

The “House of Life”: A Russian-to-International Pentecostal Movement

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Abstract

Growth, stagnation, and decline affect churches, denominations, and movements. This article discusses some of the factors that, when combined with one another, may help to overcome socio-cultural barriers to growth. Examples are taken from a Russian Pentecostal movement that has overcome barriers of ethnicity or culture to become what might be the most geographically widespread movement in the world, with churches from Spain to Cambodia.

Key Words: contextualization, House of Life, methods, miracles, movements

Introduction

Churches or movements that seek to keep on growing and to make disciples of all nations need to expand beyond their existing national, ethnic, or linguistic boundaries. However, a structural factor inhibiting this process is the current pattern of growth which tends to occur mainly through existing social networks, especially through groups with shared interests, including relatives, contacts at work, fellow students, and those with whom one has shared leisure activities. As a result, a church, denomination, or larger movement tends to grow among people sharing the same language or who are from a similar class or ethnic background (McGavran 1990, 163). The church or larger grouping then gets stuck within its existing sub-culture and finds difficulty expanding beyond that particular segment of society.

For a church or movement to break beyond the confines of its own broad cultural or linguistic affinity group requires giving greater attention to certain biblical principles or practices that have to some extent been taken for granted, under-valued, or even ignored in the currently prevailing discipleship process of many movements. Even if churches or movements pay lip-service to these principles, in their actual behaviour they do not model to their disciples the application of these biblical practices consistently enough that these biblical practices or principles become engrained within the *modus operandi* of the movement. As a result, the church or movement’s growth continues to be restricted by differences of culture, class, or language.

Principles or Practices in Overcoming Socio-cultural Barriers to Movements

Three of the relatively under-emphasized principles for crossing socio-cultural barriers are *expansive intercession*, *contextualized evangelism*, and *receptivity to the supernatural*. These are three of the distinctive features of a church planting movement in Russia called the “House of Life,” which has overcome various social and cultural barriers to become what might be the most geographically widespread movement in the world. Further information about the House of Life in English is available on their YouTube channel (House of Life n.d.) and other publications, such as their founder’s testimony (House of Life 2019).

Expansive Intercession

Probably every program for church planting or disciple-making includes prayer in some way or other. An emphasis on prayer may seem to be nothing new: however, what might be called “expansive” intercession is prayer that stretches beyond the boundaries of one’s own local area, network, organization, or ethnic-kin group. It is the kind of prayer that Jesus modelled by saying, “My prayer is not just for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me

through their message...” (John 17:20). He taught us to pray, “your Kingdom come... on earth” (Matthew 6:10), not simply in Galilee or even the Middle East. Among many rapidly growing movements there is plenty of intercession by members of the movement, but often their prayers are focussed only on the local or regional situation—their unconverted family members, their ethnic group, or even their country—but it is rare to find those whose intercessions regularly and persistently focus on peoples and nations beyond their own horizons. One of the exceptions is the House of Life movement in Russia, which encourages their members to pray every day for an unreached ethnic group: they have a calendar with 49 such groups so that the cycle repeats every seven weeks. Perhaps it is partly because of such prolonged intercession over several years, accompanied by efforts to reach these peoples, that now this movement includes representatives of 30 of these 49 ethnic groups. Moreover, at their prayer meetings members of this movement also pray for many other parts of the world, including tribes in Amazonia or countries such as Afghanistan where there are relatively few Christians. Often their intercessions are also accompanied by fasting.

Contextualized Evangelism

Most movements claim to use a contextualized approach in some way or other, but what in practice they mean by this differs from case to case. For some, “contextualized church” means simply using some local musical instruments or singing songs in a local style, or sitting in a circle on the floor instead of on chairs (or pews) in rows. Others think of the language that they use in evangelism, for instance those ministering among Muslims using the Arabic name for certain prophets—e.g., *Isa* (Jesus), *Musa* (Moses)—instead of the equivalent in their own language. A few go deeper and use selected quotes from the Qur’an when talking with Muslims. However, it is a wider kind of contextualization that we see in the New Testament, where spiritual concepts were expressed in terms relevant and familiar to the audience. Jesus not only told stories about themes in everyday life but also used popular proverbs (Matthew 16:2-3) or current events (Luke 13:1-5) as “points of contact” to share spiritual truths (Lewis 2018, 9). Likewise, Paul cited local literature (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12) and found other points of contact within a Gentile cultural context that were based on his own research (Acts 17:23). Nowadays this kind of approach to cross-cultural evangelism is rare even among some rapidly growing movements, partly because they are familiar with their own culture and almost intuitively know how to contextualize the gospel for their own people. However, few of them have much training in how to share the message with those of very different cultural backgrounds. Even within their own general culture, they may still have problems in relating to certain groups, such as those in the LGBT+ sub-culture.

