The Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland and Labrador
Reflections on Historical Trends
1991-2007

by H. Paul Foster
General Superintendent

The Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland and Labrador (PAONL) has a history covering almost one hundred years. This time period has seen our Fellowship grow from a “seedling” to an “oak tree,” and “thus far the Lord has helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12, *New King James Version*)!

The General Executive Officers have proposed an overview of our Fellowship dating back to 1991, particularly in the areas of historical trends, demographic shifts and financial and attendance membership data. The findings will impact and influence our vision and strategy for the future. Let us look at some historical trends from 1991 to 2007.

The year 1991 marked the eighth decade since the founding of the PAONL. At that time, we were moving into our second year of what was called the “Decade of Harvest.” The General Executive Committee had signed a Decade of Harvest Declaration with a rationale for evangelistic outreach. It said:

- Because we believe our mission is to obey the Great Commission to reach every person with the gospel;
- Because we believe in the imminent return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ;
- Because we believe that all who do not profess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord will be eternally lost; and
- Because we believe we will be held accountable for our actions, both individually and corporately.

The desire was to enlist 5,000 prayer partners, reach and win 25,000 individuals to Christ, train and disciple 250 persons for ministry and bring the total number of assemblies to 200 by the turn of the twenty-first century.
This had followed a study undertaken by an Indepth Decline Study Committee (report on file). Burton K. Janes, in his book, *History of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland*, wrote:

An Indepth Decline Study Committee reported to the 1990 Conference. In his foreword to the accompanying booklet, the General Superintendent [Roy D. King] noted: “The social, economic and spiritual climate could be a factor to discourage us. All of the indicators point to the conclusion that we need a spiritual awakening.” The study determined that the denomination was being faced with a new set of realities: “We are not the same, our place in the world has changed. The field is not the same, our society has gone through a revolution.” Several suggestions were then made to avoid the apparent pitfalls and make the most of the Decade of Harvest: understand the difference between vision and strategy, resist fear and put faith in God, develop a hunger for God and His righteousness, assess growth honestly, promote what unites the denomination, be courageous and creative in outreach, and establish greater accountability. The conclusion was an understatement, “The task before us is immense.” The most practical response of the study was to propose a leadership consultation for “reflection, renewal and dialogue.” (pp. 520-521)

The rationale for the Decade of Harvest still stands today. However, the vision and dreams for the decade did not materialize. Our Province was broadsided when the Government of Canada announced a moratorium on the northern cod fishery on July 2, 1992. This affected many local communities and churches, both in population and financial resources which, in turn, affected us provincially. The effects were felt particularly in a reduction of the number of church volunteers, departmental ministries attendance (e.g., youth and Sunday school) and finances needed to make some churches viable, thus creating the necessity of churches integrating in some areas.

The 1990s onward also demanded that the Fellowship respond to growing societal and legal challenges which may have distracted us from our Decade of Harvest focus. It became necessary to develop such policies and programs as “defined” membership, Plan to Protect, Ministry Covenant, Remedial Boards, Minister’s Discipline and Restoration, etc. It was obvious that the General Executive Officers, General Executive Committee and assembly pastors were weighed down with such matters.
Pastors were particularly burdened and stressed by the local church’s acceptance or rejection of such matters, leaving them with much to deal with on a daily basis.

It is interesting to note that in the late 1980s there was a Study Committee on Decline and the Future, another review was done in the late 1990s and now we are in process once again.

It is also interesting to note that the “new realities” of the early 1990s are almost identical to the realities of 2008.

It would appear that historically our Fellowship had challenges that repeated themselves with each passing decade which often led to some changes, especially several times of restructuring. Spiritual challenges seemingly remain the same, for humanity never ceases to follow in paths that call for revival and restoration.

The second half of the 1990s also saw the demise of our Province’s denominational school system, which was replaced by a public school system. We lost the “triangle” of Christian education, the church, home and school. Our school system had a component of Christian education and students had a Christian world view. Religious education classes were lost, leaving a gap in the triangle. The question is, Did the church and home compensate for the loss?

At the same time, there was an increasing loss at the church level because of the eventual demise in some churches of Sunday school and excellent midweek programs (e.g., Crusaders, Missionettes, BG Clubs). Over time, the Christian Education program seemingly went from an outreach/discipleship emphasis to family-oriented fun times. There was some loss of non-Pentecostals, and midweek vs. Sunday programs appear to have reduced discipleship emphasis, missions emphasis and tithes/missions offerings to Central Finance which had depended on these resources.

