Missiological Reflections

Multiplying Indigenous Churches in Rural America

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Introduction

As a retired Assemblies of God missionary to Africa, I have long believed in and practiced the proven strategy of planting Spirit-empowered indigenous churches. The principle of indigeneity comes from the world of horticulture. An indigenous plant grows naturally in its own native environment. It needs no outside assistance. While non-native plants require

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He has written nineteen books: Teaching in the Spirit (1995), Power Ministry: How to Minister in the Spirit's Power (1998), From Azusa to Africa to the Nations (2005), Empowered for Global Mission (2005), Acts: The Spirit of God in Mission (2007), In Step with the Spirit: Studies in the Spirit-filled Walk (2008), The Kingdom and the Power: The Kingdom of God: A Pentecostal Interpretation (2009), Teaching in the Spirit (2009), Experiencing the Spirit: A Study of the Work of the Spirit in the Life of the Believer (2009), You Can Minister in the Spirit's Power (2009), Proclaiming Pentecost: 100 Sermon Outlines on the Power of the Holy Spirit (co-editor, 2011); The 1:8 Promise of Jesus (2012), Missionary Tongues Revisited (2014), Walking with the Apostles: 45 Days in the Book of Acts (2016), The New Testament Strategy of the Spirit (2017), Proclaiming Christ to the Nations: 100 Sermon Outlines on Spirit-Empowered Mission (2017), Interceding for the Nations: 100 Sermon Outlines on Missional Prayer (2018); How to Live for God: A Guide for New Christians (2018), and Mobilizing for Missions (2019).

The second book, Power Ministry, has been translated into seven languages and is used in Bible schools throughout Africa and in parts of Europe. He also wrote Paradigms for Pentecostal Missions: Graduate Study Guide. In addition, Dr. Miller has written for the Pentecostal Evangel and Advance magazines. His books have been published in several languages including Spanish, French, Portuguese, Romanian, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Chichewa, Moore, and others.

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extraordinary means to nurture them and keep them alive, an indigenous plant needs no such assistance. It naturally blooms, matures, and reproduces on its own. A Spirit-empowered indigenous church is a church that emphasizes the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of its members and practices the biblical principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation.

This was the strategy followed by the apostle Paul in the book of Acts. When he entered new territory, he preached the gospel with power, gathered converts into churches, raised up workers from the native soil, ensured that they were filled with the Spirit, trained them, deployed them, and moved on to the next place. Each time, he left behind a Spirit-empowered church that could support itself, govern itself, and extend the gospel throughout the region. In doing this, Paul was following the pattern first set by Jesus.

Worldwide Success

Adherence to these indigenous church planting principles has played a significant role in the growth of the Assemblies of God worldwide. In just over a century, the AG mission has grown from a few underfunded missionaries serving in a handful of countries to a small army of 2,699 world missionaries serving in 153 countries. Globally, the movement reports 56 million adherents meeting in 432,000 local churches. Missions scholars have attempted to explain the movement's success, citing cultural and sociological factors. Insiders, however, attribute the movement's success to the grace of God and to its strong commitment to Pentecostal experience and practice and a relentless application of indigenous church principles.

In addition to the above figures, AGWM reports 159,242 ministerial students presently being trained in 2,929 Assemblies of God Bible schools. With the typical student completing his or her training in two to four years, this means that, on average, Assemblies of God schools are graduating more than 50,000 students each year—or about one-half million new Pentecostal ministers each decade. This is a powerful reality. And yet, this is not the most significant dynamic contributing to the growth of the Assemblies of God worldwide.

The most significant dynamic occurs in the tens of thousands of local assemblies around the world who supply our Bible schools with fresh ministerial candidates. It is in these churches, large and small, urban and rural, that prospective Pentecostal ministers are being saved, filled with the Spirit, and challenged to pursue God's mission. It is in these churches that they first

sense a call into ministry and are directed to the Bible schools for further training. Healthy, Spirit-empowered local churches are the key to the future success of the movement. This is true around the world. It is also true in our American AG churches.

