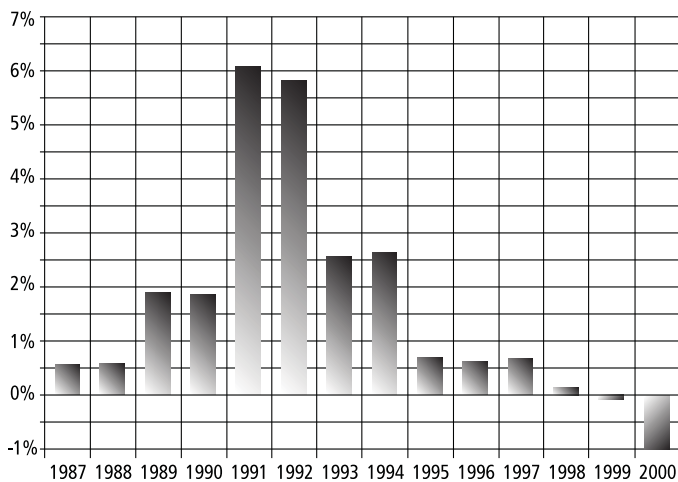


Mission to a Secular City: *The Value of Research for Reaching the Unreached* | BY PETR ČINČALA

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

You've probably heard of 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 the newly reopened Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, we witnessed a great wave of spiritual receptivity. Crowds were attracted to evangelistic meetings and to the local churches. However, it took only a few years before they were gone, as the annual church growth rate (*below*) shows.

SDA Church in the Czech Republic Annual Growth Rate (1987–2000)



Global Church Growth Research Center

In 1994, God allowed me to come to Andrews University and study for a master of divinity degree to better prepare for ministry back at home. My pregnant wife accompanied me and was very supportive throughout the entire time. Classes at the North American Division Evangelism Institute (NADEI) taught me that there is more to evangelism than public crusades. I realized that besides theology, there are other disciplines that may help us develop more efficient ways of reaching people for Christ, and that led me to get involved in social work and missiology (1997–2000). It became more and more clear to me that 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 reached them for his kingdom.

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

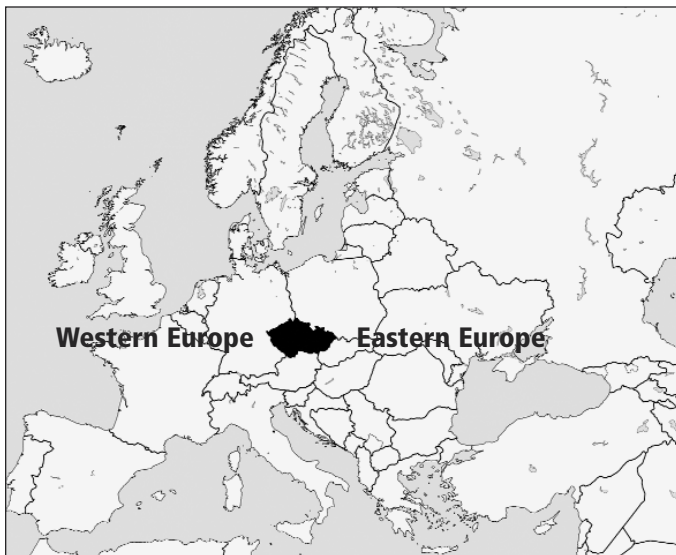
Although research has not been a major aim of my preparation for ministry, it has stayed with me ever since. Along with assisting the Institute of Church Ministry and other organizations with statistical research, I served in 2003–2008 as a research manager for the Institute for Natural Church Development (NCD International), maintaining a large worldwide database and helping to assess the health of local churches.¹

My dream and main aim in life up to that point, however, was to be involved in mission outreach among the

Czech atheists. God put a passion in my heart to work in a very secular and irreligious environment to be a catalyst for the 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 the idea that research is not just for academics, but can actually play a fundamental role in understanding people's worldviews 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 the idea that God can grow church in a similar way as 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, exploring how to bridge the bottomless and unbridgeable gap between the church and the society, and discovering how to foster a mission movement.

