Towards a Global Vision of the Church

Explorations on Global Christianity and Ecclesiology
Faith and Order Paper 234

EDITED BY
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Towards a Global Vision of the Church
Volume I

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Introduction

Faith and Order Studies on the Church since *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has been concerned with ecclesiology since its founding in 1948. The Commission on Faith and Order has worked on ecclesiological issues for decades. One can go back to the mid-1970s and find the commission working on three important Church-dividing issues that are still relevant today. It published its influential work on these issues, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* in 1982.¹ Over the years that followed, churches from around the world responded to BEM, offering valuable contributions to the first convergence document in the history of the commission.²

As these consultations began, the fifth World Conference on Faith and Order convened in Santiago de Compostela on 3-14 August 1993, under the theme “On the Way to Fuller Koinonia.” The conference celebrated the convergence brought thus far to the churches through the BEM process and affirmed the work that Faith and Order had done to provide a common creed (the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) as testimony to a shared apostolic faith.³ It urged the churches to receive these studies. With koinonia on the minds of all participants, and with the recent changes that had taken place throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the topic of the Church, its diversity, its boundaries, and such issues as proselytism became important points of discussion and resolution. The conference noted, for instance, that “Concrete challenges stand before the churches,” and it urged Faith and Order to “continue to explore how to confess our common faith”; it also emphasized the need for a deeper understanding of the Church and its apostolic character in light of the Holy

It went on to note that the churches needed to work more diligently on the mutual recognition of baptism, and it encouraged them to do so. That led Faith and Order to engage in further study of baptism; nearly two decades later (in 2011), the commission published *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*, which went a long way towards helping to resolve many of the as yet unresolved issues on that topic.

The Faith and Order Commission subsequently established a study group to address *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. The commission published its findings in 1998. The study group had found the topic daunting, and while it offered a preliminary glimpse of the Church, it found many points that remained unresolved. Consequently, the study group offered its findings; however, it placed the unresolved issues into 15 separate boxes, constituting roughly 25 percent of the document, for future members of Faith and Order to consider.

In 1998, the commission received the work of its predecessors as an important beginning that provided an outline for understanding the Church and gave insight into many of the places that needed further attention. Thus, the newly constituted commission decided to form a new study group to pick up the study of the Church once again. It made three things clear. First, the new study group should take into account a number of responses that had been received regarding *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* from a variety of churches as well as individuals. Second, it should focus on the Church’s mission. Third, it should attempt, through its concerted study, to resolve as many of the issues in the boxes as possible. The new study group succeeded in eliminating some of the boxes (such as koinonia, apostolic faith, hierarchy, and communal, personal, and collegial), though it sometimes made certain boxes longer. In 2005, it published *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, a more coherent statement that did indeed approach a convergence document much more than the previous one.

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had done.

Once again, a newly established set of commissioners received this paper with appreciation, but it was clear that while progress had been made in resolving some of the previously unresolved issues, enabling Faith and Order to gain further perspective on the Church, work on the Church needed to continue. A new ecclesiology study group was therefore assigned the task of continuing to work for a true convergence text, taking into consideration the many written responses that those who had seen the earlier documents had made. Whenever possible, the commissioners included what they believed to be the majority opinion on all subjects considered.

The result was the 2013 publication *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*, a significant step forward in the process of finding greater convergence regarding the Church. This time, areas in which it was still not possible to find full agreement or consensus were placed in italics and posed as questions to readers.

Meanwhile, massive changes in the Church were taking place around the world, especially throughout the global South. The “centre of gravity” in the Christian world had “shifted inexorably Southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.” Thousands of newer churches—Evangelical, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches, as well as African Instituted/Independent Churches (AICs)—had sprung up, especially since the mid-20th century. At the same time, many historic Protestant and Anglican churches faced growing problems that challenged their futures. The WCC decided that it needed to study these new realities and reach out to these newer churches.

**External Factors Contributing to Further Study of the Church**

As early as 1991, the WCC assembly in Canberra passed a multi-part resolution that called for developing closer relationships with many of the churches that had not previously expressed interest in the WCC. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches were singled out in this resolution. The following year, the WCC executive committee named Huibert van Beek, director of the Office of Church and Ecumenical Relations, to develop these relationships as his primary task.

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Much of van Beek’s work focused on Classical Pentecostal, Independent Pentecostal, and Charismatic leaders and congregations; he also reached out to a range of African Independent Churches and to megachurch pastors. Van Beek began by convening a series of consultations; these brought leaders and scholars from these groups into conversation with a small number of WCC leaders to explore various possibilities for further exchange.\textsuperscript{13}

During this period, the WCC general secretary, Dr Konrad Raiser, worked with the central committee and various commissions and committees on a “Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC” statement that he hoped the central committee might adopt on behalf of the WCC.\textsuperscript{14} Raiser’s vision included the idea that the WCC could make a substantial step forward towards greater Christian unity by convening a forum that would include non-member churches. The draft of this document placed before the central committee read:

The WCC should invite those bodies who now may send official observers to the Assembly – other ecumenical organizations, Christian World Communions, churches not now holding WCC membership and international Christian organizations of various kinds – to join in creating a new “Forum of Christian Churches and Ecumenical Organizations” or “Forum of the Ecumenical Movement” (the actual name would be chosen together by the participating bodies).\textsuperscript{15}

Such a move, Raiser argued, would enable the WCC to broaden the ecumenical table. He believed it was important to work more closely with the


\textsuperscript{15} World Council of Churches, “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision.”
Roman Catholic Church, which is a full member of the Faith and Order Commission but is not a member of the WCC. He also wanted to find a way for Evangelicals, Holiness Christians, Pentecostals, and others to participate in ongoing conversations with the WCC. The world, he contended, was growing more dangerous for all Christians; Raiser believed that the ecumenical table should be broadened so that the churches would not be left to their own limited, individual responses but could find a way to speak with a unified voice.

Raiser explored various ways for WCC member churches, Evangelicals, Holiness Christians, Pentecostals, and Catholics to sit together and deliberate on the problems facing churches around the world. For example, he convened a consultation at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey (26-29 August 1998) to explore such a possibility with various ecumenical leaders. The group agreed that the concern was worth considering, though they decided that more representation from those churches that were not WCC members was needed to join them in a second consultation. Raiser then suggested the names of several participants who could serve as a steering committee for the project.

The WCC assembly in Harare in 1998 took up the proposal of the initial Bossey consultation and cautiously encouraged the continuing development of the ecumenical forum then under consideration. A second consultation was convened at Bossey (20-22 August 1999), with half of the participants drawn from Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Independent churches and the other half coming from WCC member churches and the Catholic Church. With a trial consultation held at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California in September 2000, drawing about 35 participants from a range of Evangelical and Pentecostal groups, the steering committee believed the group was ready for a larger international gathering at Fuller. That meeting took place on 15-21 June 2002. The result of the meeting was a strong endorsement for what became the Global Christian Forum.

The Global Christian Forum was highly successful from the beginning. It drew the interest and participation of churches outside the ecumenical movement and churches within the ecumenical world of the WCC. This put many leaders in the WCC in direct contact with leaders in these other churches, many of them for the first time. It has since expanded these contacts through the Global Christian Forum’s three global gatherings (2007 in Limuru, Kenya; 2011 in

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Manado, Sulawesi, Indonesia; and 2018 in Bogota, Colombia). It has been particularly successful at engaging leaders from the Pentecostal World Fellowship and from the Organization of African Instituted Churches.

**Continuing the Search for a Common Vision of the Church**

Each of these publications, events, and organizations has been on the minds of many Faith and Order commissioners for several decades. Some members of the WCC may believe that prior to this round of Faith and Order, the nature and mission of the Church were fairly well in place and understood by the member churches. They affirmed the move towards developing, with more precision, a common vision of the Church and suggested that the end of that quest was becoming clear. Nevertheless, the fellowship of churches that are members of the WCC represents only a part of World Christianity. It does not include the vast majority of Christians around the world, especially from the global South, most of whom do not hold WCC membership. For Faith and Order to provide the churches of the WCC with a closer approximation to a common vision of the Church around the world, the commissioners believed that the commission also needed to listen to voices which had not yet been strongly or clearly heard in the conversation, both inside and outside the WCC membership, and ask how these churches view the Church.

Because the WCC member churches and many of these other churches have not interacted with one another, have frequently misunderstood one another based upon third-party critiques, and often speak of one another using stereotypes, the commission thought it important to reach out to them and ask them to explain how they understood the Church. The input received from these churches brought to the table a number of insights due to history, culture, experience, spirituality, theological development, and other factors that will need further discussion and discernment as to what role they might play in developing a more global future vision of the Church.

During the current round of Faith and Order discussions (2015–22), the commissioners working specifically on ecclesiology formed two groups. One focused its attention on the official responses sent to Faith and Order by churches reflecting on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. That group published these responses in two volumes.18 It also produced a third volume that identified and

explored key themes that emerged from the official responses\textsuperscript{19} and a fourth, shorter publication that included summaries and recommendations.\textsuperscript{20}

The second group, recognizing that so much of world Christianity had not yet engaged with the text of TCTCV or with this ecumenical conversation on ecclesiology … set out intentionally and proactively to engage more churches from regions and from traditions that represent some of the fastest-growing parts of global Christianity.\textsuperscript{21}

That group undertook the task of broadening the table of ecclesiological dialogue by going into more and wider conversations with ecclesiological perspectives from various regions (especially Asia, Africa, and Latin America), denominational families (such as evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and independent churches), and forms of being church (such as ecclesial movements, new forms of monasticism, and online churches) “which have not always been clearly or strongly part of discussions on the way to TCTCV, and whose understandings of ecclesiology we want to discover and to enter into dialogue with.”\textsuperscript{22}

**Broadening the Table of Conversation**

To engage in such a dialogue, the commission organized a series of encounters and interactions with representatives from these regions, denominational families, and forms of being church. In this way, these voices had the opportunity to engage in a lively dialogue on ecclesiology with Faith and Order, with TCTCV as a key tool for conversation, and to express their insights, contributions, constructive criticism, and self-understanding of ecclesiology


\textsuperscript{21} Faith and Order Commission, *What Are the Churches Saying About the Church?, §5.*

from their own perspectives.

This broadening of the dialogue has been a landmark initiative. It combined faithfulness to the traditional mandate of Faith and Order to work towards visible unity by continuing and expanding the work of the commission in the previous years with a fresh and creative way to disseminate the fruits of this work globally and engage in dialogue with voices representing millions of Christians around the world who had not been around the table for years. This broadening of the table is extremely strategic for at least four reasons.

First, it responds to a challenge that the WCC and Faith and Order have been facing for years, namely that a major part of World Christianity has not been represented (or has been underrepresented) in their work. At the time of this writing, the WCC represents about 580 million Christians, which is about one-quarter of the world Christian population. The Roman Catholic Church (which is a full member of the Commission on Faith and Order) represents about half of the global Christian population. This means that approximately one-quarter of World Christianity (more than half a billion Christians) has not been around the table of Faith and Order. A major part of this quarter represents some of the fastest-growing parts of global Christianity and is increasing, both in terms of demographics and in terms of influence; hence, their absence from the table of conversation is a major gap.

Second, this broadening of the table is important because it carries on the spirit of the ecumenical movement since its very beginnings: namely, to include the whole of World Christianity. Over the years, many churches that were in Edinburgh for the World Mission Conference in 1910, or in Lausanne for the first World Conference on Faith and Order in 1927, eventually left the WCC. Many other churches, which did not even exist back then, never joined the WCC in the first place. Over time, this led to that half a billion Christians who are not engaged in Faith and Order work.

Furthermore, a major part of those churches does not even wish to have membership in the WCC or Faith and Order; in fact, many of them have been vocally critical of the WCC for decades. This broadening of the table does not mean that these churches will become members of the WCC or Faith and Order; it means creating opportunities such as consultations that will function as spaces to hear them and interact with them. The spirit that gave birth to the ecumenical movement was a spirit of engagement with the whole of World Christianity; thus re-engaging with the whole of World Christianity is not just a matter of

relevance (so that the work of Faith and Order is up to date with the latest developments of what is happening in the world) but also a matter of faithfulness to our ecumenical tradition.

Third, this broadening of the table is important because it carries on the task that the WCC undertook in recent decades, as described above. Just as the WCC played a key role in establishing opportunities for interaction outside its structures (such as through the founding of the Global Christian Forum), it also needed to establish such opportunities within its structures (such as these consultations organized by Faith and Order). Of course, the former are not substitutes for the latter (and vice versa); neither do the consultations replace the traditional Faith and Order work. They complement and enrich one another. Furthermore, these consultations have been an opportunity for closer cooperation between Faith and Order and other WCC commissions, such as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, and hence they functioned as opportunities for synthesis, not only in terms of hearing from more voices outside the WCC but also further integrating the work done inside WCC commissions.

Fourth, a major task of all organizations (especially of pre-eminent global organizations carrying out world-class work in their fields) is to actively seek to respond to the latest developments and provide cutting-edge information about what is going on in the world in their area of expertise. If they do not do that, they fail in a core part of their mission. Imagine, for example, the state the world would have been in if, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the various centres for disease prevention and control around the globe had decided that they would not search for treatments for the new coronavirus, as they had enough other global health issues to address. That would have been a massive double failure: a failure to serve humanity and a failure to stand up to their own world-class standards.

In a similar way, a pre-eminent global organization like the WCC cannot afford not to be up to date with what is going on in the world in its own field. Of course, in the case of the WCC, the mission of the organization is to serve humanity by working towards healing not of diseases but of broken church relationships. And, of course, the new global developments that the WCC has to address are not only negative things (like church divisions) but also positive developments (like Christian growth in many parts of the world) or trends that can have both positive and negative aspects (like an increasing global diversity which in some cases is enriching, in some cases is a challenge, and in other cases may be problematic).
Growing in Convergence

Understandably, following up such developments can feel overwhelming. How can one keep up with all these developments in an ever-changing world where change is not just continuous, but also accelerating? Why not just focus on the part of World Christianity that is already participating in Faith and Order? If it took so many years to reach a level of ecclesiological convergence among just the churches that have traditionally been a part of Faith and Order, what will happen if the commission tries also to interact with half a billion Christians outside the WCC, with all their diversity? Does it run the risk of starting over again from scratch? These are legitimate questions that the commission takes very seriously.

Interestingly (and probably also surprisingly, to many), the recent Faith and Order consultations showed that this broadening of the table is leading to more convergence, not less. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, although many aspects of ecclesiology in these regions or denominational families seem distant from (or incompatible with) “traditional” ecclesiologies, a closer look at them reveals significant commonalities and similarities. This does not mean that real and deep differences do not exist; of course, they do. But the number of convergences outnumbers the divergences. There is a lot of significant common ground that, even though it does not appear initially, can be unearthed if one has the patience to dig deep enough. That common ground brings the different churches much closer than they may have anticipated before these consultations.

Second, this broadening of the table offers opportunities to build convergence, not just on many issues which had already been identified as points of convergence by TCTCV, but also on issues that have not been addressed enough in the past, or even on issues that have been areas of divergence among WCC churches. For example, many of the official responses to TCTCV written by WCC member churches observed that TCTCV relies heavily on the institutional aspect of the Church, at the expense of not focusing enough on its spiritual aspect.24 Or that it says too many things about ordained ministry, but

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few things on the ministry of the laity. The consultations held by Faith and Order with churches outside the WCC offered opportunities to reframe and discover ways in which TCTCV could achieve a broader balance on many issues, including the above. Such contributions are important in the quest for further convergence, and some of them could provide a breakthrough in areas where TCTCV had reached a deadlock.

Third, the truth is that many of these voices from outside the WCC reflect a diversity that also exists, to a certain extent, even within and among many WCC member churches. Diversity is not only something “out there”; it is also “in here.” For example, charismatic trends are found not only in Pentecostal churches, but even within mainline WCC member churches. Quite often, churches are puzzled about how to deal with them. It may be that engaging in dialogue with Charismatic theologians from around the world can help us understand better how to engage with charismatic trends within our own churches. Hence, it can be a positive contribution—not only in our multilateral dialogues but also in our internal denominational discussions.

The same is true for numerous other aspects of church life as well. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that pretty much all churches around the world were much more diverse than one would have realized or wanted to acknowledge. The solution is not to ignore this diversity but to find ways to address it. Church history is a living testimony that there has never been a time that diversity did not exist: it has always been an inherent characteristic of the Church throughout the world. For that reason, the search for the limits of appropriate diversity is an important part of the ecclesiological conversation within Faith and Order work.

Fourth, this broadening of the table might reinforce not only the progress of the multilateral dialogue, but also the role of Faith and Order as a protagonist in the ecumenical movement. Realizing that a significant part of World Christianity would never think of approaching the WCC, the commission did not wait for them to take the first step but actively took the initiative to reach out to them. This was not just a pragmatic approach; it was also a gesture showing that the Commission on Faith and Order is not living amid nostalgia for the past but seeks to be an active and vibrant agent of the ecumenical movement today which understands the times and sets the stage where the world’s greatest and latest developments on ecclesiology are discussed.

Through this broadening of the table of conversation, Faith and Order has

brought various voices of World Christianity together in an environment where everyone had gifts to contribute and gifts to receive from each other, so that everyone can learn from each other in the process of a multilateral and mutual ecumenical gift exchange.  

Methodology

In the spirit of this approach, the ecclesiology study group of the Faith and Order Commission worked through the two groups mentioned above. The first group harvested the fruits of the official responses to *TCTCV*, while the second actively reached out to gather more. The members of the two groups worked in parallel and in close cooperation with each other, exchanging insights and papers at various points. As the process of the reception of papers on both ends was advancing, the mutual complementarity of the work of the two groups was becoming increasingly visible. That is why the published work of the two groups (the four volumes mentioned earlier which were published by the first group, and the current two volumes published by the second group) need to be read synthetically and in parallel with each other, as they are complementary and mutually enriching.

For example, the analysis of the 78 official responses to *TCTCV* shows that the vast majority of responses came from the global North and from churches or bodies which have traditionally been part of the ecumenical movement. Only ten responses came from churches and organizations that have, in different ways, a global presence. But at the same time, no responses came exclusively from Latin American or African contexts, and only one was from an exclusively Asian context. Similarly, there was only one response from a Pentecostal perspective, and four from an Evangelical point of view. This finding reconfirmed the urgency of the need to broaden the table of conversation and integrate further the work of the two groups.

The work of the group that undertook the broadening of the table included three major areas of focus. The first focused on broadening the table regionally by engaging in further dialogue with theologians from the global South. The second focused on broadening the table denominationally by exploring further Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and independent perspectives on ecclesiology. And the third focused on harvesting the fruits of the above and identifying key themes for the future. These two volumes follow the above series:

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the first volume includes the papers submitted in the process of the first area of focus, while the second volume includes the other two.

1. Broadening the table regionally: Engaging in further dialogue with perspectives from the global South

To interact with perspectives on ecclesiology from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the commission organized three consultations (one in each region). In each case, the speakers included theologians from the respective region in which the consultation was being held, as well as Faith and Order commissioners. This created multiple opportunities for fruitful dialogues between the commission and the churches represented at this broadened table.

In each consultation, TCTCV functioned as the starting point of the conversation: the Faith and Order commissioners presented the main points of TCTCV on the nature, ministry, and mission of the Church as seen from the perspectives of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant traditions. Then the regional theologians presented their papers, explaining how the churches that they represented viewed these issues, with TCTCV again as a point of reference. To facilitate the conversation, four key questions were sent to the contributors:

• In what ways does TCTCV reflect a vision or understanding of the Church, its mission, and its ministry from the perspective of the church about which you write?

• Where do you see clear differences?

• What is missing from TCTCV from your perspective?

• How can TCTCV expand a vision of the ministry of the Church from the perspective of the Church about which you write?

As one can observe, these questions have quite a few similarities to the ones included in the introduction of TCTCV, to which all churches were invited to respond. This was intentional, so that the papers of these consultations can be read in parallel with those of the official responses. In fact, even though the chapters included in these volumes do not constitute “official” church responses to TCTCV, they are in many ways an extension of the TCTCV reception process, thus raising the number of “official” and “unofficial” responses to TCTCV to more than a hundred. Most impressively, the number of responses to TCTCV from the global South included in this volume matches the number of responses that were published in the six volumes of the official responses to BEM from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
The first consultation focused on African perspectives on ecclesiology; it took place in Arusha, Tanzania, on 12 March 2018, during the 14th Conference on World Mission and Evangelism. Due to the limited time and nature of the meeting (a workshop within a much broader conference), that consultation could not cover every aspect of ecclesiology, so it focused on the issues of ministry and discipleship, which were also the theme of the conference. The panel comprised five Christian leaders from African Independent Churches or African Pentecostal churches and five Faith and Order members.

The second consultation, “Towards a Global Vision of the Church: Dialogue with Latin American Pentecostalism,” focused on Latin American perspectives on ecclesiology. It took place on 19-21 March 2019 at the Faculdade Unida de Vitoria in Brazil. Ten Pentecostal church leaders and theologians from Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador were invited to present Pentecostal understandings of the nature, ministry, and mission of the Church, with special reference to what TCTCV says on these issues. Six representatives of the Commission of Faith and Order also participated and had a mutually constructive and fruitful interaction with them.

The third consultation focused on Asian perspectives on ecclesiology. It was initially planned to take place in India in the summer of 2020; however, the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to change both its timing (eventually held on 5-7 July 2021) and its form (online). While this did not allow some opportunities that in-person meetings have, such as experiencing Asian churches in their native context, it allowed for the inclusion of multiple speakers who would otherwise not be able to participate. Eleven Asian theologians from India, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia presented Asian ecclesiological perspectives and engaged in fruitful dialogue with the Faith and Order members.

The papers submitted by theologians from Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the above consultations (as well as a few others received during the term of this commission) are being published in the first volume of this publication, along with some papers written by Faith and Order commissioners from these regions which present some broader distinctive elements on ecclesiology.

2. Broadening the table denominationally: Engaging in further dialogue with perspectives from Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and independent churches

Understandably, given what is described above, to some extent the regional and denominational broadening of the table coincided with each other. Quite a few of the theologians from the global South who participated in the above
consultations came from Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, or independent churches. Yet, in addition to these consultations, the commission took two more initiatives to supplement them and to explore further the perspectives on ecclesiology of these denominational streams.

The first task was to study some major official theological statements in which these streams were represented. For example, the official bilateral dialogues of Evangelicals and Pentecostals had already been discussing various ecclesiological topics. Some Faith and Order Commissioners analyzed these dialogues, along with other significant international theological statements, to examine what they said on ecclesiology in comparison with TCTCV and to harvest from them contributions that informed our multilateral ecclesiological conversation.

The second task was a consultation that took place at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in the United States on 26-30 June 2018, under the title “Towards a Global Vision of the Church.” The commission had the opportunity to interact with theologians who presented papers on Evangelical, Pentecostal, and independent perspectives on ecclesiology. Other papers presented in this consultation covered perspectives that were not limited to a certain denomination or region but to two major global realities that reflect how millions of Christians around the world experience the Church: perspectives from immigration churches and from persecuted churches.

The first chapters of the second volume of this work include most of the papers presented in the process of the above denominational broadening of the dialogue.

3. Harvesting the fruits and identifying key themes

The richness of theological reflection and interaction that has taken place during all the above consultations and meetings has been a significant contribution to the multilateral ecclesiological dialogue. The more the commission engaged in this broadened dialogue on ecclesiology, the more points of convergence were found; hence, these two volumes integrate a uniquely global and multi-voiced feedback, which is unearthing new areas of convergence.

For example, when consultations with Latin American and Asian Pentecostals discussed the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a significant amount of common ground with Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology was identified in the way they understand the role of the Holy Spirit, the supernatural, and miracles in the life of the Church.

Similarly, when the issue of evangelism and proselytism was addressed, an open and constructive discussion integrated theological, historical, and social elements that contributed to a better understanding of numerous parameters
involved. This then helped highlight the difference between proselytism and evangelism, and it showed that proselytism can be prevented if all churches involved take steps towards mutual respect and trust as well as engaging in preaching the gospel to those who had never heard it.

In another example, three theologians—one Orthodox, one Pentecostal, and one Evangelical—explored how they understand the connection between ecclesiology, pneumatology, and spirituality and how TCTCV could be enriched by a more robust integration of these three areas. The outcome of that comparative exploration was that many major convergences were identified: not just among them, but also with Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant theologians who participated in the conversation.

These are, of course, just some of the many examples identified; many more could be mentioned. One of the major challenges for the future work of Faith and Order is to continue unearthing points of convergence with these regions and denominational streams of World Christianity. This would enrich significantly the multilateral ecumenical conversation on ecclesiology and thus become a major contribution in the quest for further ecclesiological convergence.

Among the many contributions that emerged during the work, the commissioners of the ecclesiology study group identified ten key themes which deserved further exploration and wrote papers that addressed each issue directly, harvesting the fruits of these encounters and identifying contributions that could advance the ecclesiological conversation:

- baptism in water and in Spirit
- gifts of the Spirit
- authoritative teaching
- the role of experience
- mission and proselytism
- sources of theology
- sacraments
- ministry: threefold ministry and the role of laity
- exclusive denominationalism
- linking ecclesiology with spirituality and pneumatology
The analysis of these key themes can be found in the final chapters of the second volume of this publication. While each chapter is the work of a commissioner from a particular tradition, taken together these chapters reflect the insights and collective input of the entire group.

Considerations for Future Work

The work presented here towards broadening the table of conversation does not exhaust all perspectives from the various regions, denominational streams, and forms of being church with which the commission wanted to engage in deeper dialogue. The holding of one consultation in each region of the global South by no means exhausts the exploration of global South perspectives on ecclesiology. It would obviously be an understatement to imply that. The goal of these consultations was not to finish the broadening of the conversation (as if that were even possible) but to have it begun in each of these three global South regions. This should have begun many years ago. But even now, it has been crucial to make a first step in each region to open the way for the next commission to capitalize on this initiative and carry on the conversation. The same is true for the broadening of the table in engaging in dialogue with more denominations and forms of being church.

As we live in an ever-changing world, the commission needs to keep its eyes open to how new major global developments affect the ways that Christians around the world experience the Church. The COVID-19 pandemic is just one example of this. Most of the work held during the term of the current commission (2015–22) was done before the pandemic erupted; hence, although the consultations covered some of the latest developments in World Christianity, by the time of the publication of these papers, further new developments had already occurred.

For example, in the pre-COVID world, online churches were considered as a new perspective that affected only a minority of the churches in the world. When the pandemic erupted in 2020, the minority became a global majority. Even as these lines are being written (August 2022), while most countries of the world have returned to a certain normality as we move into a post-COVID era, it is also increasingly clear that the online (and hybrid) world is here to stay in many spheres of life.

Technological, social, and cultural developments which in other circumstances would take a decade or so to happen in society happened massively within just a couple of years, during the 2020–21 period. How did these affect the Church, both in its services and in the daily life of its members? In which
ways did the pandemic (or its developments) challenge or affect (consciously or subconsciously) the theology of some churches or how their members experienced new ways of church life? If the internet and the world of social media are a major area where ideas and influencers compete, how does the Church engage with them to address both its members and the world? If discipleship or witness is done online, does this change only the medium, or does it have broader implications as well? What does it mean to have a theology of incarnation in a virtual (or hybrid) world? How can the Church proclaim the truth of the gospel in a post-truth world? How can the Church be an agent of healing in a post-COVID world? How can the Church be an agent of justice and reconciliation in a world full of injustices, wars, and conflicts?

These questions are not easy ones to answer. At the moment of writing, we are still too close to all these events. The years ahead will be a much better opportunity to assess the implications of these (and many other) developments with a much clearer view.

If one thing is certain for the future, it is that Faith and Order must remain committed to keeping its eyes open to the latest developments around the world and how they affect the Church; as well, it must engage in a broadened dialogue that will both address more topics (such as the ones described above) and include more partners in dialogue from regions, denominational streams, and forms of being church like the ones presented in this work. Their inclusion is vital to have a holistic, universal, and contemporary-sensitive view of global Christianity. As the commission stated in one of its latest publications:

These regions and denominational families are the ones where the conversation now needs to develop further, so that Faith and Order may continue to be part of the growing understanding of what it means to be the Church within the contemporary context of world Christianity, and to do that with much broader participation. This is an essential, and urgent, part of the future ecumenical reception of *TCTCV*, and of the whole ecumenical movement. The deep awareness of the centrality of the Church and its ministry in God’s purpose for the human family and the whole creation is one of the most important gifts that the ecumenical movement can share with a Christianity that becomes both more strongly identified with the global South and more evangelical, charismatic, independent, and Pentecostal. The ecumenical movement, in turn, sorely needs the voices of those who have not historically been part of it, if it is truly to be, in every sense, ecumenical, and to speak within and for global Christianity. This is why, for example, *TCTCV* has now been translated into Portuguese, Indonesian, Swahili, and Mandarin. There is a strong
imperative to continue the conversation and to gather more voices, regions, denominational families, and traditions to be part of it, as we envisage future work.27

The editors recognize that while the churches and authors that have played a role in furthering this project have contributed substantially to our understanding of the Church, and while they have enabled us to move the discussion still further along and unearth further common ground and highlight new points of convergence, we do not yet hold a common vision of the Church. We still need to include many more voices in order to arrive at a truly global vision of it. Still, we offer these two volumes to all who are interested in the Church and especially to the next commission, as it continues to engage further in work on the Church. It is our hope that these volumes will enable the churches of the WCC—and, indeed, all churches—to gain a clearer vision of the Church in the 21st century and will make a substantial contribution to the unity of the Church for which Jesus prayed.

