

## The Value of Research for Reaching the Unreached – Case Study

What happens when the findings of research are actually applied in practice

It was an exciting experience for me to attend the Human Resources Conference at Andrews University where I met those who were teaching me and mentoring more than a decade ago. It was my honor to present my report on how is God-given dream being fulfilled.

You've probably heard or read about how the church functioned in a communist society where I grew up as pastor's child. In those days God gave me a dream that one day more people from that overwhelmingly unbelieving communist society would come to love God and follow Jesus. Shortly after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when I attended newly reopened SDA Theological Seminary, we witnessed great wave of spiritual receptivity. Crowds were attracted to evangelistic meetings and to the local churches. However, it took only a few years before it was gone as the Annual church growth rate shows (see graph).



Since 1994 God allowed me to come to Andrews University and study Master of Divinity to prepare better for ministry back at home. My pregnant wife accompanied me and was very supportive all along. NADEI classes taught me there is more to evangelism than public crusades. I realized besides theology there are other disciplines that may help us to develop more efficient ways of reaching people for Christ, and that lead me to get involved in social work and missiology (1997 to 2000). It became more and more clear to me Jesus was not just a theologian who understood the Bible, he understood people, he was able to work with them in a practical ways and thereby he reached them for His kingdom.

As an unsponsored student looking for work, I was introduced, in 1996, to a research project lead by Erich Baumgartner. Based on the data entry of SDA church growth data [www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org) site was later developed. The last year of my studies at AU, in 2001, I got involved with Institute of Church Ministry as a research assistant. At the meantime NADEI hired me to research methodology of Natural Church Development. These experiences allowed me to taste various kinds of research projects that directly or indirectly supported the mission of our church.

Although research has not been major aim of my preparation for ministry, it has stayed with me ever since. Along assisting the ICM and other organizations with statistical research, I served in 2003-2008 as a research manager for NCD International Institute, maintaining large worldwide

database and helping to assess the health of local churches.<sup>1</sup>

My dream and main aim of life up to that point, however, was to be involved in mission outreach among the Czech atheists. God gave passion into my heart to work in a very secular and irreligious environment to be a catalyst for mission revitalization movement. But how could that happen in a country that is so resistant to church and empty of religion?

My teachers gave me an idea that research is not just for academics but research can actually play fundamental role in understanding people's worldview and in forming mission strategy. I came to believe that research actually might have an impact on the effectiveness of reaching people for Christ. Various research projects gave me an idea that God can grow church in a similar way he grows organic nature, and I was increasingly interested in understanding the Czech context to find the possibility of breaking through the thick walls of prejudices and resistance of irreligious people, explore how to bridge the bottomless and unbridgeable gap between the church and the society, and how to foster a mission movement.

Thus started my doctoral research searching why are the Czechs the way they are. Why is it that historically the Bohemians and Moravians were so religious (their search for truth led towards rise of Hussite, Anabaptists, Moravian movement, Czech Brethren, Unitas Fratrum movement etc.) and yet at the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century they claimed to be one of the most atheist nations?

*The map shows the Czech Republic in the heart of Europe between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Politically, the Czechs have been considered East Europe, historically, however, they have leaned towards West. The country has been rather small among surrounding larger and stronger countries (such as Germany and former Soviet Union).*



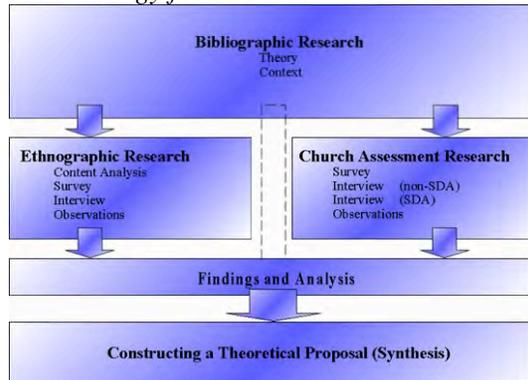
A research method has been devised to understand the “religiosity” of the irreligious Czech people and to construct a theoretical proposal how to reach those secular people (see methodology chart). The findings indicated the Czechs are not really Atheists, as they like to claim, but overall it is spiritually disoriented and wounded nation, who gave up on church and resists towards any authorities. The words like “church,” “God,” are either avoided or used with caution. People admit they believe something but they refuse to call it God. Surprisingly, the historical reformation mindset has remained part of the Czech worldview and not surprisingly the

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<sup>1</sup> There are number of books written on this topic. For more information, see [www.ncdnet.org](http://www.ncdnet.org).

so-called “atheism” is only a result of it.

