

Articles

An Airplane View and Current “Snapshot” of WAGF Missions

Brad Walz*

Abstract

Brad Walz shares insights into 160 General Councils of World Assemblies of God Fellowship (WAGF) involvement. Walz is uniquely qualified to write this article as the founding chairman of the WAGF Missions Commission as part of his 37 years of involvement in developing sending agencies in Latin America and beyond. The article is based on extensive surveys conducted with all 160-member national churches in 2013, 2018, and 2022 concerning missionary involvement.

Walz gives a realistic analysis concerning the national churches missionary programs and provides suggestions for further development. He concludes the article with a postscript article by David Kensinger, Integrating National Missions into our World Evangelization Program, originally written about 1968.

Introduction

Since most of you fly a lot, we all understand the perspective of looking out of the airplane window, and seeing a “big perspective,” rather than just a short distance from the ground. At the same time, the word “snapshot” reminds us that things are constantly changing. You get the right person, the right leader, and the right circumstances, and things can be totally different just a year or two later. It is truly a hope that in a few short years the reality might be quite different from today.

The World Assemblies of God Fellowship (known as WAGF as in the title) officially formed their Missions Commission in 2009. I have had the privilege of being the founding chairman. Before that we worked both in Argentina to develop their Foreign Missions program,

* Brad Walz, Missionary, Assemblies of God World Missions since 1986; Chairman, World Assemblies of God Fellowship; and President, Latin America Assemblies of God Missions Network.

and in Latin America with their missions network of 22 countries. So, we have a perspective of 37 years of the growth of new sending countries. Though I will draw from those experiences in this article, I want to focus as well on a “big picture” perspective, in a sense an “airplane” view at 40,000 feet.

A final comment before I make some observations, is that we have done three surveys of all 160 General Councils to gauge their missions involvement. We have had 100% participation in two of them, the first and the most recent. We did the first one in 2013, a second in 2018, and the most recent one in 2022. So, all these observations are also based on research from that survey. The 2022 survey has a 26-page report that goes into detail. We have chosen not to put it online, but you can request a copy of it from the author (e-mail contact to request 2022 WAGF Missions survey: bradwalz@fastmail.com). Some of these observations as well I’m taking from that 26-page report. We’ll look at six observations, then seven challenges, and finally there will be a historical exhortation as a “postscript.”

Thirty years ago, they weren’t correct!

I recall in the 1990’s missiologists declared that “the new senders (at that time often referred to as “non-Western missions”), had surpassed the West (I prefer the term “historical senders”), in the number of missionaries sent. (I remember as well that declaration in the 1980’s, when I attended Fuller Seminary School of Missiology. A similar declaration was being made even at that time). Yet, over 30 years after, many missiologists declared that our snapshot of the Assemblies of God, the largest Evangelical body in the world, shows that to have not been true, and just now we are at a “breaking point.” There is no doubt that at some point in the future, should Jesus tarry, the new senders should greatly outnumber the historical ones. That would be healthy and correct, since they represent 92.5% of the church worldwide in our Assemblies of God context. It should be natural and should happen! But how little statistical evidence there was in the 90’s for those exaggerated claims, and how tragic that it has taken so long for much of the 92.5% of the world’s Christians to just be awakening now to the call of God upon them for the world harvest.

There are several reasons for the exaggerations that took place in the 1990’s. To illustrate one of them, let me share from a personal experience in 2018. Taking advantage of being invited to the same missions conference in the country of a new sender, I talked personally with a leader

