

To Advance from “Talking” to “Walking:” Recognizing the Reality of the New Sending Countries

Brad Walz*

It was a few years ago, I was in a conference with a recognized regional leader. In talking about the importance of his region taking practical steps to result in the sending of missionaries, he made an important observation: “It is time for our region to stop talking about it, and start doing it. We have spent enough time doing just that...talking about it.”

His observation was welcome, and his honesty appreciated. Yet it would be debatable if that region has crossed over into that which he talked about: to start doing it. And my premise is that it is this problem that plagues the nations of the so called “Global South,” of which the vast majority have done far more talking than doing, especially when it comes to practical responses in sending cross-cultural missionaries and workers to the least reached parts of our world.

I remember the dream we had for what was called “third world missions,” when I was at Fuller Theological Seminary in the mid 1980’s. The only book I could find on the subject at that time was Lawrence Keyes’, *The Last Age of Missions: A Study of Third World Missionary Societies*.¹ In such a short time since then, it is obvious that the growth in what is now referred to as missions from the “Global South,” has been real and is changing the face of missions, the way we do it, and the future of it.

Beginning in the 1990’s, I began to notice many undocumented assertions that “there are now more missionaries sent out by the new senders than the traditional West.” Here is an example from *Christianity Today* article from March 1, 2006:

* Brad Walz has served in Argentina 24 years. He is director of foreign missions for the Argentine Misioneros Department (Assemblies of God), leader of the Assemblies of God Latin America missions network, and chairman of the Missions Commission for the World Assemblies of God Fellowship. His travels have taken him to 100 countries. He and his wife Rhonda reside in Buenos Aires. They have two adult children.

But more than that, mission scholars agree that Koreans are a potent vanguard for an emerging missionary movement that is about to eclipse centuries of Western-dominated Protestant missions. They call it the "majority-world" mission movement. They say this new term—"majority world"—is necessary to replace the aging terms "third world" and "developing world." The radical change in Protestant missions is forcing scholars and missionaries to create new ways of talking about the global scene.²

There is no doubt that the new senders are re-writing the history books of missions. However, I would like to challenge the assumptions that the full reality of this majority world sending is already here today. I also want to appeal to the new senders and potential new senders to make the transition from "talk to walk"; truly the world will be better for it. We need the fresh energy, passion, vision, and commitment of the growing churches in the Global South.

We also need their "numbers." The sheer task of the least reached nations requires a response from more than just the traditional sending Western nations. We also need the prayer involvement of that part of the world. People will pray and intercede for that which they are involved with. If a country is not sending workers out from their midst, their prayer focus most likely is ingrown and focused only on their own nation. What I want to do in the remainder of this article is to bring to bear some statistical data that shows majority world sending is not as robust as the reporting would seem to indicate.

Some statistics from the Assemblies of God

Let me start with Latin America. Consider the Latin churches are some of the strongest ones within the WAGF, and as a bloc, possibly the strongest in the world. That is, in every Spanish speaking country with maybe one exception, the Assemblies of God (A/G) is a strong force within that nation's evangelical community, and in most cases it would be considered the largest evangelical body within that nation. Yet from the 20 Spanish speaking countries, there are fewer than 500 documented missionaries sent out by their countries to other ones. These are from 20 of the larger, stronger, Assemblies of God national churches in the world. If you take away the three largest senders, that number is reduced to just over 200 workers.

The largest body, Brazil, though there is no doubt many missionaries are being sent from that large A/G church, lacks a central office that can provide reliable statistics. At one point in private conversations their leader at that time observed they knew of 2,000 missionaries being sent to 17 nations. Yet 250 of those were documented as having been sent to Argentina. The vast majority of those 250 would not be missionaries as we define them, but lay workers that were living and working in a neighboring country. It would be impossible to come up with a realistic number at this time, but surely the number 2,000 doesn't reflect actual sent and supported cross-cultural workers.

Definitional differences make it impossible to come up with an accurate figure.