*Methodology for PhD in mission dissertation research*



When the research phase preparing for ministry ended, it only made sense to us to go back and get involved in mission. As my wife and three little children and me returned back in the fall of 2002, two years of prayer and vision casting followed to get one SDA church person to pray with and prepare for whatever God had in mind for us. We were meeting on a weekly basis, until in 2005 God providentially opened door for launching a community outreach center right downtown of a city Liberec (see the picture).

*Picture showing downtown of city Liberec (red arrow shows where our center is located)*



When we prayed, we did not know exactly what kind of ministry would be appropriate for the outreach. But with the new facilities the idea was born to bring together all facets of life that were being separated by the new freedom of capitalism in the post-communist society, such as the younger and older, the rich and poor, the disabled and healthy, the politicians and common citizens, etc., and so the Generations Center was born. We explored various ways of reaching people and develop a community, our motto was formed shortly as to “build healthy relationships, foster personal growth, and live a better lives.”

*Generation Center’s team in June 2012*



*Kindergarten program in Generations Center*



The following seven years (2006-2012) were filled with various outreach activities, working with children, youth and young adults, families and with seniors. Our center became a place where moms and dads would come spend time together with their children, where children were attending their kindergarten, various clubs, leisure activities and programs were going on (English classes, art bees, interest clubs). The first years we were simply “salt,” loving people and mingling with them, building networks, etc. Although we desired to talk with people more about God, to start Bible class, long time there seemed to be no interest. When people got closer to us and learned we are Christians, whenever they trusted us enough to be open, they told us not to impose our believes on them and asked us to give them time they needed.

*Part of Generace Gospel Choir performing in Třeboň, South Bohemia in June 2012*



Generace Gospel Choir was born out of adult English class early in 2007. Five mothers on maternity leave thought singing songs in a style of Sister Act movie was okay for them and they started to invite their friends to sing along. Somehow they embraced singing spiritual songs (particularly in English) although most of them claimed not to be religious. Over the time the group grew not only in number but also close to each other. Each Wednesday people come, bring their children, sometimes spouses, and spend time talking and then singing beautiful heart touching songs worshipping God often without realizing it. From time to time someone brings “prayer” request and then we sing song thinking of this or that person. Although many of these singers are not ready yet to go to church or publicly study Bible, they have their heart open and are soaking God’s love through other people, singing songs, kind words, and through prayers.

*One of the Gospel Choir baptisms, June 2012*



In 2008, a small group of believers gave birth to a church plant for those “atheists” who would eventually want to follow Jesus publicly. Early in 2009 God gave us an impression to pray more for those we were working with. Even some overseas prayer worriers “adopted” Gospel singers to pray for. And then first gospel baptism came. Gospel singers were right there by the baptistery singing song “Take me to the water.” Since then, number of baptisms grows, we celebrate weddings, new babies are born, birthdays and anniversaries celebrated, yes we had also a funeral, gospel singers are always there to sing. Some of them joined recently, some have been singing with us three, four, five or even six years already! We keep praying for them to give their heart to Jesus.

*Summer family camp in July 2012 (mostly our “atheist” friends)*



How long does it take? What can we do to make it happen? One never knows. On Sunday

December 16 2012, our Choir was supposed to sing in one little chapel. Few minutes before we were to go on stage, I asked the group to form a circle holding each other's hands to pray. I asked heavenly Father to give us strong voices despite of cold weather, to fill the chapel with his presence, touch the hearts of listeners and allow us singers to be his channels, and also take away the stage-fright especially from those who sing solos.

Then we went off to sing. The concert went well. At one moment I made a mistake and switched the sequence of two songs. The conductor did not like it but I told her just to sing the song I announced. At the end, the listeners were pleased and gave money for our long-distance adopted girl studying in Bangladesh.

Later in the evening one singer who sang solo for the first time sent an email saying: "My Dear, I am still "recovering" (in a good way). I give thanks for this beautiful experience of the whole concert, I give thanks for the trust you gave me, I thank to my daughter who was assuring me the whole weekend that I will sing the solo well (I had only very little faith but did not want to disappoint her) and I also thank God because nobody else could make me not to have almost any stage fright despite there were listening my closed relatives among the many listeners. I give thanks for the fact that you are and I can be among you."

Because she repeatedly claimed she was not a believer, I asked her the next rehearsal about her statement regarding God. She (lady in forties) said it was her first time in life she completely felt God. Month later, another interesting detail was revealed by her singing friend. In the middle of the concert the organizers made announcement there was a car outside the chapel parking wrong that needed to be removed. One listener went out. At that time the unwitting switching of the songs happened. Well for our soloist this was God's miracle. Why? The person going out to remove car was her close relative and the proper song we were supposed to sing was her first solo. God made us to switch the songs without giving it any significance. Through this mistake God made himself known. When Radka sang her first solo, all her family was back in place and her usual nervousness was gone, a miracle that made God's existence evident for her.