recognized by many for his impact on world missions. He had stated that a certain country he was associated with was one of the largest senders of missionaries, and used figures surpassing 10,000 missionaries, yet our own experience in that country reflected about 20 foreign missionaries having been sent by the Assemblies of God. Despite being one of the largest churches in that country, and as well an incredible potential to have that number be in the hundreds, there were only a few foreign missionaries. So, I asked him: “Why the discrepancy between the figures you give and the figures we have observed in our denomination, recognized as well to be one of the largest of that country?” He did not want to give details and did not wish to answer the question and was obviously uncomfortable with it. Finally, after continuing to insist, he said that the many construction workers and household domestic help of that country often had been “trained” to have a spiritual impact in the places in the Middle East that they would serve as employees, and that they considered them “spiritual missionaries.” But even in his shallow answer, he realized his “exaggeration” had been exposed. These were not even “tentmakers” by any true standard. They were maids and construction workers who were Christians, who no doubt worshipped with others from their country in international churches and though they are probably praying for the household or colleagues they interact with, they are not “sent missionaries.” He finally admitted: “Well, at least we got the church to have a burden for unreached peoples within their own nation.” Excellent. And I congratulated him on that front. But I also reminded him that the exaggeration of the other figure had brought confusion to many who thought “something was taking place, that in fact was not taking place.” He had no choice but to agree with my observation unfortunately and uncomfortably. Many other illustrations could be found to reflect the same point.

To not invest more time on this issue, I will express that Jason Mandryk of “Operation World” feels our research of our WAGF world is the most accurate and detailed they have come across when it comes to new senders and their date of sending. They face the same problem as the mentioned illustration in gathering solid and credible data of foreign missionaries that have been sent from new senders. Traditional senders tend to have more data to provide. Before closing out this point, the numbers of our 2022 survey were: For foreign workers only, historical senders sent out 4,233 workers, compared to 3,083 for “new senders.” (57.8% of the missionaries sent by historical senders). Adding cross cultural home missionaries changed the dynamic of course, but still at a break-even point. The historical senders sent out 4,323 workers

(home missionaries for the United States was not included) and new senders sent out 4,653 workers. With that number they slipped over the 50% number, with 51.83%.

Most countries are still in a “pioneer stage.”

The reality is that most of the 112 programs in 103 countries are still not sending missionaries, but in a “pioneer stage.” It is wonderful that there are now over 100 countries with a missions leader or department. But the reality is 24 of them (22.2%) have not sent a missionary. Another 30 of them (27.7%) have sent less than 10 missionaries, many of them sending out only one or two missionaries. So, 54, which is 50% of the 108, have sent out none or less than 10 missionaries!

Here is the statistic on how many countries are sending out what range of missionaries:

0 missionaries: 25 countries
1-10 missionaries: 30 countries
10-20 missionaries: 13 countries
20-50 missionaries: 18 countries
50-100 missionaries: 8 countries
100-200 missionaries: 10 countries
200-500 missionaries: 2 countries
500-1,000: 2 countries
1000+: 1 country

Most countries in Latin America have seen a breakthrough in the missions leadership.

In 1987, in an event in Brazil sponsored by Comibam, an interdenominational missions network, the declaration was made: “Latin America is not long just a mission field, but also a mission force.” On an interdenominational basis, Latin America has not had a breakthrough, and one would wonder how 35 years have not shown more fruit. The Assemblies of God show a bright contrast in the Spanish-speaking countries. Most of the “breakthrough” on a massive scale has taken place in the last 10 years, though leadership of Argentina in the 1990’s, and later

in El Salvador, helped to foster a “We can do it!” attitude as opposed to the previous “It can’t be done.” mentality. Many leaders observed, “Argentina is like the engine of a train, pulling the rest of us behind her.” As well, a strong and vibrant Latin America network, which had an official start in 1998, provided networking and mentoring opportunities on almost a yearly basis.

Despite that, in 2013 the leadership of the Latin America missions network opened their hearts to the superintendents at a lunch meeting in Costa Rica. The commission expressed to the leaders present: “We need your help. You are naming leaders that in many cases are not credible, not committed, and the instability of naming a new leader every few years causes us to have to re-boot a process of orientation and mentoring on a cyclical basis, repeating the same basic principles over a 3–4-year period instead of being able to go on to more in-depth issues and themes. Probably half of the countries did not have credible and/or competent leadership. And it reflected in the chaos and instability of their missions sending structures, or alternatively viewed, “lack of them.”

