

PENTECOSTALS, TRANSFORMATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

- A RESEARCH OVERVIEW



Cover:

Women from the Toposa community dancing in traditional clothes as part of a PMU funded project where the communities in Kapoeta East are brought together in a peace campaign to stop the inter-clan fighting.

Photo: Malin Canslätt

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Introduction

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy... And to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists don't know how to do that.¹

Gus Speth, U.S. Advisor on Climate Change.

We live in a time with many global and local challenges. To deal with them, many actors and forces need to join hands, and changes need to take place both on individual and on structural level. In presenting this research overview PMU and Pingst (the Swedish Pentecostal Alliance of Churches) want to achieve two things.² First and foremost we want to encourage Pentecostal leaders and churches to see the importance of their involvement in transformational work in their communities and countries, based on current research. In many Pentecostal churches, the message is clear about God's heart for justice, restoration and righteousness. The movement offers dignity to people living in poverty by conveying the message that they are created in the image of God and therefore have value and purpose. It also instils a sense of agency, helping people in poverty to move away from fatalism and the feeling that they are victims, to a situation where they become part of a community with a mission to change the world. It is however our conviction that this transformational work of Pentecostals should be further stretched out and strengthened.

Secondly, we want to highlight the opportunities and possibilities available to the donor community in international aid if they engage in a closer cooperation with the Pentecostal movement. The United Nations 2030 Agenda has 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targeted to end

poverty and hunger, to protect the planet, to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies that are free from fear and violence.³ When working with these goals, the need for a broad variety of processes and inflow of resources becomes obvious as the expected cost to reach the goals by far exceeds the total aid given worldwide.⁴ New innovative partnerships through which we can reach the poorest are needed, so that no one is left behind. There is a growing belief that the role of religion in processes of change must be further explored, given that religious belief is such a determinant for people's world view, identity, values, attitudes and behaviour, as well as the cultural expressions of a society. Therefore, it is central for a good societal development to establish relations and innovative partnerships with progressive, legitimate and locally rooted religious forces.

Some researchers have lately been increasingly intrigued by the strong development and influence obtained by the Pentecostal movements, particularly in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In this document, we present an overview of some current research on Pentecostalism. Considering the global poverty situation, most attention is given to research on Pentecostalism in Africa. PMU and Pingst hope that a better understanding of the Pentecostal movement will make it easier for the Pentecostal global community to increase its contribution in tackling challenges related to poverty, environmental and other aspects of sustainable development. There are evidently many challenges connected to cooperating with faith-based actors. As we shall see in the following pages, one of them is that Pentecostalism is a very diverse movement, which makes it important to assess, in each specific case, which Pentecostal or Charismatic actor to strategically cooperate with. However, with this overview, PMU and Pingst mainly wish to highlight some positive contributions that have been noted by current research, and thereby draw attention to the potential among Pentecostals to promote a fair global development.

DANIEL ALM - Superintendent, Pingst
NICLAS LINDGREN - Director, PMU



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Progressive Pentecostalism is Christians inspired by the Holy Spirit seeking to holistically address the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their community.⁵

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The Pentecostal tradition

GLOBAL PENTECOSTALISM

The global Pentecostal-Charismatic movement is one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the world today and the major renewal stream of world Christianity.⁶ It is found in almost every country and has affected every denomination worldwide. In actual numbers, *The World Christian Encyclopedia* counts 644 million adherents, which means that one out of every twelve persons on the globe is a Pentecostal/Charismatic Christian.⁷ The movement has its strongest presence in the Global South with 195 million adherents in Latin America, 125 million adherents in Asia and 230 million adherents in Africa. According to analysts the global figure is expected to rise to a 1 billion in the year 2050.⁸

This is a movement that is taking on more and more of social responsibilities while already having extensive social impact in local societies.⁹ Dena Freeman at the London School of Economics claim that the Pentecostal movement have done more to reduce poverty in Africa than any other NGO or organisation.¹⁰ When Donald E. Miller and Tetsuano Yamamori examined social engagement in growing churches in developing countries, they discovered that a large majority of these churches were Pentecostal-Charismatic churches.¹¹ They termed this spirit-centred Christianity coupled with social commitment “Progressive Pentecostalism”, defining it as

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Christians who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus and seek to holistically address the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their community.¹²

Vibrant worship is the very hallmark of this Christianity that has “developed as a non-western enterprise with Africa as one of its major heartlands”.¹³

Pentecostalism is highly adaptable to the cultural context - a “religion made to travel” - and in many ways compatible with pre-existing local sensibilities and identities, lending itself to local ownership.¹⁴ Requesting God’s best on earth activates Pentecostals for passionate service and every Pentecostal believer is encouraged to be involved in serving God in some way. Social scientists call this *voluntary association*, which is considered essential for development theory but also for mobilizing sustainable development practice. The belief that one can be restored in one’s relationship with God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve Jesus purposes of bringing God’s love to all people, exemplifies a thorough holistic approach where the spiritual, the physical and the social harmonize.

But while Pentecostalism is a diverse and manifold force for good, there are also challenges and flaws. One could easily criticise parts of the movement for being too otherworldly, materialistic, commercialized, hierarchical, superficial, individualistic, etcetera.¹⁵ One NGO-consultant has described the Pentecostal “track-record” in one place as “patchy—a mixture of spectacular success, dreadful failure, and a lot of mediocre work in between”.¹⁶ Other researchers warn that Pentecostalism might foster with its prosperity gospel a wealth-accumulating individualism that hinders wealth distribution and is not environmentally sustainable.¹⁷ Things like these need to be addressed and solid criticism is needed, followed by action for change.

