

INTERVIEW WITH PETER SLEEBOS

A Sovereign Move of God

Peter Sleebos, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God of The Netherlands, recently visited the United States to participate in the annual World Missions Fly-Ins. He spoke with Gerald Branum, area director for Western Europe, and Ken Horn and Miriam Testasecca from Today's Pentecostal Evangel.

PE: You have a rich Christian heritage. Will you tell us about your walk of faith?

Sleebos: I am of Dutch-Indonesian heritage. My father was a prisoner of war during World War II in Burma (now Myanmar), but he faithfully ministered for the Lord even in those circumstances. My mother was a part-time evangelist with the Indonesia Assemblies of God and prayed earnestly for her seven children. Several of my brothers and sisters are in ministry today.

After the war, my family moved to the Netherlands where my parents planted an Assemblies of God church in Alkmaar, north of Amsterdam. God called me into full-time ministry during a missions service when I was 11 years old. Following Bible school, my wife and I ministered in the Netherlands at the Bible school for 11 years, followed by nine years as a missionary in Indonesia. In 1987 the church in Alkmaar asked me to come as pastor.

PE: What were the steps that led to your election as general superintendent in the Netherlands?

Sleebos: Nearly 200 people attended the church in Alkmaar when we began our ministry there, and they didn't have their own building. As God blessed us, the church grew to 900 people and we built a \$2 million multipurpose building. We were the largest church in the city.

When the possibility of a leadership change in the Fellowship became known, my name was mentioned. I knew it would be a difficult job, because our movement was going through many changes. I simply told people I was not available for the position.

Several weeks before the council meetings, Brother Andrew, a well-known missionary-evangelist, came to our church to preach. His topic was "The Right of Every Human Being." He said that everyone should have the privilege — the right — of knowing Christ. My heart was moved, but then he asked this stirring question: "Are you willing to give up your rights so that the rest of the world can receive its right to know Jesus Christ?" The Lord dealt with me about my selfish

attitude, and I was the first person at the altar. My wife knelt next to me, and we both knew that God was calling us to serve the Fellowship.

PE: What is the spiritual climate of the country?

Sleebos: The Netherlands was an important center during the Reformation and was 60 percent evangelical before World War II. Then secularization and modernization brought individualism, and people turned away from God. They denounced the authority of the church and preferred a hedonistic, atheistic lifestyle. By 2000, the evangelical church claimed only 21 percent of the population, and 60,000 members were leaving each year.

The results were that the Netherlands was the first nation to legalize abortion, homosexual marriage and euthanasia. We legalized prostitution, giving prostitutes protection and job benefits, and openly allowed the sale and use of drugs. Lawlessness was prevalent, and an increasing number professed no faith in God.

PE: Do you see any changes in people's spiritual attitudes?

Sleebos: People are dissatisfied with their indulgent lives. Youth especially are looking for reality. We can talk about God again without people being offended. Last year Jan Peter Balkenende, a born-again Christian, was elected prime minister. We are praying that God will use him to bring change to our nation. Rotterdam, the largest seaport in the world, is now called *Europort* or "Gateway to Europe." Believers are praying that our nation will be the gateway for revival in Europe.

Officials at the Free University in Amsterdam invited our Bible school to move to their campus because they wanted our students to influence and evangelize the university students. Melvin and Louise Ho are part of the Bible school teaching staff.

Recently the Lutheran, Reformed and Dutch Reformed denominations merged. Their theme for 2004 is "Come, Holy Spirit, and Renew Your Church." Their leadership met with me recently and said, "Please pray for us. We have tried everything and nothing is working. We need revival."

PE: What is God doing today in the Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands?

Sleebos: We are experiencing a sovereign move of God. No man could have orchestrated what is happening. For many years, Pentecostals were considered a sect. Even Protestant churches preached against us. But the attitude toward us has shifted.

Several years ago, Dr. Jan Willem Ouweneel, a conservative evangelical theologian in our nation, wrote *The Domain of the Snake* to denounce the gifts of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and healing. The book hurt Pentecostals greatly. Then four years ago Ouweneel's deaf granddaughter visited Africa where she met an African Pentecostal evangelist. He prayed for her and she was healed. The evangelist did not know who her grandfather was but felt led of the Holy Spirit to say, "I want to speak with your grandfather." Ouweneel visited Africa, met with the evangelist, and God revolutionized his life. He was baptized in the Holy Spirit and recalled his book. For the past three years he has prayed for many people to be filled with the Spirit. In youth festival last year, he preached on the baptism in the Holy Spirit to 35,000 youth.

PE: How are Pentecostals influencing the culture in the Netherlands?

Sleebos: I believe God is giving us a ministry to the nation. I've been asked to sit on the board of a government broadcasting company and invited to four meetings with the queen as a Pentecostal representative.

A few Pentecostal believers are involved in politics. A pastor in Amsterdam, a former prostitute, now serves on the city board. In some of our churches, especially in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, former criminals, drug traffickers, addicts and inmates are making an impact for Christ.

For many years, the Netherlands had several Pentecostal denominations, each in competition with the other. Soon after I took office, Fellowship leaders began praying with the Full Gospel denomination. This led to a merger. Other Pentecostal groups have asked us to partner with them for leadership and prayer conferences, and God is freeing us from competition. Today I serve as chairman of an umbrella organization that gives Pentecostals a testimony of unity and a platform within the nation.

Prayer and fasting movements have started among Pentecostal, evangelical and protestant pastors. These pastors are approaching city mayors, asking about the needs and how they can pray. People are seeing our pastors as community leaders.

PE: What are some of your goals as superintendent?

Sleebos: When I came into office five years ago, the Lord gave me three values to set before the people as goals. They were to be trustworthy to believers and non-believers, balanced in the Word and in the Spirit, and involved with other Pentecostal churches in our nation. God is helping us to accomplish these.

We also want to plant churches. The Netherlands has hundreds of empty protestant churches. Some towns have no Christian witness — just an empty building. We are asking God to help us purchase these buildings and fill them

with people coming to Christ. We are using "We Build People," a church growth and discipleship program developed by the U.S. Assemblies of God, to help us reach beyond the church walls

PE: How can U.S. believers pray for the Netherlands?

Sleebos: We need encouragement. Our leaders are working hard and believers are praying, but in many places it's as if we are swimming against the tide. Pray that our leaders will be able to equip believers to reach their neighbors for Christ.

Pray also for Prime Minister Balkenende as he becomes chairman of the European Union in July. We are praying that he will be empowered to give God a place in the European constitution.