In the last few years, we have seen a breakthrough. In several problematic countries, the superintendent became intentional in not only naming a good leader, but in mentoring them and giving them the space needed to grow and mature. Even just a few months ago, a newly elected superintendent declared, “I’m tired of us not having a missions department that has the trust of our churches and is growing and moving forward.” He intentionally convinced a new leader to take over. Latin America has seen a breakthrough and is going through a good moment. As an example, 5 of the 10 fastest growing countries in numbers of missionaries sent are from Latin America. (And it almost was seven, as a couple of the top ten probably in part made that statistic because they didn’t give correct statistics in the first survey in 2013). Spanish speaking Latin America is sending out 848 foreign missionaries, 148 domestic cross cultural, for a total of 996. But more important than actual numbers are their trajectory. One country alone recently informed me of having almost 30 new candidates to “commission,” their highest number since 1996. Spanish speaking Latin America is going through a wonderful moment of credible leadership and growing programs.

A final note on Brazil: Brazil continues to be a challenging paradox. Though they have more missionaries than any other country, proportionally their numbers are far behind the rest. (As an example, Argentina sends out one missionary for every 10 churches, and Brazil’s number

is one for every three hundred). Brazil, as a distinction from the rest of Latin America does not have a centrally organized missionary sending structure, but rather a “secretary” who coordinates information between the 52 “ministerios.” “Ministerios” can be described as a large mother church with potentially hundreds of smaller churches under their spiritual umbrella. Missions sending is therefore done from a large mother church/affiliate daughter church structure. Brazil potentially could send out over 10,000 missionaries. (They officially have informed of 210 foreign workers and 329 trans-cultural domestic workers, for a total of 539). Still, the biggest challenge Brazil faces is the vast majority of their workers minister in either Portuguese or Spanish. People who speak one of those two languages as their first language are only 11% of the world population. Brazil has the challenge to reach the 89% of the world that do not speak “Latin based languages.” They have done relatively little among Unreached People Groups. They are a “sleeping giant” for Latin America and for the world, should they be able to send both according to their potential and as well with a greater focus on Unreached People Groups.

Praying for continued breakthroughs in Africa and Asia.

We talk about the great potential in Africa and Asia. Yet these same areas can give great resistance. We will look at the need for continued breakthrough in Africa and Asia. Asia: If you take away Korea and some of the stronger economies, Asia’s numbers reflect a pioneer stage. The WAGF Missions Commission do believe that breakthroughs have taken place and Asia will have great growth in the coming years. A network/commission was formed in 2021 and they have made incredible progress. There is a fresh season of growth in Asia Pacific that gives us great anticipation and encouragement for what God will do through churches there. The network formed has great momentum, good leadership, and there is an increase in vision and commitment. I personally am very optimistic about the next years in Asia Pacific.

Southern Asia also has seen some great breakthroughs. Despite being the host of some of the greatest numbers of “Unreached Peoples” in the world, most countries now have a missions dept. The Tamil district of Southern India has sent out 400 workers and gives over a \$600,000 a year to missions. There is a growing missionary vision, and the present leadership shows great promise.

Africa is the area we are most concerned about and are praying for miracles and breakthroughs. In 2009 then AAGA Chairman Lazarus Chakwera (currently the president of

Malawi) declared: “Africa for years has been talking about missions; it is now time stop talking and do it.” Yet, the current “snapshot” of Africa in 2022 is weaker than that of 2009. Instead of moving forward, they have in fact taken a step “backward.” Two strong senders of that time have either entered a “plateau,” or declined rapidly. Some of the strongest churches still have not sent out even a single foreign missionary. As well, half of the countries (17 of 34) have not yet sent a single foreign missionary. A goal made in 2018 by AAGA leadership to impact North Africa still has not seen even one practical response of sending to the North African and Horn of Africa nations. Except for the growth in Ivory Coast, Africa’s survey is one of great concern. We believe that surely the Holy Spirit is moving there in missions and calling people. Assuming we are correct, the problem then is most likely that the correct and right leadership have not emerged in many of the countries to channel what the Holy Spirit is doing into a practical response.

As well, it appears that many of the programs are “institutional” rather than “influential.” (Explanation of “institutional contrasted with influential:” A missions department and leader exist because the constitution says it should, rather than actually doing something to make missions vision and sending a reality and being an “influence” in the country). Many involved in the WAGF Missions Commission, including the Africa Missions Commission, are asking God for a breakthrough in missionary vision and response in Africa. Many of us also believe there is “spiritual warfare” involved with this present cycle of not advancing forward. The enemy knows there are strong churches in Africa. Eight countries have more than a million believers, as an example. The enemy does not want them to become engaged with missionary vision and in the world harvest. Since the African church is large and represents over 18 million believers (25% of the total of WAGF members and adherents) their eventual practical response must be one of the major priorities of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship.

