

## **Beyond the Great Divide: How Innovative Ministry Methods Brought the Gospel to the Pacific Northwest with Applications for Missional Ministry Today**

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### **Introduction**

Believe it or not, a common item of tableware used every single day was once thought to be a “tool of the devil.”

Following years of heated debate, during the seventeenth century people in England began using the fork. The clergy protested it as a sacrilege, in that it provided a substitute for God-given fingers and was traditionally (not biblically) associated with the devil. If the devil used the pitchfork to cast people into the fires of hell, why would any Christian person want to use it as an implement for eating? Despite the protest, the usefulness of the fork eventually overcame superstition and won it a permanent place at the table.<sup>1</sup>

While one may laugh about equating dinnerware with the work of the devil, the great challenge for the church in the twenty-first century lies in its ability to emotionally separate tradition and personal perceptions of tradition from biblical Christianity. How well one navigates that challenge may well determine the success of evangelistic efforts in the emerging culture. Today’s pioneering ministries give birth to innovative strategies that bridge the great divide between the traditional church and postmodern culture.

In many respects, the early American pioneers crossing the Great Divide in Conestoga wagons provide a suitable

metaphor for modern pioneers mapping a bridge for moving churches from where they are to where their future lies. In the process, churches must carefully evaluate and examine traditions to determine if they provide a stepping stone to the future or a stumbling block preventing forward momentum.

### **Pioneers**

“Crossing the Great Divide” explained the goal of early pioneers during the height of the western wagon train migration in the United States during the 1840s-1860s. Many historians believe the famous admonition attributed to publisher Horace Greeley, “Go west, young man,” fueled the national frenzy of western movement. When coupled with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, espoused by many Americans to invoke God’s providential blessing on the concept of expanding America’s borders, many people undertook the journey with a sense of Divine sanction upon their journey.

Early adopters of these themes included Protestant missionaries like Marcus and Narcissa Whitman who came to the Pacific Northwest in 1836 and set up a mission station near Walla Walla, Washington. A letter dated June 1834 sent to the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions in Boston indicates Whitman’s missional perspective and intentions:

I regard the Missionary cause as based upon the Atonement, and the commands and promises of the Lord Jesus Christ to his Ambassadors and Church. I regard the Heathen as not having retained the knowledge of the true God and as perishing as described by St. Paul. I esteem it the duty of every Christian to seek the advancement of the cause of Christ more truly than they are wont to their own favorite objects. I am ready to go to any field of usefulness at the direction of the A. Board. I will cooperate as Physician, Teacher or Agriculturalist so far as I may be able, if required. I wish soon to have definite course. Yours in Christian fellowship, Marcus Whitman.<sup>2</sup>

Not long thereafter, Marcus Whitman married. Although trained as a teacher in physics and chemistry, Narcissa Whitman's original application for traveling west as a missionary was turned down because she was single. She challenged the conventional wisdom of the day by starting the journey westward with her new husband on the day following their New York wedding on February 18, 1836.

Prior to their arrival in the Oregon Territory, people thought that white women were unable to endure the rigors of crossing the Rocky Mountains. As the first two women to do so, Narcissa Whitman and fellow missionary, Eliza Spalding, proved the possibility of females enduring the rigors of such travel, dispelling the notion that women were too weak for the journey. In so doing, they paved the way for multitudes of American pioneer women who braved rivers, mountains, isolation, and miles of

desolate topography to reach their version of "the promised land."

Whitman, a farmer and physician, used his agricultural and medical skills as tools for reaching the indigenous peoples whose culture was far removed from his civilized New York upbringing. Marcus farmed and provided medical care, while Narcissa set up a school for the Native American children. Together, they established the first Protestant missions outpost and church in the Oregon Territory of the Pacific Northwest. Their innovative ministry strategies required a break from the established New England paradigms of church life previously accepted as the norm.

The Whitmans labored mightily to make their mission a success. Marcus held church services, practiced medicine, and constructed numerous buildings. Narcissa ran their household, assisted in the church ministry, and taught in the mission school. At first the couple was optimistic and seemed almost thrilled by the challenges their new life posed; Narcissa wrote home, "We never had greater encouragement about the Indians than at the present time." This optimism soon faded, however. The Whitmans' two-year-old daughter drowned in 1839, Narcissa's eyesight gradually failed almost to the point of blindness, and their isolation dragged on year after year. Above all, the Cayuse continued to be unreceptive to their preaching of the gospel.