PENTECOSTAL BEGINNINGS

In a quote from one of the prophets in the Bible, God promises to pour out his Holy Spirit on servants and slaves.¹⁸ This word took on a very particular meaning through the African-American preacher, William J. Seymour, a son of former slaves and Lucy Farrow, herself a slave as a child. In 1906, they had both accepted a new teaching about being baptised with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Seymour came to Los Angeles to teach this message, invited by Richard and Ruth Asberry to hold meetings in their home at 214 North Bonnie Brae Street. At first these meetings “were attended mainly by ‘negro washwoman’ and a few of their husbands”.¹⁹ Lucy Farrow came to assist, and on the 9th of April a spiritual outpouring took place. Due to massive interest the meetings moved to a warehouse-building on Azusa Street, which has given name to what is now known as the Azusa Street Revival.

The revival spread fast to many nations and most classic Pentecostal denominations of today can either trace their roots to it, or were strongly influenced by it. People of all sorts,

”educated, non-educated, rich, poor, African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, whites, men, women, native born, recent immigrants, and foreign visitors – prayed, sang and came to the altar together.”²⁰

The revival especially attracted people from the lower working classes and anyone could participate as long as he or she submitted to the Spirit. Unfortunately, the movement soon became deeply split by doctrinal differences. Strong cultural secular values distorted the original unity and a racist system was introduced, a colonial mentality got a foothold, women experienced inequality, the strong passion for borderless peace was replaced by patriotism and nationalism, and so on. The fact that the Azusa Street Revival was colourblind, ethno-blind, age-blind, class-blind and gender-blind is however still an important restoration-narrative for Pentecostals worldwide.

At the same time, the Pentecostal movement has never been one single coherent organisation. Around the beginnings of the 20th century a number of independent Pentecostal churches were established in Africa and Asia, defining the beginning of what is today seen as a second group of Pentecostals that doesn’t have any links to mission from Western nations.²¹ A third group of Pentecostals became visible in what is called the Charismatic renewal, which was an acceptance of the teaching of baptism in Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues among older mainline churches from

the 1960s and onwards. Today, Roman Catholic Charismatics are as numerous as classical Pentecostals.²² A fourth group are the independent Charismatic megachurches, also termed “Neo-charismatics” that surfaced in the mid-1970s. They are by many considered to be the fastest growing sector within the Pentecostals, but they are also controversial as many of these churches promote a *prosperity gospel*, a belief that God also makes the believers prosper materially.

While there is a large variety of Pentecostal expressions, Pentecostalism can be seen as either a distinct Christian tradition alongside Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants or as a diffuse movement that overlays Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism, making it eclectic, pluralistic and manifolded but also very modern and very global.²³ Pentecostal theology is not “concentrated in a single doctrine but dispersed among a variety of Christian practices along a core commitment to the transforming and renewing encounter with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit”.²⁴ In the present document, “Pentecostalism” and “Pentecostal” refer to all different groups mentioned above and the narrative in this text is spoken from a classic Pentecostal position as PMU and the Swedish Pentecostal Movement have their roots to the Azusa Street Revival in 1906.

ACADEMICS AND PENTECOSTALISM

In a short time and from humble beginnings, Pentecostalism has entered the global stage and is thereby also gaining academical interest. A prevailing assumption in many Western societies, as well as within academia, was for long that religion would decline and eventually lose its significance as societies progressed and modernized.²⁵ Instead, the situation has developed in the other direction and religion is now seen as an important factor for change, which creates a new interest in studying links between religion and development. The growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America, Africa and Asia has led researchers to seriously examine the impact of the movement and its activities, and scholarly interest in Pentecostalism has been growing both among scholars within Pentecostalism and among those studying the movement from the outside.²⁶ In addition to theological, missiological, religious and church-historical studies, many studies on Pentecostalism have been made within sociology, anthropology, ethnology, economy, politics, environmental, philosophy and gender.²⁷

The new emerging field of religion and development are of particular interest here. As an example of the growing interest in this field is a new peer-reviewed journal, *Religion & Development*, which was published by Brill in 2022. In the

first issue, two out of five research-articles focus on Pentecostal development and in the inaugural editorial it is stated that “contributions focusing on non-mainstream religious actors and new religious movements, such as Pentecostalism [...] are particularly welcome.”²⁸

Siding with post-secular studies some suggest “Pentecostalism is avantgarde for a new way of thinking”.²⁹ It offers a sociological shift, breaking away from the dichotomy of church and state or religion and society as it claims that religion cannot be relegated to the private sphere. The boundaries considered to exist between spiritual-material, secular-sacred, individual-society, etc., are reconstructed with the result that the modernist conceptions of the world are rejected and faith is again considered a vital component in society.³⁰ Rather than seeing development as an additional concern attached to Pentecostalism, it is actually a central and integral feature of Pentecostal faith, a foundational thinking.³¹ Pentecostalism is a transforming movement and while being a subject itself, Pentecostalism also is becoming a lens or a discourse through which other fields can be studied.