An increased focus on Unreached People Groups

A positive trend of the survey is that there continues to be a focus on intentional targeting of Unreached People Groups. As one person observed: “Being Pentecostals, we will always respect and appreciate the Holy Spirit’s call and burden upon a person’s life. At the same time, we wish to be certain their call is not just motivated by circumstances (a missions trip at a key time of their life, for example), and at least challenge them to pray and consider being part of a team working among UPG’s.” Virtually every country expressed an interest in being more

strategic and focusing more on Unreached People Groups, both now and in the future.

Obviously, the challenge is seeing that expressed in practical ways. It is observed that the newer senders have a higher percentage of their workers among UPG's than the historical ones. Most likely because the historical senders have relationships with many countries that continue to be viable, even though the church has grown.

Generally, the historical older senders had between 20-35% of their workers among UPG's, and the new senders range was higher, at 30-60%. It is also recognized newer senders have less workers so their percentage can more easily be higher.

Areas where workers are laboring.

We were able to again track what percentage of workers are being sent to what type of area. See the general responses in the statistics below. In 2018 Latin America was able to do a detailed census of where Latins were serving. This was not updated in 2022. However, once can see how similar it is to the world average.

Nominal, secular humanistic, Post Christian: 50%	(Latin America: 67%)
Tribal, Animistic: 20%	(Latin America: 15%)
Islamic Peoples: 20%	(Latin America: 10.5%)
Hindu Peoples: 5%	(Latin America: 4.4%)
Buddhist Peoples: 5%	(Latin America: 3.1%)

It is understandable that many potential workers with a burden for Hindu peoples have visa issues that limit them responding in the long term; but it was surprising how few people are working with Buddhist peoples. This has been a blind spot in our world missions focus. Most countries had no workers among Buddhist peoples. (It is interesting that AGWM has a new aggressive focus on Buddhist people groups).

Also, it is recognized that there is a growing need in many countries of secular humanistic, post-Christian peoples.

Seven Challenges for the future

Our report concluded with seven major "challenges" for the future of World Assemblies of God Fellowship missions efforts. As the report observes: "While we rejoice that WAGF

churches are making great strides in missionary vision, sending, and programs, there are many challenges that lie ahead in this strategic eleventh-hour harvest. Really, the challenges are the very similar to those expressed in 2013 and 2018 reports.”

A. Missions vision is needed on a worldwide basis. Without a doubt, missions vision is just starting to be expressed in the vast majority of Global South new emerging senders. It needs to be accelerated by the Holy Spirit!

B. There is a need for strong leadership and a stronger commitment is needed in most of the countries. There is a need for the superintendents to be more engaged and hold the missions leadership to account and do all they can as well to support and accelerate potential growth.

C. There is incredible potential for growth in the number of missionaries in the future. If we sent one missionary for every 10 churches, we would have close to 40,000 missionaries, more than quadrupling the current number!

D. There is also incredible potential in growth in giving in the future. Every church giving \$149 a month on average would result in one billion dollars for missions! Or another way of looking at it: if every believer would give \$1.19 a month!

E. A growing missions vision will not only help the WAGF in reaching future goals, but also be key in reaching the least-reached countries and peoples.

F. It is not that we feel the traditional senders will not continue to bless and impact the world. But 7.5% of the church can't do the task by themselves. The other 92.5% must fulfill their potential!

G. As the WAGF prepares for the challenge of MM33, and to reach one million churches by 2033, it is essential that Africa, Asia, and Latin America raise up to become a part of that harvest response! They must of course plant churches among their own countries. That is part of the growth. But for the WAGF to reach the 50% of the world where the church is small or has very little presence, missions is the key for many of those 630,000 new churches (using 370,000 churches as a base) to be planted! We can't have a true decade of harvest and reach one million churches only working where the church already exists or is strong. The vision must also engage the Unreached People Groups.