Perhaps one reason for their resistance was the Whitmans' reluctance to offer the gospel message in terms familiar to the Cayuse, or to accommodate themselves even partially to Cayuse cultural practices. Gift-giving was essential to Cayuse social and political life, yet the Whitman's viewed the practice as a form of extortion. For the Cayuse, religion and domestic life were closely entwined, yet Narcissa reacted with scorn when they

suggested a worship service within the Whitman household. Even a sympathetic biographer admits that “her attitude toward those among whom she lived came to verge on outright repugnance.”<sup>3</sup>

The Indians’ suspicions gave way to rage in late 1847, when an epidemic of measles struck nearby whites and Cayuse alike. Although they ministered to both, most of the white children lived while about half of the Cayuse, including nearly all their children, died. On November 29, 1847, several Cayuse, under the leadership of the chief Tiloukaikt, took revenge for what they perceived as treachery. They killed fourteen whites, including the Whitman family, and burnt down the mission buildings.<sup>4</sup>

Marcus and Narcissa Whitman broke new ground in frontier missions. While they did many things wrong, they also did many things right. Their efforts helped pave the way for other people who would come to do the mission of the church and build congregations across the Pacific Northwest.

### **Early Pentecostals**

The Assemblies of God actively engaged in missions in the Pacific Northwest since the beginning of the twentieth century. Accounts tell of Pentecostal Churches started in Everett, Seattle, Lynden, Olympia, Spokane, Portland, Salem, Eugene, Lewiston, and Boise (among other places) during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Northwest Ministry Network (commonly known as a “district” in the Assemblies of God), comprised of the states of Washington and the northern panhandle of Idaho, was officially organized in 1919. In 1977, former Northwest Ministry Network Superintendent, Frank N. McAllister, wrote:

Going back to 1919, when the Northwest District Council of the

Assemblies of God was set in order, our founding fathers stated that the prerogatives of the district “shall be to: (1) promote the evangelization of the Northwest District, our country, and the world by all scriptural means; (2) set for a basis of Christian fellowship and provide counsel and cooperation among those of like precious faith; (3) establish and develop assemblies in the fellowship in accordance with New Testament standards and principles.”<sup>5</sup>

The Oregon Ministry Network was originally part of the Northwest Ministry Network and became a separate network in 1937. The Southern Idaho District was also originally part of the Northwest Ministry Network and organized as a separate district in 1943. Throughout the twentieth century, the Assemblies of God expanded in influence throughout environs in the Pacific Northwest. The early focus of the Assemblies of God was on rural towns, and many such communities existed in the Pacific Northwest.

### **Current Realities: Demographics**

Currently, more than twelve million residents<sup>6</sup> live in the Pacific Northwest, encompassing the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. A recent Gallup survey reports about 32 percent of the people in the Pacific Northwest attend church weekly or almost weekly,<sup>7</sup> compared to 42 percent nationally.<sup>8</sup> Another source states that, “Those who identify with no religion are in the majority in some Northwestern states, including Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.”<sup>9</sup> This distills into roughly 3.85 million people in our region who have a church affiliation while more than 8 million not affiliated with any church.

This represents a mission field larger than the population of London. Surely these unreached millions in the Pacific Northwest deserve a clear presentation of the gospel in language understandable to them within their own cultural context.

Economic realities and demographics of the region have changed significantly since the inception of Assemblies of God missions work in the early twentieth century—moving from a largely rural population base to urban environments. While early church planting efforts centered in rural towns, many of these communities are now struggling for viability with emerging populations of young people moving to urban or suburban areas out of economic necessity. This has resulted in the decline of these many of these communities with resulting impact on the rural churches.

### **Changing Paradigms**

Yesterday, people would say, “That’s my bank on the corner of First and Main, and directly across from it is First Baptist Church, where we have been members since we moved here thirty years ago. The college is up on the hill, our hospital is about a half-mile to the west, and our doctor has his office in that building over there.”

Today, a new generation says, “That’s my bank, but I’ve never been there. I do my banking online or at the supermarket branch where we buy groceries. I seldom use cash, and have no use for a land line telephone. We’re members of Northside Community Church. We have one congregation but three meeting places. We go to the one near our house. The old college on the hill is now a university. That is their main campus, but our kids go to the north side campus. We’re members of an HMO that has doctors in five locations; we go to a branch about a mile from where we live. I’ve never been in the

main hospital except to visit a couple of friends.”