Many of those in the Russian movement mentioned above, House of Life, can relate well to drug addicts, criminals, and others on the edges of mainstream society because these Christians had themselves come from such backgrounds. They know how to speak with such people and to contextualize the message within those sub-cultures, but their personal experience does not equip them to relate so easily to indigenous peoples of Siberia or to Muslims in Central Asia, whose cultures are very different. Nevertheless, the movement has managed to bridge such cultural gaps not only among diverse ethnic groups within the former USSR but also with peoples from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. One reason they have been able to do this is because many of their training courses since 2006 have included specific teaching on how to relate to people of different cultures and to find relevant points of contact.

For example, in 1993 I was living with reindeer herders in the Russian Arctic, and a local veterinarian commented to me that they were “like shepherds.” As I reflected on that statement, it occurred to me that in that Russian Arctic cultural context it would be more

understandable to speak of Jesus as the “Good Reindeer Herder”—even though some might consider that phrase to be an insufficient “paraphrase” rather than a more biblically faithful “literal translation.” Later I shared this thought with Christians from the House of Life, who subsequently developed the idea much further. One of their publications states: “A Reindeer is their clothing, protection, it is shelter, food, medicine, it is everything for the indigenous nations, just as Christ is everything for us” (Jedidiah n.d., 14). They not only noticed that the image of the deer is used in the Bible—e.g., “My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag” (Song of Songs 2:9)—but also discovered an early Christian image depicting deer horns within Christ’s crown of thorns (Jedidiah n.d., 16). That same publication describes in English how the House of Life has discovered many other points of contact for sharing the gospel in culturally sensitive ways with the indigenous peoples of Siberia. These have been developed through a combination of reflecting on the Scriptures alongside a sensitivity to the local culture—in effect emulating the cultural research modelled by St. Paul in Acts 17:23. For example, they encourage the use of indigenous musical instruments such as the Jew’s harp (*khomuz* хомуз or *vargan* варган) or a hand-held drum (called a *bubin* бубин in Russian), which is reminiscent in some ways of the instrument that was used by Miriam, the sister of Moses (Exodus 15: 20) but is normally translated into English as a “tambourine.” The House of Life also encourage the use of the indigenous ethnonym for a people group, avoiding the sometimes derogatory exonyms that had sometimes been used in Russian literature (Jedidiah n.d., 10-12). This repertoire of tools has facilitated their effectiveness in reaching peoples of many different ethnicities.

It is noteworthy that the title of Jedidiah’s book (just cited), *Keys to Adopting Nations*, contains the plural word “Keys” because the House of Life recognize that there are several different approaches for reaching other cultures. Many missionaries have a distorted view of “contextualization,” thinking of it as if it were a process of finding the “magic formula” that will unlock an entire culture. To some extent this impression has been fostered by Don Richardson’s book *Eternity in their Hearts*, which seems to imply that for each culture there is a particular “redemptive analogy” that is “the” key to reaching that ethnic group (Richardson 1981). However, each society has some degree of diversity, including age, generation, gender, education, and other traits. An approach that makes sense to older people who know their culture’s traditions might not be so appropriate to the younger generation in today’s world, or what is relevant to one gender might be almost meaningless to the other. That is why I see contextualization not as a single “magic formula” but more as a “tool box” of different approaches, some of which may be more relevant to some parts of the population than others. Examples of different approaches are given in my book *The Unseen Face of Japan*, with reference to a culture that superficially might appear to be relatively “homogeneous” but like any other society actually contains a spectrum of diverse sub-groups (Lewis 2013).

How to understand other cultures and to find points of contact for sharing the gospel cross-culturally has been a component of House of Life seminars conducted in many cities of Russia—literally from the Baltic to the Pacific. The teaching has been illustrated by examples from personal experience of ministry among Muslims in Central Asia, indigenous peoples of Siberia, and various cultures of East Asia. When the students expect to be ministering more among Muslims, greater focus is given to examples from Central Asia and the Caucasus, including material from Pilgrim David’s book *Silk Road Pilgrimage*, which has been translated into Russian, Kazakh, Azeri, and several other languages (Pilgrim David 2012). Within Russia there are not only Muslim “guest workers” from other countries of the former USSR but also substantial populations of Muslims who are indigenous to the North Caucasus and the Volga-Ural region—regions within the Russian Federation—having diaspora

populations in many cities and provinces of the country. Therefore training on relating to Islamic peoples has been given at House of Life seminars throughout Russia and also in the Middle East and elsewhere. Likewise, the presence of a Chinese diaspora (including business people, students, and tourists) in many parts of Russia and Central Asia mean that House of Life seminars have also included some teaching on relating to Chinese people. The training includes discussion about the Chinese script, focussing on certain Chinese characters which in their composition seem to reflect a knowledge of stories found in the early chapters of the book of Genesis (as described, for example, by Kang and Nelson 1979). Those who have received such training have subsequently gone out to plant churches in many different cultural contexts, including Western Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Receptivity to the Supernatural