In one Asian country that has talked about sending out 850 workers, in a private conversation with one of their leaders in 2009, he acknowledged, "Most of that number are pastors who have gone to other countries and are pastoring churches of our language and culture. They aren't cross cultural workers. Possibly we have 110 cross cultural and supported workers." The lack of hard data makes it difficult to have an accurate survey. But a few years ago, in 2007-2008, our committee secretary did just that, and in responses from national churches from all around the world, the numbers we came up with for a "Report on Sending by the National Churches of the WAGF," (Aug. 2008) were the following:

Sent out by European and North American traditional sending nations: 4,264
Sent out by "new senders" in the Global South: 1,073
Undocumented (General numbers without a data base) from Global South: 4,481
Total: 9,818

If you include the undocumented numbers, the new senders have surpassed the traditional ones. But many of those undocumented "workers" are not "missionaries" in the strict sense. In this undocumented category are people out doing short-term missions activities, or not working among another culture/language, or a local church has counted every immigrant that has gone to other countries for secular work as a "missionary." The problem is anyone can throw out any number they want, and without there being some

kind of standardized way to define "missionary" and thus get an accurate count, we are comparing apples and oranges. These kinds of numbers without substance do not help the cause of world evangelization.

The problem of defining what is a "missionary."

I want to acknowledge that there are many different kinds of cross-cultural ministry experiences people that have value in Kingdom work, while at the same time are not "missionary" in the New Testament sense of the apostolic task of planting the church among societies without the Good News. In saying they are not a missionary in this classic sense, I in no way want to take away from the value they do bring or denigrate the sincerity and commitment of those who are laboring in this way. I do want to illustrate some of the complexity that arises when all of these activities are labeled as "missionary".

My first example is the short-term worker sent out for less than a year to another country. They may be a blessing, but are not necessarily a "cross-cultural missionary." It takes time to learn a language and culture. I have seen teams sent out even for two years from one Asian nation to Argentina. They were frustrated and limited in their ministry, because of depending on a translator. They were not going to learn the language for just two years.

Next, there are pastors working among the people of their own culture in another nation. This is fulfilling a great need, and they are certainly sacrificing in many ways in raising children in another culture and not living in their own land. But when they do not learn the language of that nation, as is often the case, and do not minister to the people of that nation, is that person a "missionary?" Some would say yes, others would say no.

I recognize that immigrants can be used by God as "natural missionaries," and their numbers might not be included in many statistics. But if they are leaving the country for work reasons and because of problems in their own nation, and are not sent and supported, does that make them a "missionary?" And should they be counted in statistics we then use and counted as missionaries?

These are some of the problems in coming up with data that would give us a realistic snapshot of the world missions response of newly sending nations. But beyond that, the major problems faced are not those of definitions: it is of going from “talking to walking”; From theory to “doing.”

Obstacles in the Latin Nations

Our Latin network has been functioning formally since 1998, and informally going back to the late 80's. We have hard data for the statistics of the Spanish speaking part. For example, in 2009, \$4,203,973.13 was given through the missions departments of those 20 nations. But the two greatest obstacles we have found in having effective and strong sending structures has been that of having the right and experienced leadership, and confronting a poverty mentality which still strangles so many churches.

The poverty mentality is still frightening. There was and is great resistance to missions vision by the many pastors who view missions as a threat and something that will take income and funds away from their local church and for their use in expanding the ministries and vision they have for their community. And if this is a problem in most of the nations where we have had sending structures, networks, and support systems for over 20 years, how much more might this be a reality in other regions that are just getting started?

The first interdenominational missions congress was held in 1987 in Brazil, and COMIBAM (*Cooperación Misionera Ibero American*) was formed. Our first Assembly of God formal event was held in 2000. We have had them every year since except for 2002, and they are well attended and with good representation from most of the nations. There is a history in Latin America of 10-20 years of missions formation, teaching, networking, and events. Yet the poverty mentality is still strong. In one country, which is one of the strongest general councils we have in the world, the giving for foreign missions is just 44 cents a church per month. Notice, this is 44 cents *per church* per month, not per person. This is a reality in many of our national churches around the world. If this is the reality of a Latin church which has been challenged both inter-denominationally and denominationally for over 20 years, what is the reality in Africa,

Eastern Europe, and even parts of Asia which in many cases have even less time of engagement in the challenge of "we can do this too!"

