Assemblies of God Missionary Philosophy

The Indigenous Church

To attain a pervasive Christian witness in the world, the Assemblies of God seeks to establish indigenous churches wherever its missionaries serve. Studying this monograph should help you define the word "indigenous" and understand its meaning as used by missionaries to describe national churches. You will learn three characteristics of indigenous churches and understand the implications of each characteristic to missionary work.

The concept of indigenous churches was conceived in response to the strong paternalism of many Western missionaries in the early 19th century, especially in Asia. Many early converts were totally dependent on missionaries, but were loyal to the church only so long as they received free food; hence, they were dubbed “rice Christians.” In return, missionaries expected complete loyalty and submission to their control. The system tended to foster unhealthy dependency between the missionaries and nationals.

In reaction to the dependency model, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, 19th century contemporaries, pioneered the principles of modern indigenous church missions theory. They identified three main principles: self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Both believed the church in a region should be built from the bottom upward. Only when there were enough ministers and churches supported by their own people, should a bishop be appointed as the climax of the development process.

John Nevius, a 19th century Presbyterian missionary to China devised similar strategy but placed heavy responsibility on involved laymen. He advocated leaving converts in their business or employment and usual place in society while voluntarily engaging in evangelism and Christian activities. He published his concept in 1886 in a book, “The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches.” He called for simple flexible church government. While his brethren in China did not immediately adopt his system, missionaries in Korea did so with amazing success.

Melvin Hodges, an Assemblies of God missionary to Nicaragua, again popularized the idea in the 1950s in his book, “On the Mission Field - The Indigenous Church.” He believed the church should share the life of the country where it exists, and dependence on foreign money resulted in paternalistic patterns leading to unhealthy weak national churches. He emphasized the need for flexibility and shaping the principle to fit the local situation. Although Hodges did not originate the three-self formula, he adapted it to fit modern missions and made a huge philosophical contribution to Pentecostal missions.

Jesus placed high value on the Church. Although the Christian life is intensely personal, it is not individualistic. Jesus came to save sinners, but also to build His Church (Matt. 16:18), communities of His followers placed among every people group on earth. He expected these communities to reach out cross-culturally to others to share the good news of salvation with them. The ultimate goal of evangelism is to call out a people for God. The Church is God’s agent for evangelizing the world. Individual converts are to identify with other believers, to be incorporated into the life, witness, and fellowship of a local caring community of believers. The call to identify with these new communities of Christ was both universal and local in specific places. It includes all God’s people everywhere in all time. The church represents God’s Kingdom until the end of the age.
Assemblies of God pioneers recognized that evangelism without discipleship, and a full orbed church experience was ineffective, comparable to parents bringing infants to birth but neglecting subsequent nurture and care. The Assemblies of God is committed to being a church-planting mission. The goal of our missionary outreach is to evangelize the lost and to plant local churches in every field of labor. “We desire to establish in the country of our labors a strong church patterned after the New Testament example,” Melvin Hodges wrote.

New Testament churches are indigenous churches. Literally the word “indigenous” mean “up from the soil of…” It suggests a plant is native to its environment. This does not necessarily mean “original,” or that the plant has always grown in the location; but it has so well adapted to the location that it is fully at home in the environment. Indigenous churches have been planted in various cultural locations around the world; but have so well adapted to their cultural context that they are comfortably at home in their setting. This means, on the one hand, that churches in various locations will reflect the culture in which they are established. An African church will differ from a Japanese church. On the other hand, this means that believers in various places do not have to reject their own cultural context and embrace another that is foreign to their setting. Certain fundamental concepts must always be maintained wherever the church is planted, but other concerns are important in one location but not in another.

The Assemblies of God uses the term indigenous churches in a specialized way to mean churches that reflect three primary characteristics: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Churches which reflect these characteristics are independent, not dependent. Missionaries should train churches to be responsible for their own affairs. By way of illustration, a building should not be supported by the scaffolding the builders use in constructing the building. Missionaries from the sending church may be compared to the scaffolding, and the national church to the building under construction.

Self-Governing: Indigenous churches are self-governing. This means they are led, pastored, and supervised by persons who are raised up by the Holy Spirit from the converts in the locality. A national ministry to serve the national churches means there must be a means of educating and training clergy persons from within the culture. Hence, Assemblies of God missionaries frequently establish Bible schools in the fields they serve. Bible school administration and teaching are considered front line missionary ministry. Eventually the management and instructional functions of these Bible schools should be turned over to national leadership. In places where higher educational opportunities are not readily available, it may take a long time to put ministerial education totally in national hands.

Various cultures around the world organize groups in different ways. And people rise to leadership in different ways. In some cultures mature age is valued, so the oldest, most mature person will inevitably lead the group. Western cultures choose leaders by democratic processes, but people who live where other processes of choosing leaders are common often struggle with the electoral process. Self-governing churches will be organized along the lines most frequent in their culture context.

Self-propagating: Indigenous churches possess sufficient vitality that they can reproduce and extend throughout a region by their own efforts without foreign help. Generally speaking, indigenous evangelists are more effective at evangelism and church planting within their own people. They understand their own culture, know the kinds of approaches that appeal to the people, and understand the decision making process of their own people. In some countries, the national church organization requires new candidates for ministerial credentials to plant a church in an unreached area before qualifying for ministerial recognition. Because of this, Bible school education often includes very practical learning-by-doing experiences, such as Christian service assignments, internships, and mentoring relationships.

Self-supporting: Indigenous churches support their own ministry and activities. They are not dependent on foreign sources of money to pay the expenses of their churches. National pastors receive
their pay or living allowance from the tithes and offerings given by their local congregation rather than from the missions organization in the United States.

Some people have asked, “How can a church in a poor third-world country be expected to finance its own ministries?” This question goes deep. It is to ask, “Is God the source of supply for national churches in poor area or just for churches in more affluent settings?” It is essential that from the beginning national Christians be taught to trust God to supply their every need.

Churches in third-world countries can finance themselves by adopting local standards for pastor’s income, buildings, transportation, etc. All Christians should be taught to tithe. Even the poorest people owe God ten-percent of their income. He promises to bless those who are obedient and faithful to His commands. The tithe can be given in either money or kind—ten percent of the crops harvested, of the chickens raised, or whatever crops are raised.

An indigenous local church can support its pastor at the average income level of the community if ten wage earners tithe. Ten persons tithing their income provides enough money that the pastor can live on the level of the average of the congregation. With more than ten tithers, other expenses of the ministry can be paid too.

Land for building church facilities can be very expensive especially in the large cities of the world. Likewise, building a church facility can be very costly. Many years could pass before a congregation in these cities could save up enough money to purchase land on which to build, to say nothing of the cost of putting up an adequate respectable facility to meet their ministry needs. Assisting in such situations need not create dependency if the local congregation is challenged to do as much as they possibly can and to trust God to supply the rest. Funds from abroad may be an answer to their prayers.

**Conclusion:** The Assemblies of God missionary philosophy is to establish indigenous churches in each field of labor. These churches will govern their own affairs, continue the outreach to its own people and to the ends of the earth, and support its own activities.

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