Reaching Rural America

Reaching rural America will require the multiplication of Spirit-empowered indigenous churches in thousands of small towns and communities across the nation. And this multiplication of churches will require the proliferation of a new breed of indigenous church planters. These new church planters will not fall from the sky. And it is unlikely—except in rare cases— that they will spring from our urban churches. They will emerge primarily from our rural churches across the nation. It was after observing people in the "towns and villages" of rural Galilee, that Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mark 9:37-38).

This is where our present rural pastors come into the picture. Only they can initiate the process. Without focused, Spirit-directed, missions-minded rural pastors, nothing else will follow. They are the match that must light the fuse. And their churches are the seedbed from which new church planters must sprout. To fulfill the vision of reaching rural America, every rural pastor must see his or her church as a missions mobilization station.

Thus, when we plant churches, we cannot plant just any kind of churches. We must intentionally plant Spirit-empowered indigenous churches. To do this we must purposely raise up an army of well-trained, Spirit-empowered indigenous church planters. In our Bible schools in Africa, we teach our pastors to view themselves not only as a pastor caring for a single flock of people but as a missionary-pastor tasked with reaching an entire region with the gospel. I recall one student coming to me with a wide smile on his face. "My teacher," he said, "my leaders have made me a presbyter." "That's great," I replied, "how many churches are in your section?" "Just mine," he answered, "they told me to plant my own section."

Getting Started

In the remainder of this article, I will suggest a strategy for getting this process started. In my years of collaboration with leaders, missionaries, and church planters across Africa, I have

observed four qualities exhibited by those pastors and churches who consistently produce new Spirit-empowered ministers and church planters:

1. Consistent teaching and preaching on the mission of God. Those pastors and churches who consistently raise up Spirit-empowered ministers and church planters possess and propagate a clear understanding of God's mission and the Church's role in fulfilling that mission. God's mission, sometimes referred to as the *missio Dei,* is His intention to redeem and call to himself a people out of every nation, tongue, and tribe on earth (Rev. 5:9; 7:9). Jesus summed up that mission in His Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:20-21; Acts 1:8). God now petitions His people to join Him in fulfilling His mission. If we hope for church planters to arise out of our congregations, we must consistently teach God's people about God's mission and guide them in finding their place in fulfilling that mission.

2. A strong emphasis on Spirit baptism. Second, those pastors and churches who consistently produce Spirit-empowered ministers and church planters rightly regard the baptism in the Holy Spirit as an essential missionally empowering experience (Acts 1:8). Because of this, they preach and teach often on the subject, and they regularly pray with their people to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They then trust the Spirit to work in the lives of their people, convicting, calling, and emboldening them for service. The words of the late AG missiologist, Melvin Hodges, are especially applicable: "To be successful in indigenous church ministry, missionaries [church planters] must do more that teach and initiate believers in right methods. They must also initiate believers into the realm of the Holy Spirit's workings. New Testament methods coupled with New Testament power is the answer to present-day problems on the mission field" (*The Indigenous Church and the Indigenous Church and the Missionary,* Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2009, 127).

3. Modeling evangelism and church planting. Further, those pastors and churches who consistently produce church planters and other missional leaders are themselves winning souls to Christ and planting other Spirit-empowered missionary churches. In other words, church planters typically rise out of churches that are led by pastors who are themselves reaching out to the lost and planting new churches. These missional pastors then invite others to join them in the mission. If we expect to raise up indigenous church planters across rural America, we must ourselves become church planters. And we must invite others to join us in the venture. Further,

we must ensure that the churches we plant are themselves Spirit-empowered indigenous churches led by Spirit-empowered missional leaders. And so it goes.

4. Facilitating the call of God. Finally, those pastors who effectively raise up other Spirit-empowered ministers and church planters speak often on the call of God, and they provide their people with opportunities to respond to that call. Then, when individuals do respond, these pastors invest time and energy in guiding and nurturing them in fulfilling God's call on their lives. Following the example of Jesus, they spend much time with them inviting them to join them in ministry (Mark 3:14; Luke 8:1, Luke 9:1-2). And when God leads them to go to Bible school to seek further training, the church stands behind them with their prayers, encouragement, and financial support.

At the heart of planting indigenous churches is confidence in the Spirit of God. The Pentecostal pastor can be confident in the people, no matter how commonplace and unsophisticated they may seem, because he or she believes that the same Spirit who indwells, empowers, and equips them, will indwell, empower, and equip others.