DR CONGO / PHOTO: Annelie Edsmyr

A transformative movement

TRANSFORMING INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES AND SOCIETIES

Pentecostalism is characterized by the members seeing themselves as bearers of a revolutionary message, which has the power to change both people and societies. This self-image and worldview often lead Pentecostals to break with inhibiting traditional cultural practices. The concept of change is characterized by the belief that established and transformed individuals also create change in society. Several recent studies have shown that the intervention of the Pentecostal message into severely deprived communities unleashes powerful redemptive forces resulting in upward social mobility.³²

In a report from South Africa, researchers found that with their faith, congregants in Pentecostal churches in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban had gained greater self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect and a sense of personal agency. Among several other things, they had become more harmonious in family and other relationships including work relationships, improved work ethic and occupational success, gained an emphasis on the importance of education and become active in outreach and volunteer work in the community among the poor.³³

Engaging in activities such as reading together, reflecting on biblical texts, praying and being prayed for, often lead to changes where people begin to see themselves as valued individuals. Pentecostal believers thus seem to become natural and locally anchored agents of change. Their worldview, self-image and behaviours change as they begin to see themselves as belonging to God's people. They depart from fatalism and the sense of being a victim and they are given agency and purpose. In becoming part of a community and culture with a vision for restoration, they experience a cultural revolution that also creates local development.³⁴

Pentecostals emphasize that the individual must take active ownership and control over his or her own life. This includes everything from cultural habits and social relationships to economic and spiritual spheres of life. Believers are expected to live a holy life, distance themselves from evil, abstain from things like alcohol, tobacco and extramarital relationships, work hard and do what is right.³⁵ Pentecostals encourage one another to exert self-control, to set up goals and realize their life projects, and to plan and budget their time and money well. The Pentecostal message offers a spirit of entrepreneurship and optimism and is effective in bringing about dramatic changes in subjectivity, leading to equality and agency were the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers also becomes a reality. The experience of

speaking in tongues is therefore not only a symbol for erased ethnical, racial or and class distinctions, but it serves as "a critique to ministries that tended to be overly mediatory and hierarchical".³⁶

In the process of change, it is central to break with the past and the concept of repentance is essential for increased control over one's life situation. Through this type of proclamation, individuals get a chance to see themselves as new creations in Christ Jesus.³⁷ They are valued beings, created by God and now belong to God's people, with gifts, capacities and agency in their own hands. The idea of a God who can help and give hope creates an opportunity to dismantle mental blockings, while the inclusion in a community that has a clear mission in the world creates incitements for community involvement. An important aspect of the Pentecostals' ability to bring about change is that they can stimulate a change in the individual's self-concept and a belief in the possibility of making life better through hard work and prayer.

In her research, Dena Freeman speaks about "transformation of subjectivity" and defines three linked processes which lead to a radical transformation of people:

- 1 embedded transformation and empowerment of the individual,
- 2 a shift in values which offers moral legitimacy for behavioural changes that would otherwise collide with local practices and culture,
- 3 a reconstruction of social and economic relationships within family and society.³⁸

According to Freeman's research, the Pentecostal rhetoric seems to make people more engaged than secular NGOs' way of talking about poverty alleviation. In research literature on Africa and Latin America it is often suggested that Pentecostalism makes people develop an approach that promotes stability, thereby contrasting and counteracting failing, uncertain and flexible contexts, and supporting believers to handle poverty and adapt to uncertain conditions of informal economies and the insecure and flexible neoliberal labour market.³⁹ While not in any way perfect, Pentecostalism is an important actor that transforms and empowers individuals and a communitarian counterforce that promotes well-being in societies.



PENTECOSTALS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Focusing mainly on the materialistic, Western development theories have not succeeded to resolve problems of poverty and underdevelopment. According to the Pentecostal view, the cause of poverty is also spiritual, which imply that the solution must take spirituality into consideration.⁴⁰ In Africa, the Pentecostal doctrine of salvation extends beyond an inner spiritual and moral renewal and righteous living, to include salvation as “redemption from physical powers and structures that induce ill-health and poverty”.⁴¹ But salvation is even more than that. The Pentecostal view of the concept of salvation is communal and holistic, which makes Pentecostals highly engaged in social and economic issues. To fight sickness, Pentecostals pray for healing, but they also start hospitals. To fight poverty, Pentecostals pray for financial resources, but they also start businesses, etcetera. Human beings are not by nature rational economic agents but are also steered by things like beliefs, values and morality. While a modern secularized Western mindset has ridden itself of spiritual realities, Pentecostalism fits very well with, for example, African ontologies and sensibilities.⁴²

In Africa, Christian faith in Pentecostal churches “must always have a developmental agenda at its core because God delights in human flourishing”.⁴³ While some kind of improvement, well-being and idea of progress lies at the core of development, the concept is complex and connected with more of a discursal understanding than with a precise meaning.⁴⁴ As a materialistic economic approach is now replaced with a more holistic one, the approach that sees religion only in terms of its surface, rather than its inner values, becomes more and more questioned in its reductionism. A modernist understanding of religion as merely institutions

and structures simply lacks the tools to include the supernatural and the transcendent as central points of reference to beliefs and rituals, without which the institutions and structures have no real meaning to the religious person.⁴⁵

Pentecostalism is usually a grassroots movement among the poor and the Pentecostal practice could be termed “development from below” in contrast to government and international development agencies that can be seen as “development from above”.⁴⁶ It is also argued that Pentecostalism fosters

“sobriety, new economic priorities, discipline and initiative, an entrepreneurial spirit, optimism [...] which enables converts to cope with poverty and adapt themselves to unstable work conditions.”⁴⁷

By fostering strong personal moral commitments and taking the spiritual life of the individual seriously, Pentecostalism becomes a force in creating people-centred, transformative and sustainable development.⁴⁸ Alongside the concepts of cultural, economic, political and social capital, Pentecostalism also offers a “spiritual capital”.⁴⁹ Like social capital it can be used or misused, but it holds a worldview and a conceived reality that envisions an idea of the goal and vision of society, which very much defines the very concept of development itself.⁵⁰