Rev. Dr Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. (Assemblies of God)
Rev. Dr Sotirios Boukis (Evangelical Church of Greece)
Dr Ani Ghazaryan Drissi (Armenian Apostolic Church, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin)

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27. Faith and Order Commission, *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church?* §5.
SECTION ONE

Perspectives from Asia
A Malaysian Pentecostal Perspective on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*  

Victor Lee

**Introduction**

Malaysia is a nation of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. It is estimated that for the year 2021, of the population of 32.7 million, 69.8% are “Bumiputera” (literally, “prince of the land”), 22.4% are Chinese, 6.8% are Indians, and 1% are from other minor ethnic groups. Only 9.2% of the people are Christian (inclusive of all streams of Christianity). The Bumiputera group consists of Malay and all Indigenous Peoples. Malaysia is an Islamic nation, with 61.3% of the population practising Islam. The religion is also tied with the Malay race; hence, all Malays are Muslim in Malaysia.

It is enshrined in the Federal Constitution, Article 3(1), that Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and that other faiths can be peacefully practised. Article 11(3) further elaborates that every individual has the right to practise their religion. However, in Article 11(4), the State and Federal Territories may enact rules to restrict the propagation of other religions to Muslims. The Syariah Court (the legal court for Islamic religious law) has also criminalized Muslims who attempted to become apostate. As such, the conversion of Muslims to other religions is practically illegal in Malaysia. Any discussion of ecclesiology in the Malaysian context ought to consider the political and religious climate of the nation.

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The Assemblies of God Malaysia (AG Malaysia) is a classical Pentecostal church affiliated with the Assemblies of God USA. An Assemblies of God missionary planted the first registered Assemblies of God church in 1933. Currently, there are 411 Assemblies of God churches with 860 credential members (pastors and church workers) in Malaysia.

This chapter is a response to The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV), based on the author’s observations as a member of AG Malaysia. The response is presented as answers to the four questions raised in the Faith and Order Asian consultation.

1. In what ways does TCTCV reflect a vision or understanding of the Church, its mission, and its ministry from the perspective of AG Malaysia?

AG Malaysia agrees with TCTCV’s vision of the Church, its mission, and its ministry. Concerning the vision of the Church, AG Malaysia entirely agrees with TCTCV that the Church, “as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participate in God’s work of healing a broken world” (§1). AG Malaysia believes that the empowerment of the Spirit enables the Church to fulfil its mission to evangelize the lost. The preaching of the gospel is an essential role of the Church. AG Malaysia upholds the mandate of making disciples for all believers.

AG Malaysia affirms the importance of the unity of the Church (TCTCV §8–10) and shares the conviction that scripture is normative and is the source of agreement about the Church as a classical Pentecostal church (TCTCV §12). AG Malaysia believes the scriptures as divine truth that governs all aspects of the Church’s beliefs and practices. AG Malaysia also upholds the role of the Holy Spirit, who continues to guide the communities of believers in understanding the scriptures. AG Malaysia believers expect the spiritual experiences recorded in the scriptures to be experienced today. Some pastors of AG Malaysia exercise the gift of prophecy under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is taught in AG Malaysia that such inspired speech must never contradict the scriptures. If it does, it will be deemed to be false.

The doctrine of the triune God is one of the 16 fundamental beliefs of AG Malaysia. As such, AG Malaysia affirms the Church’s communion with the triune God (TCTCV §12). Although AG Malaysia is influenced by the dispensational view of the Church and Israel, most pastors of AG Malaysia agree that the Church is united with the believers of the first covenant (TCTCV §17–18). The Church does not replace the role of Israel, but neither is it separated
from it. AG Malaysia affirms the practice of ordained ministry (TCTCV §19). Those who apply for credentials with AG Malaysia are expected to be trained theologically and are charged to carry out the pastoral duty.

AG Malaysia preaches and teaches that the Church is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit (TCTCV §21). AG Malaysia believes that the Holy Spirit filled the believers with the experience of speaking in tongues. According to his will, the Spirit bestows diverse spiritual gifts to the members of the body.

AG Malaysia seldom mentions the ecumenical creed in church services, nor do pastors teach it to their congregations. Yet, the fundamental beliefs of AG Malaysia are in agreement with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (TCTCV §22). AG Malaysia affirms that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic and strongly confirms that the Church is both a divine and a human reality (TCTCV §23). AG Malaysia churches constantly emphasize the presence of the Holy Spirit in all their gatherings.

In Malaysia, the creed serves as a basis for unity among the diverse Christian denominations. AG Malaysia is a member of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF). The NECF, the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia, and the Council of Churches Malaysia form the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). The Apostles’ Creed was used as the basis for the formation of the CFM.

The mission strategy of AG Malaysia emphasizes the strength of the local churches. At the same time, AG Malaysia affirms the importance for the local church to participate in fellowship with other local churches. AG Malaysia is constituted not as a typical denomination but as a fellowship to foster unity among AG churches. AG Malaysia agrees that the local church is a part of the universal Church (TCTCV §31–32).

AG Malaysia affirms “already but not yet” (TCTCV §33–34). The present visible Church is imperfect and in need of constant purification by the sanctifying power of the Spirit. AG Malaysia churches believe that the Church will be perfected when Jesus returns. Presently, AG Malaysia regularly confronts members and ministers who have fallen into sinful acts.

AG Malaysia agrees that ordained ministers are the congregation’s shepherds (TCTCV §45–46). Each AG Malaysia church is led by credentialled ministers who are entrusted with the responsibility to care for the members. Concerning authority, AG Malaysia entirely agrees that all power in the Church comes from Jesus Christ, who is its head (TCTCV §51). The Church exercises the authority of Christ as it endeavours to be faithful to the revealed Word of God.
2. What do you see as the apparent differences?

AG Malaysia does not hold a sacramental view of the Church. It sees the importance of the local church in edifying individual believers, however, AG Malaysia does not consider the Church as providing sacramental means for believers to be incorporated into the body of Christ. Instead, AG Malaysia sees the Church as a gathering of believers, where each received their adoption into the family of God, joining the body of Christ through the works of the Holy Spirit.

As such, AG Malaysia never uses the word “sacrament” in its tenets. The ministries of baptism and eucharist are considered ordinances. They are helpful for spiritual enlightenment in remembering the death of Jesus and the new covenant but they are not required to share life in Christ. Most AG Malaysia churches conduct the eucharist only once a month.

As a classical Pentecostal church, AG Malaysia believes that water baptism and the Spirit’s baptism are two different spiritual experiences. Many AG Malaysia churches have a unique worship service for believers to seek the Holy Spirit’s baptism. The baptism of the Spirit is expected to be a normative experience for all believers, and it is received with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues. The Spirit’s baptism is also an affirmation that believers are filled by the Spirit and are incorporated into the body of Christ. Thus, belief in joining the body of Christ is both a dogma and an experience.

AG Malaysia expands through church-planting initiatives. Some pastors may pioneer new churches with a number of lay members, where the laity provides the leadership of the new church plant. There are also cases where the only church pastor has left for various reasons. The organizational structure of AG Malaysia cannot provide an immediate replacement for the pastor. Thus, AG Malaysia permits the ministries of baptism and eucharist to be carried out by lay church leaders “with the expressed permission of the senior pastor, and in the absence of the senior pastor, the expressed permission of the respective District Superintendent” (AG Malaysia Constitution, Article 7.8). This practice is consistent with AG Malaysia’s view of the two ministries as ordinances rather than sacraments.

Concerning the apostolicity of the Church, AG Malaysia perceives it in a historical sense, where the apostles established the Church in the first century. The Church today continues to preach the apostolic message. AG Malaysia does not hold to the view of apostolic succession in the ecclesiastical government. AG Malaysia believes in the gift of apostolic ministry, which the Holy Spirit gives to enable believers to establish local churches. Although some claim to be modern-
day apostles, AG Malaysia generally does not observe the office of apostles, as some charismatic churches do.

AG Malaysia may be categorized as a low church. We do not see the institutional structures or ministerial orders as rigidly willed and instituted by Christ for all time. The Church recognizes the biblical teaching of having leadership in a local congregation. However, AG Malaysia does not restrict the leadership of the Church to a particular form of government. AG Malaysia does not prescribe institutional structures or religious orders to its members. Within AG Malaysia, member churches may have different institutional structures to meet their needs. Some members register with the Malaysian government as a society; they need to comply with the government’s governance structure. Some have registered as a private limited company and have structured their church differently, according to the Company Acts of Malaysia.

AG Malaysia does not consider the office of bishop as an essential ecclesiological component to the structure and reality of the local church. Member churches have the autonomy to be self-governed and to choose their preferred government model. Furthermore, AG Malaysia is a fellowship; it resisted the term “denomination” to describe its identity. The elected executive committee serves to carry duties like the office of the bishop. The general superintendent (the leadership head of AG Malaysia) is permitted to use the designation “bishop” in public avenues, especially when dealing with non-believers in the country who are more familiar with the title “bishop” to signify the leader of a church.

AG Malaysia seldom mentions the creed in its weekly worship in terms of worship liturgy. We also infrequently pray the Lord’s prayer in our services. AG Malaysia does not hold on to a particular liturgy or service order. AG Malaysia churches practise diverse forms of worship.

Lastly, AG Malaysia sees the importance of ordained ministry to provide leadership and pastoral care to the congregation. However, the church does not consider that ordained ministry has a special relationship with the unique priesthood of Christ. Instead, ordained ministry is regarded as a vocational calling that Christ has given to individuals to manage the congregation. Some AG Malaysia churches are led by elected lay members; the committee hires the ordained minister. Generally, the priesthood of Christ is related to the priesthood of all believers rather than just to the clergy.

3. What is missing from TCTCV from your perspective?

Among AG Malaysia churches, there is an ongoing discussion concerning being a multi-generational church. Many AG Malaysia churches are missing the
Millennials (born 1981–96) and Generation X (born 1965–80). Most of the current credentials belong to the baby boom generation (born 1946–64). The concept of a homogenous church that segregates the congregation into services for different ages seems to have created the disconnection between the generations. AG Malaysia finds the need to emphasize the Church as a family. TCTCV appears to lack this emphasis on the image of the spiritual family, which is needed to build a multi-generational Church.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is practically illegal to share the gospel with the Muslim majority in Malaysia. Malaysian Christians constantly struggle with the mandate to evangelize to all people when they are restricted by law from sharing their faith with their neighbours. Should believers follow the rule of the land or obey the Great Commission? Malaysian Christians today avoid preaching to Muslims directly. Such a complicated issue could be considered in TCTCV, particularly for churches in countries where faith propagation is restricted.

Given the legal restrictions in Malaysia, Muslims cannot participate in any of the Church’s religious activity. Nonetheless, some undocumented individuals discover Jesus through dreams and visions. Some may find Jesus while they travel to other countries or through digital broadcasts on the internet. These people secretly believe in Jesus but cannot express their faith publicly. They are not able to follow any Christian religious rites. This area of secret believers is missing in TCTCV.

AG Malaysia has organized many evangelistic rallies emphasizing signs and wonders. So-called power evangelism is especially effective in rural areas, in the animistic society, and even among urban dwellers who are desperate for healing and deliverance from demonic oppression. It is not uncommon to witness the supernatural ministry of Christ in the worship services of AG Malaysia churches. Furthermore, many churches of various denominations would also participate in the evangelistic rallies hosted by AG Malaysia. This aspect of witness with signs and wonders seems to be lacking in TCTCV.

In Malaysia, there is growing concern about Christian cultic movements. As a nation with pluralistic religions, many religions may freely build shrines, temples, and churches in this land. This inevitably turns the country into a hub of religions. Many Christian cults worldwide (most notably from Korea, China, and the USA) affect Malaysian churches. The segment on unity in TCTCV may consider expressing the need for separation for those who do not uphold the ecumenical creeds.

Besides Christian cults, there is also a growing trend of radical Christian groups (such as the cage-stage Reformed believers) that disrupts the unity of the Church. These believers generally hold on to orthodox beliefs of Christianity, yet
their practices imply that their version of the Church is superior to, purer than, and more authentic than others. Their teachings portray themselves as the vanguard of truth and consequently develop the attitude of spiritual superiority and arrogance that disrupt the spirit of unity among churches. TCTCV may also consider addressing this issue, which is more subtle than the issue of Christian cults.

For many years, AG Malaysia was criticized for abusing the spiritual gifts publicly in its worship. Being a Pentecostal church, AG Malaysia encourages believers to exercise their spiritual gifts publicly. Although there are cases where some preachers have abused the gifts, these minorities should not be taken as the proper representation of the church. Many Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Malaysia today believe in and practise the spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit in their worship services. However, those churches that hold on to the cessation view continue to mock those who practise the gifts. TCTCV could consider addressing the need to reconcile these two camps.

Several preachers from the USA, Africa, and India promote the restoration of the apostolic office. They claim to be apostles and exert their spiritual authority over the churches in their God-given regions. The usage of the title “apostles” has caused uneasiness among the local churches of Malaysia. Some consider such use a sign of spiritual pride or an attempt to be manipulative. Aside from the designation of “priest,” TCTCV may consider addressing the other designations observed by other church traditions.

Another global trend that is affecting Malaysia is the migration of workers. Many migrant workers in Malaysia have been mistreated and abused. Not many churches are willing to open their doors to serve the migrant workers due to the fear of legal complications. This alienation of migrant workers ought to be addressed in the segment of the mission and unity of the Church.

There are members of AG Malaysia who find the need to evangelize Roman Catholic believers. Many of these people were previously idol worshippers. They find it difficult to reconcile themselves with the practice of veneration of Mary and the saints, the use of incense, and the devotion of the rosary. These practices have much in common with their past religious experience. Churches such as Our Lady of Sorrows Penang, St Anne Bukit Mertajam, St Michael Ipoh, and Church of the Visitation Seremban observe the “Rite of Veneration of Ancestors.” Some condemn such rites as the syncretism of Christian faith with Chinese folk practices of ancestor worship. TCTCV could consider addressing the spiritual traditions of the Church.

The issue of church splits has not been thoroughly dealt with in TCTCV. In Malaysia, there is no restriction for anyone wishing to start a church. Occasionally,
a member of the clergy who has fallen into the temptation of immorality may refuse to undergo the church’s discipline and may start another church. This has happened with several pastors who were dismissed from their denominations due to moral failure. They begin their own churches that are unaffiliated with any denomination. Other pastors split their churches for other reasons: theological, leadership, and financial disagreements. Is there any ground for unity with such churches?

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted the churches in Malaysia. Most AG Malaysia churches have started online services. Currently the churches are discussing whether an online church is a valid form of a church. The social-distancing restrictions also restrict the practice of water baptism and eucharist in the church. Future ecumenical work on ecclesiology could include a discussion on the impact of the pandemic and emerging technologies on the shared vision of the Church.

4. How can TCTCV expand a vision of the ministry of the Church from the perspective of AG Malaysia?

TCTCV may help AG Malaysia see its commonalities with churches of other traditions. Although an ecumenical body, CFM, promotes unity among the different Christian denominations in Malaysia, there are very few opportunities for the churches to enjoy fellowship and learn from one another. The document will help members of AG Malaysia to see the Church from a broader perspective, including the Church’s government, spirituality, and practices unfamiliar with our tradition.

AG Malaysia may find TCTCV helpful in better understanding the sacramental view of the Church. AG Malaysia may not realize that our understanding and practices of the Church have much in common with sacramental spirituality. AG Malaysia members have a high view of pastors, especially those with the gift of prophecy. Baptism and eucharist are observed with a deep religious sense, not merely for remembrance.

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2.Editor’s note: This chapter was submitted in the summer of 2021, when COVID-related social-distancing restrictions were much more widespread than at the time this volume was published (fall 2022).
CHAPTER TWO

An Indonesian Pentecostal Response to The Church: Towards a Common Vision

Gani Wiyono

Introduction

The Assemblies of God in Indonesia was founded by self-supporting missionaries who worked independently, without any support from any major Pentecostal denominations in the United States. During World War II, these missionaries fled the country and went back to the US due to the threat of Japanese occupation. While waiting for the war to end, they joined the US Assemblies of God. They returned to Indonesia after the war and founded churches throughout the archipelago. The missionaries handed over national leadership to the natives in 1959. Since then, an Indonesian has led the denomination. With 2241 local churches and around 200,000 members, the Assemblies of God in Indonesia (AG Indonesia) is now the third-largest Pentecostal denomination in Indonesia.

Theologically, AG Indonesia is trinitarian Pentecostal with a Christocentric focus, as expressed in the four cardinal doctrines: Jesus as the Saviour, Jesus as the Baptizer of the Holy Spirit, Jesus as the Healer, and Jesus as the Coming King. Ecclesiologically, we are not so-called high church. In addition, the Assemblies of God acknowledge two sacraments, baptism and eucharist, and have a mixed model of church government: some churches are presbyterian; others are congregational, and none are episcopal.

In terms of effort towards visible Christian unity, AG Indonesia has taken a supportive stance. In 1975, it became a member of the Indonesian Evangelical Communion. In 2005, it became a member of the National Council of Churches (NCC); it has been registered as an official member of the NCC since January 26, 2006.
Response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

The Church: Towards a Common Vision (*TCTCV*) is possibly the most important document issued by the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission since the Lima Text was published as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982. *TCTCV* reflects a growing consensus on the excellence of koinonia for ecumenical work (§67), as manifested in three interconnected ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service.

After examining the text, this chapter will attempt to respond to *TCTCV* from the standpoint of AG Indonesia. This response is structured based on the reflection questions provided. Questions 1 and 2 have been combined for the sake of brevity.

1. In what ways does *TCTCV* reflect a vision or understanding of the Church, its mission, and its ministry from the perspective of the Church about which you write? Where do you see clear differences?

The first theme of *TCTCV*, the exposition of the origin of the Church rooted in the missio Dei—that is, in the economy of the triune God in history, from the Father, through the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit—has been favourably accepted by AG Indonesia. Despite the lack of official texts that elaborate on this point, AG Indonesia believes that the Church does not exist by and for itself; the Church is created, has been given life and growth by God, and has a clear goal: to glorify God.

The second theme of *TCTCV*, the koinonia nature of the Church—that the Church is called to communion vertically with the triune God and horizontally with one another—is well embraced. As Pentecostals who value a personal and deep relationship with the triune God, we have no difficulty responding to the call for vertical communion with God. What about the call to horizontal communion? We believe that we must also respond positively to the call. We are open to fellowship with various ecclesiastical groups, as stated in our by-laws (chapter 4). Joining the National Evangelical Fellowship and the National Council of Churches demonstrates how the by-laws are implemented or concretized.

The third theme of *TCTCV* focuses on the Church growing into communion. The three pillars of true koinonia (faith, sacraments, and ministry) are depicted as already-but-not-yet realities.

Concerning common faith, despite a growing consensus about the cardinal doctrines (as being taught in the Nicene Creed), doctrinal divisions that
potentially hinder ecumenical works still exist among ecclesiastical bodies in the world. This disharmony is evident in our current situation. While theological differences among Protestants have occasionally resulted in conflict between liberals and evangelicals, Calvinists and Arminians, Cessationists and non-Cessationists, misunderstandings between Pentecostals and Catholics have frequently pushed a wedge between the two. Many Pentecostals continue to see certain Catholic beliefs as heretical. Thus, when Pentecostals recruit Catholics to join their Church, they believe they are engaging in evangelization, whereas Catholics believe Pentecostals are engaging in “sheep stealing” or proselytizing. Furthermore, the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, which treats Catholicism and Protestantism as two distinct religions, has made the task of achieving visible unity even more difficult.

When it comes to sacraments and ministry, *TCTCV* undoubtedly relies heavily on high church ecclesiology. This is evident in the document’s emphasis on sacramental theology when discussing baptism, the eucharist, and ordained ministry. This kind of approach seems relatively unfamiliar for most Pentecostals, who have low church ecclesiology. Given the current and future demography of Christianity in the world, which appears to have a greater proportion of Pentecostal and evangelical forms of Christianity, it would have been more appropriate for *TCTCV* to take a balanced approach: discussions about baptism, eucharist, and ordained ministry should be approached from two distinct perspectives (high and low church ecclesiology) in equal measure.

The fourth theme of *TCTCV* elaborates the Church’s mission in and for the world. As signs and servants of the trinitarian God, churches worldwide should strive for healing, reconciliation, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation to make koinonia of the entire creation possible.

While reading this section, we discovered passages that confirmed our convictions, such as the notion that Christians must promote moral ideals in both the individual and social aspects of human existence (§61–63). On the other hand, certain sections may provide challenges, such as the discussion on religious pluralism and the possibility of redemption for individuals who do not profess to believe in Jesus Christ (§60). True, we formally endorse an exclusive perspective of salvation (exclusivism), as implied by the fifth of our 11 fundamental truths. This fact, however, should not obscure the truth that “God is providentially present in non-Christian traditions while directing all of human history, religious or secular, toward Christ.”

religions in no way undermines the Pentecostal mission because it recognizes that while non-Christian faiths have elements of truth, they are not salvific. Such a more positive theology of religion is necessary to foster a more hospitable space of encounters with the others in the world, which is coloured with religious diversity and rivalry.

*TCTCV*’s urge to strive for the integrity of creation (§66) is not echoed in official documents published by AG Indonesia. Such an omission is usual for most Pentecostals, who, according to the Pentecostal theologian Harold Hunter, care more about their sick bodies than God’s sick creation


Given the current environmental crisis and its disastrous impact, I believe it will be relatively easy for AG Indonesia to incorporate creation care as a component of its mission in and for the world. Recently, two young Pentecostal scholars from AG Indonesia wrote papers addressing the ecological crises from a Pentecostal perspective. Hopefully, their initiatives will raise awareness of environmental responsibilities among our people within AG Indonesia.

2. **What is missing from TCTCV from your perspective?**

To begin, while *TCTCV* articulates God’s plan of redemption, emphasizes the salvific significance of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, and encourages the Church to proclaim the good news of the kingdom to the world, it makes scant reference to sin and judgment. Furthermore, it appears that the consequences of sin are limited to this-worldly sorrow alone, leaving the eschatological implications of sin largely unaffected. If scripture and tradition are not afraid to speak openly about sin and its terrible consequences in this world and the world to come, *TCTCV* should have given a proportionate amount of space to discuss the topic.

Second, we regret that while *TCTCV* emphasizes the *fides quae* (the faith “once for all entrusted to the saints,” or, in more simple language, the doctrinal content in which we believe), the *fides qua* (the personal act of faith—the faith in which we believe) receives minimal attention. For Pentecostals, who place a high premium on experiential aspects of religion, *fides qua* takes on a greater
significance in building a Christian identity. By emphasizing *fides qua*, Pentecostals do not diminish the importance of the *fides quae*; it is undeniably essential for them, as evidenced by the presence of doctrinal statements in most Pentecostal churches worldwide.⁴ The *fides quae*, while playing a lesser role in the formation of Christian identity among Pentecostals, has been shown to maintain the majority of Pentecostals in line with orthodoxy effectively.⁵ Thus, *TCTCV* should ideally give equal weight to both *fides quae* and *fides qua*, as they are not two distinct forms of faith but rather two inseparable dimensions of Christian faith. In other words, ritualized confession in the absence of a believing heart becomes dead orthodoxy, while a believing heart without ritualized confession may result in heterodoxy.

Third, according to *TCTCV*, the road to visible unity should be accomplished primarily by a more formal path, namely unity in faith (doctrine), sacraments, and ministry. Given the enormous diversity of ecclesiology in the Christian world today and the meteoric rise of Pentecostal/charismatic type of Christianity in the global South, which has resulted in the emergence of many Indigenous churches devoid of central authority and frequently with scant sacramental practice and ordained ministry, this may be a journey that never ends. Thus, without undermining the value of *TCTCV*, we believe the text should take a less formal approach to achieving visible Christian unity. Listening carefully to people’s concrete or lived experiences can help *TCTCV*’s theological perspective become fruitful. In Indonesia, for example, even though churches differ in doctrine and sacraments, we have a more profound commitment to mutual acknowledgment and partnership as one body of Christ. This commitment to Christian unity is evident in official ecumenical involvement (such as the National Council of Churches) and, more concretely, at the grassroots level when people from different denominations pray together, help one another, and collaborate towards a common objective.

Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated a potential path towards unity. Before the pandemic, most people were familiar with their own church’s doctrine and liturgy. However, because of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, which compelled churches to offer online services, many Christians have become viewers of online worship services from other Christian faiths. By participating in these online services, individuals can learn and receive gifts that will aid in their collective growth into a deeper connection with Christ.

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⁴ For example, the Assemblies of God in Indonesia have 11 Statements of Fundamental Truth; the American Assemblies of God have 16.

and the Spirit. This method, which Paul D. Murray refers to as receptive ecumenism, deserves to be explored as another avenue towards Christian unity.

3. How can TCTCV expand a vision of the ministry of the Church from the perspective of the Church about which you write?

Surprisingly, TCTCV contains many references to the Holy Spirit (nearly all sections contain the words “the Spirit” or “the Holy Spirit”). As Pentecostals, we are pleased to see a broad acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit from the World Council of Churches. We have always believed that the Church's ministry will be most effective when motivated, guided, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's presence, the Church's ministry may take shape but fall short of bringing anything significant and helpful to the world. It is like a fancy car with all four tires flat; while attractive to look at, it is worthless because it cannot transport us to our goal.

Greater openness to the Holy Spirit will also assist the Church in navigating the current context, where insecurity, uncertainty, and subjectivism are dominant players. In this context, a tension that frequently arises between the contingency and fluidity of human life and the firmness of the eternal perspective on the Church from a biblical perspective sometimes questions the sufficiency of our inherited ecclesiology. Here, the Holy Spirit may assist us in exploring approaches or models that can encompass both the Church's lived reality and the Church's biblically and theologically sound perspectives. Furthermore, as the ones who inherit Restorationist impulse, we believe there is no perfect ecclesiology in today's world. We are still journeying towards the perfect one. Here, greater openness and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's guidance help us to be closer to the destination of our journey.

TCTCV's significant emphasis on mission is consistent with AG Indonesia's firm belief in the importance of mission. But what is essential is that TCTCV sees the mission of the Church and the unity of the Church as two inseparable characteristics of the Church (§8). Divisions will impede the Church's ability to carry out its mission (§68). Ironically, Pentecostals often regard mission and Christian unity as distinct entities. Even among groups significantly affected by dispensationalism's eschatology, there is an outright rejection of any ecumenical
works. They fear that ecumenism would result in the emergence of the Super Church, the Great Harlot, as prophesied in chapter 17 of the Book of Revelation. Fortunately, AG Indonesia does not see Christian unity and Pentecostal mission as standing in contradiction. Therefore, since 2000 we have joined the National Council of Churches and are actively involved in ecumenical works. Such a positive posture towards ecumenism is crucial in the Indonesian context, where Christianity is a minority. Our divided state undoubtedly becomes a scandal when we bring the gospel to Indonesians. People of other faiths frequently attack us, saying, “How come you, who offer the message of the cross that reconciles God and humans, and a humans with each other, are unable to be reconciled to one another?” That is, indeed, a valid criticism! As a result, what is mentioned in TCTCV about the inseparable parts of mission and unity should be warmly embraced by any Christian group on the globe if they desire to be effective in witnessing.

TCTCV’s call to defend and help the poor and marginalized (§64) is also consonant with Pentecostals’ vision of ministry. As Wonsuk Ma said, Pentecostalism has been a religion of the poor, meaning that this movement was embraced initially by poor people. However, “as the Pentecostal poor have become empowered, the movement has also turned to a ‘religion for the poor.’” This means that Pentecostals who are now in a better socio-economic situation are compelled to help those living in poverty experience socio-economic uplifting. This is true among our people in AG Indonesia. Most of the churches that have increased awareness to include social concern as a part of their mission grew from humble beginnings, where most of their initial adherents were poor. For example, “Bethlehem” is the name of the Assembly of God church in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. This local church was started among the poor people in 1964. It has grown significantly and is now the largest Assembly of God church in West Java, with about 5000 members. While there has been a socio-economic uplifting among its members, the church is obliged to expand its mission in the area of social concern. Today, the Bethlehem Assembly of God has some empowering programs to help those who are weak economically, builds orphanages and shelters for those who are homeless and marginalized, gives financial aid to low-income families who cannot afford to have their children attend school, and provides electricity for those living in remote villages that don’t have access to it.

Conclusion

A visible Christian unity undoubtedly is a gift, meaning that it is primarily God’s work, not ours. Consequently, prayer should be a vital element in any ecumenical works. However, the understanding that visible Christian unity is a gift should not undermine any human works at either the elite or grassroots level to bring those journeying towards visible Christian unity closer to their destination. *TCTCV*, despite its shortcomings in some areas, therefore should be welcomed with joy and a grateful heart.
This chapter is a response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* from a Singaporean perspective. It is hoped that it may provide a common basis of reference for churches “to test or discern their own ecclesiological convergences with one another, and so to serve their further pilgrimage towards the manifestation of that unity for which Christ prayed.” I am grateful for the invitation to provide observations from Singapore, but at the same time, I feel terribly inadequate in doing so. I am particularly partial to the perspective of my supervisor and mentor, Dr Howard Snyder, in his view of the Church as it relates to the scriptures. It is not surprising that a survey of the scriptures provides no neat definition of church; instead, it offers a wide range of images. Snyder understands that these images/models are “parabolic or analogical. They do not fully explain the mystery but do illuminate important aspects, often through metaphor. No model is fully comprehensive or exhaustive; a range of models which can be compared and contrasted is useful.”

In a later publication, *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ’s Body*, Snyder and Runyon attempted to present a biblical ecclesiology that emphasizes organic images in place of the often more static or institutional images. Throughout church history, the Church’s essential identifying marks are

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affirmed as unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity (*ecclesia una sancta catholicca et apostolica*). This is affirmed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE; traditionally, these marks help to define our understanding of the Church. Snyder commented:

Examining these marks in the light of Scripture, however, gives one pause. Viewed biblically, the four traditional marks appear incomplete and one-sided. Theologically, the classic formulation seems biased toward hierarchical, unitary, and homogeneous models.