Ministerial candidates were graduating from Eastern Pentecostal Bible College (now Master’s College & Seminary), Peterborough (now Toronto), Ontario, from 1939 to the present day. In the early 1990s, the institution’s student population was approximately five hundred, with about twenty-five percent coming from the PAONL.
In the years since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a drastic decline in the numbers of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians attending and graduating from this institution.

The reasons for this will depend on who you are talking to, but the result will be a shortage of new candidates for ministry within our ranks. In recent years, we have seen an aging population of pastors, many of whom have semi-retired, retired or gone to Glory! We have also seen a growing number on sick leave and leave-of-absence. It appears that we are, in reality, about to suffer a shortage of trained and prepared ministers for the immediate future. Historically, we appeared to have pastors who were possessed by a “spirit of endurance,” but perhaps we have drifted to sometimes taking the “easy road,” with many of our personnel talking of early retirement.

As well, recent college/seminary graduate candidate interviews indicate a loss of knowledge about and emphasis on the person, work, ministry and manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This will affect who we are as Pentecostals. It would appear that earlier generations of pastors habitually experienced the “pastor’s weekly sabbath,” on which they were refreshed spiritually, thanked God for their call to ministry, spent more time in prayer and the Word and were less stressed by administration and the watchful eye of “employers.” They were people persons!

Marriage, divorce and remarriage have received much attention in the last two decades. Historically we have taken a strong stand on heterosexual marriage. We have endeavoured over the years to strengthen marriage and family through special emphasis days, writing, preaching and example. We were, for many years, almost untouched by divorce and the cry for remarriage. However, the trends in recent years have changed. We changed our position to allow for divorce for the reasons of “porneia” and “abandonment.” This created much debate, sometimes localized division and several conference sessions dealing with these subjects and the attendant challenges. There is seemingly a trend towards eventually allowing our pastors to perform marriages for individuals divorced for the two reasons mentioned above. This trend would involve growing pains, and we need to educate and prepare ourselves for future ministry to a broken and hurting society within the parameters of the Scriptures.
Historically missions has been a strong component of the vision and budget of the PAONL. We have had, for many years, a set of core values which were articulated at the turn of the present century. These core values are:

- Each individual, having been created in the image of God, has equal intrinsic worth.
- Each individual is born in a state of sin as a result of the disobedience of our first parents.
- Due to this marred nature, salvation through the redemptive work of Christ is necessary in the reconciliation of the individual to the Creator.
- The individual who is finally unrepentant shall suffer everlasting damnation.
- God wishes to restore humanity to wholeness and fellowship through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.
- We value people without Christ to whom we owe the compassion of Christ, and an opportunity to receive the Gospel and enter into Christian fellowship.

Our churches over the years have contributed multiplied millions of dollars and have made every annual Offerama since 1990 a great success. Trends in missions giving have not changed despite the Cod Moratorium, losses in the mining and paper mill sector and out-migration. Missionary candidates have been in good supply, and there seems to be growth in missionary interest by the younger generation and retiring mid-lifers. Historically support for missions has come from the older generations, but it appears a new trend may become a reality as the younger generation starts to catch the vision and burden.

One thing we may need to visit is the start of a trend to become more project- and humanitarian-oriented than involved in spreading the Gospel in obedience to the Great Commission. This will need balance. We too have been involved in a missionary philosophy and program that has not required missionaries to raise their entire budgets. There may be some seen or unseen pressure for us to travel this road in the future.
Historically our main teaching/preaching themes were the “Foursquare Gospel,” Jesus as Saviour, Healer, Baptizer and Coming King. Great emphasis was placed on being born again, with a definite, time-placed conversion experience. Pastors were very strong on altar calls for souls to be saved. Prayer lines for the sick followed messages on divine healing. Prayer was offered for believers seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which was not considered optional but a must for every believer. The initial physical evidence of a believer having received his/her personal Pentecost was speaking “with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4, New King James Version). Much emphasis was placed on preaching prophecy and the soon return of Jesus Christ. This expectancy affected people’s relationship with God and people, and caused believers to live in purity and readiness and with an eternal perspective. When one preached prophetically, the results were often salvation, healing, baptisms and renewal in the one service.

The trends in recent years show an apparent softening in dealing with such subjects with consistency and authority. Conversion seems to be more gradual than a defined moment of salvation. The subjects of divine healing, the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the return of Jesus seem to be heard less and with some lost passion and enthusiasm. There seems to be a downplaying of our “distinctives” and the style of church evangelism we were once known for.

