bridges behind them and went to lands afar when it wasn't nearly as easy as it is today to tell men of the love of Jesus Christ.

Somebody has said, "Well, Brother Hogan, you've got all this mass communication. Isn't it a push-button war now?" No, it is not! We need men who will go, identify themselves with the culture, learn the language, turn their back on Americana, and stay long enough to birth by prayer the church of Jesus Christ in these lands.

We don't need people who just want to make a little sortie into another land so they can come back and be called international evangelists. We need people who will travel light and pray lots and preach for the little and preach for the big and stay long enough to tell the dark world the gospel of Jesus. Give us men who are willing to distribute to the masses." (74).

Clearly Brother Hogan was of the opinion that cross-cultural work is both demanding and requires a lifetime commitment.

Brother Hogan had a saying, "Find the soft spot, and pour on the resources." One of the themes of our missiology is being open to where the Spirit is bringing in the harvest, and these are the "soft spots" in our world where the Holy Spirit is breaking through

spiritual darkness. We can never forget that a truly indigenous church movement is a very robust concept. The apostolic function of developing a church movement that is obedient to Christ, incarnates Jesus in their world, is white hot with passion to reach everyone within their cultural sphere, and comes full cycle to do cross-cultural evangelism to those who have not heard outside of their own sociocultural setting, demands time, people and resources. It is not simply the work of an individual but embraces the catalytic function that an entire mission team has with all of its gifts being purposefully and intentionally expressed to achieve these New Testament goals.

In the “flow of the game” apostolic function means that we do many things all at the same time, and we are in different stages in different places depending on the circumstances of that setting. There is no one right way, or one singular cross-cultural worker role. It demands that we be led by the Holy Spirit to know when a national church is indigenous, when to move on to areas where the church does not exist, when to shift the emphasis of our work to keep ourselves on the cutting edge of apostolic ministry as Paul conceived of it.

Concluding thoughts

My guess is that most of our current career mission staff and the people who are now coming to our agency as candidates do not “feel” very apostolic. I have tried to argue here that in order to be true to Scripture, the original vision of our founders, the early generations of our missionaries, and the missiological reality of large numbers of ethnolinguistic groups where the church does not exist, we must stir up among ourselves the sense of apostolic function.

Apostolic function has nothing to do with authority and everything to do with the pursuit of the apostolic goals of preaching the gospel where it has not yet been heard, to plant the church where the potential for near-neighbor witness does not exist, and to care for the weak and hurting. It has nothing to do with position, rank, and titles, and everything to do with a catalytic and mobilizing function to waken those believers that exist in a given setting, or to win the first wave of believers; it is about team, and about seeing the big picture to know how every gift in the body works to bring the church to its highest potential in Christ; it is about teaching and modeling care for the weak, stirring the release of the body of Christ to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their worlds, and challenging all forms of self-absorption and prejudice that keep us from reaching out to those who are different from us.

I believe that stirring up the sense of the apostolic function of cross-cultural workers is needed for this time that we live in. Our growth around the world means that we are now one Assemblies of God mission agency among many, and the number of new agencies is growing rapidly. We as the Assemblies of God USA get a chance to position ourselves for how we will respond to the next few decades of the 21st century should the Lord delay his return. I began this address by suggesting that we are at a crossroads in our understanding of missions. The winds of current trends are blowing around us and require that we choose what kind of missions we will do and the kind of missionaries we will be. Mission as project, missio-tourism, the increasing amateurization of mission, larger churches by-passing the agency to do their own work so they can be “hands on” and get more “bang for their buck”, practices that increase dependency on the finances of the West,

quick fix answers, globalizing one-size-fits-all strategies, money-based compassion, with all of this happening primarily where the church already exists while the unreached and least-reached are neglected, is all a part of the global missions scene today.

Recommitting ourselves to the apostolic function of every cross-cultural worker pounds down a stake in the midst of the winds of trendiness and anchors us to practices that led to 50-plus million worldwide adherents and will ensure that we will stay at the cutting edge of what God is doing and longing to do in our world rather than settling for more manageable and marketable activities among the church world, turning the fire of Pentecost into the fizzle of a series of memorable mission experiences.

At the end of the day the measure of apostolic function is not going to be so much about what we are actually doing—the kind of work we are engaged in—because that will vary as the gifts in the body vary. It is more about what we cry over. I have observed in my 30 years as a Pentecostal that we love to celebrate and cheer victories. And we have a lot to cheer about these days. But I think that we need to cry more. In 1914 when we started there were very few things to cheer about. Those early Pentecostal pioneers were a despised and misunderstood minority who dreamt of conducting the greatest evangelization the world would ever see, and they were burdened by the Spirit for a world that was in spiritual darkness. I think that it was harder to cheer and easier to cry then. Now that we have many victories to cheer about, I think we need to remember to take time to cry over things ... like entire people groups without a near-neighbor witness, people living in our world today in sociocultural systems where they will never meet a relevant witness in their lifetime, for those who struggle to survive in grinding poverty and are victims of war, exploitation, and

violence.

Some of us have an easier time at finding our apostolic function and weeping because we are right in the middle of a host of lost people. I have had the wonderful privilege of spending the majority of my adult life in a predominantly Buddhist country with a small Christian movement, working together with a group of people that if you met us on the street, you would find most ordinary. My friends and colleagues of the Thailand Assemblies of God Missionary Fellowship do a variety of things, wear lots of hats, and have spiritual giftings that run right across the board. Some of my most precious memories are listening to them cry during times of prayer, and crying with them. These dear friends as individuals and a collectivity are living out apostolic function. We do not have to use our imaginations to conjure up people who are not only not believers but who have extremely limited potential to hear of Christ—we run into them on a regular basis. We know their names, and we pray that our efforts, that often feel so feeble to us, will be taken by the Spirit and used to introduce people to the living God and his Son Jesus Christ. I work among the urban poor who are Muslims and Buddhists, who live in slums where for the most part the small church that exists does not venture. When I close my eyes I can see their faces and their eyes, and it is not hard to cry.

But we are a people of the Spirit. I trust the Holy Spirit to stir our minds and spirits even when we are far from the least-reached. I trust that the Holy Spirit will indeed burden our hearts for these we have never met, and put his burden—for not just the lost, but the lost who have no access to the saving message—upon our hearts.

May the Spirit who gave passion and boldness to tell the story of Jesus to the early

church, to our founders in 1914, and to the waves of our early missionaries, the fruit of whose hard labor we now stand upon, work in our hearts to be consumed by a desire to see his name hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done.