A more biblically comprehensive view of the classic marks would pair them with complementary biblical accents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One</th>
<th>Many/Diverse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holy</td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Particular/Local-Contextual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostolic</td>
<td>Prophetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Scripture, surely the church is diverse and manifold as well as one; charismatic as well as holy. It is local and contextual as well as catholic or universal; prophetic as well as apostolic. This more rounded accounting of the marks is richer theologically and more accurate historically and sociologically.4

In *Decoding the Church*, Snyder and Runyon draw on passages in scripture to ground the Church simultaneously as manifold, charismatic, local, and prophetic. Synder contends that “these four additional marks are not polar opposites of the traditional ones; they are merely biblical accents that tend to get slighted in the traditional formula.”5 These complementary marks may be regarded as the other half of the Church’s genetic makeup—her descriptive DNA, her signature double helix, thereby providing a more organic and comprehensive ecclesiology. By the same token, these complementary tensions seem to better describe the Church in Singapore and perhaps articulate a vision of the ministry and mission of the church in that country.

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One and Many

Singapore was developed as a trading port and a British settlement from the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. While Anglicanism arrived early in Singapore, the East India Company regarded Singapore more as a trading outpost than a mission outpost. I have made the case that (Methodist) missions did not ride on the coattails of colonialism. The Methodist missionaries were holistic in their approaches to missions in engaging a predominantly transient population in Singapore. Furthermore, as a trading port, Singapore at the turn of the 20th century became an important centre from which Western missionaries prepared for missions in China and the rest of Southeast Asia. This in some way accounted for the early arrival of missionary societies backed by different denominations for which there was little cooperation or collaboration. Interestingly, the Pacific War jolted the leaders of the denominational churches to the harsh realization of not only an unhealthy overdependence on Western leadership but also the shortage of Indigenous leaders/pastors and the inertia to interdenominational cooperation.

With the end of the war and the later withdrawal of the British, the Christian immigrants who had made a home for themselves in Singapore banded together to form the Malayan Christian Council. With Singapore’s separation from Malaysia in 1965, this was (re)constituted as the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) on 24 July 1974. Interestingly, the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the NCCS, though, admittedly, the council is the official organization that the Government of Singapore consults about religious/ethical considerations from a Christian perspective.

More recently, some church leaders came together to form the Alliance of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of Singapore (APCCS) on 19 April 2018. The following explanation is provided for the forming of the APCCCS:

On Aug 3 2010, the *Straits Times* reported that there are about 700 churches in Singapore. The National Council of Churches (NCCS) currently represents about 250 churches in Singapore. That leaves a large

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6. The list of founding members of the National Council of Churches includes the Diocese of Singapore, the Methodist Church in Singapore, the Lutheran Church in Singapore, Presbyterian churches, The Salvation Army, Mar Thomas Syrian Church in Singapore, and St Thomas Syrian Orthodox Cathedral. See https://nccs.org.sg/fullfounder-members. The list of members is found at https://nccs.org.sg/about/members.

7. The Government of Singapore also consults with the leadership of other religious organizations (Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Taoists, Sikhs, as well as the Roman Catholic Church).
60 plus percent of churches in Singapore that are not part of any official body to represent them or their needs as an individual church.\footnote{8}{See \url{http://web.archive.org/web/20211204040637/https://www.apccs.org/faqs/}}

This development is perhaps indicative of the diverse makeup of the Church in Singapore, ethnically as well as religiously (within the Christian tradition). Yet, the oneness of the Church may also be evidenced in the historic coming together of the Christian community during the Singapore Billy Graham Crusade, which drew a record 337,000 people over five days to the National Stadium in December 1978 in what was described as a “picture of supernatural unity.”\footnote{9}{Joey Lam, “Singapore Billy Graham Crusade 1978: A Picture of Supernatural Unity,” \textit{Salt & Light}, 19 June 2018, \url{https://saltandlight.sg/leadership/singapore-billy-graham-crusade-1978-a-picture-of-supernatural-unity/}. See also “Remembering the 1978 Billy Graham Crusade, Part 1: The Men Who Planned the Crusade,” \textit{Thirst}, 5 December 2018, \url{https://thirst.sg/remembering-the-1978-billy-graham-crusade-part-1-the-men-who-planned-the-crusade}.}

\textbf{Holy and Charismatic}

Snyder helpfully described what he meant by the charismatic view of the Church. He noted, “In the charismatic view, the church in any age must be in direct contact with God and a clear channel of his grace (\textit{charis}) in order to have life and power. The church is essentially a spiritual organism and community, whatever its institutional form. Institutional forms are viewed ambivalently or totally rejected.”\footnote{10}{Howard Snyder, “The Church Is Both Institutional and Charismatic,” \textit{Seedbed}, 29 June 2017, \url{https://seedbed.com/the-church-is-both-institutional-and-charismatic}.} The institutionalized and hierarchical order of the mainline churches have in some ways contributed to the proliferation of independent churches and fellowships in Singapore (as is the case all over the world). This may also be a contributing reason for the establishment of the APCCS, mentioned earlier.

Yet, in the history of the church in Singapore, time and again the church is reminded of the charismatic (in its linguistic fullness of the word \textit{charis}) renewal that the Holy Spirit brings (especially) in the mainline denominations. Within Anglicanism and Methodism, the case of the “Clock Tower story”\footnote{11}{Michael Poon and Malcolm Tan, eds, \textit{The Clock Tower Story: The Beginnings of the Charismatic Renewals in Singapore}, CSCA Occasional Paper Series no. 8 (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2012).} needs to be recounted in demonstrating the holy and charismatic nature of the people of
God. The Anglo Chinese School (established by the Methodist missionaries towards the end of the 19th century) Clock Tower was a place where groups of students gathered for regular prayer. In 1972, the Holy Spirit moved upon the students “in a dramatic way . . . the result was similar to the experience of the apostles at Pentecost.”12 The fresh charismata of the Holy Spirit came upon the students and were further spread to students from other schools, including St Andrew’s (a mission school established by the Anglican Church) as well as Dunearn Technical Secondary School. Georgie and Galven Lee commented: “Outside a formal church setting, the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit amplified a growing desire among the students to make a total commitment of their lives to God.”13

At the same time, among those who emphasize the charismatic view of the Church, there should also be a (counter)balance by the instruction and institution that is sadly non-existent among these younger churches, most evident in their seeming ignorance of such things as the liturgical observance of Lent or Advent. More alarmingly, a local mega-church’s course on “church history” is, in effect, a course on the history of that particular church’s formation rather than the 2000-year development of the Church of Jesus!

Catholic and Local/Contextual

Singapore presents a unique case study of this tension between the church catholic and the church that is contextual. It is a nation that is well connected to the churches and theological centres in the global North and at the same time is representative of the churches in the global South. The church in Singapore is closely tied to its colonial history and has been a beneficiary of the major theological centres of the West, yet it has a significant part to play in helping believers engage with their contexts and their cultures. As with the other churches in Southeast Asia, the church(es) in Singapore cannot afford to ignore the cultural religious context, built upon the bedrock of Indic and Sinic influences, upon which the strata of Islamic influence is layered. This is fertile ground for the development of Christian theological responses to food taboos, ancestral veneration and funerary rites, as well as missiological responses to

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insider movements and business as missions. The gradual growth in number of Asian theologians and thinkers\textsuperscript{14} has been a key focus in theological training and development at Trinity Theological College.

**Apostolic and Prophetic**

The decline of the Christian West and the rise of the churches in the global South is perhaps well caricatured in the divisions in the mainline churches in the West, catalyzed by the ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson. Laurie Goodstein wrote: “With the ceremonial laying on of hands by a cluster of bishops, the Rev V. Gene Robinson was consecrated the next bishop of New Hampshire and the first openly gay prelate in the Episcopal Church USA on Sunday, laying the groundwork for a split in the American church and a break with fellow Anglican churches abroad.”\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, the Lutheran Church USA as well as the Presbyterian Church (USA) subsequently voted to approve gay/lesbian ordinations in 2010. And while the British Methodist Church voted in favour of gay/lesbian ordination in July 2021, the United Methodist Church (USA) is headed to a vote on the same issue this year that will split the UMC.\textsuperscript{16}

This has resulted in the permissibility in the West of introducing oneself as a “gay evangelical,” which would be an oxymoron for a Christian in the global South. Understandably, most churches in Singapore (as well as the churches in the global South) see the need to be a prophetic witness in upholding scriptural truth, even if means being labelled as a conservative or a bigot. Undeniably, this issue will continue to plague the Church and be the cause of fractures within the Church in years to come; this will be one area where the younger churches (of the global South) will need to take on the prophetic role of speaking truth to power (of Western liberalism).

This is but one of the issues which the churches in Singapore are navigating. At a time when the world is looking for ways to navigate the challenges of a world stricken by a pandemic and the tragedy of war, the onus is on the Church to demonstrate prophetic compassion like that of Jesus Christ. “This compassion

\textsuperscript{14} Leow Theng Huat, ed., *What Young Asian Theologians Are Thinking* (Singapore: TTC, 2014).


can make the church [in Asia] weak and powerless with those who are weak and powerless. But it is a compassion that stands against injustices and exploitation. It is a compassion that works to restore human wholeness.”

**Conclusion**

The above are but some of my observations on what it means for us to be united in Christ. Challenging times lie ahead for those whom Jesus calls to follow him. The words of Charles Wesley’s hymn\(^\text{18}\) ring true:

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Blest be the dear uniting love
That will not let us part;
Our bodies may far off remove,
We still are one in heart. …
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Partakers of the Savior’s grace,
The same in mind and heart.
Nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place,
Nor life, nor death can part.
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\(^{18}\) Charles Wesley, “Blest Be the Dear Uniting Love,” [https://hymnary.org/text/blest_be_the_dear_united_love](https://hymnary.org/text/blest_be_the_dear_united_love).
Introduction

This chapter examines the understanding, life, and mission of the Church as assumed, taught, and practised by megachurches in Asia. This ecclesiology, or these ecclesiologies, will be placed in dialogue with The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV). Therefore, the broad question of this chapter is: Would the Asian megachurches take TCTCV to reflect their ecclesiology? If the response is an acceptance with reservation or qualifications, what are the differences between the two ecclesiological traditions? And what components are absent from the document that adequately reflect the megachurch lift?

The task comes with a few challenges. The first is that there is no such thing as the ecclesiology of Asian megachurches; rather, it will be ecclesiologies. The ecclesial roots of the top 12 churches (seen below) are Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and Independent. They have different theological roots, now coupled with their efforts of theological adaptation to their unique contexts. Also, only two in the list are identified as historic (here, Presbyterian) churches. All others are either Pentecostal or Independent, and ecclesiological studies are only starting to appear, especially those “which take Asia contexts into account.”¹

This study begins with a brief profile of Asian megachurches. The main discussion is divided by the faith, life, and ministry of the megachurch. Each

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discussion will actively interact with the *TCTCV* document. The model for the study will be Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) in Seoul, Korea. The choice of this church stems from several reasons. First, YFGC is widely viewed as the mother of the megachurch movement in both its size and its ethos. Second, many megachurches adopted its characteristic features, such as the home cell group system and social service programs. And third, it represents the Pentecostal faith which dominates the megachurch list.

**Megachurches in Asia**

The megachurch phenomenon is relatively recent: it is from around the 1970s, as shown in the Global Megachurch list. The threshold to be counted among the megachurches varies depending on the social context. For example, in North America, it is 2,000 weekly attendance, while the top 32 churches in Africa and the top 49 in Asia record more than 10,000 weekly attendance. Also, there are context-specific attributes. For example, in Singapore, internationalism features prominently. Besides this variable, the general characteristics of a megachurch defined by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research represent megachurches well:

- a charismatic, authoritative senior minister
- a very active seven-day-a-week congregational community
- a multitude of diverse social and outreach ministries
- an intentional small group system or other structures of intimacy and accountability
- innovative and often contemporary worship format
- a complex differentiated organization structure.

In Asia, Warren Bird lists 12 churches with a weekly attendance of 40,000 or more. The top three (also in the six-digit figures) are Yoido Full Gospel Church (Seoul, Korea), with 480,000 members; Calvary Temple Church (Hyderabad, India), with 400,000 members; and Myung Hee Inwang (Jeju Island, Korea), with 380,000 members.

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India), with 225,000 members; and Bethany Church of God (Surabaya, Indonesia), with 140,000 members. Of the dozen largest churches in Asia, four are in South Korea, four in India, three in the Philippines, and one in Indonesia. Although Pentecostal (in this case, Assemblies of God and Gereja Bethany) represents the largest number (six), the Hartford research concludes that most, if not all, embrace Pentecostal-charismatic traits in their beliefs and practices. The expanded list broadens the theological traditions to include Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Mennonite, and several “house” churches of China, but Pentecostalism remains the most represented tradition. Thus, diversity is constant in the social context, church traditions, and experiences of these churches.

**Yoido Full Gospel Church and The Church: Towards a Common Vision**

The following headings, although they do not follow TCTCV’s, nonetheless reflect the essential aspects of the Church, faith, sacraments, and ministry (§37–57). In this discussion, “sacraments” are taken to represent the life of the Church, including its worship, *koinonia*, and discipleship.

**Faith**

Most megachurches in Asia, regardless of their denominational affiliations, exhibit aspects of Pentecostal-charismatic beliefs. Often called the “apostolic faith,” at its heart is the dynamic and immanent work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead. Asian megachurches uncovered the early church’s dynamic experiences of the Holy Spirit, which were historically underdeveloped, theologically buried under competing priorities, and almost forgotten in church life (in the eyes of Pentecostal-charismatics). To be precise, restored by the modern Spirit-empowered Christianity is the “charismatic” aspect of the Spirit’s work, often manifested by supernatural gifts. The work of the Holy Spirit is particularly crucial in the Asian religious psyche, as almost all religions provide divine solutions to pressing needs, such as healing, protection, and prosperity. Pentecostals would question whether all the references to the supernatural work by Jesus and the Church (such as TCTCV §48) are only lip service, as they are not practices in Christian life and work. Among various churches, some simply deny the dynamic or supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in today’s Christian life. In this context, the birth story of YFGC is radical, full of testimonies of

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healing, exorcism, miraculous provision, and radical transformations, all through the power of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{7} \textit{TCTCV} repeatedly uses the term “power” in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, especially in the context of the Church’s mission (such as \textit{TCTCV} §2, 3). However, the expectation of the Spirit’s work in Christian life and mission among megachurches is more “real” than confessing the liturgy.

Related to the above is the role of experience in Christian life. Among the megachurches, terminology about the initial crisis experience varies, from the baptism of the Holy Spirit to the fullness of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{8} Messages coming out of the pulpits and media outlets of Asian megachurches consistently stress the Spirit’s radical coming upon believers. Often accompanied by speaking in tongues or healing, testimonies abound to its formative and transformative effect on one’s daily and religious life. Pentecostal-charismatic believers associate this with the “empowerment” for witnessing, based on Acts 1:8. Aside from its missionary impact, the Spirit also empowers individuals to become a better person, family member, worker, and citizen, as sociological studies attest.\textsuperscript{9} Many Pentecostals would consider that \textit{TCTCV}’s treatment of the experience of the Holy Spirit lacks the tangibility of the experience. They also believe that it fails to adequately reflect the Pentecostal understanding of the Spirit baptism as a separate experience from regeneration (see \textit{TCTCV} §41).

The prominence of the Holy Spirit among the charismatically oriented megachurches in Asia brings more than vitality to Christian life. As Amos Yong argues, their pneumatological perspective results in “new insight on established doctrines and formulations.”\textsuperscript{10} This significant theological contribution is propagated in mass fashion by the megachurches in Asia. One of them is the goodness of God. Against the backdrop of traditional religions of Asia, Cho preached God who heals, blesses, and saves. This attracted criticism from fellow Christians that his theology is shamanistic: blessing seeking and self-serving.

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\textsuperscript{7} David Yonggi Cho, \textit{Dr. David Yonggi Cho: Ministering Hope for 50 Years} (Alachua: Bridge-Logos, 2008); for example, see 32–36 for the initial miraculous healing of a woman, which led to a rapid growth of his tent church.

\textsuperscript{8} This is called “the crown jewel of Pentecostal distinctives” by Frank D. Macchia, \textit{Baptized in the Holy Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 20.

\textsuperscript{9} For Latin American Pentecostalism, for example, see David Martin, \textit{Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

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Church life

The sheer size of a megachurch in the religiously plural Asian cities speaks volumes about the reality of the Christian faith. The Church as the sign of God’s kingdom (§25) takes on a new level of meaning. Indeed, the Church, including the building, gains a sacramental value (§27). For example, the Eternal Life ministry of Pakistan claims a weekly attendance of 10,000 in Lahore. Anwar Fazal, the founder, holds a large healing gathering each Wednesday, where thousands attend in this Muslim-majority nation.\(^{11}\) The impact of a church’s size on society is also demonstrated by YFGC’s history. In the early 1970s, five Sunday services with thousands of worshippers at each gathering paralyzed road traffic in front of the church. Trapped in a bus on the way to this church, passengers wondered what had frozen all the traffic. None failed to notice the powerful impact and wondered what was taking place inside the building. Although critiques of megachurches argue that 100 smaller churches have more impact than one megachurch, the latter exercises a unique influence, both positive and sometimes negative.

Worship that encourages and expects divine encounters is another hallmark of the megachurches. YFGC’s Sunday worship maintains the traditional order, including the recitation of the Apostles’ Creed. The contents, however, are lively singing (including the pre-worship session), a sermon punctuated by testimonies of healing and miracles, a prayer for healing, and the proclamation of God’s work (through the word of knowledge). Thus, worship prepares the congregation to experience and encounter this good and powerful God. Pentecostals define this experience as the “apostolic” faith, while TCTCV uses the term with different emphases (such as §24).

The inbreaking of God through the Holy Spirit into human life is the crux of the Pentecostal experience. Pentecostal worshippers are convinced that they can live the future now, as God’s people are to live “the present in the light of the activity of the Holy Spirit” (§33). To them, this activity of the Holy Spirit is a present reality as much as a future expectation.

Because of the underlying perception of a good God and a strong conviction based on experiences of the power of God, typical Pentecostal worship is celebratory. Sharing testimonies reinforces one’s faith while encouraging others to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit. At YFGC, there are many spaces where one can freely share one’s experience with God. Some of them are the weekly home cell meetings, other informal prayer meetings, social media, the

weekly church newspaper, and monthly magazines. Interaction between the congregation and the worship leader, including the preacher, is extremely lively, involving practically the whole person: body, emotion, and Spirit. Shouts of “amen” and “hallelujah” fill the entire worship. Singing is accompanied by clapping of hands, movements of the body, and even dancing, and the congregational unison prayer roars with raised hands. Pentecostals have developed a different liturgical tradition.12

As mentioned above, to the Pentecostals and Asian megachurches, the apostolic nature of the church is not centred on the authority of episcopacy (such as §46) but on the restored faith of the early church. Yes, the founder and senior pastor of a megachurch holds and exercises enormous authority (either in reality or by perception), but the basis of this authority is born of (often) his sacrificial commitment to and “success” in ministry.13

When it comes to the sacrament, Pentecostal churches celebrate the eucharist with two streams of meaning: in remembrance of Christ’s death and to experience God’s benevolent presence, especially in healing. In a Pentecostal life, communion with God and one another takes place in worship, prayer, and small groups (often including meals). Indeed, worship (or yebae, in Korean), which traditionally requires eucharist, is not sharply distinguished from prayer meetings. To the Korean Pentecostals, the centre of worship is God’s word and encounter with God. For baptism, Pentecostals take the words of John the Baptist literally: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But... one who is more powerful than I... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11, NIV). Thus, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not an option: “all believers... should ardently expect and earnestly seek... the baptism in the Holy Spirit.”14 There is only a vague suggestion to this effect in TCTCV: “Some churches see the gift of the Holy Spirit as given in a special way through chrismation or confirmation” (§41).

Ministry

The unique doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit advocates the empowerment for witnessing, that is, calling, equipping, and commissioning every believer to be a witness. This doctrine shapes what is called “the prophethood of all believers,” radical democratization of ministry. This

challenges the historically established exclusive claim of ministry by clergy. *TCTCV* also includes this belief: “The whole people of God is called to be prophetic people, bearing witness to God’s word” (§19). The accomplishment of Pentecostal Christianity is the realization of this idea. The most iconic expression of this underlying theology is the implementation of the cell group system by YFGC. Initially motivated in 1964 to radically expand pastoral resources to manage the exponential growth,\(^\text{15}\) the mobilization of lay leaders to carry out pastoral care was a fine example of the “prophethood of all believers.” In the male-dominant Korean culture, a woman lay leader ministering to a small group, including male members, was a positive transformative challenge to the culture.

As a Pentecostal congregation, YFGC prepares its members to be zealous witnesses to Christ’s saving grace. Equipped with testimonies of God’s work of grace and power, their lives bear witness to God’s specific intervention to human life while they are eager to share their stories. Neighbours are regularly invited to home cell meetings to hear such testimonies. In this religiously pluralistic society, the “otherness” of the gospel is critical, and YFGC members are best equipped for evangelization.

This commitment to evangelism (in line with §59) is also manifested in YFGC’s cross-cultural ministry. With the steady increase of internationals and cross-cultural families, YFGC formed various language-oriented congregations under the international ministry department. Also, YFGC commissions a large number of cross-cultural missionaries. Before his death in 2021, Cho regularly conducted mass international gatherings for evangelism, healing, and church growth seminars.

For decades, YFGC has paid considerable attention to caring for those who struggle in life (in line with §58). For example, the church began a program to support children’s heart surgeries in 1984. In 2008, more than 4,000 received life-saving surgeries.\(^\text{16}\) To finance the program, members collect recyclable material; this is perhaps the first sight one would encounter upon entering the church complex. There is a long list of social service ministries, including the church-supported non-governmental organizations.

The last is the work of reconciliation, particularly between the two divided Koreas. As an extension of the church’s care for young heart patients, Cho successfully negotiated with two Korean governments to establish the Cho

\(^{15}\) Cho, *Dr. David Yonggi Cho*, 83–96, provides details of the conceptualization and development of the home cell group system.

Yonggi Cardiac Hospital in Pyongyang, North Korea. This project was hailed as a symbol of national reconciliation led by Pentecostal Christians in the South. Unfortunately, the project was halted in 2010 as the relationship between the two Koreas soured. The project is close to completion, claiming that the final phase of the project requires only six months. Despite various efforts, Cho died with this life-long vision uncompleted. YFGC, like many Korean Christians, would see this national reconciliation as the priority to interreligious issues, for which *TCTCV* dedicates much space (§60, 62).

**Conclusion: How about Church Unity?**

Megachurches are part of Christ’s Church universal, thus offering unique gifts and at the same time needing other gifts offered by the rest of the body. The most significant gift is their size and influence. Cho’s decision to have his church and denomination, the Korean Assemblies of God, become part of the National Council of Churches in 1996 was only possible because of this special gift. It is known that he persisted against considerable pressure from their US counterpart. Younghoon Lee, YFGC’s senior pastor, led a Pentecostal prayer and preached a Pentecostal sermon at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (in Busan, Korea) in 2013, continuing Cho’s commitment to church unity.

This reflection brought the members of YFGC to read *TCTCV* to find out if the YFGC can affirm the document as speaking for them. The overall verdict is negative. As expected, the voice of Asian megachurches is not found in *TCTCV*. Even the points that YFGC would agree with in the document came not from the church’s input to *TCTCV* and the process of the document, but from commonly held beliefs. Nevertheless, despite these reflections, *TCTCV* still has elements which can benefit Pentecostal churches in Asia, and thus the opportunity to interact with it through this chapter is welcomed.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Missional Church through Reproduction: An Asian Perspective of Mission

Julie Ma

Introduction

There are numerous mission perspectives and understandings from many mission organizations and different Christian groups. It is understood that the Church is inaugurated by the Holy Spirit and that the purpose of its existence is fulfilling God’s mission. Hence, it must be a missional church. Jesus commissioned his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).

In this chapter, I will address my viewpoint on a mission from my involvement in church planting obtained through hands-on experiences for decades, which is a unique underscoring on the reproduction of being a missional church. In the second section, I will assess the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*. I hope my essay on missional church and my assessment of *TCTCV* will contribute to helping reshape and re-evaluate additional studies on this significant emerging document.

Church Planting through Partnership

Countless Western and non-Western missionaries, including Korean missionaries, have been involved in church planting as their primary mission work. According to annual statistics published by the Korean World Mission Association, in 2010, 53.3 percent of Korean missionaries were involved in
church planting. Through their labours, 6585 new churches were in operation in various parts of the world.¹ In Cambodia, according to a Korean missionary who has been working there for more than ten years, there are around 500 Korean missionaries in the country, and more than half are engaged in church planting.² The number of Korean missionaries as of 2020 is 30,000.³

Our missionary work in the Philippines (1979–2006) had two ministries: leadership training through seminary teaching, and evangelism and church planting among tribal groups in the northern Philippines. Without much reflection, we were drawn into a church-planting ministry role, and I estimate that two factors played a critical part in that. The first is the socio-religious context of the region. The mountain areas, called Cordillera, were excluded from the long Spanish colonization through air-tight maintenance of the areas’ traditional animistic religion. Second, our own Korean experiences must have orientated us towards this work. The following is a summary of part of my experience:

[The national mission workers] laid a rather heavy emphasis on church planting. For various reasons, a church dedication becomes an important opportunity to encourage the local congregation to replicate the efforts. On this special and joyous occasion, the service rightly consists of lively praises, thanksgiving, and a long chain of testimonies. However, in the midst of this celebration, we make it a regular habit to challenge the church to open daughter churches in neighboring communities. In fact, our covenant with the congregation is that only through the reproducing work, will our partnership continue. This is our commitment to assist or work with them in developing new churches. Such a covenant frequently serves to motivate them to start a new house church in a nearby village where there is no established Bible-believing church. In fact, some churches, expecting our strong emphasis on reproduction, will have already started new works before their church building is dedicated.⁴

We insisted on the national personnel taking the leading role, as seen above, which necessitated full trust on our part in their sense of calling and their

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² Email message from Wanik Jang, a missionary in Cambodia, on 6 April 2014.
ministry plans. Directly or indirectly, it stressed that church planting is to be carried on among local people. By the time we finished our mission work in the Philippines, there were around 150 new congregations throughout the region. It was obviously the result of collaborative work between national leaders and workers. This partnership, through mutual trust, was critical in every feature of church planting and its movement from the initial phase, through the construction of a church building, to leadership development.

Although diverse contentious problems and challenges arose, a passion for church planting by Korean missionaries brought about the birth of a large number of local congregations.

Impact of a Similar Spiritual Worldview

In the Pentecostal mission, healings and miracles are regularly reported. Even a calling is experienced in supernatural ways, such as dreams, visions, and prophecy. In the non-Western world, including the tribal people in northern Luzon, Philippines, gods and spirits are expected to display their power in concrete ways. Frequently, the missionary message and practices came from the Western perception of the mission field, causing a clash with the non-Western worldview. This often resulted in a “split-level Christianity” or a syncretistic one. In contrast, the Pentecostal worldview is much closer to the animistic focal point in the non-Western worldview. Therefore, the Pentecostal message without hesitation opens the minds of people and raises an expectancy for God’s extraordinary work. This may partly account for the accomplishment of


9. For instance, for a comparison between the Pentecostal worldview and the tribal Kankana-ey worldview, see Julie C. Ma, When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry Among the Kankana-ey Tribe in the Philippines (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 213–32.
the Pentecostal mission.  

Healing or the supernatural work of God produces an awestruck consequence in the mind and causes a crack in a tight-fitting worldview constructed by communal life in a tribal setting. It is considerably intensified when a family encounters a disaster, such as disease, and their traditional gods and spirits are incapable of assisting them. A concrete experience of divine power brings modifications in many ranges of personal, family, and even community life. Such a healing or miracle plays a pivotal role in a quantity conversion or people’s movement. For example, as is often observed, the utmost effective component of Muslim evangelism is through the supernatural demonstration of God’s power.

Two Cases in Point

I will refer to two instances, both taken from Pentecostal churches. The first is on a smaller scale, on behalf of local development, while the second is macroscopic, signifying an international movement. The two are chosen to illustrate that an international movement is probable only where there is a local movement—just as the earth turns itself, which provides the needed vitality for the earth to circle the sun.

Local reproduction

The Kankana-ey tribe resides in the rugged mountains of the northern Philippines. Tiny villages are reachable only on foot. The normal lifespan is short since only poor medical services are accessible. Frequently, traditional religious practices, such as sacrifices and funerals, contribute to the deterioration

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10. Although Pentecostal mission has advantages in this area, it is still open to syncretism. See, for example, Mathew S. Clark, “The Challenge of Contextualization and Syncretism to Pentecostal Theology and Missions in Africa,” JAM 3:1 (2001), 79–99, and Julie C. Ma, “Santuala: A Case of Pentecostal Syncretism,” AJPS 3:1 (2000), 61–82.


13. The Kankana-ey tribe is one of seven major tribes in the northern Luzon, Philippines.
of the state of affairs in their lives.

Balili is an old Kankana-ey “mother church” in this region. As the church grew, members living far away wanted to have their own church, particularly during the long rainy season. Hence, the Sebang Church was born. In the Sebang Church, Miss Pynie Bacasen, a young Bible school graduate, inspired a few young people to pray for the Kalango-ya over the mountains. One summer, Pynie hiked the Spanish Trail, which was often infested with Communist guerrillas. When she reached Cocoy after a five-hour hike, she discovered some little kids all over the mountain villages. She conducted a vacation Bible school, and rapidly a church was born in this sternly animistic community. Young people from Sebang made almost weekly trips to Cocoy to support the believers. Through prayer, people were healed, and others were delivered from threatening dreams. In spite of strong antagonism from the village priest, the church grew gradually. Within a year, the church building was dedicated through the joint work of Balili, Sebang, and Cocoy.