PENTECOSTAL CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In the severe winter of 1914-15, the recently started Filadelfia Church in Stockholm provided warm breakfasts each day to 3,669 hungry individuals. A few years later in 1919, after the war, the same church provided relief for a thousand families in Vienna, Austria, due to terrible conditions there.⁵¹ The Swedish Pentecostal movement is a classic example of how Pentecostals spiritual focus is widened to also include the mobilization of resources in support of development and change among marginalized and vulnerable people both locally and internationally. Other historical examples are Ramabai's Mukti Mission in India in the early 1900s and Lillian Trasher's work among orphans in Egypt from 1911. Since early on, “Pentecostals were involved in socio-political criticism, including opposition to war, capitalism and racial discrimination”.⁵²

Today Pentecostal and Charismatic churches provide vital contributions in urban settings as well as in remote rural areas where they promote development among the socially and economically marginalised in.⁵³ Many churches invest immense commitment in improving life conditions in their local contexts, often without outside funding. This results in locally driven ownership, grassroots-involvement, independence, empowerment and agency, not least in distantly located places. Many churches see education as crucial and give financial support for school fees or run their own schools, provide skills training and foster entrepreneurship.⁵⁴

In Africa, many Pentecostal churches incorporate local religious and cultural knowledges, cosmologies and spiritual dimensions at the heart of their activities, thus contributing to the decolonisation of development.⁵⁵ Instead of depen-

ding on external funding and support from the Global North, local Pentecostal churches build development from below. Studies show that Pentecostal churches can be more effective than Western secular NGOs, both in results and finances, when it comes to bringing about social and economic development.⁵⁶ The key is transformational change from within. Pentecostal churches are embedded in local communities and enable their members to be involved in church activities. This results in “locally owned organisations, run by the people for the people, in a way that most development NGOs simply are not.”⁵⁷

Findings from a research project in Malawi which compared cost effectiveness of a traditional NGO project approach with a church and community mobilisation approach found that the latter was 27 times more cost-effective while having the same level of positive impact on the quality of life in the community.⁵⁸ The church-communities also took more deliberate and direct action to care for the most vulnerable and had greater belief in being able to solve problems for themselves in the future.

Being spiritually driven, Pentecostal churches all over the world implement activities that contribute towards sustainable development as they are outlined in the SDGs. Among many other things, churches offer scholarships for students, organise entrepreneurship workshops and have youth empowerment programmes, establish schools, training centres, clinics and hospitals, implement decentralised livelihood programmes focused on agriculture, build and manage universities, and offer micro insurance loan.⁵⁹

Pentecostalism and sustainable societies

PENTECOSTALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy is an ambiguous concept, partly an ideal and partly a reality.⁶⁰ For several years modern democracy has lost ground globally and is struggling against more authoritarian rules, practices and states.⁶¹ One of the challenges is that democracy must be understood as more than just a political method; it is also a culture in which citizens consciously participate in everyday democratic practices.⁶² In a quite noticed academic work, Robert Woodberry empirically shows that a certain kind of Protestant mission (what he calls "Conversion Protestantism") has been very positive for the spread of democratic development in the world.⁶³ While this sort of protestant mission is highly endorsed within much of Pentecostalism, Woodberry also concludes that Pentecostalism itself has "moderate positive impact on the spread and stability of democracy".⁶⁴ While his critic is mainly aimed at corrupted Pentecostal political leaders, Woodberry recognizes that Pentecostalism "has expanded civil society among groups and in areas where civil society has historically been weak. It seems to limit corruption at a nonelite level, lead to moderate economic and educational improvements among nonelites, and expand both religious liberty and the rights of

organisations outside state control."⁶⁵

While there is plenty of space for improvements, Pentecostal churches in many places help building strong, autonomous civil societies, and support and give room for democratic values in several ways, not least in training people to vote their leaders, teaching their members:

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that they are made in the image of God; that all people have dignity and are equal in God's sight; and that therefore they have rights - whether they are poor, women, or children. These values are fundamental to the creation of a democratic government, and therefore, at the very least Pentecostalism is preparing good citizens who may exercise their vote in ways that affect egalitarian values.⁶⁶

In Pentecostal churches there is a "desire for education, a strong work ethic, individualism, and an affinity with democratic politics" and the "roles and contribution of women in society are recognised and expanded, as is the importance of education for children".⁶⁷ In many churches, members learn to "elect their own officers [...] to exercise leadership themselves [to] run meetings, to conduct business, to handle money, to budget, to plan, to compromise, to formulate and 'own' a course of action, to implement it, to critique results, to change direction in the light of experience".⁶⁸ In Africa, Pentecostal churches "add value through the great attention given to trust and community relations; through the important role played by the leadership; through local roots and sources of accountability; through a commitment to values compatible with democratisation, good governance, and other forms of sustainability, as well as participation."⁶⁹ The indigenusness of local churches and Pentecostalism's distinct ability to self-organise, contributes in building a democratic ecology and form civil societies which, at least in some places, suggest the function of Pentecostal churches as "schools for democracy".⁷⁰

At the same time, some Pentecostal churches also have a too strong hierarchical governing. While a strongly centred leadership may release visionary and entrepreneurial power, it may also conflict with and even hinder the development of deeper democratic practices. On the local level, leaders are accountable to their congregation, and members who do not approve of what is happening in their church are free to leave whenever they like.⁷¹ But Pentecostals also need to deepen their democratic reflections on a structural level. Fighting corruption, offering transparency, creating space for dialogue, seeking peaceful negotiations and building trust are democratic key elements and societies all over the world need to strengthen these ideals. Pentecostal churches might be important actors to cooperate with in this regard.