Conclusion:

As our name even in the IJPM states, we are Pentecostals. We believe the Holy Spirit is the source of the call, and often is a step ahead of the institutional church. We are reminded that the Holy Spirit began calling Argentines during the revival movement, before the church understood, responded to, or embraced the vision. The Holy Spirit was a step ahead of the church.

We are reminded from scripture that even as the disciples did not understand the true impact of “Go ye into all the world,” and often their early efforts were focused on the Jewish diaspora “spread throughout the geographical world,” but not truly taking the gospel to most of the world’s population: the Gentiles. In fact, God had to raise up a terrorist named Saul, who later became Paul, to take the gospel to the Gentile peoples. So, it is ironic that the original 11 surviving disciples (and recognized as “apostles”), did not in fact fulfill the commission that was given to them of going “unto the ends of the earth,” though their work among the Jewish people and church was pioneering and notable. One could argue that the vision given to Peter in Acts 10 preparing him to minister to Cornelius family, was not to prepare him for future ministry to the Gentile people, but rather that he would be “less of an obstacle” to Paul’s efforts to see a breakthrough in the church being established among the Gentile people.

Therefore, it is also understandable how historical senders did not always understand that in fact the receiving church was not just to reach out to their “Jerusalem and Judea,” but also, they eventually had the call to also go to “Samaria and the ends of the earth.”

I remember growing up in a great missionary church. My pastor would declare “God has raised up America to win the world.” It was motivation and we applauded and responded with commitment. But it wasn’t a biblical truth and it caused us to form a human paradigm rather than a biblical one. We were supposed to be the missionaries. The world received us. With God’s help, we were going to “win the world.” Yet, the truth was (and is) that the Great Commission was for the Church, not just one country. And even then, we were ignoring other historical senders such as Canada, the Nordic giants of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and other historical senders. America was going to win the world, not the worldwide Church.

As missionaries then were sent out by the “historical senders,” it is understandable if some or potentially many of them had a mentality “You reach your country. We’ll reach the

world.” Would anyone have verbally expressed that? Most likely not. But the “worldview” existed and contributed to the resistance all countries of Latin America expressed in the 90’s and early 2000’s and is still a part of the contemporary scene today in many other regions and countries. David Kensinger, a missionary sent out by the United States to Costa Rica, observed this and wrote a penetrating and insightful article that was certainly ahead of its time, sometime in the late 60’s. So impacting is it and at the same time it gives us a “snapshot” of the mentality prevalent at that time, that I’ll include it here as a “postscript.”

We are optimistic for the future. There is a momentum. There are models today that are not just from “historical senders.” There is an understanding in many countries that the “Great Commission is for the Church, not just a handful of Western nations.”

So, as we land the airplane after getting a “airplane view” of WAGF missions, there is that tension: The Holy Spirit must lead us to see missions being a “normal” part of the DNA of dozens of countries, not just a few. Yet just as human vessels did not understand the Great Commission given to them by their own mentor and disciple maker, Jesus, so it should not surprise us that there is also resistance to a full embrace of missionary vision by a large percentage of our 70 million WAGF adherents.

We will continue to seek that tension within that balance depending on the Holy Spirit. We will also continue disciplining and teaching the church that has long considered themselves to only be a “mission field,” that they are also, by the very nature of the character of the Church, a potential “mission force.”

End of author’s article

Postscript: Article/exhortation written by David Kensinger. (Used by his permission, before his passing, which took place in 1998)

Integrating National Missions into our World Evangelization Program

By David Kensinger (Originally written about 1968)

In speaking of “National Missions,” it would first be well for us to clarify what we mean by “missions.” The basic pattern of missions is found in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:14-16. He first states that all who call on the Lord shall be saved. He then sets forth the classic reasoning for missions: “How shall they call on Him in who they have not believed? And

how shall they believe on Him of whom they have not heard?’ He then defines what constitutes missions: “How shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall they preach except they be sent.”