At this time, the young people of Cocoy began to pray for another nearby village, Docucan, as all the Cocoy children go to school in this community. Pynie led young volunteers from Cocoy, as well as Sebang, in her weekly evangelistic journeys to Docucan. Again, during this time, the young people regularly prayed for healings and deliverance from various spiritual and physical problems. When the church was constructed, the joint workforce consisted of people from Babili, Sebang, Cocoy and Docucan. Before the Docucan building was completed, the newest church had already begun to send their young people regularly to a nearby village, Ambakbak. Already six families were worshipping the Lord. Now, four churches are “daughtering” this village church and they began to construct the church building and expect to finish it very soon. The ultimate goal for this “chain of daughter churches” is Tinuc, the most influential and sizeable Kalango-ya center in the country. The good news is that already there has been a Bible study at the center of this tribal region. Again, this is a joint ministry participated in by all the “mother” and “daughter” churches: Babili, Sebang, Cocoy, Docucan, and now Ambakbak. 14

**International reproduction**

International Charismatic Service in Hong Kong is a multinational and multicultural Pentecostal congregation. This became home for numerous

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overseas employees in this lively city. A substantial ethnic group was Filipinos serving in diverse jobs. The major element of the Filipino audience (they later had their own worship centre due to their large number) was women who worked as domestic helpers. Many of them had left their country, families, and children behind. These women believed in Jesus Christ during their lonesome life in this city.\footnote{Ma and Ma, \textit{Mission in the Spirit}, 55.}

As a Pentecostal church, members have been profoundly dedicated to missionary works and very attentive to reaching Mainland China. In the early 1990s, the church noticed that Mongolia was about to be opened to the external world, beginning a transnational ministry. In September 1992, the church sent a 50-member evangelistic group. Two of them were Filipina workers who offered their valuable vacation break to this missionary cause instead of going back to their home country to spend time with family. The group members conducted “a one-week open-air evangelistic crusade in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of this newly opened country”; as a consequence, the Hope Church was erected with a group of 300 new converts from the crusade.\footnote{Ma and Ma, \textit{Mission in the Spirit}, 55.}

The Hope Church became one of the largest flourishing churches, with nearly 600 in Sunday attendance. Soon they opened a Bible school in the church, which has produced many graduates. As a mother church, the Hope Church is now beginning to reach some outskirt regions of Mongolia with the gospel.

**Concluding Remarks**

Due to the similar spiritual worldview of the two groups, Pentecostals and animistic people in tribal society, the gospel was well accepted. Through training and teaching to be a missional church, the tribal churches became producers of daughter churches, a multigenerational church. These are prime instances of a full-circle mission. We can perceive a few distinctive structures in this multigenerational development of God’s mission within an eight-year span. The churches have been unsurprisingly successful in their missionary work as part of their Christian vocation. This can be effortlessly credited to the exposure of the members to Pentecostal teaching.\footnote{Ma and Ma, \textit{Mission in the Spirit}, 41.}

In entire situations, the main vigorous work has been done by laypeople. Pynie is the only qualified and licensed minister with the Philippine Assemblies of God for the earliest example, while the majority of the mission group members

were laypeople who led the Mongolian evangelistic crusade.

Their pledge to this work is conspicuous, since throughout the six-month rainy season, they continued to endure walking and climbing a few hours on rough mountain trails to minister to the church people. Obviously, surrendering their annual holiday for a mission stems from great determination and commitment.

Praying for healing is a significant part of their ministry. Frequently, anecdotes of divine supernatural work provide innovation in evangelism. Without a doubt, such an empowerment mission at micro levels can be simply expanded to an international scope. This perspective creates the Pentecostal mission, which is exclusive and hopeful.

An Assessment for TCTCV

*TCTCV* is well formulated, with suitable and adequate topics and sources. It will bring marvellous and inspiring benefits to the Church. However, I will make some suggestions as contributions from my personal empirical mission experiences through church planting and reflecting the perspective of the Korean Church; and I will also note the areas where I agree and disagree with *TCTCV*.

Several possible additions to consider

First, it would be great to add explanations on the existence of a church and its fundamental role, which is being the missional Church, somewhere in a relevant area in the document. The role of the Church is bringing dying souls to the knowledge of salvation. The mission will begin in a local setting and move overseas, as Jesus commanded his disciples: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Second, I recommend adding the feature of multiplications of the Church. The Church has to reproduce itself, which will result in a multigenerational church. It will occur by opening outreaches within the same tribe or in trans-tribal settings: a daughter church opens another daughter church, and the third daughter church will establish another one.

Third, I suggest adding church prayer life and spirituality as a prime aspect of the Church. To make the ministry efficacious and fruitful, the Church has to devote time to prayer, and it further reflects in each individual Christian life.

Fourth, I propose adding a section on spiritual worldview or making clear the spiritual worldview held by the document’s authors. Christians have a common view of the spiritual world since we believe in the existence of the Holy
Spirit and his working in the daily lives of believers. Having such a spiritual worldview helps to understand those people in the non-Western world who worship their ancestor spirits and practise filial piety, shamanism, and spiritism. It will be common ground to understand the unseen world and further enable them to open up to each other. People in the majority world who have such spiritual notions can effortlessly accept the gospel when it is accompanied by divine healing demonstrations.

**Points of disagreement with TCTCV**

I have only one area that I found difficult to understand, which is in *TCTCV* §15: “The response of Mary, the Mother of God.” Although the Son of God, Jesus Christ was born to the world through the body of Mary and the trinitarian perspective of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, existing in three coequal and coeternal persons, I find it difficult to accept this expression.

**Points of agreement with TCTCV**

I agree with the majority of the document. The document is carefully crafted. But a couple of particular themes I found significant. First, “unity,” which was discussed in the introduction and chapter 1. Churches in Asian and non-Asian countries are easily split because of disagreements and incongruities. Without a doubt, the body of Christ must be united as we serve one God. In its opening chapter, *TCTCV* claims that “visible unity finds a most eloquent expression in the celebration of the eucharist, which glorifies the Triune God and enables the Church to participate in the mission of God for the transformation and salvation of the world.”

Second, giving attention to interreligious groups of people sharing the good news of Jesus is such a noteworthy part. In the fourth paragraph of the introduction, *TCTCV* notes, “the Church relates to the world as a sign and agent of God’s love, such as proclaiming Christ within an inter-religious context, witnessing to the moral values of the Gospel and responding to human suffering and need.” The Church should be open to dialoguing with other religions and learning from one another with humble hearts and attitudes, so that each religion has its own unique aspect of teaching. Some Asian churches are still hesitant to engage in interreligious dialogue and interaction. The Church also needs to show care and love for those outside the Church who are suffering in pain and agony. This is part of reflecting the character of Jesus Christ through which the world will experience our Saviour and will turn to Christ.
The Church Is to Commune with the Holy Spirit

The pivotal roles of the Holy Spirit in ecclesiology can be readily appreciated since the Church was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost and is continually empowered by the Holy Spirit for the entrusted mission of God today. However, “a pneumatological deficit” has often been recognized, in that theologians have called pneumatology the “Cinderella of theology.” The convergence text The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) is not an exception to the theological deficit. Although the adoption of the Greek term koinonia for the nature and the mission of the Church in TCTCV contributes to the further development of the trinitarian ecclesiology, a two-fold issue can be discussed: 1) an excessive emphasis on the intercessory role of the Holy Spirit in the Church’s communion with the triune God, and 2) a lack of pneumatological personhood in highlighting the missional Church’s charismata.

When TCTCV states that “In the Church, through the Holy Spirit, believers are united with Jesus Christ and thereby share a living relationship with the Father” (§10), the ecclesial communion with the triune God seems to depend

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heavily on the Father and the Son particularly, since the Holy Spirit serves as the facilitator for the union with the Son and for the relationship with the Father, not as the immediate recipient of the fellowship. As a result, the role of the Holy Spirit in communing with the Church is found to be relatively functional, not relational. This notion often creates a misunderstanding that “The Spirit appears as a sort of glue, binding Father and Son together, and binding both to believers.” Consequently, this type of trinitarian perspective can lead to a criticism “for depersonalizing the Holy Spirit or at least for not allowing the identity of a distinct person to come through clearly.” In this regard, it is necessary for the concept of koinonia as communion with the Spirit in TCTCV to be further developed to reflect the full personality of the Spirit and his inseparable union with the Father and the Son, “both in nature, in honour, in godhead, and glory, and majesty, and almighty power, and in all devout belief.”

When TCTCV describes the Holy Spirit primarily with functional terminologies such as “calling,” “enabling,” “empowering,” “equipping,” renewing, life-giving, and guiding (§6, 9, 13, 21), it is possible that the relational characteristics of the Holy Spirit get overshadowed by the instrumental functions that enable the Church to “serve the Lord in furthering the kingdom in the world” (§13). Although the value of spiritual empowerment for the Church should be constantly appreciated, the excessive pneumatological emphasis on the functional side without supplementary explanation of the Holy Spirit’s personhood can result in a theological bias as if the Holy Spirit comes as power or primarily in / for power.

When the Korean Church interacted with Pentecostal beliefs, the conception of the spiritual gifts rapidly percolated into the mindset of the people, to the degree that the baptism of the Holy Spirit became a religious experience, or even ritual, to receive spiritual power. However, this view was gradually contextualized in the Korean Church. The most representative Korean Pentecostal, David

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4. O’Collins points out the trinitarian dispute between the Augustinian and Eastern Church groups. See Gerald O’Collins S.J., *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1999), 135.


Yonggi Cho, shows how his pneumatological perspective changed:

Many people do not know the meaning of fellowship with the Holy Spirit. They say they are born again and have received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. They have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in ministry . . . But God changed my attitude and showed me that the Holy Spirit is more than the Spirit of being born again, more than the Spirit of power. He’s a person – but a person who lives inside me. To live with a person means to have fellowship with the person. It means recognition of each other. It means intimate fellowship and communication.\(^7\)

When the baptism of the Holy Spirit is considered as a distinctive spiritual phenomenon characterized by missional implications for evangelistic ministries, Korean Church leaders like Cho have developed a common theological tenet that the Holy Spirit is “a personal Being,” and the intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit must be the primary calling of the Church.\(^8\) This was a timely discernment of the potential danger of overemphasizing the functional aspects of the Holy Spirit and depersonalizing the nature of the Spirit as if he is power, particularly when the biblical images of the Holy Spirit are often associated with the material and animal world.\(^9\) However, one should know that in John 14:16, the Holy Spirit is also called *paracletos*, meaning counsellor (Revised Standard Version), advocate (New International Version, New Living Translation), comforter (Young’s Literal Translations, King James Version), and helper (New American Standard), clearly connotating a personal being. In this regard, Cho pays attention to the pneumatological personhood by arguing that the Bible describes the Holy Spirit with the proper pronoun *he*, not *it*, such as in John 15:26; 16:7-8, 13.\(^10\) Cho continues to regard the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in 2 Corinthians 13:13, which is used as the most popular benediction formula in the Korean Church as the “participation in the Holy Spirit,”\(^11\) in Harris’ interpretation.\(^12\) This notion sounds improbably artificial, especially since the expression of *koinonia* is attributed to the Holy Spirit, whereas the Son

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9. Kärkkäinen points out various images of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, such as fire, cloud, water, breath, and dove. See Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 23–25.
and the Father respectively take credit for grace and love. When the passage presents two possible interpretations—participation in the Holy Spirit and fellowship with believers through the Holy Spirit—Martin believes that “it is clearly possible to combine both syntactical points and think of Paul as remarking on ‘the fellowship of the church through the common share in the Holy Spirit.’” In other words, the Holy Spirit is not only a source for believers’ communal lives inside the Church but the key person in perfecting the fellowship with the triune God. The process of the Church’s communion with the Holy Spirit itself must be a vital calling of the Church: not simply because the Church can be united with the Son and have a living relationship with the Father through the Holy Spirit, but because the Church can be united with and have a living relationship with the Holy Spirit. Thus, it seems necessary in TCTCV that the Holy Spirit should be more appreciated for his being a person and for inviting the Church to intimate fellowship with him and with others.

The Church Is to Confront Spiritual Oppressors

As the Church participates in the redemptive works of Jesus as her essential mission, many in Pentecostal/charismatic circles believe they need to have a confrontational approach to be effective in their evangelistic activities. Interestingly, TCTCV shares a similar idea in observing that “the churches are trying to fulfill this evangelistic vocation . . . through advocacy even to confrontation with the powers that oppress human beings” (§6). However, TCTCV focuses on the Church’s confrontation with various forms of oppression from socio-politico-economic contexts without considering demonic oppression from the spiritual dimension.

When it comes to the Korean Pentecostal/charismatic practice, spiritual battle against demons/Satan is not optional but a primary mission of the Church. It is commonly witnessed that when the gospel is proclaimed in areas where Christianity was less known or not yet introduced, the level of disturbance of spiritual enemies is greater than in other places. As an example, at his conversion, the first Korean healing practitioner, Ik-Du Kim, is believed to have had a

14. See Martin, 2 Corinthians, 505; David E. Garland, 2 Corinthians (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999).
Communion with the Holy Spirit, Healing, and Spiritual Battle

A spiritual war against an evil spirit called Cheonjadaegam. His ministry in Sincheon was also described as “a holy fight.” Cho echoes the same idea as he says, “Wherever we go, we meet the strongholds of the enemy – of Satan. Every town has its own devil. If I ever would like to establish a church in a certain area, I have to challenge that power first. If I can defeat the devil, then I can build a church.”

The salient point is that Satan’s efforts in hindering the evangelists from spreading the gospel are felt to be great barriers in a realistic way. Thus, the biblical notion “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8-9) is prevalent particularly in the mission field, where the salvific war is severe. Unsurprisingly, the Christian life became like a battle against the spiritual enemies to the degree that one of the most popular Christian greetings in the Korean Church is seung-li-ha-se-yo, meaning “Have a victory.” As Paul believed that Satan had hindered his journey to the church (1 Thess. 2:18), Satan’s cunning and vicious works were understood as an ongoing hindrance to the expansion of God’s kingdom.

The spiritual battle against demons has been an old belief and practice of the Church held not only by Pentecostals/charismatics but also by early Church fathers. Eusebius Pamphilus treats the demon as the one “who hates everything that is good, and is always hostile to the truth, and most bitterly opposed to the salvation of man, turned all his arts against the Church.” According to Tertullian, “the ruin of mankind” and “their destruction” are the primary tasks of demons; they are “everywhere in a single moment; the whole world is as one

16. Cheonjadaegam is one of the gods that were worshipped in the Shamanistic context of Korea. The word daegam appears to originate from the vocational term referring to those officers who had at least the third position of the 18 ranks of the Joseon dynasty. This was later developed into a religious word that was combined with other modifying terms to name various gods with their distinctive roles of conferring fortune, misfortune, protection, health, wealth, and so on, as in ancestor worship. See http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/kr/topic/detail/1273; https://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?docId=547620&cid=46622&categoryId=46622; and In-seo Kim, Kim Ik-Du Moksa SoJeon [A Short Biography of Ik-du Kim], in Kim Ik-Du Mogsa Seolgyo Mit Yakjeonjib [The Sermons and Biography of Ik-du Kim], ed. Seong-ho Lee (Seoul: Hyemunsa, 1977), 144.


place to them.” Augustine of Hippo also acknowledges the substance of demons’ aerial bodies and their vicious works:

As to the demons, these false and deceitful mediators, who, though their uncleanness of spirit frequently reveals their misery and malignity, yet, by virtue of the levity of their aerial bodies and the nature of the places they inhabit, do contrive to turn us aside and hinder our spiritual progress; they do not help us towards God, but rather prevent us from reaching Him.

As presented above, there is an agreement on the reality of demons and their major roles to debilitate the Church. Nonetheless, there is hesitancy to put too much stress on the demonic power, as it is believed that “Demons are real, but their reality is mere illusion . . . . Demons can only terrorize those who attribute to them the power to do so.” This idea is even further developed to its extreme. Clement of Alexandria asserts that “there is no power” in demons. Gilbert considers the demonic power not as realistic but symbolic as he claims that “the image of spiritual warfare is but one of a number of metaphors that are used in Scripture to characterize the Christian life.”

A question to answer is, are demons real or mere whispers? According to Tertullian, demons are capable of inflicting “upon our bodies diseases and other grievous calamities, while by violent assaults they hurry the soul into sudden and extraordinary excesses.” Tatian presents the same idea in ascribing “diseases and disturbances” to demons. These conceptions seem reasonable when “the reality” and “activity of demons” are clearly witnessed in the Bible. Matthew 8:28–34 testifies that “There is an unseen spirit always near us, very powerful and full of
endless malice against our souls.” Demons are usually associated with the idolatry of non-believers, and “idolatrous activity is energized by demons” to oppose the “reception of the gospel that Christians are to spread” (Luke 8:12). They can utilize their “destructive” power to cause “dumbness (Matt. 9:32-33), blindness (Matt. 12:22), deformity (Luke 13:11-17), and convulsive fits (Matt. 17:15-18).” They are also believed to “drive men to self-inflicted injury (Mark 5:5; 9:22) or to destroy others (Rev. 18:2, 24). They may directly slaughter men (Rev. 9:14-19) . . . some suicidal manias come from their treachery (Mark 9:22).” These informative biblical passages show that demons are not figurative entities but powerful spiritual beings whose malicious influence is real in the world.

One should, however, caution against adopting a dualistic perspective that equates demonic powers with that of God, since that is not what the Bible testifies. It is noteworthy that “Mighty as he [the devil] is, there is someone even mightier. Although he is set on doing harm in the world, he can only work by permission.” Demons are “the powerless fallen angels who are certainly subject to God’s power” and are all under the sovereignty of God. It is also biblical that God sometimes sanctions “demon powers to correct defection (1 Tim. 1:19-20) or immorality (1 Cor. 5:15)” so that “through difficulties inflicted by them, the believer may grow in discernment (Job 40:1-3; 42:1-6) and learn to trust God more thoroughly (2 Cor. 12:7).” In this regard, G. E. Ladd’s argument is plausible when he accentuates the most crucial point: “Satan is not powerless, but his power has been broken” (Mark 3:27). Tatian shows a similar perspective that although demons can inflict believers through their malicious power, “they depart in terror . . . being smitten by the word of God.” In this sense, Chrysostom describes the spiritual battle as “an easy victory” as he interprets 2 Corinthians

32. Dickason, Demon Possession and the Christian, 29.
10. Considering the aforementioned contextual, biblical, and historical witnesses to the nature of demonic power, the Church should not be afraid of demons but bravely confront them. It is therefore important to understand the reality of the ongoing salvific war between the Church and her spiritual enemies. Moreover, if Justin is right when he says that one of the most crucial reasons for the incarnation of Jesus is to destroy the works of the devil in 1 John 3:7-8, the Church’s mission in TCTCV should include the spiritual dimension of confronting demons that oppress human beings to impede the expansion of God’s kingdom.

The Church Is to Heal the Sick

When the whole world is fighting against the invisible force of the COVID-19 virus, praying for the sick is no longer a matter of sectarian partiality. The World Council of Churches booklet entitled Voices of Lament, Hope, and Courage: A Week of Prayer in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic confirms that churches are receptive to divine healing today. TCTCV also sheds light on the Church’s ministry to heal the sick. The major agreement between the Korean Pentecostals and TCTCV is the belief that “Communion is . . . the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity in hope of reconciliation and healing” (§5) and that the Church is required to continue Jesus’ ministry of “healing every disease and every sickness” (§5–6). However, it is still necessary to elaborate on the inseparable relationship between the Church and divine healing since healing practice tends to be considered one of the

Church’s activities, not a fundamental element of the gospel. When divine healing has helped churches to grow in number, it has characterized the Pentecostal/charismatic movement as the “most outstanding distinctive.” Dayton argues that divine healing is “more characteristic” of the movement than the “doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit.” In this light, paying attention to divine healing is crucial for understanding Pentecostal ecclesiology. Pentecostal healing theology that emphasizes soteriology “most strongly” in terms of healing in the Atonement leads to an assertion that healing as “the salvation of body” must work in the same way it does for spiritual salvation. Thus, healing is not a collateral ministry of the Church but one of the central missions of the Church.

Another reason for the Korean Church to see divine healing as one of her primary missions can be explained from her unique context. Divine healing has played a significant role in sustaining those who were oppressed as the Korean Church suffered from various trials caused by the Japanese colonization (1910–45) and the Korean War (1950–53). In this time of frustration and despair, Ik-du Kim’s healing events emerged as a popular topic in the entire society of Korea, especially for the persecuted and marginalized people who were struggling with poverty, tribulation, and suffering caused by the failure of the Korean independence movement in 1919. Seong-bong Lee’s report on his


healing ministry helps us to better understand the significant role of healing ministry for the suffering people as he says, “all the oppressed with hunger and thirst under the Japanese rule were filled with joy, and wherever I went spiritual fire was kindled,” resulting in bringing people to Jesus. Cho’s case is no different, as he felt the great need for healing ministry after the Korean War to bring the good news to the suffering people in a holistic way. It can be noticed that the healing movement in Korea has provided an urgent ministry for the suffering people to be healed not only of physical sickness but also of emotional wounds, which were culturally, socially, politically, and economically formed in the souls of Korean people, known as Han. That is why healing ministry in Korea was not a simple church activity but an indispensable reminder of God’s love and power for the physically and emotionally sick living in the darkest periods of the Korean Church. As the majority Christians in the global South still seem to suffer pain caused by socio-politico-economic instability, the message of God’s hope and comfort should continue to bring holistic healing to the sick, the broken-hearted, and the marginalized. In this regard, it would be recommended for TCTCV to highlight divine healing as one of the core missions of the Church since what Jesus accomplished on the cross is spiritual as well as holistic.

52. *Han*, the typical soul of the Korean, translates as “wandering souls,” which are filled with anger, bitterness, and resentment because of the unjust death of people. Adams explains Han as “an accumulation of suppressed” and “condensed experiences of oppression”; he continues to list socio-political factors that historically have induced Han in the four-fold concept: 1) oppression by powerful nations, 2) tyrannical rulers, 3) oppression of women because of neo-Confucian laws and customs, and 4) hereditary slavery. Jeong also presents a similar view in defining Han as “the diseased hearts of people who are physically or psychologically associated with the suffering of survival created by wars, patriarchal suppression, poverty, and sicknesses in Korean history.” See Soo-young Kwon, “How Do Korean Rituals Heal? Healing of Han as Cognitive Property,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 14 (2004), 31; D. J. Adams, *Christ and Culture in Asia* (Quezon City: New Day, 2002), 97; Chong-hee Jeong, “The Korean Charismatic Movement as Indigenous Pentecostalism,” in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. A. H. Anderson and E. Tang (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2005), 555.
Voices from the Grassroots: Basic Ecclesial Communities on the Mission of the Church

Fides del Castillo

Introduction

This chapter privileges the church of the poor. It articulates the lived experience of select Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in the Philippines and aims to contribute to the universality and relevance of *The Church Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*. The World Council of Churches (WCC) hopes that *TCTCV* will pave the way to visible unity among Christian churches “to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world” (§58).¹ The restoration of visible unity is a common goal shared with the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian churches active in the ecumenical movement.

From this mutual interaction between current human affairs and the Christian tradition, the author hopes to unpack the understanding of grassroots Christians on the nature and mission of the Church, after which the author responds to following questions:

1. In what ways does *TCTCV* reflect a vision or understanding of the Church, its mission, and its ministry from the perspective of select Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines?

2. What is missing from *TCTCV* from the perspective of grassroots Filipino Christians?

3. How can TCTCV expand a vision of the ministry of the Church from the perspective of select Filipino Basic Ecclesial Communities?

A Brief Survey of Religions in the Philippines and Contemporary Catholic Faith

The Philippines is a predominantly Christian country—around 80 percent of the population professes the Roman Catholic faith. Various Christian denominations are also actively present in the country, including Evangelical, Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), and Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Philippine Independent Church). Roughly 5 percent of the population are Muslims. Chinese Buddhism is also present in the country.

Basic Ecclesial Communities

Pope John Paul II reiterates the invaluable role of BEC in the Church's life in his post-synodal exhortation Ecclesia in Asia. In the Philippines, BEC practise a new way of being church. They do not reject or supplant existing church structures. Instead, they are the Church at the grassroots. As the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991) stated:

[They are composed of] Christian families who gather around the Word of God and the Eucharist. These communities are united to their pastors but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name and share the Word of God and the Eucharist and their concerns, both material and spiritual. They have a strong sense of belongingness and responsibility for one another.

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BEC can be a viable model of the church in Asia. Members of small Christian communities understand that a church is guided by doctrine and is praxis orientated. They exercise their ministry first to their families and then to the community. The lived religious experiences of BEC provide them with first-hand knowledge of the perplexities that Christians face in society. As such, laypeople have much to contribute to ecclesiology.

**Methodology**

In November 2019, the Episcopal Committee on Basic Ecclesial Communities of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP-BEC) convened the 4th National Assembly at Davao City. Around 1200 people—Catholic bishops, priests, religious, and BEC lay leaders—participated in the convention. The author asked the participants to answer a short survey composed of the following open-ended questions:

1. What is the response of the Church to social issues?
2. What can the Church do to fulfill its mission in these modern times?

When the survey was completed, the researcher collated the data and employed the empirical phenomenology process. First, the researcher analyzed the informants’ experiences with the Church. By organizing ideas, patterns, and themes, the author was able to identify the first-order constructs. Next, by synthesizing the first-order constructs and formulating a central theme, the researcher developed second-order constructs, which revealed the deeper meaning of notions of the Church among select members of BEC in the Philippines. Third, the researcher evaluated the first-order constructs and related them to the nature and mission of the Church according to Judeo-Christian tradition. Lastly, informed by BEC’s notions of the Church, the author conversed with TCTCV.

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8. The author is a member of the De La Salle University – Manila research team commissioned by the CBCP-BEC to conduct studies on the identity and local histories of BEC in the Philippines.
Conversing with *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*—select responses

1. In what ways does *TCTCV* reflect a vision or understanding of the Church, its mission, and its ministry from the perspective of select Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines?

*The Church: Articulations of Basic Ecclesial Communities*

The select members of BEC articulated salient qualities of being church—universal in mission yet mindful of their purpose in the community, rooted in the Christian tradition but contemporary-sensitive in praxis.

BEC share in God’s plan to save the world. They are aware of socio-political issues beyond their faith communities, such as extrajudicial killings, threats to human reproduction and the sanctity of marriage, and discrimination of persons with diverse sexual orientations, gender identity, and gender expression. The faith of the members of BEC compels them to act on behalf of justice and social transformation. Although faith includes the celebration of rituals and sacraments, BEC recognize the social implications of their faith on Christian mission and day-to-day living. Furthermore, BEC understand that they have fundamental relationships with their neighbours. Informed by their lived faith experience, the laypeople make the Church contemporary sensitive and strive to fulfill the love commandments of Jesus within the family, the community, and society.

2. What is missing from *TCTCV* from the perspective of grassroots Filipino Christians?

A sense of urgency

The lived religious experience of BEC demonstrates that, indeed, “faith impels Christian communities to work for a just social order.” However, BEC also expressed a need for the Church to take a more active role in addressing social issues. In the Philippines, the major social problems are extrajudicial killings, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and reproductive health.

Anchored on the experiences of the first small Christian communities in the country, BEC highlighted the need for urgency in responding to social issues. Many BEC members remember that during the tumultuous political period of the 1960s, the Philippine government failed to provide vital social services to the needy. In response, church workers involved in the BEC movement encouraged

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9. This is usually referred to using the Latin expression *missio Dei* or “the mission of God” (*TCTCV*, §3).
the poor to help each other by pooling their resources and talents to meet their needs as a caring and compassionate community. This aligns with the commitment of the Catholic Church to be the Church of the poor and for the poor. Therefore, the Church is duty bound to move decisively in its responsibility towards the poor and the marginalized.

The author proposes to include the missing term “urgently” in TCTCV §64: “Faith also impels them to urgently work for a just social order, in which the goods of this earth may be shared equitably, the suffering of the poor eased, and absolute destitution one day eliminated.”

Ecclesia domestica

BEC understand the family’s value in the Church’s mission of working towards social order and the new evangelization. Such understanding of ecclesia domestica (the church that is the home) among grassroots Christians mirrors Catholic teaching on the ecclesiality of marriage and the family.

Interestingly, BEC—the primary form of the church, according to the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines—acknowledges the basic cell of the society, the family, as a fundamental ecclesial community. This understanding agrees with the view of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences: “The family has to be the focus of integral evangelization and the essential building block of BEC and even of the local church as a whole.” Indeed, a family living in the spirit of the kingdom is a genuine way of being church. The church that is the home participates in the missio Dei.

Among BEC, the family is critical to fulfilling the Church’s mission and the work of evangelization. It is through BEC that Filipino Christian youths can rediscover the ecclesial form of faith. BEC affirms the Christian faith’s personal and communitarian goodness by exposing the youths to the sacramental life.

Thus, the author proposes to include in TCTCV the importance of the family in the mission of the church.

11. FABC Paper No. 111, cited by Jose De Mesa and Rebecca Cacho, Being Church, Being Sacrament (Manila: St Scholastica’s College, 2012), 155.
12. De Mesa and Cacho, Being Church, Being Sacrament, 157.
13. De Mesa and Cacho, Being Church, Being Sacrament, 73.
3. How can TCTCV expand a vision of the ministry of the Church from the perspective of select Filipino Basic Ecclesial Communities?

BEC in the Philippines understand the value of catechism. As such, they want to know more about the Christian faith. The importance of “faith seeking understanding”—St Anselm’s motto and one of the classical definitions of theology—has been critical in the Christianization of the country. In 1593, Fr Juan de Plasencia, a Franciscan missionary to the Philippines, wrote and published the Doctrina Cristiana (Christian Doctrine). The book consists of 74 pages of translations of the Christian catechism and hymns from Spanish to Old Tagalog and Baybayin—an Indigenous script of Indigenous Filipinos. The Doctrina Cristiana was used by Catholic missionaries to transmit the Christian faith to the people faithfully.14

The salience of catechism, from the perspective of select BEC, shows the dynamic character of theology. Theology is never static, since the particular way of understanding our faith in a given context changes. If faith cannot translate its message into the modern frame of reference, it condemns itself to irrelevance and, ultimately, decay.15 The convergent texts in TCTCV that align with the Catholic Church’s teachings can also be taught among BEC as part of their catechism—specifically those which invite Christian believers to dialogue and foster a shared understanding of the nature and the mission of the Church.