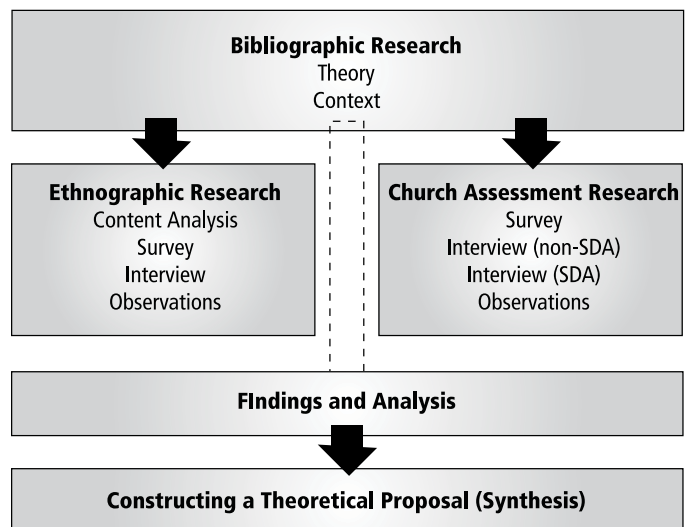
Thus began my doctoral research: a search for why the Czechs are the way they are. Why is it that historically, the Bohemians and Moravians were so religious (their search for truth led toward the rise of Hussites, Anabaptists, the Moravian movement, Czech Brethren, the Unitas Fratrum movement, etc.), and yet at the turn of the twenty-first 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 Eastern Europeans; historically, however, they have leaned toward the West. The country has been rather small among surrounding larger and stronger countries (such as Germany and the former Soviet Union).

A research method has been devised to understand the “religiosity” of the irreligious Czech people and to construct a theoretical proposal of how to reach those secular people (see methodology chart). The findings indicate the Czechs are not really atheists, as they like to claim, but overall the Czech Republic is a spiritually disoriented and wounded nation, which gave up on church and resists any authorities. Words like “church” and “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, this so-called atheism is only a result of it.

Methodology for a PhD in Mission Dissertation Research



When my research phase of preparing for ministry ended, it only made sense to us to go back and become involved in missions. As my wife, three little children, and I returned to the Czech Republic in the fall of 2002, two years of prayer and vision-casting followed to get one SDA church person to pray with us and prepare for whatever God had in mind for us. We were meeting on a weekly basis, until in 2005 God providentially opened the door for launching a community outreach center right in the downtown area of Liberec (*top, page 49*).

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



Downtown Liberec (arrow shows location of our center)

younger and older, rich and poor, disabled and healthy, politicians and common citizens, etc., and so the Generations Center was born. We explored various ways of reaching people and developing a community. Our motto was soon formed: to “build healthy relationships, foster personal growth, and live better lives.”



Generation Center's team in June 2012

The following seven years (2006–2012) were filled with various outreach activities, working with children, youth and young adults, families, and seniors. Our center became a place where moms and dads were coming and spending time together with their children, where children were attending kindergarten, and various clubs, leisure activities, and programs were going on (English classes, art bees, interest clubs). During the first years, we were simply “salt,” loving people and mingling with them, building networks,

etc. Although we desired to talk more with people about God, to start a Bible class, for a long time there seemed to be no interest. When people got closer to us and learned we were Christians, whenever they trusted us enough to be open, they told us not to impose our beliefs on them, and asked us to give them the time they needed.



Kindergarten program in Generations Center



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

Generace Gospel Choir was born out of an adult English class early in 2007. Five mothers on maternity leave thought that singing songs in the style of the movie *Sister Act* was OK 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 time, the group grew not only in number, but also close to each other. Now, people come each Wednesday, bring their children, sometimes spouses, and

spend time talking, then sing beautiful, heart-touching songs worshipping God, often without realizing it. From time to time, someone brings a “prayer” request, and then we sing a song thinking of this or that person. Although many of these singers are not yet ready to go to church or publicly study the Bible, they have their hearts open and are soaking up 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 the impression to pray more for those we were working with. Even some overseas prayer warriors “adopted” gospel singers to pray for. And then, the first gospel baptism came. Gospel singers were right there by the baptistery, singing “Take Me to the Water.” Since then, the number of baptisms continues to grow; we celebrate weddings; new babies are born; we honor birthdays and anniversaries; yes, we had also a funeral; and the gospel singers are always there to sing. Some of them joined recently, and some have been singing with us for three, four, five, or even six years already! We keep praying for them to give their heart to Jesus.