PENTECOSTALISM AND GENDER EQUALITY

Most Pentecostal believers worldwide are women.⁷² In the philosophy of Aristotle in Antiquity Greece, a woman was seen as a second-rate human being. This thought entered into the Catholic Church through the theological thinking of Thomas Aquinas in the High Medieval Period, but Pentecostals have never accepted such an idea. Women have since the very beginning been at the forefront of the Pentecostal movement as teachers, missionaries, evangelists and apostles. We have already mentioned how Lucy Farrow was key in sparking the Azusa Street Revival. In 1923, Aimee Semple McPherson founded the first Foursquare church in Los Angeles, USA, a church that is now a global denomination with more than 8.8 million members in over 67,500 churches across more than 150 nations.⁷³ From the very start of Pentecostalism,

” women were active as both indigenous leaders and missionaries on every continent where the force of renewal was felt.⁷⁴

But parallel to many positive examples, Pentecostal churches also have a history of silencing women, and structures exist that have inhibited women’s involvement. While Pentecostals in general do not embrace many aspects of secular solutions from feminist criticisms, the reasons for that criticism may often be relevant and important. It is vital to examine what cultural ideas are imported from other religions and from local, regional, national or international secular mindsets. While some churches tend to stress moral obligations of women towards men, men’s moral obligations towards women need to be addressed as well. At the heart of Christianity lay the concept of equal worth and a self-sacrificial giving to which men and women are called equally.⁷⁵

The fifth SDG of the 2030 Agenda calls upon countries to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls along with harmful practices such as violence against women and girls, including trafficking and sexual exploitation, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.⁷⁶ In many active ways, global Pentecostalism addresses human rights violations and has ministries to aid street children and youth, prostitutes, trafficking-victims, etcetera.⁷⁷ The

constant effort in Pentecostal churches towards economic, social and moral rehabilitation of families has meant that repented men have stopped living a profligate and irresponsible life, and restoring the core family has been important in also restoring women. A study from Colombia shows that Pentecostalism strengthens the status of women in their own homes and when men reduce their “machismo” culture, strength is given to women’s voices instead.⁷⁸ In a study on the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God, both men and their families often succeed better financially when the men are converted and “money once spent on drinking and womanising is now invested in the home, particularly in education”.⁷⁹ A “dangerous masculinity” is replaced by a “born-again masculinity” and circumstances for women and children, not least girls, are radically improved. Research in Brazil has also shown that “Pentecostalism re-directs women’s primary responsibility away from spouses and families towards God, which encourages individuation and ‘transforms women into active, responsible agents’”.⁸⁰ In India, “Pentecostal Dalit women are defining and owning a distinct identity as independent and active Christians”.⁸¹

Another example of women’s liberation to agency in Pentecostal contexts can be seen in their freedom to run organisations and businesses. Studies of entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa show that small and medium enterprises are significant for boosting economies and economic empowerment of female entrepreneurs. In a study from South Africa, Pentecostal women have two key advantages, in church they gain familiarity with the masculine rhetoric of the corporate world and they are not restricted to just being “wives, mothers, and homemakers but can also excel on their own in professional society”.⁸² In Nigeria, some of the most successful Pentecostal entrepreneurs in the nation today are women.⁸³

Women and agency in the Pentecostal community.



ETHIOPIA / PHOTO: Linus Linbro

” Pentecostalism re-directs women’s primary responsibility away from spouses and families towards God, which encourages individuation and ‘transforms women into active, responsible agents’.⁸⁰

PENTECOSTALISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber observed that religious ideas drive economic change and he discussed how protestant ethics matched the logic of capitalism where rational work gives profit that is reinvested.⁸⁴ Pentecostals believe redemption gives the individual a lift also in form of upward social mobility that could be said to take place with a “revised Protestant ethic that emphasizes a frugal lifestyle, disciplined habits of consumption, builds self-confidence, and thereby encourages risk-taking in business ventures”.⁸⁵ The Pentecostal faith empowers the individual and encourages creativity, entrepreneurship, pluralism, choice and competition, things that all fit with the market driven liberal economy of our time.

In South Africa researchers write that Pentecostalism “have indeed protected the family, the home, and the personal spheres of millions of people [and] has helped to insulate growing segments of the population from the effects of severe socioeconomic alienation.”⁸⁶ Religion seems to protect people from political and economic stress and churches in Latin America as well as Africa help members to succeed financially.⁸⁷ By promoting hard work, saving and a limitation on certain types of unproductive consumption, the Pentecostal faith “leads people to participate, and succeed, in the capitalist economy”.⁸⁸ Charity and international aid is replaced by social enterprises where economic agency is activated in individuals and in the local society. In churches, people can get information on how to look for a job, how to apply and how to handle an interview. They can also obtain basic administrative skills, and with more responsibilities even management skills.⁸⁹ Pentecostal churches are also involved in crime prevention and the mentality of poverty is attacked in several constructive ways as Pentecostalism has the ability to offer a sense of hope, purpose and mission that becomes a powerful transforming power.⁹⁰

In South Korea the economic growth of the nation occurred at the exactly same time as Christianity began to spread quickly.⁹¹ In 1958 the Yoido Full Gospel Church, the largest single church congregation in the world with more than 800,000 registered members, was founded in Seoul.⁹² Its founding pastor, David Yonggi Cho, preached a theology of the threefold blessing of salvation, financial prosperity and healing that “became an effective contextualizational means of bringing Pentecostalism into Korea”.⁹³ It would be important to further explore the links between these processes.