Moreover, the author also believes that the use of the vernacular is critical since it is the voice of the Indigenous culture speaking in its terms.16 Thus, this chapter proposes that TCTCV also be translated into Filipino (and, if possible, the major dialects in the Philippines) for it to be appreciated and better understood by the people from the grassroots.

Conclusion

Surprisingly, even after almost 500 years of Christianization, there was a claim that Filipino Christians lack formation. There is a call for the catechesis of BEC


members, that they may attain Christian maturity and become a more responsive people of God. However, the catechism that BEC pertain to is contextualized and contemporary sensitive—a catechism that proclaims the “Word of God as the living address of the living God to a living community of believers that, again and again, responds creatively and redemptively to changing human needs, predicaments and depravities.”\(^\text{17}\)

Interestingly, there were very few doctrinal articulations among select BEC about the mission of the Church. As a group of households beset by the challenges of daily living, it is understandable that their concepts about the Church are pragmatic. They are, after all, a church of the poor.\(^\text{18}\) Many BEC assert that the Church needs to respond urgently to social issues through actions that bring real change.

The members of BEC practise their faith beyond the sacraments and popular religiosity. Small Christian communities strongly believe that the Christian religion has a social implication. Moreover, the praxis of faith starts with the family—the Church that is the home—which forms BEC. Urged by the love of Christ (\textit{Caritas Christi urget nos}), the Christian initially fulfills the love commandments of Jesus within the family, then the community, and then the society. BEC have demonstrated that the laypeople in the Church are crucial to the \textit{missio Dei}—they make the Church responsive to the signs of the times and, to a certain extent, ensure that the gospel message is faithfully transmitted to the younger generations. God’s work of salvation includes a partnership with women and men baptized into a community of Christian faith and mission.\(^\text{19}\) As such, the ecclesiological locations of the healing, life-giving, and reconciling mission of God include, but are not limited to, Basic Ecclesial Communities.


The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV), with its 69 theses, is certainly more than what an ecumenical group of theologians and church leaders with varied theological positions, missional commitments, and contextual compulsions could achieve. In understanding the meaning and mission of the Church, the document sought to offer a theological exposition of a theological category. In so doing, it engaged creatively with the biblical texts and historic Christian tradition. The document locates the origins of the Church within the movement of the triune life of God, as Father willed, Christ initiated, and Spirit empowered.

The document uses existing theological language that has found its place in the creeds and the history of their interpretation. Such an approach has both strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths lie in its efforts to stay faithful to the Church’s deposit of faith. It achieved this by choosing to confine itself to viewing the Church as a theological concept and engaging with biblical texts and church documents. However, any exposition on the Church is incomplete if it fails to take into account the Church’s history and its sociological, cultural, and political context. Since the Church is also a social reality, its sociology is as important as its theology.

For an Indian Christian, Christian identity is multifaceted, and the existence of the Church is complex. The Church exists in a pluralistic, multireligious, multi-ethnic, multicultural background where her official status is that of a minority. Without understanding the historical and sociocultural background of the Church’s life, it is difficult to think of the unity of the Church based on theology.
I would like to share an incident that happened to us in June 2021. I live in Hyderabad, in South India. Since we had to vacate our residence, we had been house hunting for the past month. In some places, we were told that they do not rent their house to Christians. Then, on 30 June, we went to see a house. The owner and landlady, a Hindu, spoke to us. We told her that we were Christians involved in ministry and that we might have visitors coming by. Her immediate reaction was “Do Fathers come in their robes to visit you? If they do, we cannot give you the house.” After I explained to her what we do, she started sharing that she also has faith in the Lord and that she prays to him. Showing us the idols that she worships, she said, “Although I worship in front of them, I think about the Lord. I was told by a priest, there’s nothing wrong in doing so. At one point I even contemplated baptism, but . . ..” One of our friends, a young man, had helped us find this house. She asked if he was our son. When we told her that he is a friend, she said, “We find this love only among Christians, helping each other.”

I share this incident because it defines what it means to be a Christian and Church in India: the multi-layered identity coupled with the existential predicament. The “robes of the Fathers” signify the Western, colonial, denominational identity of Christians and the Church. Denial of a house to Christians signifies the caste identity. Christianity, Church, and Christians are identified as low caste or followers of a Dalit religion. The landlady’s hesitation to profess faith in baptism demonstrates how faith is a community-sanctioned event; multireligious belonging (though done secretly) cannot cross the sociocultural boundaries. Association with Christians indicates the fear of visibility and the suspicion of the wider society in the current political and religious scenario. Love is perceived as a Christian virtue.

This is the sociocultural milieu in which one has to discuss the Church, and church unity, notwithstanding the intra-church complexities of caste (casteism), gender, and ethnicity that relate to identity and egalitarian dignity. In koinonia and the communion ecclesiology, along with baptism, the celebration of eucharist finds the pivotal role as sign and symbol of visible unity in the document. It signifies the Church as the body of Christ. It epitomizes the catholicity, the communion of the local churches, and church unity. TCTCV states, “Such visible unity finds a most eloquent expression in the celebration of the eucharist, which glorifies the Triune God and enables the Church to participate in the mission of God for the transformation and salvation of the world” (Introduction).

“The liturgy, especially the celebration of the eucharist, serves as a dynamic paradigm for what such koinonia looks like in the present age” (§67); “the
eucharist demands reconciliation and sharing by all those who are brothers and sisters in the one family of God. ‘Christians are called in the eucharist to be in solidarity with the outcast and to become signs of the love of Christ who lived and sacrificed himself for all and now gives himself in the eucharist’” (§43). If the Church in India (South India) is to fulfil this vision, it must face up to the reality that divides the Church in order to be the single body, the body of Christ.

The question of church unity in India is perceived to be related to doctrinal and denominational issues. The Church, however, is more entangled with issues of caste discrimination. In South India, the churches are divided on the basis of caste. In certain places, different castes have different churches. The Dalits are socially, spatially (sacred space), and spiritually stigmatized and marginalized. In some places, the Dalits have their own churches; in other places, they attend services standing outside the church. In common churches, they are seated on the side or at the back and can take communion only after the upper-caste Christians do so. In some churches, Dalits and the upper caste do not break bread together or share the eucharist. Dalits cannot be pastors in upper-caste congregations. Even cemeteries are kept separate for Dalits and the upper caste.1

“Even though CSI [the Church of South India] was formed with an organic unity in principle, the groups involved in the union continued to preserve their own denominational missionary heritage in its life and ministry of the local congregations, besides safeguarding the caste identity.”2

These issues form the lived religion and the identity of the Church in India. Thus, church unity cannot be envisioned without justice and liberation as the commission and mission of the Church.

The Indian Church appreciates the document’s acknowledgement of the coexistence of other religions and the attitude of respect they deserve in evangelization. “Evangelization should always be respectful of those who hold other beliefs” (TCTCV §66).

The document’s recognition of the colonial atrocities in evangelization is well received.

At times, the cultural and religious heritage of those to whom the Gospel was proclaimed was not given the respect it deserved, as when those

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engaging in evangelization were complicit in imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations. Notwithstanding such tragic events, God’s grace, more powerful than human sinfulness, was able to raise up true disciples and friends of Christ in many lands and establish the Church within the rich variety of many cultures. (TCTCV §6)

However, the simplistic approval of the positive work of the Holy Spirit through this kind of evangelization as establishing the Church in a variety of cultures could open up new conversations. The Indian Church still grapples with the alien identity of being the product of the colonizers/oppressors with the alien structures that were imposed on her. The Church struggled to establish herself with a self-identity of being Indian on Indian soil. As a result, churches had to find ways to dissociate themselves from the historic denominational churches by establishing independent Indian Christian churches. This has left the churches functioning apart from each other.

As the document rightly points out, “The ‘emerging churches,’ which propose a new way of being the Church, challenge other churches to find ways of responding to today’s needs and interests which are faithful to what has been received from the beginning” (§7). The rise of house churches and independent megachurches speaks of a new longing for the simple communion of believers functioning together. This has also brought new issues into the churches, where believers maintain dual membership: one with the historic denominational churches for privileges and another with the house churches for spiritual nourishment. While structures and authority bind them to one denomination, faith or doctrine leads them to another. Thus, their identities are multiple and the denominational boundaries are porous.

The document maintains that “Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church” (§31). The independent church movement in India should be understood from this perspective. The churches are unique, are diverse, and are grounded in a spirituality that affirms life and the experience of the divine. They do not function from an organized central authority, as envisioned by TCTCV. The Indian Church celebrates plurality, diverse experiences, and multiple expressions of faith. Their ecclesiology is more pragmatically based on the day-to-day lives of people than theology oriented, as viewed by the document. It is an ecclesiology from below. The document appears to have failed to bring these churches or alternative ecclesiology and doing theology into conversation with the older churches in such a way as to make their voices heard. This is also obvious in the absence of the global South in the responses to TCTCV.
Church is a dynamic organism, as it addresses and makes itself relevant to the changing contours of the society and theology too. The emerging “virtual churches” and their functioning pose a challenge to the very understanding of the visible Church and its koinonia and eucharistic ecclesiology. TCTCV must wade further through the contextual patterns of being the Church and define her within the contemporarily relevant idiom.

The ecumenicity of the Indian Church is visible in the face of natural disasters and in the threat of persecution of the Church. They work in solidarity with each other as one Church. Unity based on theology would be a far cry for the Indian Church, if unity is divorced of justice. Only when the Church orientates herself to the ethic of justice, service, and love can she think of unity within her complex existence.

TCTCV is a testament to the hope of unity that is envisaged by the Church. Unity may be achieved as we continue to dialogue with an attitude of learning, where penitence is a leaven and love is the binding factor.
Socio-Religious Location

In India, Pentecostals are located in a religiously plural context. However, the context is largely shaped by the majoritarian religious (Hindu) view that all religions are equally valid paths of salvation. In the past, India was known for welcoming and protecting diverse faith traditions. Today, instead of celebrating the differences, proponents of Hindutva ideology promote religio-cultural homogeneity in all areas of social life. They advocate religious nationalism in the garb of culture and attempt to realize their monocultural vision of “One Nation, One Language, One Culture, One Religion and One Thinking.” For them, Christians are religiously “other.”

We also live in a social atmosphere where religion defines and interprets everything. Religious invocations/greetings like Jai Shri Ram have become political slogans. Religious minorities and subaltern/marginal communities (including Pentecostals) experience discrimination at different levels and often become victims of violence. Hindu communal organizations and fringe groups strongly oppose Christian evangelistic or humanitarian activities. They look at every Christian activity with suspicion of conversion. Recent communal riots and legislation on citizenship and conversion taught us that the forces of communalism have succeeded, to a large extent, in polarizing citizens along religious lines. Now it is not national identity but religious identity that matters in Indian polity. The subalterns, irrespective of religious traditions and denominations, continue to live on the periphery of the society. They are economically poor, socially outcast, and politically powerless. They constitute a majority of Indian Pentecostals. This chapter attempts to locate The Church:
Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) in the larger context of India and engages with it to explore areas of convergence and divergence from the perspective of Pentecostal subalterns.

**Ecclesial and Missional Context**

Pentecostals make up a small percentage of Christians, who constitute only 2.3 percent (27.8 million) of the total population of India. Though mission agencies claim the growth of Christianity, there is a decline in the percentage of Christians in government records. One reason for the official decline is dual religious membership. For example, many subaltern Christians, particularly Dalits, keep Hindu identity in their official documents to access scheduled caste privileges. Despite having ecumenical bodies/forums at different levels, Christians in India continue to be a disjointed community. Caste has already crept into the Church and plays a negative role in the life of many denominations and dioceses. Often, caste identity determines social relations among Christians. Pentecostal communities are not immune from these ecclesial realities.

Pentecostals do their evangelistic activities in a religiously inclusive context. Aggressive evangelistic activities and exclusive salvific claims often invite conflicts and false allegations of conversion. Nevertheless, evangelization is no longer the programme of Pentecostals alone. Today, Hindu gurus such as Sri Sri Ravishankar, Baba Ram Dev, and Mata Amritanandamayi also carry out their mission activities under the umbrella of yoga, art of living, and universal brotherhood, attracting many in India and from abroad. Though the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion (the right to profess, practise, and propagate), Pentecostals, irrespective of denomination, face persecution. Physical assault, vandalism of houses and places of worship, forceful closure of churches, and arrests of pastors and missionaries or community workers through false allegations of conversion are common. Sadly, they go unreported in the mainstream media. Therefore, it is significant to formulate a Pentecostal subaltern response to TCTCV in light of ecclesial and missional realities.

**Subaltern Perspective**

The majority of Pentecostals in India come from subaltern communities: Dalit/Tribal/OBC (Other Backward Class).¹ They embraced the Pentecostal faith to experience freedom, particularly freedom from the bondage of demonic powers,

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¹ V. V. Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism* (Bangalore: ATC, 2008).
and social mobility obstructed by the caste system. Though the new faith has enabled them to improve their socio-religious condition, Pentecostal subalterns remain subalterns in the eyes of co-religionists and the larger society. For Pentecostal subalterns, the Church is a community of equals that empowers them spiritually and socially. Pentecostalism primarily offers them a space for a new fellowship that transcends caste and class. Therefore, a subaltern look at *TCTCV* will furnish a relevant Pentecostal response in the context.

**Pentecostal Understanding of Church**

The Church, the Body of Christ, is a pneumatic and eschatological community. It embodies the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit and prepares believers for the coming of the Lord. As a Spirit-empowered community, it emphasizes holy living in all aspects of life. Pentecostal ecclesiology is also missional ecclesiology. The organic relationship between Church and mission defines the existence of the Church as “Church-in-Mission.”² For Pentecostal subalterns, the Church is the place where they experience spiritual and social empowerment. It allows them to unburden their struggles through worship, prayer, speaking in tongues, testimonies, and so on.³ Though they are socially and economically poor, they experience the empowerment of the Holy Spirit through the fellowship (spiritual and social) of believers. The Church equips them with spiritual capital to face the challenges in life. The subalterns continue to be primary beneficiaries of Pentecostal churches and missions in India. Pentecostal churches’ pneumatic centric communitarian atmosphere offers them space to express themselves and gives them resources for their faith journey.

**TCTCV and Pentecostals**

There are areas where *TCTCV* converges with Pentecostal ecclesiology in India. Pentecostals agree with the scriptural and trinitarian understanding of the Church in the document. Its definition that “The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission” (§1) recapitulates Pentecostal ecclesiology. The Church as a “community of witness” (§2) summarizes the missional nature of Pentecostal communities. The subalterns find their liberating space in the Church because of its missional life. *TCTCV* describes the Church as the “initiative of God the Father, the Son and

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the Holy Spirit” (§13). Indeed, the Church’s being derives from the triune God. Pentecostals affirm this trinitarian understanding of the existence of the Church.⁴ For them, the expression “the Church is holy” (§22) implies community holiness through personal holiness.⁵ In this sense, TCTCV underlines the Pentecostal emphasis on “holy living.” The idea of a “communion of local churches” (§31) gives recognition and validity for local (independent, autonomous) Pentecostal churches that are not part of ecumenical bodies but are led by subalterns. These not well-organized churches cater to the spiritual and physical needs of the subalterns. Pentecostals believe that gifts of the Holy Spirit are inevitable for the Church’s life and mission. TCTCV affirms that “Every Christian receives gifts of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the Church and for his or her part in the mission of Christ” (§18). It acknowledges the Pentecostal view of lay participation in mission and ministry.⁶ The subaltern thrust in the ministerial and missional life of the Church (§64–65) invites the churches to intentionally engage with the subalterns and become voices for them in society. It gives them hope in the midst of their struggles for a dignified life. While accepting TCTCV’s description of the Church, the subalterns focus more on its praxis in their lives. They remind us of the spiritual and social identity/role of the Church in the context of social discrimination and religious/denominational plurality.

Divergence

Pentecostal ecclesiology diverges with TCTCV in terms of its focus on the following areas. The differences do not minimize the significance of the document for the Pentecostal communities, however.

Evangelization

TCTCV narrates the challenges of evangelization in a pluralistic context. However, the document does not clearly explain what’s to be done in the context of religious pluralism except for saying that “Christians [are challenged] to deepen their reflection about the relation between the proclamation that Jesus is the one and only Saviour of the world, on the one hand, and the claims

⁵. M. Stephen, Towards a Pentecostal Theology and Ethics (Kottayam: Chraisthava Bodhi, 1999), 29.
⁶. Stephen, Towards a Pentecostal Theology and Ethics, 24.
of other faiths, on the other” (§7). This suggestion apparently encourages compromising the position of “Jesus is the one and only Saviour of the world.” For Pentecostals, evangelization liberates the subalterns from spiritual and social bondage. Evangelization without affirming the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic context does not draw them to the Christian faith. The Indian Constitution allows the propagation of faith without disturbing public order. The context may decide the mode but not the content of proclamation.

The kingdom of God and kerygma in a pluralistic context

*TCTCV* seems to focus more on the praxis of the kingdom of God (§64–66) in a pluralistic context. Though kerygma ultimately leads to the experience of the kingdom of God, social actions should not obscure the importance of kerygma. Social engagement of the Church (promoting kingdom values) may contribute to the upward mobility of subalterns but not their spiritual emancipation. Pentecostal ecclesiology teaches that “social concern is a consequence of evangelism” that primarily involves kerygma. While there is no harm in joining hands with people of neighbouring faiths for promoting kingdom values, Christian engagement with society must not lose its kerygmatic essence.

Truth and good in other religions

According to *TCTCV*, there are “elements of truth and goodness” in other religions (§25). It is ambiguous whether it is talking about theological truth in other faith traditions. Pentecostals maintain an exclusive position regarding the presence of truth and goodness in other religions. For them, the issue of contention is not people, but truth. The acknowledgment of truth and goodness in other religions minimizes the relevance of evangelism in a plural society. In the case of Indian Pentecostal subalterns, truth and goodness have caste connotations. As historical victims of the caste system, they embraced the Christian faith because it taught them truth and goodness that denounced the caste system and affirmed dignified life.

The gospel: The norm, not the priority, in moral thinking

According to *TCTCV*, “priority is given to the Gospel in evaluating new developments in moral thinking” (§63). Pentecostals disagree with this position.

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8. Satyavrata, *Pentecostals and the Poor*, 70.
and believe in the doctrine of holiness or separation that requires them to consider scripture as the source of morality. Therefore, the gospel is the norm rather than a priority in moral thinking. The normativity of the gospel protects the subalterns from succumbing to unethical behaviour that defines their inferior social standing in the eyes of the dominant.

**Religious persecution**

In India, religious persecution is primarily related to freedom of worship and proclamation rather than to believers’ engagement with “political and economic authorities in order to promote the values of the kingdom of God” (§64). In most incidents of persecution, subalterns are the victims. They endure suffering mainly because of their religious persuasion. The dominant look at conversion through the eyes of electoral politics and violently respond to the religious freedom of subalterns.

**Ministry of oversight**

Though Pentecostals acknowledge the ministry of oversight, it is not spiritually hegemonic. Since every Pentecostal believer is a potential minister, clergy and laity are equally responsible “to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the Gospel” (§52). The functional hierarchy of the ministry of oversight does not nullify the participation of believers in overseeing the congregations. This spiritual and ministerial equality is liberating and empowering for the subalterns who were treated as socially inferior and religiously impure in the sight of the dominant Hindus.

**Missing Points**

There are areas which seem either to be overlooked or minimally discussed in *TCTCV*.

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Mission as church planting

Church planting is an essential characteristic of the Pentecostal mission. Though Pentecostals are involved in social actions as part of their missional engagement, church planting is considered the end result of mission activities. For the subalterns, church planting is significant because social actions and initiatives may give them temporary relief but do not necessarily contribute to the formation of a community of equals. The ministry of church planting enables them to be part of a new faith community where they experience spiritual and social empowerment. The church offers them social fellowship that is not defined by caste.

Prophetic ministry: Social and spiritual

Prophetic ministry is not limited to the practice of critique in the context of unjust, unequal social relations alone. Pentecostals believe in the gift of prophecy, particularly communicating God's will about a person who is in crisis or anticipating divine intervention in his or her life. It has a spiritual value because it strengthens the believers in the faith. The practice of prophecy is also liberating for the subalterns. They come to the Church with wounded psyches and bodies. The prophetic utterances and visions give them the assurance of God who stands with the afflicted and comforts them in times of struggle.

Priesthood and the prophethood of believers

Pentecostals encourage lay participation in mission and ministry, particularly in exercising spiritual gifts. They accept the idea of the priesthood of all believers that allows the laity to participate in the ministry of the Church along with the clergy, though the pastors have practical (not spiritual) precedence in certain ministerial functions. In the absence of a pastor, the believers lead the worship services and exercise ministerial gifts. In Pentecostal communities, there is no restriction for the believers to exercise spiritual gifts. Pentecostals emphasize not only the priesthood of all believers but also the “prophethood of all believers.” The ministerial participation of believers in Pentecostal churches helps the

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subalterns enjoy equality and recognition, which they long for but are often denied in society. They feel privileged to be divinely favoured through ministerial vocations. In faith communities, they are valued based upon their spiritual capital rather than social capital (caste).

**Experiential participation**

Pentecostals give importance to the experiential participation of believers in worship guided by the Holy Spirit rather than mechanically controlled by the liturgy. Though elements of worship initiate the participation of believers, the content of prayers, songs, sermons, the experience of the Holy Spirit, sharing of visions, prophecies, and ministry of other gifts are not externally regulated. They embody the work of the Holy Spirit through their participation in worship. They are free to experience and express the divine power depending on their spiritual and personal conditions. The embodied experience of God occupies an important place in Pentecostal worship. The subalterns find empowerment with such experiences in light of emotional, physical, and social wretchedness.

**Eschatological orientation**

According to *TCTCV*, “The Church is an eschatological reality” (§33). Pentecostals also endorse this view, with an emphasis on holiness in personal life. They emphasize the eschatological orientation of life and believe that the present life has a cumulative effect on the future life. Therefore, life in this world needs to be oriented within the framework of eschatology. It calls for the Church to prepare believers morally and spiritually before the eschaton. The eschatological orientation of life prevents believers from indulging in immoral actions and decisions that destroy their social and economic lives. For the subalterns, it protects them from detrimental behaviour and helps them to build up their lives in this world. It also gives them hope of eternity in the midst of suffering.

**Witnessing within the Church: Internal transformation**

Pentecostals give equal importance to internal and external witness. While witnessing to Christ through evangelistic activities and personal life in society, they insist on witnessing within the Church. In the context of the erosion of

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moral values and caste/class discriminations within faith communities, the Pentecostal faith demands internal transformation. An internally transformed church is a site of liberation for the subalterns who are victimized by oppressive social structures and dominant cultural values. Pentecostals do not endorse morally corrupt ministers and leaders, who lose their testimony in the faith community. Every Pentecostal believer ought to live out a holy life within and outside the Church. There is no difference between “life in the world and worship.”

**TCTCV and Possible Areas of Inclusion**

**Experience of the outpouring of the Spirit (revival and evangelism)**

Indian Pentecostals believe in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) for revival and evangelism (witnessing). They tarry for the experience of the Spirit to revive themselves and to be empowered to reach out to the unreached. For them, evangelism begins from the experience of the outpouring of the Spirit in the life of believers. The illiterate subalterns are empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to break the oppression of the powers and principalities of this world. Though it is a mandate, the thirst for evangelism emerges from revived individuals and communities. Therefore, the experience of the outpouring of the Spirit also needs to be emphasized in *TCTCV*.

**Spirituality**

Every denomination has its own perception of spirituality. *TCTCV* encourages the churches “to foster legitimate diversities of spirituality” for the unity of the universal Church (§30). Scripturally, the Christian faith provides space for diverse spiritual expressions. This diversity is the uniqueness of Christian spirituality. It provides resources to satisfy the spiritual quest of people from different social and cultural backgrounds and facilitates mutual enrichment of spiritualities. Pentecostalism also offers an alternate spirituality that emphasizes the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in social and spiritual life. It is characterized by energetic worship, dreams and visions, healing by prayer, prophecy, speaking in tongues, testimony, personal holy living, and more. The subalterns easily

familiarize themselves with this spirituality because they come from oral spiritual traditions which have certain commonalities (not theological but operational) with Pentecostalism.

**Church as the primary unit of social fellowship**

Indian Christians, even today, are socially defined more by their caste identity than their faith identity. The caste continues to influence their social relations and marital alliances. At present, we have not Christians in the strict sense of the term, but Reddy Christians, Nadar Christians, Syrian Christians, Dalit Christians, Tribal Christians, and so on. The caste has firmly gripped the ministerial and community life of many churches/denominations. Sadly, Indian Christians’ primary social contact has become the network of fellowships shaped by caste consciousness/affinity. In this context, church as the primary unit of social fellowship should be affirmed along with biblical images of the Church. The Church must be the primary communion of believers but not a caste/ethnic association. The subalterns have embraced the Christian faith because of its liberating community life that gives them social and spiritual capital.

**Open church**

The census data from 1981 to 2011 reveals that there is no quantitative growth of Indian Christianity. As mentioned earlier, dual religious membership contributes to the official decline of Christians in India. Dalit Christians who officially remain Hindu so they can access reservation benefits (affirmative action) are a case in point. On the one hand, the government does not protect the converted subalterns; on the other hand, churches insist that they are official members through baptism. Official affiliation with the Church invites social/family and occupational ostracism in many parts of the nation. This situation demands an alternative way of being church for the subalterns who have been historically victimized by the caste system. They long for a faith community that accepts them without official membership but allows them to partake in spiritual and social communion, as most Hindus do in India. Hindus practise their religion without becoming members of a temple. The Church should practically be an open community to embrace anyone who may not necessarily meet the ecclesiastical requirements but who believes in the liberating power of the gospel. It will be a community of hope and empowerment for the subalterns.
Non-liturgical worship

Pentecostal churches follow unwritten/less structured/spontaneous liturgies in worship. They have theological and practical reasons. As far as the subalterns are concerned, non-liturgical worship is liberating because it gives them space to express their concerns during worship through prayers, testimonies, and so on. The informal and flexible nature of worship allows preachers and participants to experience the worship contextually. The spontaneous expressions do not disturb the flow of worship. In this worship, the spiritual and physical realities of the participants (faith community) are reflected in the content of the elements of worship. The illiterate believers, particularly the first-generation Christians among them, can easily participate in the non-liturgical worship. Along with liturgical worship, TCTCV should acknowledge the value of non-liturgical worship.

Equal importance to individual and structural change

Pentecostals accentuate individual transformation as the starting point of structural change. They believe that individual salvific experience contributes to the transformation of society. Therefore, TCTCV needs to promote a balanced approach that gives equal importance to individual and structural changes. The advocacy for structural change without individual transformation (salvific experience) does not do justice to the kerygma of the Church. While exhorting believers and churches to transform oppressive social structures, the document requires including individual change along with structural change. Otherwise, the mission will be reduced to social activism. The life realities of subalterns call for transformation at individual and structural levels.

Directions towards the unity of member churches and non-member churches

TCTCV should include practical directions for the unity of member churches and non-member churches of the World Council of Churches, particularly Pentecostal churches in the respective countries. The liberation of subalterns needs to be the rationale for this unity. Therefore, new realms of unity should be explored to respond to the lived realities of subalterns. It must be unity for struggle and solidarity with the subalterns. Prayer fellowships, Bible study groups, Solidarity action groups, and so on can be initial steps to the unity of member and non-member churches.
Areas of Introspection

There are areas where Pentecostals need to do some introspection on their theological outlook and practical engagement.

Engagement with Christian denominations and non-Christian faith traditions

*TCTCV* encourages Pentecostals to “promote the values of the kingdom of God by working together with adherents of other religions and even with those of no religious belief” (§64). Indian Pentecostals have not yet taken such initiatives to engage not only with other faiths but also with other Christian denominations. They should join hands with others for the transformation of society, particularly the empowerment of subalterns who constitute the majority of Indian Pentecostals. They should converge with others to address the life-threatening issues of subaltern communities. This requires a shift in their missional and theological approach: a shift from an exclusivist communal approach to an inclusivist egalitarian approach in witnessing the values of the kingdom of God.

It also calls for a shift from spiritual empowerment (partial) to holistic empowerment of people because “humanization is inherent in the message of salvation in Christ.”

24 In practical terms, Pentecostals alone cannot transform a society that is culturally and religiously plural. Therefore, the missional life of Pentecostals must be informed and enriched by their engagement with Christian denominations and non-Christian faith traditions.

Sacramental openness

Many Pentecostals do not accept or participate in the sacraments of other denominations. They maintain a superior view of the sacraments observed in their congregations. This exclusive theological approach hinders the possible engagement of Pentecostals with other denominations at the grassroots level. It also encourages non-Pentecostals to disengage with Pentecostals in ministerial communion. Therefore, sacramental openness plays an important role to achieve “the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world” (§31). It does not compromise the essence of Pentecostalism but enlarges its space in communion with denominations and “bears witness before the world of the unity that exists among all believers (koinonia).”

Sacramental openness reduces the gulf between Pentecostals and other

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Christians, opens dialogical relationships, and breaks new pathways of ecumenism that will contribute to the empowerment of subalterns.
The Church: A Perspective from India on Persecution, Growth, and New Movements

Richard Howell

*The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)* will certainly play an important role in guiding conversations towards visible unity. While efforts for visible unity are deliberated and promoted among member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC), there are many newer movements to faith who confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour even while suffering, as seen among the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. They require an intentional outreach on the part of WCC members to invite them to the table to journey together in the pilgrimage of faith! *TCTCV* truly highlights that “there are tendencies toward fragmentation and more attention to what is uniting the few rather than the many” (Foreword).