These examples illustrate the direction our world is advancing—institutions are growing larger and smaller simultaneously, blending the strength and influence that comes with size with the comfort and convenience of smaller, closer venues.<sup>10</sup>

### **Implications for Missional Ministry**

People in the Pacific Northwest tend to be more independent and skeptical of institutions. Perhaps this is due in part to the pioneer nature of many early settlers who were forced to be self-reliant. Even within recent generations, the Pacific Northwest has experienced mass immigrations. Migration from other areas represented 56 percent of the growth in Washington State over the past decade.<sup>11</sup> Immigrants often leave behind family and traditions, including any particular church affiliation. Recent immigrants from other nations present entirely different opportunities and challenges for missionary activity.

Missionaries and church planters in the twenty-first century cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes the Whitmans made more than 175 years ago. Although missionaries and church planters are not in danger of being murdered for their efforts, unless church leaders contextualize their ministry to the native culture, they are not likely to succeed in the mission.

### **Successful Business Models: Pacific Northwest Influence**

Boeing, Weyerhaeuser, Ore-Ida, Simplot, Boise Cascade, Micron Technologies, Costco, Nike, Intel, and Nordstrom are just a few of the corporate giants with roots in the Pacific Northwest. Products from these companies find their way across the United States and around the world. While some

decry the application of business methods to the church, is it possible that the church could learn some lessons from these successful Pacific Northwest Corporations?

Starbucks began with a single location serving coffee at Seattle Pike Place Market in 1971 and currently has more than 16,500 locations worldwide with 2009 net profits approaching \$10 billion.<sup>12</sup> Part of the reason for Starbucks' phenomenal success and global appeal is due to their mission statement and guiding principles: "Our mission: to inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time."<sup>13</sup> The spiritual aspect of their mission reflects an important component with application to the church.

Ideas and innovations have become the most important resource, replacing land, energy, and raw materials. At the heart of this information revolution has been another Pacific Northwest corporate giant, Microsoft. The technological innovations of a few people in the Pacific Northwest more than thirty years ago have led to changes felt around the world—strategically impacting the daily lives of most people on planet earth.

### **Outward Vision and the Main Thing**

How will the Assemblies of God respond to the urgent need to reach the unchurched masses in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere? The changing cultural landscape has created new environments demanding new strategies to reach people for Jesus Christ. This is the main mission of the church, to follow Jesus' own imperative: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Churches must change their focus from being a refuge for the already saved to a mission outpost for the lost. Jesus willingly left the ninety-nine already saved sheep to

find for themselves in the wilderness (Luke 15:4-5) while He went in search of the one lost sheep. While an appropriate balance is necessary, by and large, most churches are over-balanced in providing resources, ministries, and choices for the already saved while neglecting the need for outreach.

### **Combine Good News with Good Deeds**

"Externally focused churches are convinced that good news and good deeds go together. Thus, they have the two-pronged approach of evangelism coupled with service to the community."<sup>14</sup> When a church begins to give back to the community, people take notice. Again, a balance must be maintained lest the message become nothing more than a social gospel. Nevertheless, churches that combine good news and good deeds find open doors that were formerly shut tight.

One of Marcus Whitman's pioneer missionary associates, Henry Spalding, once made this analytical comment to his missions board regarding outreach to the Native Americans, "While we point them with one hand to the Lamb of God, we believe it to be equally our duty to place the other hand to the hoe as the means of saving their famishing bodies."<sup>15</sup> While the Whitman team avoided the cultural trappings of the native population, Spalding spent considerable time learning the language of the native people and presenting the gospel within a cultural context understandable to the native people. He also taught them practical skills such as irrigation of crops and cultivation of potatoes.

Laboring with his wife Eliza, Spalding lived a long and fulfilling life of ministry near his mission in Lapwai, Idaho while the Whitmans died before their time as martyrs. The nearby historical museum dedicated to the Nez Perce of the region contains a translation of the Scriptures made by

Spalding in the language of those to whom he was sent to minister. The famed Chief Joseph became Spalding's first convert, who led his tribe in professing faith in Jesus Christ. Spalding's friends and disciples erected a large monument in his honor in the community cemetery. The adjacent church Spalding established remains a viable congregation to this day. Thus, his legacy continues.