In Africa, the Pentecostal emphasis on transformational leadership is essential for developing human capital that encourages economic growth. Almost all Pentecostal churches embrace prosperity in their theology, but while the degrading term “prosperity gospel” suggests that ministries deceive poor members of their money, many pastors and

churches see wealth as a tool for serving the common good rather than a way towards personal enrichment.⁹⁴ Both positive and problematic aspects are found within this term, and researchers speak of a plurality of prosperity theologies.⁹⁵

Today, as the concept of prosperity theology put “significant emphasis on social and economic development”, it is striking how well Pentecostals adapt to the neo-liberal economic system and show ability to become both functional and beneficiary in modern socioeconomic life.⁹⁶ But neo-liberal economy does not ensure economic growth to all and in the wake of the decentralization of service provision to meet conditions of the free market reform in neoliberal states, Pentecostals also address social needs.⁹⁷ While valid criticism must be kept against corrupted and selfish Pentecostal leaders growing rich at the expense of impoverished church members, prosperity gospel has contributed through the Pentecostal churches, to real socio-economic development. In Nigeria, Pentecostal churches initiate microfinance initiatives, conference events, business schools and entrepreneurship education to build capacity in the small and middle-segment of businesses.⁹⁸

While individual economic empowerment and entrepreneurship is connected with spiritual transformation some Pentecostal pastors recognize

“that collective prosperity will be attained only if the structural and environmental causes of poverty and inequality are addressed.”⁹⁹

Pentecostals need a deeper commitment to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns in order to fight the negatives of materialism, individualism and over-consumption driven by neo-liberalism. And while maybe most Pentecostals accept the economy on its own terms and work within existing economical systems, there are also those who want to transform the economy with the inclusion of a moral dimension, a value-driven economy and economic justice, making “shalom central to the new economy and community”.¹⁰⁰

Sustainability on the agenda.



NEPAL / PHOTO: Matilda Nyamai



PMU MEETING / PHOTO: Mikael Jägerskog

PENTECOSTALISM AND POLITICS

The involvement of Pentecostals in changing socio-political structures has long been a matter of quite some ambivalence. One perspective has been that “political structures are often seen as part of the ‘evil world’ with which Pentecostals are exhorted to have nothing to do”.¹⁰¹ Such position should be seen in the context of a historic reality where Pentecostals, often poor and coming from the margins of society, have experienced much distance, neglect and rejection from those in power. But as Pentecostalism have expanded in number of adherents as well as in width of social strata, their relation to political power has changed. Focusing on the empowerment of the individual, Pentecostals have become more engaged in thinking about political theology with the aim to transform entire nations.¹⁰²

While it is not possible to distinguish a consistent doctrine around political design, Pentecostalism, like Christian faith in general is not apolitical by nature.¹⁰³ In the book, *The politics of Jesus*, one of the most influential theological works in the 1900s, the author points to the fact that though

not being a politician, Jesus still discussed issues of power, status and right relations in society.¹⁰⁴ Amos Yong refers to this as “prophetic politics”, claiming that Pentecostals are “indirectly political, but nonetheless political for all that”.¹⁰⁵ In Nigeria, prominent Pentecostal leaders have spoken out against the corruption in the national oil industry and the governmental misuse of power.¹⁰⁶ Prayer led to prophetic politics that in turn became political protest that brought change in the society. In Nigeria, churches are fighting “for the emergence of a more just and equitable society, where corruption will be banished, human rights promoted and peace and tranquillity well established”.¹⁰⁷

Studies in the Teso district of Eastern Uganda also challenge the idea that the development depends on the state and secular agencies and suggest that “sustainable change depended on local churches and organisations”.¹⁰⁸ This put Pentecostalism in an interesting position. While its prophetic task is to speak truth to power, the increasing numbers of Pentecostals in many nations start looking for Pentecostal

individuals to accept governmental responsibilities. This raises a tension between collective theological values held by the church with a universal understanding of what is on God’s heart and the individual Pentecostal politician who must manage with what is politically possible. Pentecostal individuals may also use their connections with influential churches for their own agenda and of course Pentecostal politicians are exposed to corruption as much as any other politician.

On the community level the “Christian citizenship” emphasizes morality and ethics and is primarily linked to the Biblical vision of Shalom.¹⁰⁹ Grace Milton claims in her book *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion* that the concept of Shalom, as a holistic wholeness, characterizes the Pentecostal view on repentance, and that Shalom is God’s primary purpose for his creation. The Pentecostal vision of the good society thus stretches out from the Church and encompass society at large, as well as the whole creation. This view puts a limit to an overly nationalistic focus and

problematizes political visions seeking national gains at other nations’ expense.

Pentecostals contribute to the development of new social and political landscapes in many countries today. Heeding Jesus’ words in the Sermon of the Mount, Pentecostals believe that values such as justice, peace and lasting relationships are meant for society at large to enjoy and members of Pentecostal churches are sometimes encouraged to engage in politics.¹¹⁰ One example is the *African Forum on Religion and Government* (AFREG), founded in 2006 in Nigeria by a Pentecostal pastor with the vision “to see Africa transformed into a premier continent based on God-centred values.”¹¹¹ Participants from 27 African countries attended AFREG’s inaugural conference in Abuja, including the Nigerian and Burundian heads of states. Other similar initiatives have been started as well.¹¹²

PENTECOSTALISM AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is defined in the Brundtland Commission's report, *Our Common Future* from 1987, as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹¹³ This definition focuses on ecology in the sustainability concept as being fundamental to the 2030 Agenda. But there are also tensions between the socioeconomic and the ecological goals in the Agenda and SDGs and the materialistic approach is in dire need of more holistic concepts.¹¹⁴