However, the WCC indeed took a commendable initiative to create a safe and open space to invite to the table Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and the Global Christian Forum was born. It became an instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit to invite to the table the unengaged churches; amazingly, it now has the engagement of the WCC, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, also called the pillars of the Forum. Participants share their journey of faith and discover that we confess the same triune God as we worship the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**The Workings of the Holy Spirit**

Listening, seeing, understanding, accepting, loving, rejoicing, and obeying are all aspects of discerning the work of the Holy Spirit in our common witness.
The free working of the Spirit is at the heart of the understanding of the Church in newer movements, which are visible in a very big way in India and Asia. The emphasis is on the Spirit at work directly in individuals, to say a new thing.

While the established churches recognize the work of the Spirit in the institutional forms of the Church, in the reason of an ordained clergy entitled by their spiritual formation to conclude how scripture is to be read and interpreted by some people more than the uninformed laity, it can restrict the working of the Spirit to the regular, predictable channels of church tradition and church life: for example, to sacraments routinely administered by ordained clergy.

Anything out of the ordinary or anything novel becomes in this way suspect simply because it fails to conform to commonly held traditions. The unusual is not taken for a sign of the Spirit but of the demonic spirit. The newer movements advocate for the free action of the Spirit against its domesticated captivity in rigidly controlled institutional forms.

The Suffering Church

The churches in India have suffered and continue to do so for their worship of Jesus Christ. While freedom and justice are for all communities, the churches need to stand in solidarity with the suffering and be the voice of the voiceless. The newer congregations comprising first-generation believers continue to suffer for their faith.

A research report commissioned by Open Doors UK and conducted by researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science1 has documented disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India. The harms suffered include (but are not limited to):

- a. loss of life, bereavement, physical injury due to practising their faith, or accusations connected to their faith-based identities,

- b. panic, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation about the consequences of continuing publicly in their faith-based identities,

- c. job loss and/or financial loss through loss of property and/or work opportunities due to practising their faith or connection to a faith-based identity,

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d. separation from family members because of intimidation and fear around their faith,

e. children growing up in fear due to parents’ faith-based identities or practices,

f. fear of practising their faith openly, fear of encountering violence for wearing symbols of faith (such as beards, skull caps, headscarves, veils, habits, crosses),

g. low self-esteem and sense of isolation experienced because of multiple forms of misinformation against their faith communities,

h. political disenfranchisement and fear of voting,

i. repeated humiliation and dehumanization in front of fellow citizens, fellow villagers, relatives, friends, or co-workers through unwanted touch, shoving, hitting, verbal abuse and neglect, and

j. a sense that they are endangering others through their faith and hence a need to get rid of external symbols or markers of faith.

**Growth of the Church**

The 19th-century growth of Christianity was in the context of colonial India amid a rising national awakening led by established, foreign-funded Western missionary societies that were in control of the transmission and direction of missions. The mission birthed the mainline churches, which continue to imitate Western church structures and liturgy; Robin Boyd called this the Latin captivity of the Church.²

The Church’s recent growth is post-colonial, encountering a militant Hindu nationalism, and is happening without Western organizational structures, including recognition by academia. This growth is occurring amid widespread instability. It needs to be termed the growth of Indian Christianity, for it is Indigenous and involves considerable Indian resources and Indian religious categories to communicate the gospel of the kingdom of God. Even the church leaders have been unable to comprehend fully, still less to respond effectively to the growth.

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The early Christians met in homes. With the growth of the house church movement in the 21st century, the old question needs to be raised again: “What did the early Christians do when they met?” And “Where did the early Christians meet?” For the first 200 years, the New Testament church spread to most parts of the known world. It even hitched a ride on the silk road across Central Asia to China and Tibet.

The newer church movements again reflect on the questions: Is the Church universal, local, invisible, or visible? Is the apostolic pattern normative for all times and cultures? What functions do the bishop, elder, pastor, and deacon(ess) perform in the Church? Is the Church led by a plurality of elders, or does one pastor shepherd each congregation?

Transmission of Faith

Andrew Walls raises important questions regarding how the transmission of faith occurs. In his book *Bhojpuri Breakthrough*, Victor John explains how the church-planting movement has seen over 10 million previously Hindu and Muslim Bhojpuri people come to know Jesus in the last 20 years.

The Bhojpuri people group live in north India, bordering the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They comprise around 50 million people. The overall emphasis of the book is how a mass church-planting movement started and how it works in practice. Its core emphasis is not evangelism or church growth but deep and ongoing discipleship (Matt. 28:19).

The following principles guide the movement:

1. Prayer: Only God can create a church-planting movement, and every movement begins in prayer. Sometimes it is corporate or combined with fasting. Sometimes it is through the day while working. When prayer stops, so does the movement.

2. Instantaneous witnessing: New believers immediately begin sharing their faith with friends, family, and contacts. One's testimony is the most powerful spiritual possession one has.

3. A culture of empowerment. Entrusting new and imperfect believers with responsibility for future growth is the heart of empowerment. They are empowered to share their faith, start new faith communities,

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pray for the sick, baptize new believers, and begin grassroots movements. Most are bi-vocational and self-supporting. Funds do not go into buildings, as this also limits growth. Multiplication is the goal, so empowerment and self-reliance are the only way to get there.

4. Reach whole families. New believers are a powerful example to their families. The family sees tangible change. Families also protect each other from persecution if they all come to faith. They are God’s natural bridges into a community.

5. The Bible is the foundation. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the word of God (Rom. 10:17). Scripture is the anchor of the movement, not Christian traditions or even miracles. The scriptures are committed to memory by illiterate people, as is everything else in their life. That is where local Bhojpuri worship songs are of great benefit.

6. Intentional planting and reproduction. Sharing the good news, making disciples, and planting churches are intentional, not accidental. All systems, actions, training, and culture are designed to produce new believers, turn them into solid disciples, encourage them to train other more contemporary believers, and plant churches as this process multiplies.


8. Cultural relevance. God’s kingdom must be relevant to the culture it enters or it will not flourish. Meeting the needs of the whole community is part of the DNA of the Bhojpuri movement. This is primarily achieved through community learning centres, where Christians rent a room and then serve the local community in whatever way it needs help. This creates credibility, leading to opportunity.

9. Sensitivity to other religions. Believers are encouraged never to attack or criticize different religious beliefs or practices. Proclaiming the greatness, goodness, and love of Jesus Christ and the blessings to be had in life with him is all that is needed. Allow people to make their comparisons and conclude that the Holy Spirit guides.

10. Pioneering outreach. The Bhojpuri movement specializes in reaching unreached areas with the Good News. We look for local partners from the harvest in that specific area who demonstrate added passion for souls. They receive extra training and will become apostles to their area.
11. Encouraging other believers. The Bhojpuri movement will partner with other Christians, churches, or denominations who want to be trained. The movement does not compete with but partners with Christians, teaching them to help them bring new believers more efficiently. Men and women don’t own the movement or its principles. God does.

A new *kairos* moment has dawned, and old ways can no longer be a pattern for our current lives. The challenge before us is to be open to the power and the promise of God’s vision of the future. God has granted his Church a spirit of wisdom and revelation (see Eph. 1:17-18), so we must engage in the process of envisioning, which inspires hope and gives back to the Church the capacity for dreaming.

**Unbaptized Believers in Christ**

There are thousands of unbaptized believers in Christ in India today. They worship Christ Jesus and claim culturally that they are Hindus. Some do not take water baptism, for they will lose their privileges of affirmative action by the government reserved for the scheduled caste. It is indeed a new *kairos* moment for the Church in India. The Indigenous cultures have discovered Christianity and Jesus Christ. Communities have embraced Christianity, with implications for a fresh understanding of the gospel in Indian history. Indians’ response amid a militant resurgence of anti-Christian forces suggests a degree of Indigenous compatibility with the gospel.

Mahatma Phule (1827–90) was thrown out of his Brahmin friend’s marriage process as a young man because he belonged to the backward caste. This experience of exclusion and discrimination was a catalyst in forming Phule into a social activist, thinker, anti-caste social reformer, writer from Maharashtra state, and worshipper of Christ Jesus who did not undergo baptism. He was the first Indian to give a contextualized expression to the Christian faith when he called Jesus Christ “Bali Raja,” who was crucified for the sins of the world and who will come again to establish his kingdom of righteousness. Bali Raja was a king who was deceived by the incarnation of the god Vishnu as a dwarf and pushed to hell. However, Bali Raja comes out once a year to see his kingdom deceptively taken from him and assures his people that he will come again.
Conclusion

The initiative to transmit the theological and spiritual heritage of the Church and its traditions and to invite to the table the newer movement is of critical importance. The legacy of the Christian faith over two millennia is unknown to the new churches. Through the sharing of faith stories, one discovers the working of the Holy Spirit. We do not know much about each other.

Another problem that must be addressed is who is included in the definition of ecumenism. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church has incorporated the charismatic expressions of faith as part of church life. Many ecumenical churches in India still have not created safe spaces and acceptance to express charismatic worship. As a result, many have left the ecumenical churches for charismatic congregations.

The WCC should continue to be a forceful voice for the suffering Church and strengthen the ministry of the Global Christian Forum, which has begun taking baby steps towards establishing bonds of fellowship in life, witness, and worship that are pointers to and encouragement of a common ecclesial life. For this to happen, the three steps of the Forum—testimonial, relational, and missional—lay a foundation on which dialogue can proceed. The same Holy Spirit dwells in all believers. Can’t we then extend the hospitality of the Lord’s supper to all?
While *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV) mentions persecution or martyrdom only as something that happened in the past (§6) or as something that may happen in the future (§65), for millions of Christians worldwide, persecution is not a historical memory but a present daily reality that often threatens their lives. The reality of persecution brings with it certain ecclesiological implications for church practice, which will be explored in this short chapter.

Persecuted Christian communities often reflect a reductionist expression of Christianity due to stringent conditions. To the persecuted, the Church is first and foremost not a building but the gathering of a few people in private settings with the presence of the Lord (see Matt. 18:20) or, in some instances, the communion of oneself with the Lord for an extended period of time before the convert is able to find another believer.

While God’s word and sacraments are the two fundamental elements in most churches, persecuted churches are often deprived of both; thus, often they cannot be expected to be or to be seen as an integral part of normal church life. Whereas some believers are able to get hold of scripture and study it themselves, it is not uncommon for others to know little about the word due to meagre resources. Having the word preached to believers on a regular basis can hardly be taken for granted. Similarly, participating in the sacraments is often wanting when the community is without a spiritual leader; some even have to be “self-baptized,” since being baptized by others is prohibited in some Muslim countries.

Since a developed organization or a sophisticated hierarchy is mostly missing
in regions where Christians are persecuted, high church ecclesiology, including the sacraments and the threefold ministry that are expected as normative in the West, can scarcely be anticipated in churches in these places. Yet, even without the external institution, Christians in these churches reflect an authentic identity as the priesthood of all believers, since many of them live their Christian life and respond to God’s call according to what the Lord teaches them personally and daily. We often hear that in countries where persecution is high, people come to know Christ through visions, dreams, and hearing God’s voice. They also act, serve God and others, and make different and sometimes difficult decisions on the same basis. The non-centralized church organization gives room for a more dynamic relationship between God and those individuals who have no other options.

When Christians in countries where persecution persists have an opportunity to read the scriptures themselves, the reading is often strongly biblically oriented, and the word is often taken literally, at face value. Since the worldview of persecuted Christians is often similar to that of the Bible, the signs and wonders found in the scriptures are not regarded as myth but as something they have experienced and something they continue to anticipate in dire situations. In this sense, the persecuted churches reflect an ecclesiology that is not far from that of the Pentecostal churches.

Despite persecution, the word of God grows. A strong oral tradition is prevalent among persecuted Christians. Although public preaching or evangelism is prohibited, the gospel travels by word of mouth in the form of personal testimonies among families and friends, often accompanied by the story of a changed life and heart. In persecuted churches, the gospel is not only heard but also seen. Just as Jesus Christ incarnated and lived among his people while being mocked and persecuted, so do believers—past and present—live among their people while being humiliated and hated. The word of God grows through the “providential failure” brought by persecution.1

Jesus foretold that his followers should expect persecution, if not martyrdom, and that the world would hate the believers of God (see Matt. 10:16-33; John 15:18-27). It is not a message to past and future generations but a warning to every believer in all ages, including those not only in the East but also the West. Hence, persecution is not only an integral consequence of following Jesus, it is a mark of the Church. Such a mark fits neatly within the holiness aspect of the Church, for it is often when Christians are under trial that their faith is refined

(1 Pet. 1:6-7, 4:12-19) and when churches are under persecution that they are further cleansed.

If persecution is expected of every believer of all ages, the doctrine of the Church and its relation to the principle of economy or necessity as identified by the West needs to be re-evaluated. The concept of the principle of economy or necessity is derived from and defined by what is considered normative in the global North and the connotation of abnormality implied. Such a principle accommodates practices that would normally not be permitted because of an exceptional or emergency situation, such as allowing Christians to receive communion in heterodox churches in the Soviet Union era when there was no church of their denomination near their residence. Yet, what is normative in the global North is often not normality for those in the global South, and what counts as an “emergency situation” in some countries is the daily reality in many other countries. Moreover, it is from Jesus’ mouth that we learn that persecution is an indispensable part of one’s identification with Christ. In other words, persecution is the norm for those who are called Christians, and it is the persecuted churches, rather than the non-persecuted churches, that reflect even authentically the church life that Jesus described. In short, the limits of the principle of economy or necessity are likely to have been misconceived by the global North.

The recognition of persecution as normative challenges the way we think not only about church and church practice, but also about our faith. If we wonder why we are not persecuted as Jesus said, we may ask whether we are carrying the cross as Jesus commanded. We may also ask if we are living in the world, witnessing our faith to unbelievers. Perhaps the rising hostility and animosity towards the gospel and confessing Christians in the West over the past decade can even be seen as an authentic reflection of the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ. If we identify ourselves as disciples of Jesus, we will be persecuted.

It is suggested that a more extensive use of the term or the conception of persecution is needed throughout TCTCV, as it reminds believers of the model of Jesus and how we are to live and think as followers of Christ. The theology of persecution cannot be overdeveloped. Bearing in mind our identity as the persecuted helps us to determine how we live our lives and to stand in solidarity with our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world—in the East and the West. We would not choose a lifestyle that is too comfortable, but we will constantly be alert and keep watch rather than falling into temptation and falling asleep (see Matt. 25:1-13; 26:38, 40-41). We would not opt for cheap grace but rather for costly grace, so as to remind ourselves daily of the weight of the cross.
The doctrine of the Church would seem to be filled with uncertainties once TCTCV regards the persecuted churches not as the exception but as the norm. Yet such a Church will also be the boldest and the truest, as it carries with it the certainty that divine assistance can always be expected in the midst of tribulation\(^2\) and, as such, the Church is what Jesus claimed to have left behind.

\(^{2}\) Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations*, 184.
SECTION TWO

Perspectives from Latin America
CHAPTER TWELVE

Ecclesiology in Latin America: An Overview

Pablo R. Andiñach

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, about 98 percent of the population of Latin America professed its Christian faith through the Roman Catholic Church. Only a group of intellectual liberals and positivists—though very active in the society—showed their agnosticism; few Protestant or Orthodox communities were present. Some of these churches were active and growing, but others were mainly related to European immigrants who came with their language of origin, their cultural marks, and their church tradition. With some exceptions (Methodists, Baptists), few of these churches tried to establish Protestant churches among the local population.

This situation has changed dramatically. Today we can find Protestant/Evangelical churches in all Latin American countries, as well as Buddhists, American Indigenous religions, Jewish communities, and other religious expressions. This situation expresses today the diversity of the Latin American society in many aspects.

- The first aspect is cultural, due to the strong immigration that took place during the last century. Then the emergence of a new actor in the scene took place, because in recent decades, the Indigenous peoples are recovering their place and religions in society.

- The second aspect is political, because democracy became standard over the last 30 years on the continent.

- The third aspect is religious, because plurality and an open-minded society allow the growth and exploration of new and different ways to
live the Christian faith as well as other forms of faith.

If, in the 19th century, the Roman Catholic Church exerted a kind of monopoly in the religious field, today Latin America is a multicultural and multireligious society. This new landscape of the Latin American religious field has its impact in theology and, in our particular interest, in the way the believers understand their presence in the Church.

A second aspect to consider is the influence of Latin American liberation theology in the interpretation of the role of the Church in society. A Latin American theologian does not need to subscribe to any aspect of liberation theology to accept and deal with some of its main affirmations. In relation to our topic, I would like to point out the following:

a. the ecumenical character of theology and therefore the ecclesiological consequences of such a theology,

b. the need for a new and permanent process of evangelization and the crisis of the idea of a “Catholic continent,”

c. the understanding of poverty and of the poor as victims of an economic system where sometimes even the churches are involved in sustaining injustices and offering ideological support to marginalization; the perception is that the Church has a role in the struggle of the people for justice and human rights,

d. the need for dialogue with the political and social sciences and other scientific disciplines, which must be achieved while looking for orientation (to learn, not to teach) in dealing with social and political problems; for our topic, this means the Church recognizes its limitations in these fields and the need to seek help from the social sciences to act according to the demands of the gospel.

Different Churches, Different Approaches

I will present four different understandings of the Church, all of them active and alive in Latin America, represented by the following Christian families: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal.

The Roman Catholic Church. Today, between 70 and 80 percent of the Latin American population declare themselves to be Roman Catholic. This may vary by country, but these numbers are the average for the continent. Due to its numbers, Roman Catholicism is the most complex and diverse of all the
Ecclesiology in Latin America: An Overview

religious expressions in South America. Running the risk of oversimplifying, I would describe the Latin American Roman Catholic Church using three different simultaneous ecclesiological models.

a. The first is the church that is expressed in documents and declarations. Most of this model is based in national and Latin American episcopal conferences and their documents. Its main goal is to be the voice of the bishops and to situate the teachings of the Church in the life of the laity and leaders of the local parishes. In this model, the Church is the institution and its authorities, and it is mainly responsible for theological education and its publishing houses. Most professors and theologians are in the middle between this model and the next one.

b. The second model is the church that grows from the grassroots or from the people or from below. This model is built on the structure of local base ecclesial communities [in Spanish, comunidades eclesiales de base]. At the beginning of the 1970s, these Christian communities were the result of the lack of priests in many of the poorest neighbourhoods of Brazil. They started to develop a lay leadership, in many cases conducted by nuns or local community leaders; the main characteristic of these locally based communities was that they gathered to study the Bible. This was the beginning of the so-called Latin American popular reading of the Bible movement. The local base community model was later adopted in other countries and became one of the most dynamic movements within the Catholic Church.

c. A third model is the popular Catholicism movement, sometimes referred to as the popular religious movement. The difference in the expression is not naïve. The first emphasizes Catholicism in relation with local and popular expressions of faith. The second puts the emphasis on the other side. It is the popular expression of the faith in relation to Catholic symbols and practices—but not exclusively with them. This model has hundreds of different manifestations and is followed by millions of people. From local and normally unofficial saints to a version mixed with African religious practices in Brazil, this religious movement includes many priests and theologians (and sociologists and anthropologists) who offer support and help to build an ecclesiology and theology from this experience. In Brazil, this is crucial because around 60 million people practise Afro-Brazilian rites (Candomblé, Umbanda, Quimbanda, etc.) and the Catholic faith. In some dioceses, this is accepted as part of the people’s understanding of
the Catholic faith, while in others it is rejected because it is considered as falling beyond the limits of the Catholic doctrine. Among some of its critics, the principal accusation is syncretism, while others speak of it simply as paganism.

Protestant churches. Here we refer to the churches which arrived in Latin America during the 19th century, mainly Methodists and Baptists—and, with less impact, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Calvinists, and Lutherans. In the United States, they are called the mainline churches, while in Europe they are referred to as historic Protestantism. From the beginning, they represented the liberal understanding of the Church, sometimes in conflict with the Catholic Church. Those were the days of controversy, but happily these days are past; today, these churches are also known as ecumenical churches in the sense that they are involved in the ecumenical movement and are in active dialogue with Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church in national councils of churches or other ecumenical organizations. In many cases, they are not just dialoguing but also working in collaboration, sharing professors in their seminaries, and working together on the translation and distribution of the Bible. The ecclesiology of these denominations is built upon the local community: the church is a group of people who gather to worship Christ in the context of biblical teachings. Within this group, Episcopalians and Methodists have, in their ecclesiology, the sense of being part of a bigger body than the local community. I would say that in them, the sense of catholicity is stronger than it is in the rest of the Protestant churches; in these denominations, even the recognition of apostolic succession has an important value for the Church (for Episcopalians, in the classical sense; for Methodists, it is understood as the apostolic succession of the Christian faith).

When we try to identify the characteristics of the ecclesiology of these churches, it is impossible not to enter into the realm of social issues. They understand that to be church also means to be involved in the struggles for justice and peace. These struggles and commitments are not understood as mere ethical options but as a distinctive mark of the Christian faith; in this sense, to commit to the building of a better world is not an option or an opportunity to express kindness to the poor or to victims of human rights violations but a faith imperative. For this ecclesiology, the mandate to announce the gospel implies working for justice and peace.

Another characteristic they share is that they also take the mandate of Jesus to be one as a faith imperative. This means that participation in ecumenical dialogue, in active interdenominational movements, and in concrete actions
with other churches is not just an expression of politeness and respect for other traditions but, again, is another faith imperative. Being ecumenical is one of the signs of the Church; not complying with it would be failing in the accomplishment of the Church’s mission.

**Evangelical churches.** Until the 1970s, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, and the other Protestant denominations in Latin America were all evangelicals. And, in a good sense, they still are. But the distinction came from the United States; today, under this title we refer mainly to Baptists, the Brethren Church, and a large group of Free churches, most of them born in Europe or the US, that arrived in Latin America through the work of missionaries during the first half of the 20th century.

From the ecclesiological point of view, they have more or less the same ecclesiology as the Protestant group: the church is the gathering of believers in Christ at the light of the Word of God. But in a practical sense, there are differences. Their characteristics can be summarized as follows:

- They are fundamentalist and typically offer a literal reading of the Bible. This is quite different from the Protestant churches, which accept in different degrees the need for some tools to enter into the biblical text: historical criticism, social approach, linguistic, contextual reading, etc.

- They practise the baptism of believers, do not accept the baptism of children, and do not recognize the validity of such baptism by other denominations. This makes the practice of rebaptism common and a source of controversy, not only with the Roman Catholic Church but also with other Protestant churches.

- Even if this group of churches tends to be conservative in relation to social issues, in recent decades it has shown an openness to dealing with political issues and human rights. For these churches, it is clear that their engagement in struggles against poverty or injustices is an ethical consequence of the gospel but not an essential mark of their theology. The Church has as its primary and fundamental goal to preach the gospel; this is understood as an action which saves the souls of the people or gains people for Christ. It is when the person is first converted that the believer can help the society to be more human and just, usually from a conservative point of view. While Protestant denominations will accept the wording of these affirmations, their practice is different; it expresses a more open ecclesiological view that is closer to
liberal and progressive options.

- Evangelical churches tend to distrust any structure beyond the local congregation. Normally, they do not attend the national or international councils of churches and are not part of ecumenical organizations. There are exceptions and sometimes contradictions, but on a regular basis, Evangelical churches do not agree with the general direction of the ecumenical movement.

Pentecostal churches. Born at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, and having arrived in Latin America less than 100 years ago, they represent the most numerous group of non-Catholic Christian believers in Latin America today. The Pentecostal movement has extended into all the countries, constituting over 40 percent of the population in some countries of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala) and around 30 percent in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In the whole of Latin America, it is estimated that, on average, 20 percent of the population expresses its Christian faith through Pentecostal churches.

Many denominations embrace a Pentecostal theology in Latin America. Although the so-called megachurches and famous Pentecostal churches are the most visible, the strongest point in the Pentecostal movement is that it is formed by thousands of small local churches. They sometimes gather in the home or the garage of one of their members, or they rent a commercial venue. If they grow in number, they may rent an old warehouse or an abandoned cinema. These millions of people who praise the Lord and hear the gospel every week are the essence of this movement. These small churches challenge traditions and liturgical practices; they do not use classical liturgical symbols or sing well-known Protestant hymns. They do not even necessarily want a sanctuary with its characteristic architecture. These churches just need some chairs, Bibles, and a preacher. Normally, the preacher does not have theological training or a big library, he or she (there are few she's) is frequently not ordained, as in other denominations, but is passionate and is recognized by his community for his or her leadership.

From the ecclesiological point of view, they understand that the main marks of the Church are represented when at least these two spiritual manifestations are present: the baptism of the Holy Spirit, expressed by speaking in tongues, and the manifestation of divine healing. These two manifestations provide proof that the Holy Spirit is present, and so the Christian Church is there. But other than these required manifestations, the Pentecostal movement is not far from Protestant and Evangelical theology. Its theology is typically trinitarian; they
consider that faith is a personal matter between God and the believer; and they are closer to the Evangelicals than they are to the Protestants. They practise the baptism of believers and rebaptism, and some of them adhere to the doctrine of the inerrancy of the scriptures.

Crossing Borders, Blurring Limits

We can arrange these three ecclesiologies in columns and show the different doctrinal approach of each of them along with which denominations or church families are attached to which. This would be useful in making a synoptic chart to highlight similarities and differences. But, in fact, it is a little more complex in Latin America—and perhaps in other regions too. Transversal practices and beliefs gather people from different churches and create some kind of camaraderie over the boundaries of their respective churches. What is important for us is that all these transversal practices are assumed by the members of these churches as the way to be church as a crucial mark in their identity as Christians. I will mention and briefly reflect on three of them.

The charismatic movement. This movement—originally with Pentecostal theology and practices—has spread into most other denominations. The Catholic charismatic renewal is a strong movement in many Latin American countries: it has its own parishes, priests, and bishops. The charismatic movement is also present in the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, and other Protestant denominations. It has had a strong impact in Baptist churches, which in many countries have split into two separate denominations: the classical Baptists and the charismatic (they used to called themselves “renovated”) Baptists. The example of this denomination split, the result of their different ecclesiologies, could be considered an exception: one of the characteristics of this movement is that they want to remain in their original denomination.

The charismatics accept the authorities of their own church and work to keep the unity of the church. At the same time, there is an informal camaraderie: when a Roman Catholic, a Baptist, or a Methodist charismatic meet, they discover that they probably have more in common with each other than they do with the members of their own denomination. Doctrine, authorities, and liturgies are not as important as the common experience they feel and live.

Liberationist ecclesiology. In most of the Latin American denominations are members who subscribe to one or another form of liberation theology. As it is known, the theology of liberation has developed into different contextual
theologies as such as feminist theology, human rights theology, Indigenous theology, eco-theology, queer theology, and so on. People who work, live, and think according to one or several of these theological approaches are present in most denominations in Latin America. Though less likely in the conservative churches, it is possible even in Evangelical and Pentecostal churches to find pastors or laypeople working in connection with some kind of liberation theology.

As in the previous transversal line, there is camaraderie among liberationists. They gather at academic congresses, write and read theological journals, meet in groups for popular reading of the Bible, and engage in other activities that cross denominational borders. They share their passion for justice and equality, and in this quest they are ecumenical in vision. The social issues which gather this movement make them feel like they are one Church, overcoming doctrinal limits and discussions.

**The ecumenical movement and interreligious dialogue.** There are many ways to be ecumenical in Latin America. I mentioned the churches which are open to participating in ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches or the Latin American Council of Churches. But there are also people in the denominations who consider that the call to announce the gospel exceeds the limits of any denomination and even the Christian Church. So, there is a growing interreligious movement inside different churches looking for dialogue between denominations and with other religions. They organize meetings with Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews, most of them conducted by laypersons and accepted by the leaders (bishops or councils) of their churches. They work with people at the grassroots level and try to express inside their churches that to be church is also to be open to the spirituality of other traditions. This movement understands that Christian spirituality has much to learn from other religious experiences and, at the same time, is to offer our own spirituality and theology as a gift of God given not only to Christians but to the whole human community. This group understands that to be church is to be open to this kind of dialogue and practices.

**Latin American popular reading of the Bible.** This is another transversal line which crosses the borders of the denominational ecclesologies. Born in the Roman Catholic Church in the late 1970s, today this movement is present in many denominations. It has its own agenda and personality, so the people who participate in this movement tend to be ecumenical and open-minded. It was originally related to liberation theology but over the past 20 years has become
more and more autonomous from any fixed theology. The movement is stronger in some Catholic congregations, and it has been linked to certain publishing houses. They promote the reading and study of the Bible in local groups and communities, following some orientation from the leader of the group but offering room to share experiences and concerns which help to open the meaning of the biblical text. This movement is active in the Roman Catholic Church and among the Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Baptist, and other churches. The people who nurture this movement feel that studying the Bible in groups creates links between believers across denominational borders and reveals a new form of being church: it becomes the community illuminated by the sacred scriptures. This looks like a Protestant statement, but many Roman Catholic groups consider themselves in this way as well.

Sixty years ago, it was normal for a Protestant/Evangelical person to say that Catholics do not know the Bible, nor are they interested in biblical studies. With obvious exceptions, that was true for the majority of the Roman Catholic people in Latin America. Today, the Bible movement is as strong in Evangelical churches as in many Roman Catholic parishes.

Conclusion

As I tried to show in this short chapter, there is not just one Latin American ecclesiology. In my opinion, this is not because there are many churches, each one with its own theological tradition, but more as a consequence of the diversity and openness of our society. A pluralistic society produces options and offers tools to discuss and evaluate any aspect of our life and faith. As theologians, we can explain and expose the details of our sophisticated theologies and the fundamentals of our ecclesiology. But the people—that is, believers—will follow what they understand is the right thing for their faith, and they will challenge our libraries.

In my opinion, all of the different movements described in this chapter—and surely there are more—are “the Church.” They live and die in this faith. They are convinced that Jesus called them to live their faith in one or another particular way, creating what we call different ecclesiologies. All of them are active at the same time, on the same continent, facing more or less similar challenges. They are working together, cooperating in some contexts, while in others they are in conflict. But they all represent particular aspects of the same Christian Church.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Recognizing Us on the Road: Contributions of Pentecostalism on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*

Elizabeth Salazar-Sanzana

Introduction

After over half a century of isolated attempts to shape church and culture, the ecumenical and Pentecostal movements are experiencing convergence in fulfilling God’s mission.