Similarly, I recently visited a small congregation in Eastern Washington that invested a considerable sum from their tiny budget to purchase nearly 2,000 bottles of water, which they distributed freely to attendees at the community's annual summer festival. While it may seem like a token gesture, it spoke volumes to hot, thirsty citizens watching the parade go by while sipping a chilled bottle of water. This type of incarnational ministry literally reflects Jesus' own directive, "And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded" (Matt. 10:42, NLT).

Churches with a vision for community service can find a place at the table when it comes to influencing community direction and policy. With declining revenues and increasing costs for services, many cities across the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere welcome churches that will fill the gaps and provide necessary community resources. Even rural congregations can maximize their influence and create a good name through community service.

### **The Cost to Facilitate More Flexible and Innovative Structures**

Brian McLaren writes, "A. W. Tozer said that organization is necessary and dangerous, and he hits a wise balance. The key with both leadership and organization is to seek forms, styles, and attitudes that

serve, not that dominate—and that are flexible, not new rigidities. This approach, of course, is what Jesus taught and modeled."<sup>16</sup> While many may question McLaren's theological approach, he strikes a resonant chord here.

Emerging generations will not tolerate the command and control structures represented by the industrial age. Postmodern thinkers chafe under many of the institutional and organizational mandates implemented by denominational hierarchies. New bylaws do not produce new believers. Leaders must consider developing more flexible structures of governance or lose influence as emerging leaders seek new organizational networks.

Change always involves a cost and innovative ministry certainly incurs a cost. However, the cost of not changing results in organizational decline and eventual death. Overseas missions work has always come with a cost; but missional work at home also carries a cost. Carefully detailed records show that it cost approximately \$6,000 to establish the Oregon mission in 1836.<sup>17</sup> The Whitman's ministered to the Cayuse tribe, numbering between three and four hundred people.<sup>18</sup> In essence, the mission's board of the day invested approximately \$50 per unreached person to send them a missionary. If we were to spend the equivalent amount today to reach the more than 8 million unchurched people in the Pacific Northwest, it would cost us over \$400 million.

### **A Tipping Point**

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcom Gladwell states, "The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point."<sup>19</sup> He postulates that there are three characteristics or contributing factors which together or separately can contribute to the success of a movement, or

an epidemic: (1) contagiousness, (2) the fact that little causes can have big effects, and (3) the idea of major shifts or changes taking place not gradually, but at one dramatic moment.<sup>20</sup> Although the book was published before 9-11, the author would probably conclude that 9-11 was the most significant “tipping point” in modern history.

Interestingly enough, Gladwell illustrates one of the principles in the book in a discussion about John Wesley and Methodism. Gladwell attributes the success of Wesley, not to his charismatic leadership or preaching abilities, but to the fact that he knew how to connect groups of people who, in turn, trained and empowered others in his “methods” of spiritual formation. Wesley typically rode more than 4,000 miles annually on horseback to meet with as many groups of people as possible, and his movement became a global network of “Methodists.” Wesley’s ability to network with so many people was the “tipping point” in his success. The author states,

His genius was organizational. Wesley would travel around delivering open air sermons to thousands of people. But he didn’t just preach. He also stayed long enough in each town to form the most enthusiastic of his converts into religious societies, which in turn he subdivided into smaller classes of a dozen or so people. He was a classic connector.<sup>21</sup>

What if district leaders had an enhanced ability to leverage the power of various ministry networks (districts) of the Assemblies of God in the Pacific Northwest and beyond to help pastors better understand the mission of God? What if district leaders could empower pastors with new strategies and give them permission to implement those strategies in creative ways, modeled not after another successful church, but tailor-made to their own cultural and ministry contexts?

What if Christian leaders could discover a “tipping point” that would suddenly and exponentially increase effectiveness and spawn an epidemic of evangelism and disciple-making in the Pacific Northwest and beyond? What if all training, prayer, and leadership efforts were suddenly infused with a new empowerment of creativity birthed by the Holy Spirit? And what if the means and results looked somewhat different than the way leaders presently “do church” or the way believers have done things in the past? Would the church embrace it as a move of God’s Spirit or vilify it with suspicion as people initially did with the table fork?

May God open the hearts of Christian leaders to birth creative strategies and perhaps discover that “tipping point” that will bridge the great divide between the church and the people they are called to reach, thus making a difference for millions of people in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

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<sup>5</sup>Ward M. Tanneberg, *Let Light Shine Out* (Kirkland, WA: Northwest District Council of the Assemblies of God, 1977), v.

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<sup>17</sup>Drury, 220.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>19</sup>Malcom Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 9.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 172-173.