In the environment-movement the Christian worldview has not seldom been presented with a biblical God who gave humankind the freedom to subdue the earth and “no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes”.¹¹⁵ The centre of ecocritical criticism is human-kind's excessive use of the earth's resource. The idea of perpetual progress underlying this misuse of earth's resources is however an Enlightenment idea, not a Christian thought. In theological circles the concept of “subdue” or “rule” is instead linked to the idea of maintaining and nurturing rather than dominating and abusing. Some theological ideas that are presently discussed in relation to ecology among Christians and Pentecostals are for example the creation as a prophetic witness to God's work in the world, the creation mandate for believers to stewardship and the need for Christ's followers to participate in God's work of reconciliation and renewal of all things.¹¹⁶ An important aspect is the renewed eschatological discussion where hope for the coming Kingdom of God gives motivation to take action in the Anthropocene age.¹¹⁷

However, there is also a multilevel ambivalence in relation to the ecological realities in the global Pentecostal community. One researcher notes that in many contexts, Christians “are not environmental activists and environmental activists are not Christian”.¹¹⁸ In American surveys Pentecostals are consistently found to be among the least concerned with ecological issues and similar results can be found in Australia.¹¹⁹ In Western Europe, the Pentecostals also have a low profile regarding social justice and ecological care and in Brazil “Pentecostal affiliation and doctrinal beliefs are not correlated with environmental concern”.¹²⁰ While neo-Pentecostal churches with a prosperity-gospel may contribute to economic development in many nations, the tension mentioned above between the socioeconomic and the ecological is obvious. With a growing awareness, Pentecostal theologians and thinkers have started to request a more “radical neo-Pentecostal environmentalism in the light of theological and ethical obligations”.¹²¹ The need for a holistic worldview-analysis is important and the concept of shalom, mentioned above, is vital for a biblically based holism as its

reconciliation includes the physical and emotional as well as the social and spiritual, embracing social justice, gender equality and peace.¹²²

Some Pentecostals have been involved with ecological issues since long, like in Ecuador and Chile where ecology has been of interest among Pentecostals for decades.¹²³ The Pentecostal African Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe have included “a religiously based ecological ethic” in their worldview since the middle of the 1900s.¹²⁴ In South Korea, an NGO founded by Pentecostal pastor Dr David Yonggi Cho, with the support of the city of Seoul, created a “model environmental garden in Seoul as an educative program to teach on environmental issues”.¹²⁵ Cho also included ecological thinking in his theology. In Ghana, pastors have publicly opposed things like illegal mining and other such practices, not least due to degradation of the environment.¹²⁶ And the Church of Pentecost in Ghana (with some three million members, about ten percentage of the Ghana population, have run national campaigns against activities that degrade the environment by presenting Bible Studies to members and informing the Ghanaian community at large.¹²⁷ In Burundi, Tanzania and Kenya, there are Pentecostal denominations that have planted trees and worked with environmental issues for long.¹²⁸

Pentecostals theologies and practices are rooted all over the world in local settings and spiritually motivated Pentecostals have “begun to articulate a distinctive Pentecostal ecology” with concern for the “ecological and eschatological well-being of creation”.¹²⁹ The ecological and climate crisis calls “for deep moral, psychological, political and spiritual changes”, and while Pentecostals need to step up in theology and commitment, they also carry great potential and a substantial hope to make vital difference to the issues of environment and climate change.¹³⁰ Many of the Pentecostal adherents are the poor that live in the midst of environmental destruction and in the same way Pentecostals have already shown great solidarity with the poor, they may also rise to the environmental and climate related challenges and take a strong solidary position for God's creation.

Well-being
of creation.



PENTECOSTALISM AND PEACE

The two most fundamental global ecological problems are the overconsumption by the industrialized world and the growing militarization.¹³¹ In a recent report from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the authors highlight the “twin crises” of our time, the escalating security crisis and the environmental crisis, stating that:¹³²

“[...] between 2010 and 2020 the number of state-based armed conflicts roughly doubled (to 56), as did the number of conflict deaths. The number of refugees and other forcibly displaced people also doubled, to 82.4 million. In 2020 the number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads increased after years of reductions, and in 2021 military spending surpassed \$2 trillion for the first time ever.”¹³³

Pentecostals have a long history of taking a stand for peace. Before World War I the Assemblies of God in the USA declared that “we cannot conscientiously participate in war and armed resistance which involves the actual destruction

of human life”.¹³⁴ Similar statements could be found in most other Pentecostal denominations at the time. Pacifism was seen as a moral sign of the restoration of the true apostolic faith and the church also saw itself having a prophetic mission to unmask social evils. Pacifism became a “moral critique of the existing sinful order” and a way to defend the inviolable value of human life.¹³⁵ The passion for Jesus as the Prince of Peace and his Kingdom was greater than any nationalism. But after World War II this strong commitment to peace was however compromised, not least by nationalistic patriotism.¹³⁶ The structured theological framework as well as peace practices were lost, but many Pentecostals are still passionate advocates of peace.

The Panzi Hospital in DR Congo treats and supports survivors of sexual violence and in 2018 the Pentecostal pastor and gynaecologist, Dr Denis Mukwege, together with the human rights activist Nadia Murad, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, thus putting a face on Pentecostal commitment to peace. Healing women who have been hurt by sexualized violence is at the heart of Mukweges ministry. In his Nobel lecture, Mukwege also challenged the unregulated materialism of our time, which fuel conflicts like the one in DR Congo:

“When you drive your electric car; when you use your smart phone or admire your jewellery, take a minute to reflect on the human cost of manufacturing these objects. As consumers, let us at least insist that these products are manufactured with respect for human dignity. Turning a blind eye to this tragedy is being complicit.”¹³⁷

An important aspect of the peacebuilding process is the inclusion of religious and spiritual capital that generate social capital. While social capital is largely about social organisation, religious capital is visible in concrete actions and resources invested by faith-based communities. This is in turn driven by spiritual capital which supplies the motivational foundation in form of beliefs, conceptions and values.¹³⁸ When Pentecostals base their actions for peace on a transformed self-perception by which they see themselves as people with God given agency they can act confidently in processes for building peace and generating trust.