However, to which expression of Pentecostalism should I adhere in order to suggest its possible reaction to the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*? Our so-called Pentecostal movement or our Pentecostal churches are already known to have adopted different labels, and over time, their fragmentation tends to confuse everyone. Thus, from which local expression of Pentecostalism should our reflections start? From the Asian, African, Latin American, North American, or European one? From ecumenical Pentecostalism with a diversity of its own? As a starting point, we might opt for the Pentecostal World Fellowship, which derives from the activities of the Pentecostal World Conference, though some may believe that the most representative Pentecostalism is the one organized immediately after the celebration of the Azusa Street revival.

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1. The Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) is a cooperative organism of churches and Pentecostal groupings around the world, united by a common agreement. It is not a legislative organization but rather a coalition committed to disseminating the gospel to the borders of the globe. The PWF organizes a triennial celebration, the Pentecostal World Conference.
and known as Empowered 21.²

A further possibility would be focusing on the mega-congregations, the so-called Neo-Pentecostals. In what follows, I will limit myself to providing a couple of indications motivated by what is general to the most ecumenical type of Pentecostalism. My answer, therefore, will be concerned with the kind of Pentecostalism that is found in the academic environment and whose essence reveals no direct connection to Pentecostal communities.

As one of the strong aspects of Pentecostalism, we shall mention its noteworthy development which, due to its dynamism and diversity, has bewildered everyone.³ However, at the same time, its complexity is fruitful and its contextual specificity is what has enriched it most. (However, we should not forget the survival of the Pentecostal Blacks, fishermen, peasants, migrants, and the Indigenous in Latin America.)

The endeavour for unity has always accompanied the World Council of Churches (WCC), which is characterized by decades of silent work at the grassroots level and at productive meetings organized by the ecumenical leadership. We are all enthusiastic about TCTCV, which was compiled following a long process. However, some believe that the voice of the WCC is extremely worn out, which is why the document would not resound as expected.

Pentecostalism has taken its own diverse paths, and it is from this perspective that we should examine in what ways a contribution from the perspective of the WCC makes an impact. There is a generalized sense of amnesia with regard to the profound influence that the ecumenical movement has exerted on the lives of Pentecostal congregations. It is imperative to evaluate the impact of the WCC on the Pentecostal movement not only by virtue of its church members but also from the point of view of its theological schools, its organizations of social action, its liturgical outreach, and its prophetic defence in the context of political crises. The positive influence of the WCC on Pentecostalism is manifold. Particularly worth mentioning is the solidarity by the very fostering of the capacity building of the Pentecostal leadership. The result thereof seems meagre; I believe this is due to the diversity of areas which it encompasses.

To some degree, the Pentecostal movement has allied itself to the so-called interdenominational alliances in the past 50 years.⁴ In light of this new religious geography, TCTCV helps us recognize the base, the convergent aspects, the

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⁴ Among these, we encounter the Latin American Pentecostal Forum, established in 2011.
points which have not yet been successfully disentangled at the WCC and in its member churches.

In addition, the creation of a document of convergence on the Church is not simply relevant to the many churches that adhere to the WCC; it is also a testimony of the work, of the transformational process of the actors themselves. A decade ago, this path had been outlined and dreamt of by those involved, and a step forward was expected. Since then, we have been able to appreciate progress in the dialogue with Pentecostal leaders as well as a well-known Pentecostal growth, coupled with increased commitment.5 If, formerly, a certain arrogance was typical of each and every part, today visible efforts to overcome the tensions can be perceived with regard to the many difficulties to which we as Christians ought to respond.6 Although the first Pentecostal churches joined the WCC in 1961, it was only in 1991 that concrete interest in the ecumenical movement in the different independent Pentecostal churches was voiced at the WCC’s 9th Assembly, in Canberra.7

This contribution is founded on an optimistic conviction about ecumenism, in resonance with other reflections.8 I do not disregard the ecumenical efforts to counteract the crisis of institutionality. On the contrary, I highly estimate the ecumenical movement, which transgresses the official, the formal, the politically correct on different levels. I strongly believe in the ecumenism of the Spirit, which is loving, is creative, and at the same time maintains the dialectic tension between the official and the spontaneous. I want to propose that today, Pentecostalism needs to focus on the ecumenical space, which after all has empowered it to be visible in theological discussions and increasingly to contribute to a humanity that lives in peace and justice. I am convinced of the necessity to abandon the apologetic-sociological, descriptive-psychological aspirations, which isolate Pentecostalism rather than endowing it with an explicit

6. This was given clear expression in the Pentecostal participation in the Centenary of Edinburgh in 2010.
7. For Latin America, the secretary-general of the WCC himself, Rev. Emilio Castro, travelled to São Paulo, Brazil, to meet with 53 churches and Pentecostal leaders in 17 countries. Previously, a vast number of consultations had been conducted. In 1988, the WCC convoked a Pentecostal consultation in Salvador de Bahía, Brazil. The Latin American Evangelical Pentecostal Commission (CEPLA) resulted from this joint effort.
theological expression that testifies to and justifies our Pentecostal faith in Christ.

**To Be Church**

It is fruitful to recognize the shared past, which characterizes us as Church. All the different confessional families turn their face to the early Church; this idealistic view does not take into account that, in its own context, even the early Church was divided. Even though the majority of divisions did not yet exist, there were still many separations that question the romantic image of a unique and perfect Church. Historical continuity is given in Christ, and hence we do not take our point of departure from this reality of divisions but rather from the stance that we are all united in our fidelity to the gospel. The perfect vision of the early Church provides us only with a model which results in utter confusion; what stimulates and inspires us is the Pentecost that connects us (Acts 2 and 10).

Taking into consideration what I have mentioned, the emblem of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Peru professes the tradition of the apostles and the prophets, and it interprets the life of the Christian Church of the first century as both exemplary and normative:

In as much as the Bible says that the eternal and express objective of God is to rescue people from the world, who will constitute the Church of Jesus Christ, edified on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets . . ., who will congregate to adore God and instruct themselves on the Sacred Scriptures, sanctity of life, the spiritual and ministerial gifts . . .; that the primitive apostolic Church was united and congregated in such a fraternity of believers, full of the Holy Spirit . . ., therefore we declare to recognize ourselves as a fraternity of Evangelical Christians of equal faith and doctrine, baptised in the Holy Spirit.9

This coincides with the point of view of the majority of the evangelical churches. However, that there are denominations which confess being closer to the legacy of the early Church than others becomes problematic: this cannot be our starting point, at least not for Pentecostalism.10 In accordance with its Toronto Statement (1950),11 the WCC has also summoned us to recognize that

belonging to the Church of Christ surpasses the community or congregation one is a member of. For example, since the WCC’s 3rd Assembly, in New Delhi (1961), and the formation of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), Pentecostalism in Latin America has proved reluctant in the way it approaches theological discussions.

Understandably, the Church and those who confess Jesus Christ as their Saviour receive the faith to communicate it, to pass it on to the world as good news, and to transform history. For Pentecostals—and this was openly declared at the Centenary of Azusa—to confess faith means to provide a clear testimony to the world, that is to say, to give account of faith.

The Christians ought to be a river from which life flows towards the nations by virtue of the Spirit’s work in us. With regard to the Holy Spirit, Jesus said: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)

In this respect, things come to be aligned with TCTCV.

The baptising in the Holy Spirit, as was implied in Azusa, was not only a personal blessing; its most seminal objective was to give power. This is a vital distinction because some have sought the Spirit through the very experience, and not by means of a new daring and competence to be witnesses of Christ.12

Importantly, it needs to be understood that precisely this love of God leads a person to share faith in a community. Faith gives rise to the community, and this is not private but public. It is implied that “all faith is ecclesial, and essentially communicational . . . . Personal faith is communion in the faith of the whole body, the insertion of the individual amen in the big heart of the Church.”13 For the most part, Pentecostalism is aware that the Church is the entity to recognize a full gospel (this shall be underlined because it constitutes the doctrinal basis of most Pentecostal churches). Furthermore, Jesus Christ saves, and salvation is confessed as a gift granted by God to faithful people, thanks to the crucifixion of Jesus. In this sense, most adhere to Arminianism,


rather than to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Jesus Christ baptizes by virtue of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit is taught by Jesus. Jesus Christ heals because this powerful God, who heals by means of faith, is comprehended as a promise fulfilled by Jesus Christ at the very moment of accepting his crucifixion. And Jesus Christ will come again. Pentecostal eschatology focuses on the return of Jesus Christ to the earth soon, divided into two moments: first, the rapture of the Church of Christ; and second, the reappearance of Jesus after the Great Tribulation.\footnote{For example, “Nuestra Declaración de Fe Pentecostal,” in Las Bases de las Declaraciones de Fe Pentecostal. Cap. II. Editorial Cristiana de las Asambleas de Dios (2005), 18.}

**To Be Church as the Body of Christ**

A couple of years ago, the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Chile had to revise its articles of faith, for it was acquiring its public legal personality, that is, a new juridical-governmental status. The desire was to accept rapidly the tradition of the articles of faith which had been inherited from the Methodist Episcopal Church, which it had received from the Anglican Church. The 13th article of faith of the church postulates the following:

> The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of the faithful who have been reborn, in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered in conformity with the institutions of Christ in all that which forms a necessary and essential part of the same.

The specificity of the Pentecostal Church caused one of the few theological debates. Finally, the article culminated in these words: “The Church is longing for the arrival of Jesus Christ, its Lord, in the Second Coming according to His promise.”\footnote{Iglesia Evangélica Pentecostal, *Artículos de Fe* (Santiago: Imprenta Eben Ezer, 2003).}

They clearly stated that in their function as the body of Christ, they are aware that Christ, the head, will return in search of the Church. Independent of what this could entail, I would like to pinpoint the fact that the Pentecostal movement has been consolidated as a movement based in its conception of being the people of God in his “eternity” as triumphant Church.

The Church is always the Church of God in Christ (e.g. 1 Thess. 2:14), and as such it will always be constituted by God and by Christ, not by virtue of human beings, their ranks, qualities, or quantities. This last aspect is fundamental,
because it distinguishes the Pentecostal from the Neo-Pentecostal churches. As a result, we can circumscribe the Church as the place where, in terms of the word or sacraments, Christ brings salvation to those who do not have it, for God shelters the sinners. The Church is not the only place, it is not exclusive, but it is nonetheless a blessing necessary to grow in Christ. The Church is a conglomerate of people who have had religious experiences; it is the space in which we are blessed to bless. Rather than an obligation, it is a blessing to be able to attend church.

The community which is in Christ constitutes the visible Church, that is, where human beings interact and pursue a task: the mission of God. If the Church is described in the New Testament as the body of Christ, this can be seen as a reference to its unity, but it does not mean that there is a perfect equivalence between Christ and the congregated Church, although this equivalence is taken for granted in some Pentecostal practices. Because Christ is the head of this body (Eph. 4:15-16), Christ is also its point of reference, its comparison. However, the Church is not Christ. By hinting at the concept of the prolonged Christ, theologian Hans Küng describes the peril such a position entails and decidedly rejects it:

Assembly, home, community, Church of Jesus Christ. This means that its name and its origin imply an obligation: The Church ought to serve the cause of Jesus Christ. The Church will sin against its own reason of existence and ultimately lose it wherever it does not convert the cause of Jesus Christ into reality or proceeds to distort it.

To Be Church through and with the Power of God

One of the most crucial aspects of Pentecostal ecclesiology is found in Acts 2, where the Holy Spirit descends upon the apostles who were reunited in the large upper room. It is Pentecost that prepares them to initiate the mission. It is the Holy Spirit himself who seals the redeeming work. For the Pentecostal movement, the origin of the Church lies in the triune God’s plans for humankind’s salvation and empowerment.

For Pentecostalism, growth confirms that the mission that is being

16. In many Pentecostal congregations, the Church is understood as the embodiment of Christ himself, and what is done to the Church (as the Body of Christ) is done to Christ himself. In other words, not to attend church is to be indifferent to Christ.

accomplished is blessed. Although it has been repeatedly questioned, this has led to a significant breach between the Christian churches. For Pentecostalism, the task of evangelization is the reason for existence. There is no other possibility for mission than to create disciples from all nations, in keeping with Jesus’ message.

If, with regard to this aspect, we have to name a difficulty intrinsic to TCTCV, we would point out that Pentecostals are prone to identifying, to a great extent, their own congregation or denomination with the Church of Christ “most loyal to the Gospel,” although such denominations have been accepted by the WCC. This position is widely corroborated by the hymnology, which often questions the simplicity of faith in the world. Evidently, one tends to ignore the anointing with the Spirit (in bodily spiritual manifestations) and not to long for his arrival. The Pentecostal churches that are awaiting the rapture and claim to do so anew every day preach its very invisibility and that it will be revealed only at the end.

To Be Church – for Everyone

The universal ministry of the faithful is vital for the Pentecostal Church. Everyone partakes in this appeal and in this special choice for salvation. Salvation needs to be worked out with fear and trembling because, although everyone has been summoned, not all have been chosen. The most recurrent discourse foresees that only God knows who his Church is. Therefore, it is not up for debate which is the true Church (they already call themselves true), for only Jesus Christ will reveal it individually upon the arrival of the rapture. Hence, no one can possibly be rejected.

To William J. Seymour (1870–1922), who is considered by Pentecostalism as one of its mentors, baptism with the Holy Spirit meant the power to attract all people to one Church, irrespective of their racial, ethnic, or social diversity. For this reason, it was imperative to look out for every person who had come to know Jesus Christ as the Saviour and been baptized (in spiritual water and fire). Unless this occurred, one would remain excluded, as is typical of sinful humanity.

I would like to make some observations from a couple of aspects that I consider fundamental to understanding the Pentecostal adhesion or lack of adhesion to TCTCV, although it is impossible to generalize. Pentecostalism has

experienced changes which either have caused a positive impact on ecumenism or have resulted in total aloofness.

God’s mission makes us understand that the Church and its unity are tightly bound to its mission, which aims at all nations to become acquainted with and to recognize the love of God. On this point, so general and at the same time so vital, all branches of Pentecostalism agree. The practice of evangelization, which is defined as preaching Christ in the world, has led Pentecostalism to transgress impressive racial, social, and economic barriers. This becomes particularly visible through the presence of the Pentecostal church amid the shantytowns of Brazil, the drug trafficking and guerrillas in Colombia, the suburbs of New York where even the police refuse to enter; in nations like North Korea; and in other regions of utmost vulnerability. What incites the Pentecostal Church to surpass those borders? It is the fierce conviction of the end of all times and the urgency to disseminate the knowledge and the transforming work of Christ.20

For Pentecostalism, the Church’s mission in the world is to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. This can be easily retrieved from TCTCV, for it clearly stresses the appeal by Christ through the Holy Spirit to testify to the reconciliatory, saving, and transforming action of the Father in favour of creation. This situation implies the rejection of any other possibility of an inclusive revelation.

Specific Contributions by TCTCV

The Church as the body of Christ in unity and communion sees itself as centred in the gospel, guided at all times by Christ himself as the way, the truth, and the life. This reality is widely represented in TCTCV. A holy people, the real ministry, and the chosen lineage are what is highlighted in most Pentecostal documents. Today, we proclaim the necessity to be recognized as a people that is under the new covenant initiated by Christ: the new Israel.

What is more, there is a union dealt with in TCTCV §17 which has been extensively discussed in the spaces of Empowered 21. Zionism is typical of churches that mystically sympathize with Israel without taking into consideration what is happening in the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

The gifts provided by the Holy Spirit are destined for the edification of the Church (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:11-13), and for this there is an interpretation that distances the diverse confessional families from each other. The appeal of God for us to be instruments in his hands obligates us to respond according to what

we are (endowed with the various gifts) in the body of Christ. At this point, Pentecostalism has strongly developed the missionary responsibility of all its members. The universal ministry of the faithful accompanies this view. Therewith, we accept *TCTCV* §19, because there is no problem with the authority of anybody as long as he or she is rightfully chosen by the Holy Spirit and remains obedient. In the majority of cases, the leadership is perpetual, but the possibility of being revoked is not denied if leaders fail in the eyes of the congregation. It is well known that anointing the leaders to execute the pastoral task is much more punctual and hierarchical in the Pentecostal movement, a fact which is also hinted at to a certain extent in *TCTCV* §20.

It is crucial in Pentecostalism to be the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. In other words, not only is faith in Christ vital but so is baptism with the Holy Spirit. This is permanent: the tongues of fire, the “living” for God are renewed in every service, and this process will be testified to in a specific way. It is not just an expression; being filled with the Holy Spirit is visibly a transcendent experience, as *TCTCV* says: “to lead a life worthy of their calling in worship, witness and service” (§21).

**Questions**

In the introduction to *TCTCV*, we encounter a number of questions which help us to put ourselves in order and provide us with concrete points of convergence. Let me respond to four of them from a Pentecostal perspective.

**To what degree does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?**

To the degree to which we see how the Latin American Pentecostal Forum has been looked at, the document is fairly close to how the Church is seen as the body of Christ. The majority of congregations (through students of theology to whom we have shown *TCTCV*) have agreed with its central lines and conception. (The highest percentage of students questioned were Pentecostal.)

**To what degree does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?**

The possibility to recognize themselves as the body of Christ helps all confessional families to include Pentecostalism in this appeal. However, what contributes most to the attainment of this goal is to accept the celebrative liturgy as legitimate despite diversity. It is important not only to include the Pentecostal fervour but also to understand that in spite of the effervescence, it is possible to
be Church. The same phenomenon has become visible in the ecumenical Pentecostal sectors, whose reading of the liturgical symbols has been quite different, and in the celebration of other parts of Christianity. (It is vital to understand the cultural distance between the Eastern and Western churches.) The readiness for unity is what this document reflects, and in it we discern considerable wisdom. This also allows us as Pentecostals to read the text and to identify our language and our positions. As an example, I would like to point to TCTCV §34–36, in which the various postures of Pentecostalism about sin and holiness itself are also reflected.

**What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?**

The greatest difficulty is the urgent need to change the aggressive language of much of Pentecostalism against Roman Catholicism. Many years of friction between the two have left deep wounds. But knowing the history, incorporating theological education, it can also push towards a new ecumenical stance, accepting these crises as part of what was a history of colonialism and slavery. This aversion is based on what is seen as idolatry in popular Catholic forms of Christianity, of which many are beyond the control of the Catholic Church itself as an institution. A strong line of Pentecostalism, which is American and Latin American, is extremely anti-ecumenical. Therefore, we are reviewing TCTCV to take care of the language: what is meant by authority, primacy, Petrine ministry. It is understandable that its drive is not about a church but about Christ. A good example is the Global Christian Forum, which has led the Pentecostal World Fellowship to accept a common agenda, including challenges for other Pentecostal spaces. This fraternal look helps us focus on the ends we have in the Pentecostal movement.

Some consider that the greatest difficulty to be dealt with involves the sacraments; it is definitely not the most important problem, although I believe that many declarations of faith contain language that finally excludes even other Pentecostals. An example is the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada and how it considers churches that practise infant baptism.21

However, if we listen to the reflections of the Faith and Order Commission

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21. Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, “What We Believe”; “We believe in holy living, the present day reality of the baptism in the Holy Spirit according to Acts 2:4, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the Lord’s supernatural healing of the human body. We believe in Christ’s Lordship of the Church, the observance of the ordinances of Christian baptism by immersion for believers, and the Lord’s Supper.” [https://paoc.org/family/what-we-believe](https://paoc.org/family/what-we-believe).
of the WCC as reflected in this document, in its final part, the great difficulty lies in interreligious dialogue. Although recognized as a fundamental dimension of the gospel and human dignity (see *TCTCV* §60), for most of the Pentecostal movement, preaching the gospel means presenting Christ as the only Saviour and Lord of the universe, with a stand of revelation that is remarkably exclusive. Can you respect others without accepting their god? For Pentecostals generally, the answer is yes; it adds, “and it’s my responsibility to present Christ as the only way, truth and life.”

It is interesting that in most congregations in Africa, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Korea, we cannot really know if they are Assemblies of God or Apostolic Evangelical Free. What is known is that there are groups who were evangelized and gave their lives to Christ from their own native religions. They did not lose their language, or their dearest habits, but the possible dialogue could clearly recognize the conversion from a “pagan” religion to faith in Christ.

We must mention the tensions on moral and ethical issues that we find in *TCTCV*. In several places, the conflicts caused by these disagreements address specific moral positions that are very strong.

**How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches, which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?**

Since we have a chance to see what causes such a wide approach as this statement, I think there is a chance to work on converging practical gestures of unity that were not possible before *TCTCV* was known. Indeed, it is essential to consider that the Pentecostal World Fellowship became part of the announcement of the Global Christian Forum to combat the discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom of Christians. It certainly looks like a way for new initiatives that will reinforce the proximity between churches in their diversity.

Rev. Ingolf Ellssel, representative of the executive of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, seeking unity among Christians, said: “I am encouraged by the initiative of the Global Christian Forum to unite the Christian world to raise the voices of those who suffer discrimination, persecution and martyrdom. I hope it’s the beginning of a new process of unity in the Body of Christ.”

Two points deserve to be mentioned especially for the specific difficulties within Pentecostalism: the authority of the written word of God and female

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Recognizing Us on the Road: Contributions of Pentecostalism on TCTCV

ministry. The regulations of the scriptures have been a big problem among Christian churches and Pentecostalism. The inerrancy and infallibility of scripture have been the focus of the movement arising from fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism to a large extent will agree with this view. Pentecostalism has trouble accepting tradition next to the authority of scripture, as it certainly accepts the supreme authority of scripture. Completely rejected is the argument that the Church is a sacrament.

On the ordination of women, one of the points in TCTCV that seems interesting to me is the way the Pentecostal churches have worked with this issue. The most distant church structures have limited women’s ministry and have opened up only in recent decades; however, in the wake of the Pentecostal movement in the world, many ways to organize as churches were spontaneous, creative, and far from conventional hierarchies; with female leaders, as well as Black and disabled leaders, they shocked tradition. Today, TCTCV reflects the difficulty in reconciling these different views, but now the Pentecostal movement, which is called to understand the order of the Church as God’s call, can itself take more than one form (see §24).

Despite such releasing elements of its beginnings, Pentecostalism became distant and exclusivist. Here we must find the deepest explanation that led Pentecostalism to constitute a separate movement from other Christian churches: its rejection of discrimination because of race, gender, and social development in many parts of the 1990s has meant great progress. An example is a new stage in North America in 1994, when the organization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America was founded; it became a benchmark for other Pentecostals in the world. It was a real change for Pentecostalism, as summarized by Vinson Synan:

It was a day never to be forgotten in the annals of American Pentecostalism – October 18, 1994 – when the Spirit moved in Memphis to end decades of racial separation and open doors to a new era of cooperation and fellowship between African-American and white Pentecostals. At the time, it was called the “Memphis Miracle” by those gathered in Memphis as well as in the national press, which hailed the historic importance of the event.23

Its purpose is mentioned in his statement: to relate with each other as members of Christ’s body; to demonstrate the essential unity of believers filled with the

Holy Spirit in response to the prayer of Christ in John 17:21, “That they may all be one”; and to foster world evangelization by preaching the gospel with signs and wonders and demonstrating the gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to present Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, baptizer in the Holy Spirit, healer, and coming king.

In Conclusion

It is virtually impossible to draw a conclusion, because the path on which the Pentecostal encounters TCTCV is wide enough. The unity of the body of Christ is achieved by being in communion with God; it is unity in faith, in the sacramental life, and in service, which can take on all potential forms. As such, this includes the ministry and the mission. Ruptures and divisions thwart the will of Christ. Nonetheless, the Pentecostal world is not only embodied by a people mainly separated from the other Christians; it is a model that has been characterized to a large extent by its fragmentation, fundamental to its own way of life and of organizing faith.

In the Pentecostal churches, plurality is well perceived, and calling them to gather together in unity will undoubtedly increase the fear of diversity. The fragility of the ecumenical movement in light of Pentecostal versatility is the consequence of not understanding this logic of being and doing. However, as a product of this versatility, the Pentecostal church is present in corners where Christianity had never been able to settle as a feasible option but only as a political and cultural imposition. It has been a blessing, which has made it possible to become acquainted with the Church of Christ, calling upon love to bring forth the gospel and not upon the power of violence. The weakness turns out to be a great virtue (fortalez).

Eschatology is very important to take into account. New heavens and a new earth have been promised for the end of history, but they are already present with anticipation, even now that the Church, sustained by the faith and hope in its pilgrimage through all times, summons in love and prayer: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20). Christ loves the Church and, up to the nuptials of the Lamb in the realm of the heavens, he shares with it the mission of illuminating and curing human beings until he returns robed in glory. The Pentecostal Church firmly believes that it is united with others who also confess the same faith, but it nonetheless feels responsible for what the Holy Spirit urges it to accomplish.
A Mexican Pentecostal Perspective on The Church: Towards a Common Vision

Daniel Chiquete Beltrán

I esteem the World Council of Churches’ (WCC) Faith and Order Commission Paper 214, The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV), for its theological quality, clear construction, and ecumenical sensibility. It represents an important contribution to the ecumenical yearning to reach the “visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe” (Preface).

My reflection on the document is personal, considering some Pentecostal theological positions, without ignoring that Pentecostalism is a complex, dispersed, and often contradictory phenomenon, even in its theology.

Before trying to answer the four guiding questions that we have been asked, I would like to comment briefly on some fragments of the basic document. From the objective of the above-mentioned Faith and Order Commission, I believe that a majority sector of Pentecostalism would have no problem affirming the importance of reaching the “visible unity in one faith,” but it would be less open to accepting “one Eucharistic fellowship.” Within Pentecostalism, there are different ways of understanding the meaning of the eucharist or Lord’s supper, and its forms and frequency of celebration differ very much. In their theological understanding, the function of expressing the communion of believers on a universal level is not included but rather is restricted to the local one. It is also associated with the impulse to search for a more intense and sanctified spiritual life, as well as the purpose of remembering the second coming of the Lord. That is to say, the effect in the local church is more accentuated than the effect in the universal one, and the eschatological dimension acquires a more relevant weight.
than that of everyday existence.

I find the Introduction of TCTCV to be excellent and inspiring. Both the claim that the Christian community “finds its origin in the mission of God for the saving transformation of the world” and its complement, “The Church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission,” represent a clear and inspiring theological vision founded in a clear and convincing way. I believe that most Pentecostals would subscribe to the vision of the “Church as the pilgrim people moving towards the kingdom of God,” although I do not have the same confidence that they would share the motivation of relating “to the world as a sign and agent of God’s love.” I believe that Pentecostal praxis expresses a sincere love of the world, although Pentecostalism does not perceive itself as “sign and agent” but as concretion of the kingdom. In a certain way, Pentecostalism understands itself not only as advancing towards the kingdom but also as representing the kingdom already in this world. It could be said that this is its way of understanding the “already, but not yet” of the kingdom of God.

Chapter I (“God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church”) can be accepted in general terms by Pentecostalism, although certain statements would find some resistance. It affirms about the Church: “It was to be a community of worship, initiating new members by baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity” (§2). In this regard, it seems necessary to remember that at least 20 percent of Latin American Pentecostalism is Oneness: that is, it does not accept the classic trinitarian conception of God and therefore rejects its corresponding doctrinal and dogmatic formulations as a theological construct without sufficient biblical support, inspired by philosophies “of this world.” This sector of Pentecostalism would reject all the affirmations of the paper that refer to God as “Holy Trinity,” the “triune” God, and similar formulas. Consistent with this position, the baptismal formula used in this Pentecostal sector is “in the name of Jesus Christ,” preferring the tradition of Acts (2:38) over that of Matthew, which establishes the baptismal formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Regarding the missio Dei, which the paper claims is carried out “through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit” (§3), the Pentecostal majority might say that “it is carried out through the Church that acts in the power of the Holy

1. Editor’s note: Oneness Pentecostals began with the desire to live the apostolic life to the fullest. They noted that in the book of Acts (see 2:38, among others), the apostles did not baptize using the trinitarian formula found in Matthew 28:19-20; rather, they baptized new believers “in the name of Jesus Christ.” On further reflection, they adopted the ancient modalist position on the Godhead, arguing that “Jesus” is the true name of God, who exhibits signs and wonders in their midst.
Spirit, “shifting time—the *kairos*—to the present, the time of the performance of the Church, full of the Spirit, in this world. That is to say, the salvific mission of the Father entrusted to the Son has now been entrusted to the Church, which carries it forward, impelled and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In §6, the paper quotes the passage about Paul preaching on the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17:22-34) as an illustration of how the first Christian communities used and respected local traditions. In Pentecostalism, however, this passage is generally used to illustrate the failure of Christian preaching when it intends to use the rhetoric and philosophy of “this world” instead of the charismatic preaching guided by the Spirit. It is suspected that Paul failed in Athens because he replaced preaching in the power of the Spirit with relying upon rational human rhetoric.

The paper supports the legitimacy of diversity in the Christian community as an expression of its catholicity sustained by its universality (§10). However, although for Pentecostals diversity is legitimate, they consider that there is an element that should not be lacking and that also works as a cohesive experience: baptism in the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Pentecostalism affirms that the Church is diverse in its cultural concretions but must be one in its charismatic or spiritual essence. In traditional Pentecostalism, the presence of the Spirit through concrete manifestations is a non-negotiable fact.

Another significant element of the difficulties of a deep encounter with Pentecostalism is related to the issue of Mary. Latin American Pentecostalism emerged to a significant degree from an experience of rupture and confrontation with Catholicism and some traditions of historical Protestantism. Mary remained installed in the Pentecostal imagination as a symbol linked to its religious past, normally described as negative, and with Mary as an idolatrous character. Although there has been an evolution in this perception, the rejection at the base level is still great. We Pentecostals have a huge theological debt to Mary as the central figure of the christological mystery.