Apart of Gospel singing our Generations Center launched campaign called National Marriage Week back in 2007. Many churches, non-profits, and activists follow up this week and organize local events focusing on healthy marriage. It has become nation wide known campaign over the last six years, allowing us to organize press conferences in the senate, parliament, ministry of work and social affairs and even in the government pressroom of the prime minister. Every year, national media pay attention and announce marriage week in newspapers, in news broadcast. This campaign has recently spread into other countries including USA (see <http://www.nationalmarriageweekusa.org/>).

Another area we wish to tell you more about is working with youth. After years of prayer for the youth work, God raised a group of young people (including our own children) about a year ago who have been meeting every Sabbath on their own, worshipping God and zealously reaching out their unbelieving friends to bring them the Good News they embraced. Their music is different, their manners are different, but they love God and contagiously share faith with their peers.

One of the biotic principles indicating health is multiplication. It amazes me how that principle is applied even by those precious souls that are not churchgoers. One very active and sacrificially serving senior lady called Nina who – with a grin on her face – still claims to be an atheist (her cousin was the first baptized gospel soul in 2009), decided to start her own choir just for seniors while she is still part of our Gospel Choir. It did not take her long to mobilize 20 some senior citizens who started to meet every Monday (since October 2012) to rehear songs they love to

sing. Others have joined since then.

Nina is a good organizer but she does not lead the Choir singing. So she asked me to be their Choirmaster at least temporarily. Laughing, she warned me not to impose my religion on them. But the third time we met and the singers were already tired singing, Nina exclaimed: “So, Petr, come, tell them something about our Gospel.” She meant the choir, but I knew it is an invitation to tell these people about how God cares and loves them and that’s what I told them (with the same grin on my face😊). Over the last four months we fell in love with each other and I strongly believe there are souls God is about saving.

There is not enough space to report on what’s going on in the neighborhood city as a result of the ministry being multiplied. It seems we are at a verge of a local movement with the potential to multiply and spread on.

### **Conclusion**

When considering mission as the main purpose of church leading people to worship God, the value of continual research is priceless. The connection between research and application of research findings is particularly powerful. Understanding theology without understanding people appears narrow and limited. In our case, understanding the text led to research worldview issues of specific people and then to apply the findings. It did not stop there, the application then brought new insights into the understanding of the Scripture and that deepened the understanding of the context of application. This spiral-like continual research has made all the difference.

What does it mean to follow Jesus and what were the ways he related to people outside of “religion” – it has become a whole new issue after seven years of living among and working with the Czech “atheists.” Jesus not just listened to people and spoke to them he understood their hearts. Thus became a lot easier for them to love him and follow Him. Today, there are serious attempts made to research and understand unreached groups in various corners of our globe, but what about the vastly growing group of unreached secular people who are amidst of us western Christians and yet lives in a whole different world than us? How do we reach the unreached in Christian society or better said in post-Christian society? How far are we willing to go and how long are we willing to take?

It is very difficult to reach people in a faraway place where they never heard about God of the Bible where they do not have their own written language, but it has become more and more obvious that it might be as difficult to reach the unreached in a society where there are hundreds of Christian denominations and numberless Bible translations and only honest research leading to application can help us to see the difference.

Whenever mission minded people want to reach out people in a newly emerged segment of a society, quantitative or demographic research is good, but is not enough. Is it possible to pay more attention to worldview research that would lead to more effective and culturally sensitive ways to win people for Christ? Research of secular unreached and in some ways “unreachable” people tied to those who are also willing to explore applied and incarnational mission is still missing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> However, there are great research resources with general ideas on how to do such ministry – Monte Sahlin’s book *Mission in Metropolis*, Center for Creative Ministry, 2007 is one good example.

To do research in order to obtain information or enhance education is great, but is it enough? What if we advocate creating a forum to do transformational research which being communicated would serve to motivate, involve, enable, encourage, and empower people to be more Jesus-like missionaries outside the church walls, outside our religion, amidst of emerging communities? Research that allows for spontaneous multiplication of spiritual families, small companies, big companies, hubs, clubs, house or cell churches and/or new church plant movements in which churches come to exist just so that they produce other community based churches?



*(Although his life-long passion for reaching the Czech people for Christ lasts, presently Petr is in a process of being hired as the director for Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University.)*