In Kenya the Free Pentecostal Fellowships (FPFK) employ several strategies to build peace. They have initiated livelihood projects to address the lack of resources and created platforms for dialogues.¹³⁹ They have also constructed a system with peace monitors that alert peace teams in the event of escalating conflict. The peace teams in turn mobilizes law enforcement, local leaders and other peacebuilding actors to stop conflicts to turn into violence. In Nigeria, Pentecostals have taken on a mediation role to help to reduce tensions and prevent violence. *The Young Ambassadors for Community Peace and Inter-Faith Foundation* (YACPIF) was founded in the city of Jos by a Pastor of Assemblies of God who has trained thousands in conflict-resolution skills.¹⁴⁰ Pentecostal responses in Nigeria to violence and violation of religious freedom have included interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding initiatives, and programs that engage both Muslims and Christian youth.¹⁴¹

There is a raised awareness today within Pentecostalism to look deeper into peace issues, but much more needs to be done to recover and develop theological reflections and reactivate peaceful practices.





Concluding words

PENTECOSTALISM AND THE 2030 AGENDA

With the 2030 Agenda, the discourse on development has shifted from a narrow concept of economic growth in what was seen as “developing countries” in the Global South, to an awareness that challenges such as climate change, global health, increasing inequalities, conflicts and shrinking space for civil society are relevant for all societies in the world. The conversation has moved through the concept of human development, in which human well-being and social transformation were central, towards a search for more holistic ideas where the concept of sustainability is fundamentally rooted in an ecological sustainability widened to include economic, social, and political dimensions.¹⁴² This radical shift requests new reflections on what development means and to whom and where it applies. The present secular discourse however still misses the spiritual dimension of development. In the UN agenda and its resolution on the SDGs, religion and religious communities are more or less completely omitted.¹⁴³

More than 80% of the world’s population are affiliated with a religion, and while a majority of North Americans and Europeans give religion a diminishing role, the opposite is seen in many other parts of the world.¹⁴⁴ A transformational paradigm shift is necessary in the social, ecological and financial

realms. Fundamental values and spiritual orientations are at stake, which means that “the moral and spiritual basis for a new concept of development can only come from bodies which reach deeper than secular governmental agencies”.¹⁴⁵ Jørgen Thomsen points out:

”
[R]eligion, beliefs and ideas can promote change, but religion, beliefs and ideas can also block change ... However, the fact that religion is ambiguous just proves that it is important: it can either be conducive to development or block development, but it is never irrelevant to development.”¹⁴⁶

While many donors within development aid have started to give increased recognition to religion as part of development, a wider acceptance of faith-driven initiatives also needs to take place.¹⁴⁷ From an economic viewpoint the expected cost to reach the 17 global development goals in the 2030 Agenda by far exceeds the total aid given worldwide. Assistance from faith-based organisations and churches are therefore absolutely necessary for the goals to be obtained.

In the 2030 Agenda, the world is called upon to embrace sustainable holistic development. While Pentecostals have much to learn, they also have much to offer. To Pentecostals, real transformative change, spiritual as well as social, takes place when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ and is activated with and through a local church. Jesus had a global mission to present good news to the poor, liberty for the bruised and preach the gospel to the whole creation.¹⁴⁸ This is also the Pentecostal passion, and as it has been shown in this research overview, Pentecostals are highly involved in many issues concerning the well-being of individuals, families, nations and the globe as a whole, from a holistic perspective.

Considering that 2030 is only a few years away, we have no time to lose in the fight against world poverty and vulnerability. All constructive and progressive forces are needed for us to succeed in the global fight against injustice and poverty. As PMU and Pingst, we are convinced that the global Pentecostal movement can and should play an important role in that battle.

About PMU

PMU is the Swedish Pentecostal Churches' development and humanitarian aid organisation. PMU is a rights- and faith-based organisation working in about 30 countries. PMU is part of the Swedish Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches (Pingst), and is also part of the global Pentecostal movement. The main mission is to mobilise international and Swedish partners in the work of reducing all forms of poverty, exclusion, upholding democracy and human rights. In humanitarian aid the goal is to save lives, alleviate suffering and restore human dignity. PMU's strategic priorities and contribution to Agenda 2030 is described in PMU's Compass.

www.pmu.se

About Pingst Sweden

Pingst Sweden, the Swedish Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches (Pingst – Pingst fria församlingar i samverkan) is the national organisation of the Swedish Pentecostal movement. Pingst Sweden is part of the international Pentecostal movement and is a member of the Pentecostal European Fellowship (PEF) and World Pentecostal Fellowship (WPF). Pingst Sweden's vision is to "Be known for our genuine love for Jesus and people, and to be a clear and respected voice in society and a movement that never stops growing". Nearly all of the Swedish Pentecostal Churches are cooperating with sister churches abroad, in around 100 different countries, with church building activities, development work or with humanitarian interventions. In Sweden the Pentecostal movement has special branches for Rehabilitation of drug and alcohol addicts, Youth work, Training of pastors and other leaders, Church development, Education, Relationship and Social awareness.

www.pingst.se



KENYA / PHOTO: Andreas Alexandersson

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