But the bigger problem we face is not having the right leadership. In country after country, not having the right leader has been an impediment to a structure, which many young people and a few of the missions minded pastors yearn for. And obviously, a challenge in a church with no missions experience is to have leadership that can guide the church towards having their first missions experiences. In country after country, the right leadership would speed up the process and growth required for an effective missions sending structure.

A Nike theology for the new senders.

A region of the world that has had many missions seminars in recent years, talking about the need to send, recently invited me to participate in a consultation on Pentecost and world missions. They requested a 25 page paper. In part of the response, I talked about the need for what I call a "Nike Theology" for that region. Nike's slogan is "Just Do It!" It is time for many of our countries to stop talking about it, and "just do it." I believe the emerging church in the "Global South" has the potential to not just send more missionaries than the traditional West, but many times more. If the Global South has about 90% of the Christians in the Assemblies of God, shouldn't they potentially be able to send 90% of the missionaries? And even if economics does play a reality, for them to send out 4-5 times as many missionaries as the traditional West is no doubt a realistic possibility. But it requires a practical response: missions can't be something just "talked about." There has to be a specific, concrete response, through sending, people preparing to be sent, and offerings to send them.

And to simply say, "The Global South is now sending more missionaries than the west," without any figures or statistics to back it up, only does a disservice in our not recognizing that the Global South has a major challenge in responding in practical ways to that which the Holy Spirit is stirring in their midst. If a national church and a region can't even provide a census of which countries have missions departments or sending structures, of how many missionaries are sent out from that region, or how much is given

in missionary offerings from the churches, then even less so will there most likely be effective sending structures, resulting in the numbers that we all desire to come out of a concrete response from the “Global South.” In our experience of trying to gather information in recent years, only Latin America has been able to provide basic information, and that would be speaking of the Spanish Speaking countries. The largest church in that region, Brazil, has not been able to provide it. Some of the regions could not even provide the information of which countries have some type of sending structure, or even a sending structure in the process of formation.

The challenge to the western senders

The challenge to a “Just Do It!” NIKE response to Assemblies of God majority world churches is also a challenge for those strong sending bodies from the West. In our experience in the recent past, in Latin America there have only been 5-7 AGWM USA missionaries, at different times that have helped the receiving countries in developing a missions program. In countries that have requested help, we have tired of looking for it among Western missionaries, and began to ask our stronger Latin missions departments if they can respond in sending someone to focus on that need. Argentina has sent out people to several nations with that focus, and most recently Venezuela has sent someone to Peru to help them in developing their missions program.

In Africa, there is not one person to our knowledge dedicated full-time with this focus. In Asia Pacific, I don’t know of anyone with this focus. The same is true of Eastern Europe. If God can use Western missionaries in pioneer areas, surely there is no more pioneer task in a country with a strong national church, than that of helping in developing a strong missions sending structure, and of course the foundational vision that needs to go with it.

Many counties are begging for help. Others that are not begging, are open to help if offered. In the past we have been able to help place strategic persons in countries that were not asking for help, but realized they needed it, and accepted the offer when given. I can only hope that in the future more Western missionaries will have this burden and

focus. What a strategic opportunity it is to help prepare the pioneer and first generation of newly sent workers from the "Global South."

The "NIKE" theology isn't only needed for the national churches of the global south. It is needed in our Western workers working among them. And it is time that Western missionaries stop celebrating the fact that "there are no more of them than us," and realize we need to work and contribute to making that a reality. In the future there will be many more workers sent from the Global South than the traditional West. But many changes will have to take place for those new senders to have serious, competent, and mature sending structures. May we all be part of that change...the strong national churches and the Pentecostal missionaries who work among them.

¹ Lawrence Keyes, *The Last Age of Missions: A Study of Third World Missionary Societies*. Forward by C. Peter Wagner. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1983.

² Rob Moll, "Missions Incredible." *Christianity Today*, 50 #3 (March 1 2006): 30.