

# Assemblies of God World Missions (USA) and the Challenge of Majority World Missions\*

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In 1968 David Kensinger, missionary to Costa Rica, challenged his North American colleagues arguing that to fully plant a New Testament church following the indigenous principles, the ultimate objective had to be to plant a national church which was a missionary sending church.<sup>1</sup> His clarion call needs to be heard once again. In the past two decades, missions vision and commitment in the national churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America has grown but their potential has yet to be fully realized. Unfortunately, many Assemblies of God World Missions (USA) (hereafter AGWM) missionaries ignore their missions mobilization responsibility. Only a few are actively fomenting and supporting missions development. It is imperative that we, as Assemblies of God missionaries, serve not only as model missionaries, but that we commit in concrete ways to mobilize the global church to its missionary mandate. This brief essay affirms the missionary mandate, identifies barriers to missions mobilization, suggests areas of cooperation for AGWM missionaries, and notes significant trends related to majority world missions in the Latin American context.

## The Mandate

Most of us would be aghast if someone declared that only citizens of the United States are qualified and responsible for the missionary mandate. Yet, often our actions or the lack thereof, speak louder than our words. The responsibility of reaching the world applies to every

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believer, including the millions of Assemblies of God believers of the majority world. We must affirm this biblical truth in our preaching, teaching and priorities in missionary service. If we preach passionately of the priority of missions in our year of deputation, how is it that we can go four years without preaching missions? Could it be that our deputational preaching and presentations serve as means to our own ends? The spiritual vitality of the church depends not on the external manifestations of what some call revival but in true revival where each member of the body of Christ has had such a powerful encounter with Jesus that his passion becomes their passion, that all, from every nation, might come to know him. The missiological principles of the three “selves” were never intended to produce a “self”ish, inward looking church but an empowered church, led by the Spirit, sustained by the Spirit, and thrust into the world by the Spirit. A healthy church looks upward in worship and service to God, inward by mutual edification in love, and outward in communicating the gospel to the world through sacrifice and commitment. Is this the church that we seek to establish as missionaries?

### The Barriers

Admittedly, every one of us is, to some degree, ethnocentric, but is our missionary ethnocentrism hampering the development of missions in the various contexts in which will serve? Do we truly believe that our national colleagues can be called to be missionaries and that our national churches can actually select, train and support them? In my conversations with Latin American missions mobilizers and missionaries, while they recognize and applaud the positive contribution of North American missionaries, they concede that their relationships with some North American missionaries have been sources of emotional stress and obstacles to ministry. Somehow, we communicated that to be a “real” missionary, one has to have a U.S. passport or at least have plenty of dollars. Brother Hodges used to say, “The missionary must believe that what God has done in his/her life, he can do in the lives of those with whom they work.” If God can call a North Dakota boy to be a missionary, he certainly can call a Salvadoran, a Nigerian, a Thai or an Uzbek.

Or perhaps it is not ethnocentrism but “ministry-centrism” (i.e. “it’s not my area, my ministry, I have too much to do.”) Yet, how can we call ourselves missionaries and not do everything we can to make missions happen in the context in which we live and work?

Missionaries should be the first to commit time, energy and resources to missions. Not every missionary is called to be a full-time missions mobilizer and missionary trainer, but every missionary should contribute.

Missions mobilization is not a priority on our missionary agenda. By way of illustration, missions mobilization and missionary training are not recognized as missionary ministry options in most missionary surveys or events. As AGWM missionaries we must repent of our missionary ethnocentrism, our ministry-centrism, and say, “Lord, what can I do to make your highest priority my priority in the ministry to which you have called me?”

#### Areas of Cooperation for AGWM Missionaries and Majority World Missions

##### Missions Mobilization and Promotion:

When given opportunity, preach and teach missions and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Give altar calls believing God is going to call missionaries, missions mobilizers, and missions supporters. Our responsibility is to prepare the way; it is the Spirit who will do the work. Every promotional activity should inspire, educate and move to concrete expressions of commitment. The majority world church “can do” missions in the power of the Spirit.

##### Missions Education and Missionary Training:

We can facilitate missionary formation in many ways and at various levels. Our local churches need to be educated in their responsibility to become missions training centers in which every member can participate in the missionary task. Every new church plant should be a missionary church from its inception. Pastors, missions leadership, missions promoters, and national executives need formation in missiology, missionary administration, and in the selection, formation, and supervision of missionaries. Latin American missionaries need exposure to an entire gamut of spiritual formation, leadership, missiology (missions philosophy, theology, and strategy), cross-cultural communication, inter-personal relationships etc. AGWM missionaries are often not only the most academically qualified but more importantly, their teaching is modeled practically and experientially. A word to those involved in Bible school ministry: Bible schools should be centers of missions education, training both the missionary and those who send. Every course taught should be a “missionary” course.

### Missionary Logistics and Technical Support:

Organization is sorely lacking in the majority of our countries both at the local and national level. We can facilitate the development of contextual models for the selection, training, and sending of missionaries. Practical items such as: how to set up a missions agency, how to have a missions convention in the local church, how to write newsletters and build a relational support base, how to organize a short-term missions trip, how to network with other AG missionaries, how to get visas and support to the field etc. Please, let us not just replicate our U.S. model or create a paternalistic missions program dependent on the U.S. missionary, but let us encourage by humbly offering and sharing our passion, our experience, and our resources.

### Trends in Latin America

1. Increasing numbers of missionaries are being sent out from majority world nations. In Spanish speaking Latin America in 1994 there were 60 appointed missionaries, 1996 - 140, in 2000 - 305, in 2002 - 334 serving in 53 countries, in 2005 - 656 in 59, and in 2012 – 1060 missionaries in 83 nations of the world. The question is: will our national churches create the structures, networks, training opportunities and the support-base necessary to send out the called or will the called, seek out and serve other agencies?
2. Increasing numbers of local churches are sending and supporting missionaries, but the majority of potential is still unrealized (e.g. in El Salvador church participation has increased from 0.1% in 1987 to over 70% in 2012, but the majority of countries have less than 10% of the churches that participate in missions sending. In Guatemala and Peru there are over 600 churches for every missionary appointed.) The transition from emotional assent to concrete commitment is slow requiring continual promotional and educational activities.
3. Increasing numbers of national churches are developing sending agencies and structures. All of the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America (except for Cuba) have an AG agency/department, but most find themselves in the early development

stages with no missionaries or just one or two and a national leadership of limited missionary experience. The majority of AG agencies in Latin America and the Caribbean have yet to reach critical mass.

4. Increasing numbers of nations are participating in a global network of Assemblies of God missionaries and agencies. Missions in the majority world is more relationally based than conceptual.
5. Increasing numbers of Latin Americans, especially young people, are participating in short-term missions activities.
6. Increasing levels of cooperation must develop between AGWM missionaries and other AG missionaries. We must learn how to effectively serve with Latin American and other majority world missionaries under the authority of national leadership.

Finally, I am convinced that the future of missions lies in missionaries being sent from the churches of every nation to the peoples of every nation. The majority world, the emerging cultures will do missions with or without us, but their effectiveness and ours will increase exponentially as we partner together in the power of the Spirit. We will reach the world with the good news of Jesus Christ; he promised it.

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<sup>1</sup> Kensinger, David. "Integrating National Missions into Our World Evangelization Program." Unpublished Address to Assemblies of God Missionaries. Springfield, MO: AGWM Archives, 1968.