Our Fellowship’s Church Ministries Department conducted a Discipleship Survey in 2007 to determine trends and practices within the PAONL regarding discipleship and teaching in our assemblies (copy on file). There were 120 responses. Some items gave a startling revelation. The main focus of the questionnaire was the frequency and importance of teaching on essential truths, doctrines and foundations of faith. Thirty-eight respondents indicated that in the previous five years they had rarely or never dealt with some of these important topics because other pressing matters such as social issues needed attention. Others felt they did not have the time to adequately prepare for these topics. Yet others felt their people were uninterested in such topics.

We must ask ourselves, if this is, or becomes, a trend, then where are we headed in faith, practice and discipleship in the future?

Historically the Fellowship made strong use of the hymnbook and theology contained in the pieces of the past four hundred years or so. The trends of the past decade have led us to more informal and user-friendly music and choruses. This has been a time
of transition for all age groups. There have been lines of demarcation which appear to be becoming less evident and a desire by all to bring praise, worship and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some other trends since 1991 worth noting are:

- Less emphasis on our position papers (eg., abortion, social drinking)
- An aging church population.
- Possibly an increase of youth/young adults involved spiritually outside the Church.
- Less attendance at Sunday evening services.
- The renaming of churches with less connection to scriptural names and “Pentecost” and more connection to “community.”
- Less spontaneity and faith in decision making.
- More affluence and less sacrifice and dependence upon God.

In conclusion, it is worth noting the Strategic Plan, “Vision and Celebration 2000.” It was hoped that this would set the course and trends as we headed into the twenty-first century.

**Goals for Ministry**

To engage in networks which enhance ministry and fellowship.

To keep the ministry effective and progressive in relation to the harvest.

To provide biblically-based and compassionate ministries which address the challenges of emerging social trends.

To affirm the reality of our Pentecostal distinctives.
To disciple all believers for involvement in the mission of the Church.

To effectively communicate our biblically-based position on emerging issues.

To practice for accountability in our stewardship at all levels of leadership.

To provide cooperative decision-making and information flows at all levels of leadership.

**Setting our Boundaries**

The mandate of the Great Commission will be our primary focus.

Our decisions and related actions will be consistent with our fundamental and essential truths.

We will strive for excellence in all areas of ministry through the enabling of the Holy Spirit.

Ministry will be characterized by respect for the dignity and worth of all individuals.

We will uphold the standards of holiness, righteousness and integrity.

We will be good stewards of our time, money and talent.

Corporate worship will be Christ-centered.

Our ministry will be supportive of the whole Body of Christ.

Ministerial and lay workers will be required to subscribe to the philosophy of ministry held by the PAONL.

We will develop those partnerships that support our primary focus.
Strategies for Ministry

To fulfil our mission, we will . . .

Strengthen our appreciation of the Body of Christ worldwide.

Establish reciprocal relationships with groups that support our mission.

Promote actions which provide for consolidation and shared ministries.

Minister to the unique needs of all age groups.

Respond compassionately to the needs of the disenfranchised of our society.

Equip believers to actively, but sensitively, apply biblical principles to contemporary issues.

Encourage believers to be constantly open to, and dependent on, the leadership and empowerment of the Holy Spirit in all our worship and ministry.

Promote the biblical truth of the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

Establish a comprehensive discipleship program throughout all church ministries.

Establish a program for the development of lay ministries.

Refine our positions on emerging issues in accordance with biblical principles.

Proactively communicate our stand on social issues.

Create awareness, at all levels of leadership, of current ecclesiastical structures and procedures.
Equip pastors to teach and model accountability at all levels of ministry.

Implement a consistent, relevant and comprehensive communications network.

Establish structures and forums which will enhance cooperative decision-making.

This trendsetting action plan was to include Head Office, pastors, presbyteries and church ministry departments. It would include all of the above, as well as a provincial prayer strategy and ministry.

We must evaluate where we have gone with this since 2000. Have we set any trends?

We have much history and heritage and different roads of trendsetting over the years.

Despite the foregoing, these questions still remain, What of our future? Have we gone as far as God intended for us to go as a Fellowship? Are we any longer a “movement?” Movements are traditionally exuberant, fresh, spontaneous etc. In contrast a “denomination” after being a “movement” becomes more formalized, ritualized, and institutionalized, etc.

We find ourselves again in a time of reflection, rehearsal and the need to dream and do the Lord’s will and reach a lost world for Jesus Christ!