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. A 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 our heavenly Father to give us strong voices despite the cold weather, fill the chapel with his presence, touch the hearts of listeners, allow us as singers to be his channels,



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

and also take away stage fright, especially of those who would sing solos.

Then, we went off to sing. The concert went well. At one point, I made a mistake and switched the sequence of two songs. The conductor did not like it, but I told her to just 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, Radka, a singer in her forties who sang a solo for the first time, sent an email, writing,

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 at the next rehearsal about her statement regarding God. She said it was the first time in her life that she had completely felt God. A month later, her singing friend revealed another interesting detail. In the middle of the concert, the organizers had announced that a car was parked incorrectly outside the chapel, and needed to be removed. One listener went out. At that time, the unwitting song switch happened. Well, for our soloist this was God’s miracle. Why? The person going out to move the car was her close relative, and the prop-

er song we were supposed to sing was her first solo. God made us 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.

Separate from the gospel singing, our Generations Center launched a campaign called National Marriage Week back in 2007. Many churches, nonprofits, and activists followed suit, and organized local events focused on a healthy marriage. It has become a nationally 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 National Marriage Week in newspapers and news broadcasts. This campaign has recently spread into other countries, including the United States.²

Another area we wish to tell you more about is working with youth. After years of prayer for the youth work, about a year ago God raised up a group of young people (including our own children) who have been meeting every Sabbath on their own, worshipping God, and zealously reaching out to 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, Nina, who—with a grin on her face—still claims to be an atheist (her cousin was the first baptized gospel choir soul in 2009), decided to start her own choir just for seniors, though she is still part of our gospel choir. It did not take her long to mobilize twenty-some senior citizens, who started to meet every Monday (since October 2012) to rehearse songs they love to sing. Others have joined since then.

Nina is a good organizer, but she does not lead the choir in 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, when the singers were already tired of singing, Nina exclaimed, "So, Petr, come, tell them something about our Gospel." She meant the choir, but I knew it was an invitation to tell these people about how God cares for

and loves them, and that's what I told them (with the same grin on my face). Over the last four months, her choir and I came to love one another, and I strongly believe there are souls God is about to save.

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

Conclusion

When considering mission as the main purpose of the 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 researching worldview issues of specific people, and then to applying the findings. It did not stop there; the application then brought new insights into the understanding of scripture, and that deepened the understanding of the application's context. 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"? These questions have become a whole new issue after seven years of living among and working with the Czech atheists. Jesus not only listened to people and spoke to them; he understood their hearts. Thus, it became a lot easier for them to love 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 exponentially growing group of unreached secular people who are amidst us Western Christians, and yet live in a completely different world than us? How do we reach the unreached in a Christian society, or better said, in a 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 the God of the Bible, and 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 numerous Bible translations, and only honest research leading to application can help us to see the differences among them.

Whenever mission-minded people want to reach out to

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people in a newly emerged segment of a society, quantitative or demographic research is good, but not enough. Is it possible to pay more attention to research of worldviews 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.³

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 that when 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 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 they can produce other community-based churches? ■

Petr Činčala holds MDiv and MSW degrees and a PhD in missions.



While he continues his lifelong passion for reaching the Czech people for Christ, he is currently in the process of being hired as the director for the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University.

References

1. There are number of books written on this topic. For more information, see www.ncdnet.org.
2. See <http://www.nationalmarriageweekusa.org/>.
3. However, there are some great research resources with general ideas on how to do such ministry; Monte Sahlin's book *Mission in Metropolis: The Adventist Movement in an Urban World* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2007) is one good example.

Note: To view video clips of the Generace Gospel Choir, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBSvpoWPPUM> (the December 2012 concert) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GENZPGke3NA> (the December 2008 concert).