Ever since the era of modern missions began some two hundred years or more ago with William Carey, these two basic concepts have been followed—those who have consecrated their lives to go and those who have consecrated their giving to send. All of us who are gathered here are testimony to this fact. Our nearly one thousand missionaries (currently in 2000, 1,800) and great missionary enterprise scattered around the world testify not only to the fact that there were not only those who were willing to go, but also to those who were willing to send.

Our purpose, then, in speaking to you on the subject of national missions is to emphasize the fact that this biblical pattern for the evangelization of the world is not the prerogative or responsibility of one certain segment of the Christian church located in the U.S., and a few scattered countries of Europe, but that *EVERY CHRISTIAN in EVERY CHURCH throughout the world is EQUALLY OBLIGATED to spread the gospel to the entire world either by going or by giving.*

National missions is not a mere program to be set up in the framework of the national church to facilitate evangelization in outlying areas. National missions is the AWAKENING IN EVERY INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN HIS SPIRITUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN REACHING THE LOST, NOT ONLY BY TESTIFYING OR PREACHING TO THOSE AROUND HIM WHOM HE IS ABLE TO REACH PERSONALLY, BUT ALSO TO FULFILL HIS RESPONSIBILITY OF REACHING THE ENTIRE WORLD BY SENDING THE GOSPEL WITH HIS MISSIONARY OFFERINGS TO THOSE PLACES IN THE WORLD WHICH HE CANNOT REACH PERSONALLY.

I would like to call our attention to the fact that when the Assemblies of God was born at the beginning of the century in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, missions was woven into the very fabric of our movement. The pattern set forth in Acts 1:8 became the pattern of our existence. “Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Even before the Assemblies of God was organized in 1914, there were those pioneer missionaries newly filled with the Spirit burning with a vision to go to those regions beyond where God had called them. Immediately upon the organization of our movement a

Foreign Missions Dept. was formed, and affiliated churches and individual Christians in our ranks began sending in their missionary offerings for the fare and support of those whom God had called to the foreign field. This pattern of giving and sending has continued in our movement throughout the years. Today ours is one of the foremost missionary movements in the world. The statistics recently published in Key magazine on our total missionary enterprise this past year thrills our souls. 969 active appointed missionaries (1,814 in 2000) working in 82 countries (162 in 2000) around the globe. 17,683 churches and preaching points on foreign soil (200,467 in 2000) with 13,612 national pastors and lay workers (79,732 in 2000) and a total of over two and a half million saved, born again Christians. (32,002,437 in 2000). All this is being accomplished through the missionary offerings of 7,355 of our U.S. churches (11,937 in 1999) who last year contributed a total of \$8,765,133.20 to foreign missions (about 150 million in 1999). We humbly thank God for every soul that has been born into the kingdom of God through this great effort.

But we are faced with the fact that with all we have been able to do in winning these millions to Christ, on the basis of an approximate three billion world population (6 billion in 2000) we have only reached about one of every twelve hundred people on the earth today. And we are further faced with the fact that the population growth is much faster than the increase in converts, so that we are losing ground. Clearly there is a phase in which we as Assemblies of God together with existing missionary bodies have failed in meeting the demand for the total evangelization of the world. *It is my conviction that much of this failure is because we have failed to carry the concept of the individual spiritual responsibility of EVERY Christian participation of missions to our converts on the foreign field.*

I have been amazed and somewhat saddened by the fact that though during our past furloughs here at home I have preached hundreds of so called missionary messages to our people here in our churches in the U.S. encouraging them to give for missions, it was not until the beginning of this last term on the field that I preached those same messages to our Costa Rican Christian encouraging them to also give of their missionary offerings to send the Gospel to the whole world. And as yet in all my twenty-eight years of service on the foreign field, I have yet heard any other missionary preach a missionary message with the purpose of encouraging Christians on the foreign field towards missionary giving. And I ask myself “Why?”

We believe in missions. It has been a part of our teaching and heritage ever since we came into the Assemblies of God. We as missionaries are products of missions. We have also had the privilege of giving missionary offerings with the satisfaction that in so doing we were also reaching other lost souls by sending the message of life to those we could not reach personally. *Then why should we withhold this equal opportunity and blessing from our Christians on the foreign field by failing to teach and preach to them and encourage them in their missionary giving to a lost world?*