Many churches and movements recognize that God can sometimes work through “signs and wonders,” but they vary considerably in the extent to which they actually expect God to do miracles. Some movements focus so much on healing and deliverance that to some extent they can see this approach as almost like a “magic formula,” as if the sign will automatically lead to conversions. However, the New Testament portrays signs as *confirmations* of gospel preaching (Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2: 3-4). Signs can precipitate a decision one way or the other: some who see the signs may respond like the Pharisees and become more opposed, whereas others see a miraculous healing as a confirmation that God is at work and are helped to put their faith in Jesus (Lewis 2022, 25; 1989, 232).

The presence of miracles today can accelerate the growth of those movements in which there is an active expectation that God will work in miraculous ways in response to believing prayer—as happened in the ministry of Paul at Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20) and elsewhere (Romans 15:17-19). For instance, a study of a movement in India found that “all of the interviewees went through some type of crisis in their lives in the form of physical sicknesses or even oppression of evil spirits” (Kolhar 2022, 8).

To many Christians, the phrase “signs and wonders” connotes healing miracles or deliverance from demons, perhaps accompanied by supernatural revelations (“words of knowledge”) given to those praying for healing. However, there are various other ways in which God works supernaturally, such as when a House of Life Christian from the Russian Arctic was in southern Siberia and felt led to pray “in tongues” over a local non-Christian. Suddenly that non-Christian’s attitude became more positive, and he asked if the woman who prayed was from the Buryat people. When she replied that she wasn’t he responded, “How come you are speaking such beautiful words in Buryat?”

House of Life Christians may ask God for specific guidance about where they should go or a person to whom they should speak. Sometimes God shows through a dream or vision a particular house or street where they should go. When they go there, they find someone who is receptive to the gospel. For example, God guided two of them by a vision of water to go to the bank of the Amur River, where they then found a man from another ethnic minority who was lying behind a bush: the next day this man became a Christian through their witness.

There are many instances in which God has spoken to Muslims through dreams and visions (Darg 2006). As for biblical precedents, sometimes the significance is understood by the one who receives the dream (compare Genesis 20:3-7; Matthew 27:19), while at other times the interpretation comes through a man of God (e.g., Genesis 40, 41; Daniel 2, 4). Similarly, Cornelius received an angelic visit, but the fuller revelation about Jesus came through Peter (Acts 10).

Cornelius is sometimes cited as an example of a “man of peace” (Luke 10:6). Watson and Watson introduce their chapter on this topic by a story of a man who for 20 years had been prepared supernaturally by God through dreams (Watson and Watson 2014, 123). However, some of those who claim to use the instructions in Luke 10 as a basis for their disciple-making do not actually pay much attention to the role of “signs and wonders” in evangelism; neither do they pray actively for God to reveal himself to non-Christians through dreams or visions.

Luke 10:1-20 is closely paralleled by the instructions to the Twelve in Luke 9:1-6 and Matthew 10:5-16. In Matthew 10:8 the apostles are explicitly commanded to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, and drive out demons. Although this command is mentioned in a list of Scriptures cited by Watson and Watson (2014, 127), it is not given much emphasis today in some training seminars. Nevertheless, it appears to have been implemented not only by the Twelve but also by the seventy-two, who in their debriefing reported that even the demons submitted to them in the name of Jesus (Luke 10:17). If one really wants to be a “contagious” disciple-maker, one cannot emasculate the instructions given to the disciples by emphasizing some aspects and almost ignoring others.

Epilogue: Interdependency

The three principles described in this article and exemplified by the House of Life movement—*expansive intercession*, *contextualized evangelism*, and *receptivity to the supernatural*—are not an exhaustive list. However, it is important to note that they are more effective when they are combined with one another. For instance, intercession may lead to divine revelations to non-Christians through dreams or visions. Becoming incarnated within a culture requires being teachable and humble, listening to local people; the cultural insights gained can then be combined with spiritual discernment to see not only which methods are most appropriate but also when, where, and how to use such methods. Christians may be more likely to see God at work through miracles when they are walking with God in humility, not relying on their own character traits or skills—since miracles cannot be humanly manufactured. To discern the best approach—and the best person to apply it in a local context—requires a recognition that we cannot effectively minister the gospel by ourselves, but we need to see “what the Father is doing” (John 5:19).

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