In §16, the paper says: “The Holy Spirit nourishes and enlivens the body of Christ through the living voice of the preached Gospel, through sacramental communion, especially in the Eucharist, and through the ministries of service.” It seems to me that this would not be accepted by the majority sector of Pentecostalism, which considers that this nourishing by the Spirit is not given by eucharistic mediation and is given only very indirectly through the mediation of the word of God. Rather, it is understood as a direct infusion, commonly associated with the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which can also occur outside of liturgical activities.

Also, the following formulation would find little echo in Pentecostalism:
“Ordained ministers ‘assemble and build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry’” (§19). In its general discourse, and in the daily experience of many Pentecostal communities, the difference of essence or category between clergy and laity has been abolished, specifically by the action of the Holy Spirit that converts all believers into priests, holders of the Spirit, agents of the word. This is an essential element of Pentecostal religiosity.

In the same way, there would be resistance to the statement that it is “through the rites or sacraments of initiation that human beings become members of Christ and in the Lord’s Supper their participation in his body (cf. 1 Cor 10:16) is renewed again and again” (§21), because for Pentecostalism, the participation in the body of Christ is mainly due to the indwelling of the Spirit in each believer, and in a derived way more from the liturgical celebration and daily coexistence with other believers when they meet “in the name of the Lord.”

The concept of the “Church as a sacrament” used in the document would not be endorsed by Pentecostalism, which does not understand it as such and does not even use the term “sacrament,” although in its daily religious practice the temple, the community of believers, and the person him- or herself live as sacraments: sacred and consecrated elements for the service of the kingdom of God. Perhaps the rejection is more at the level of concepts than of realities and religious experiences.

Having shared these initial comments, I will respond to the four specific questions that have been asked about TCTCV from a Pentecostal perspective.

1) How does TCTCV reflect a Pentecostal vision or understanding of the Church?

TCTCV proposes a broad and profound ecclesiological conception that can enrich the Pentecostal understanding of the Church itself. It seems to me especially relevant to have a holistic and multilevel vision of the Church as a human reality and a divine constitution at the same time. Both conceptions agree that the Church is born and develops in human history, deeply affected by sin and the fall of the human condition, and therefore marked by the very deficiencies of this condition. Thus, the Church is not a perfect society but on its way to perfection.

The document presents the Church as a work of God with an essential vocation or salvific purpose which expresses and lives in community life with the communication of the word, the experiences of faith, and the celebration of the
sacraments. Also, Pentecostalism believes that the mission of the Church is broad and is lived through different dimensions, that it lives the faith into and out of the believing community itself. In the same way, Pentecostalism agrees with the paper in affirming the need to discern God’s will for the Church, although it would give less weight to the process of theological reflection on the revealed written word and put it more on the direct illumination of the Spirit. In any case, *TCTCV* exposes theologically several aspects that Pentecostalism lives in its daily faith practice.

Pentecostalism would feel very well represented with all of *TCTCV’s* allusions to and affirmations of the presence of the Spirit in the Church. Similarly, it would be comfortable with the idea that ecclesiastical history is intimately linked to the history and action of the Holy Spirit in its midst and with the affirmation that the constitution of the Church as a living tradition is due to the beneficent influence of the same Spirit. Perhaps we would use other theological formulations, but the background perception would be very close to that expressed in the document.

*TCTCV* is clear and precise in exposing the conception of the Church as a priestly, prophetic, and kingly people of God. This conception is deeply rooted in Pentecostalism and can be an important theological meeting point with other Christian traditions. It is likely that a difference would appear when Pentecostalism conceives of these dimensions as being more linked to the laity and less to the priestly or pastoral body. In the same way, the exposition of the Church as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit would be another central teaching of *TCTCV* which Pentecostalism would have no difficulty assuming as its own. It should be noted, however, that in Pentecostal understanding, the expectation is that this spiritual presence will be manifested in empirical signs such as speaking in tongues, healing operations, prophetic messages, and other daily manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit.

Regarding the presentation of the marks of the Church as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (§22), I believe that Pentecostalism would clearly identify with the explanation. In some groups, there would be a certain discomfort with the concept of “catholicity” because of the connotations that people would find with Catholicism; still, one could think of using equivalent concepts such as “universal.” The concept of “apostolic” would be equally accepted with pleasure. It is the case, however, that some people would think less about the tradition founded on the testimony of the apostles and rather on the life of the Church in the time of the apostles, considered permanent and with prodigious manifestations of the Holy Spirit, as they are narrated by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles.

In the same way, I believe that Pentecostalism would accept with pleasure
the conception of the Church as a pilgrim people that advances towards the kingdom of God, as well as the expositions related to the Church as a “sign and servant of God’s design for the world” (§25) and to the Church as a “communion in unity and diversity” (§28).

2) Where are clear differences?

Establishing differences at the level of theological formulations is a difficult undertaking because Pentecostalism is still at an embryonic stage in terms of the written formulation of its theology, at least in Latin America. Therefore, my observations are based more on an empirical knowledge of Pentecostal communities and an academic one related to their theological discourse. It seems to me that an important difference is the attempt to reach an agreement on the meaning of “one Eucharistic fellowship” (Preface, etc.). Within Pentecostalism, there are clear differences in the understanding and celebration of the eucharist, just as there are evident differences in relation to other Christian traditions, such as those relating to “transubstantiation,” “consubstantiation,” or “symbolic presence.”

A dense and deep phrase seems to me to be the statement that “the Holy Spirit nourishes and enlivens the body of Christ through the living voice of the preached Gospel, through sacramental communion, especially in the Eucharist, and through ministries of service” (§16). At the same time, it makes me suppose that it would not find an echo among a majority sector of Pentecostalism. Although Pentecostalism believes in a powerful and diverse action of the Holy Spirit, in its theological formulation, its priority action in sacramental communion or in service ministries still does not appear in a convincing way. In both cases, the Spirit inspires them, but does not mediate or manifest itself directly through them. At least, the Pentecostal theological discourse does not express it that way.

The paper states, quoting *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,* that the ordained ministers “assemble and build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry” (§19). In relation to this declaration, and in spite of the great consideration enjoyed by ordained pastors and ministers in Pentecostalism, the Pentecostal laity would not accept that ordained clergy or pastors constitute the body of Christ, since they

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understand that this is a privilege of all members of the Church.

I find another problematic point in the statement that it is “through the rites or sacraments of initiation that human beings become members of Christ and in the Lord’s Supper their participation in his body (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16) is renewed again and again” (§21). Most of the Pentecostal faithful limit the sacramental rites of initiation to baptism only, adding with high probability the expectation that it be accompanied by the confession of faith “that arises in the heart and is pronounced with the mouth.”

Similar to the previous observations, I think the same thing would happen in relation to the three interrelated forms: unity in the faith, unity in the sacramental life, and unity in service, where people would have a certain resistance to accept “unity in the sacramental life.”

3) In your perspective, what is missing in *TCTCV*?

The document is an excellent and concise ecclesiological exposition. And one understands that there are topics that were not included, or that there was no space to develop them more broadly. From a Pentecostal perspective, it seems to me that most of the aspects that are constitutive of Pentecostal ecclesiology are considered. I will mention some that I think deserve to enter into the reflection that calls us.

The great Christian traditions of the world tend to put little emphasis on the radical contrast between the Church and the “world,” softening its declarations that determine it as a specific society, different from and contrasting to its environment. Pentecostalism has the conviction and the tendency to radicalize its differentiation as a special body in front of the rest of society. In this sense, the Pentecostal church does not care to win the favour of the general society but to share with it a radical message of salvation and judgment. The word of God is an offering of salvation but also a word of judgment. In other words, Pentecostalism would expect a definition and understanding of the Church as radically contrasting with the surrounding societies. In this sense, I consider the document “soft.”

Pentecostal ecclesiology is based on the five christological principles that give structure and coherence to its theology: Christ saves, heals, sanctifies, baptizes with the Spirit, and comes back as king. Paradoxically, when one would expect Pentecostal theology to be structured around pneumatology, one discovers that it is actually structured around christological statements. The Church is understood from the perspective of the redeeming work of Christ and the empowering action of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the theological construction
of Pentecostal ecclesiology is not based on the trinitarian conception of God but on the perspective of the so-called full gospel, which is eminently christological and with references to the action of the Spirit, but the person of the Father is almost completely marginalized in this conception.

It is also to be noted that Pentecostalism considers the Church a therapeutic community, where liberation from evil occurs and education is given on the values of the kingdom. These issues are treated marginally in the document, but for Pentecostalism they are essential. Above all, the almost inexistent space granted to the Church as a privileged place for the reception of the Holy Spirit and community of praise and prayer, as well as fundamental convictions of Pentecostalism, will be missed.

4) How can TCTCV expand a Pentecostal vision of the nature and the mission of the Church?

*TCTCV* is the result of a long process of reflection and dialogue between various theological traditions and ecclesial experiences. I believe that in its current state, it can be considered an excellent working instrument to reflect, also within Pentecostalism, on the theological understanding of the Church. Beyond the academic level of theology, a more simplified and adapted paper could be prepared to work at the level of the local churches, an exercise that to me seems necessary and beneficial.

*TCTCV* emphasizes some fundamental aspects of ecclesiology that have found little space in the Pentecostal tradition, which has focused on emphasizing other elements that are more related to their own social and liturgical experiences, their insertion in Latin American societies, and their charismatic experiences. A paper like this one by the WCC, not committed to a single theological or ecclesial tradition, which seeks to be inclusive and dialogical, can become an invitation to Pentecostal theology also to open up and participate in this ecumenical dialogue, which is so rich and necessary.

The trinitarian vision of God, the sacramental theology, the dimension of the Church as universal koinonia, the doctrine of the Father in the economy of salvation, and the commitment of the Church to life in all its dimensions are some of the aspects where this document can enrich Pentecostalism’s own ecclesiological vision. They can offer a kind of theological agenda for the coming years.
I am grateful for the invitation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Faculdade Unida. The invitation pointed to four questions to be answered from the perspective of my Pentecostal membership. I need, then, to explain the place from which I am speaking. I was born into a Pentecostal family; my father, José Freire de Alencar (1915–82), was one of the pioneer pastors of the Assemblies of God (AG). Later on, I became a member of AG Betesda, a denomination which arose in 1982 and which includes in its mission the phrase “we are a reflexive Pentecostal church” (over the years, this church has become autonomous, established itself as the Betesda Church [Igreja Betesda], and is today rather far from the Brazilian Pentecostal standard). I obtained my master’s and doctoral degrees doing research on the AG, so I have been researching classical Pentecostalism¹ for many years. Since 1998, I have been a member of the Latin American Network of Pentecostal Studies (Rede Latino-americana de Estudos Pentecostais, RELEP)—Pentecostal researchers who research Pentecostalisms. I recently did postdoctoral research on the relationship between ecumenisms and Pentecostalisms,² and currently I am researching the expansion of Brazilian Pentecostalisms through migratory flows.

¹ In Brazil, classical Pentecostalism refers to the initial historical period of the 20th century in which the Christian Congregation in Brazil (Congregação Cristã no Brasil) arose in 1910 and the Assemblies of God in 1911.
What Does TCTCV Say to Brazilian Pentecostalisms?

Objectively, nothing. For one simple reason: The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) ignores Pentecostalisms. The invitation that was given to me and other Pentecostal researchers is probably an admission of this problem.

The document mentions the bilateral agreements often: the World Evangelical Alliance–Roman Catholic and the Roman Catholic–Disciples agreements (once); the Lutheran–Orthodox and Anglican–Lutheran (twice); the Roman Catholic–WCC (three times); the Roman Catholic–Anglican and the Roman Catholic–Reformed (four times); the Roman Catholic–Methodist (six times); the Roman Catholic–Orthodox (seven times); and the Roman Catholic–Lutheran agreement (eight times), but not once does it mention the Roman Catholic–Pentecostal bilateral agreements or any other WCC document regarding the Pentecostalisms. The International Catholic–Pentecostal Dialogue Commission (ICPDC) has been in existence since 1972 (50 years) and has accumulated a number of published documents, including documents with the same theological issues as those of the bilateral commissions mentioned in the notes. A symptomatic oblivion, because “historical silences” make a lot of noise.

If the document had been written in Brazil by an ecumenical theologian, this might be understandable, since ecumenical texts always blame the lack of dialogue exclusively on Pentecostals; however, coming from the WCC, it is difficult to fathom. After all, the Pentecostals joined the WCC in 1961, and since 1998 there has been a Joint Consultative Group between Pentecostals and the WCC. Thus, we see that the ephemeral ecumenical belonging of the church
Brazil for Christ (O Brasil para Cristo), from 1960 to 1980, had no results. Here I agree with Magali Cunha:

Although the first Pentecostal churches joined the WCC in 1961, it was only thirty years later in Canberra that member churches began to appreciate a stronger rapprochement with the Pentecostal movement . . . . The process is under way, but is assessed as slow by the two parties. It should also be noted that the hesitation about Pentecostal involvement with the WCC is not only on the Pentecostal side. There are reservations from traditional European and North American churches as well as Orthodox churches, which fear that hundreds of independent Pentecostal churches may dominate the body and / or compromise the emphasized theological perspectives.⁶

TCTCV reports that it took more than two decades of consultations, meetings, and assessments by the groups, but at no point does it give any indication of the need for dialogue with Pentecostalisms. Why?

If ecumenisms ignore Pentecostalisms, the reciprocal is also true. In Brazil, we have not only a reciprocal indifference but reciprocal animosities; it is a relationship of the neck with the guillotine.⁷ During the military dictatorship, there was a cliché that the “left only united in jail.” Just as in Brazil, evangelicals are not arrested (because they are evangelicals), and not even jail gives us hope for unity. I proved this by researching with students from three theological faculties in São Paulo: one Catholic and one Methodist—both admittedly ecumenical—and one non-ecumenical Baptist faculty.⁸ a z

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⁷. Alencar, Ecumenismos & Pentecostalismos.
⁸. See the full research in Alencar, Ecumenismos & Pentecostalismos.
The ICPDC is unknown in both the Catholic and the Methodist faculty (80 and 68.8 percent, respectively), and in the Baptist faculty there is 0 percent knowledge. Do we just blame the students for this? In the almost 50 years since ICPDC’s existence, only two documents have been published in Portuguese (they are out of print), and in this half-century, only eight Latinos were part of the Commission; currently, and for the first time, we have a Brazilian member.9 Thus, Catholic Latin America and the Pentecostal Latin America do not know each other and are also unknown. At the Global Christian Forum in Bogota in 2018, I asked one of the members of the WCC Central Committee why the Pentecostal participation was small; he objectively replied, “I do not know any Pentecostals who speak English.” And I thought that “foreign tongues” was an internal problem only for Pentecostals!

Three theological questions analyzed sociologically

Baptism, eucharist, and ministry are central issues of the document. For obvious reasons, I will not analyze them theologically. TCTCV conceals, ignores, or relativizes political reasons and sociological implications that, for better or for

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worse, greatly affect Pentecostalisms.

Baptism: Symbol of the state’s power over the Church or symbol of the autonomy of the individual?

For a church that once had the state’s power, it is much easier to decide an issue. This is not said to cause offense but is simply a historical statement, especially when we are talking about a rite of passage about which this church, and only this church, holds: the official prerogative of birth, baptism, marriage, and death.  

Official infant baptism, therefore, is the demonstration of the overlap of power relations between the state and the Church, as it was standard of the Roman Catholic and other Protestant denominations. After all, the Church is the only institution that holds grace.  

The Radical Reformation of Thomas Müntzer reminds us that there as here, any attitude that does not fall not within the institutional official view of the “right doctrine” is heresy.  

For Pentecostalisms, heirs of the Anabaptists, baptism is an individual choice. It is not the church or the parents who decide whether a person is to be baptized, but the person him- or herself in an autonomous and rational choice in adult life. There is nothing more modern! The fact is that publishing a document and transforming it into ecclesiastical practice within an episcopal, synodal, presbyteral model is easy, but how can this be achieved in congregational Pentecostal groups, which are autonomous, fragmented, and diffuse? To suggest this to such groups would be like asking the Roman Catholic Church and the

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10. In Brazil, it was only with the Proclamation of the Republic in 1888 that births, marriages (registries), and deaths (cemeteries) became civil matters; until then, they had legal value only if registered by the Roman Catholic Church.

11. Max Weber, *Ensaios de Sociologia*, 5th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: LTC, 2002). The main ecumenical document of Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio*, reaffirms the exclusivity of the Roman Catholic Church; Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) would repeat this in the 1990s. Protestant plurality, for obvious reasons, does not allow this, but in each group there is a latent dogmatism. This dogmatism is exclusive.


14. Baptism in adult life can also be a political act of a presidential candidate, performed by an AG pastor in the Jordan River, as well as the celebration of a prince’s wedding at the Anglican cathedral, a funeral for the president of Russia in the Orthodox Church, or a mass in the Vatican. Places and characters change, but they are all motivated by interests. “Not the ideals, but the interests and ideas directly govern man’s conduct.” A religious act, public by nature, is thus a political act. Weber, *Ensaios de Sociologia*, 24.

15. The three ecclesiastical systems are cited as political models of organization, as did H. Richard Niebuhr, *As origens sociais das denominações cristãs* (São Paulo: ASTE/ Ciências da Religião, 1992).
like to change their official and episcopal ethos.

Immediately we can say: Pentecostals are proselytizers, so they do not accept the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification; although labelling them as proselytizers may sound insulting externally, internally it is a compliment. After all, is not being a proselytizer fulfilling the great commission to go and make disciples? To be evangelical is to evangelize; evangelizing means gaining new followers. And baptism as a public demonstration of this choice is the greatest mutual achievement of the evangelizer and the evangelized. How to solve this?

TCTCV itself does not make this clear: when referring to the work of foreign missionaries, it states that “such solidarity of mutual assistance is to be clearly distinguished from proselytism, which wrongly considers other Christian communities as a legitimate field for conversion” (§6, note 4). What does that mean? Is doing missions—which could be synonymous with proselytism—in non-Christian spaces legitimate? So, is there a legitimate proselytism and an illegitimate proselytism? This was the reason for the missionary clash of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 and, in its Latin version, the Panama Congress in 1916. Missions, here, involved legitimation and denial of the colonialisms.

A ferocious critique of the proselytizing wrath of the Pentecostals is recurrent. I agree that religious competition in capitalism is pragmatic and not ethical, but it is worth highlighting the following. The critique comes from 1) state religions with institutional hegemonic domination, in which “everyone is born within the church”; 2) Calvinisms, in which the saved and the lost have already been predestined and there is no need for evangelization; and 3) the millennial Roman Catholic and the centennial Reformed churches, all of which are in vertiginous decline in terms of number of members throughout Latin America. Thus, if the 20th century became the “Century of the Holy Spirit,” it was the explosive

growth of Pentecostalisms that “saved” the “next Christendom,” both in the Roman Catholic Church (with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal) and in Protestantisms.

If the Acts of the Apostles events had taken place in rural Galilee, with few people, they would have had few or no results. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Pentecostal phenomenon, as in Acts, was repeated in urban areas and was inflated by migratory flows. In addition, in 1850, the world reached its first billion people; in the 20th century, another five billion were added to that number. In this population explosion, “globalized Pentecostalism,” according to estimates in 2018, would have 685 million members worldwide—yet many people still did not realize it.

Eucharist: The limits of exclusion and the limits of universality?

Who can participate? All [todos]? But are “all” only men? Does todos also include women? All or only the predestined? All the baptized, confirmed, married, heterosexual, tithe payers, and members in communion? All, including the pppp group: pobres, pretos, periféricos, pentecostais (poor, Black, peripheral, and Pentecostal)?

The theory of the production of symbolic goods can be a great pedagogical help, but the limits between producers and consumers of symbolic goods in Pentecostalism are small, tenuous, relative, and sometimes non-existent. In the Pentecostal universe, all men and all women can—and should—do everything: preach, sing, pray, anoint, lead worship, evangelize, and found churches. The distinctions between ordained ministry and laymen are diffuse. Confused. Non-

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22. The ecumenical and missionary constitution of the Azusa Street revival is now ignored and even denied by contemporary Pentecostalisms.


existent. Yes, there are many well-clericalized Pentecostal expressions, but mostly, in Pentecostal settings there is a “liturgical anarchy,” and almost always, Catholic, ecumenical, and Reformed people observe this with suspicion. Ironically, the abandonment of the charismatic and prophetic perspective of Pentecostal origins—racism, gender, and social struggles—has been softened by bureaucratic institutionalization.

Ministry: Pentecostalisms and pentecostality

This is an intrinsic consequence of the former point: Who can and should exercise the ministries?

Right at the beginning, we have a serious gender issue: some groups do not accept gender parity. This is a serious issue within Pentecostalism which was overcome at Azusa Street, one of the early-20th-century Pentecostalisms. In Azusa and in Brazil, at the outset, women were consistently recognized in the exercise of their ministries, partly because at the time, there was no distinction between laypeople and clergy. At present, in many Pentecostal churches, including Neo-Pentecostal, women participate in parity.

Bernardo Campos, a Pentecostal Peruvian theologian, constructed a typology differentiating Pentecostalisms and pentecostality, in which the former are concrete, historical, and sociological manifestations, and the latter is the theological doctrine of the belief in the contemporaneity of the gifts. Thus, pentecostality is found transversally, as synonymous with catholicity, in all times and places.

27. These are the “Catholic residues” that subsist in Pentecostalisms: João Délio Passos, Teogonias Urbanas: O Nascimento dos Velhos Deuses: Tese de Doutorado (São Paulo: PUC-SP, 2001). In addition, if Pentecostal groups in the beginning are charismatic, in the irreversible processes of institutionalization, they become traditionally bureaucratic. Weber, Ensaios de Sociologia. Some groups originally managed to combine the maximum of magic with economic rationality.

28. At the Global Christian Forum in Bogota in 2018—an event held by the Vatican, the WCC, Orthodox, Reformed, and Pentecostals—this concern was visible, since at all the tables there was parity. All tables had a female presence. But, after the event, in the house and the parish of each group, will women have the same participation?


30. Alencar, Matriz Pentecostal Brasileira.

31. In my church, for example, since the beginning of the 1990s there have been women in all areas of ministry.

In Brazil, we have a church that is macho, conservative, clerical, homophobic, bourgeois, corporatist, and allied to power, with a white, rich, hegemonic leadership. Are we talking about the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed churches, or the Pentecostals? In Brazil, this description applies to all of them, so much so that Rubens Alves’ classic book, Protestantismo e Repressão (Protestantism and Repression), originally published in 1979, was later republished with a new title, Religião e Repressão (Religion and Repression). I recall with great gratitude a young Syrian Pentecostal seminarian in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2006, who, identifying me as a Brazilian, gave me a hug and thanked me for the text Igreja, Carisma e Poder (Church, Charisma and Power). It is in these moments that we remember that there are Roman Catholics, Reformed people, and Pentecostals who are members of the “church-people of God” (igreja-povo de Deus), practising legitimate Christian solidarity in hospitals, prisons, peripheries, and favelas. After all, the Spirit is like the wind and acts as it chooses, so it does not discriminate between Roman Catholics, Reformed, and Pentecostals. In some places and times, church and charisma are central; in others, power; in some places and times, pentecostality/catholicity has freedom, while in others, it is stunted.

Final Considerations

I conclude by using the deluge metaphor. In a scientific, positivist, liberal, modern reading, it is a mythological episode. However, in times of climatic, economic, political, and post-denominational “deluge,” the ark, it seems, is the space of salvation.

What is difficult and absolutely unlikely is to be able to believe that a charismatic figure (an individual?) can have a divine teleological revelation of salvation (universal or exclusive?); would it thus bring about a saving option? The logistics are not feasible, the viability is improbable, the conduction is confusing, and the solution is utopian. If the smell inside the ark is not the best, the chaos outside is a still bigger problem. The challenge is to believe in a dove, symbol of

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34. Leonardo Boff, E a igreja se fez povo, (Petrópolis, Ev. Vozes, 2005).
the Holy Spirit, as a sign of salvation. Pentecostals, it seems, believe in it, in different ways. In our times, the deluge outside is growing always stronger; within the ark (οἰκουμένη?) there is a complex coexistence. Neither the deluge nor the ark, for both are ephemeral, but a new reality indicates a new time. In the tension between institutionalism and charismatisms in chapter 15 of Acts, after much debate (and therefore with differing opinions), they write a document defining the “essential” in a collegial decision, according to Luke, to “the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). I do not have the pretence of discernment to point out the way, and Luke, I’m sorry to say, did not spell out the Spirit’s part and the “we” part, but I know that in this deluge and in this ark we’ve already talked and decided a lot. Is it not time to listen to the Spirit?
Pentecostalism is the movement that enlivened the Church of the 20th century with a missionary, ecclesial, and pastoral transformation as it focused on the movement of the Spirit (without losing sight of Christ) and the transformation of the faith community. Trying to define it is complex, because this movement of the Spirit—mystical, missionary, testimonial, and transforming—has been catalogued many times as madness and disorder.

On several occasions, it has been said that Pentecostalism is a movement of restoration: a restorationist and eschatological movement. According to Carmelo Álvarez, it is “a missionary movement with a global character. It has its own dynamic, but it has inherited theological distinctions of the sanctity movements.”

Currently, we speak of global Pentecostalism to consider the different variants that arise in it. It is necessary to make clear that within Pentecostalism are several denominations that arise from this movement of the Spirit: the historical Pentecostal denominations, which are those that started at the beginning of the 20th century and from which other Pentecostal traditions are born; then the charismatic ones; and, finally, the Neo-Pentecostals. There is even a fourth position that says that the denominations have passed into a period of post-Pentecostalisms. I must also mention that in the Andean region there is

a strong Pentecostal presence among Indigenous Peoples with their respective characteristics. It is precisely from the perspective of global Pentecostalism that I would like to dialogue with the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*.

**Pentecostal Vision and Understanding of the Church and Its Ministry**

Regarding the first question, whether the document reflects a Pentecostal vision or an understanding of the Church and its ministry, we must make clear that from the perspective of Pentecostalism, there has not been a uniform ecclesiological reflection. There will always be a debate between experience and doctrine; therefore, it is not possible to find 100 percent coincidence in our positions. Diversity is a dynamic of the Holy Spirit, and that is how we believe that faith manifests itself.

In this sense, we first agree on two fundamental aspects. First, the unity of the Church is very important for Pentecostals, because this is what the Holy Spirit produces. The broken communion with God and with our neighbour are the greatest emphases in the sermons and conferences within the churches and at national and international meetings or conventions.

Second, we agree on recognizing the reality of sin and how it affects the life and testimony of the Church, since all denominations are aware of the problem and the serious situation that can occur when believers sin. Thus, most of them maintain that the Church is holy, although it is formed by sinful beings who through their actions can forget and despise the sacrifice of Christ, referring more to moral sins. Others, on the other hand, emphasize the systemic sin to which the Church has to respond because it affects the faith, life, and testimony of the Church. Finally, other groups argue that the Church should affect the world through more intentional participation, through politics and social action, so that sin diminishes and the grace of Christ establishes itself in this world. Thus, they dedicate themselves to forming evangelical political parties and seek election to the congressional assemblies of several countries; there is a strong
presence in the social movements.⁴

Third, baptism and the holy or Lord’s supper are two important ordinances in global Pentecostalism (the Church of God, Cleveland, also includes feet washing). Believers into the new life in Christ and into church participation; however, conversion is what introduces us to the kingdom of God. Both ordinances are symbols of what God has produced in the life of the believer through his Spirit: regeneration and sanctification.

We hold that baptism is an external signal of something that has happened within, as Aimee McPherson says:

baptism . . . is . . . a beautiful and solemn emblem reminding us that even as our Lord died upon the cross of Calvary so we reckon ourselves now dead indeed unto sin, and the old nature nailed to the cross with Him; and that even as he was taken down from the tree of the cross and buried, so we are buried with Him by baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life.⁵

This is how believers must also maintain a constant renewal through reconciliation and renewal by means of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the Church does not lose its sanctity because the word of God says that “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

With regard to the holy supper or eucharist, we hold that it is an act of obedience to the Lord’s command, since it is a commemorative act of the atoning death and the shedding of Jesus’ blood (1 Cor. 11:23, 24; Luke 22:19). But it is also a declaration of the anticipation of the return of Christ to complete his redemptive work: “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26);

⁴I suggest that the reader study materials by the following authors: Darío López (Peru), Pentecostalismo y Transformación Social, (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Kairos/FTL, 2000); El nuevo rostro del Pentecostalismo, (Lima, Peru: CENIP, 2002); La Seducción del Poder: Los evangélicos y la política en el Perú de los noventa, (Lima, Peru: Ediciones PUMA: 2020); Nicolás Panotto (Argentina), “Del Espíritu a la gente. Sobre las especificidades del ethos pentecostal y su incidencia socio-política: El caso del Centro Cristiano Nueva Vida en Buenos Aires” Religión e Incidencia Pública. Revista de Investigación de GEMRIP 3 (2016), 53-82; Hilario Wynarczyk (Argentine), Luis Orellana, and Miguel Ángel Mansilla (Chile).

and it is an experience of communion with the Lord (1 Cor. 10:17) and with the believers at the table of the Lord, constituting a declaration of the unity of the body of Christ.

Fourth, we believe that ordained ministry is for the full exercise of the ministry, and its function is to direct the gifts and ministries of the other believers. It must be exercised with love to maintain the unity of the Church (Eph. 4:12; Mark 10:41-45).

**Notable Differences with Pentecostalism**

The most notable differences in the document are found in relation to the ordained ministry and the episcopate. I will try to explain global Pentecostal thinking for a better understanding.

While it is true that we agree that the ordained ministry seeks the unity of the local and/or denominational church, we consider that in the word, one speaks more of the description of its office than of a rank or hierarchy. For that reason, we believe it is necessary to provoke fairer ecclesiastical structures because the anointing to minister comes from God. All believers have the duty to proclaim the gospel and call the community to serve the Lord because we believe in the universal priesthood of believers. They are the ones who maintain the unity of Christian life and witness and who show to the unconverted world that Christ lives in the midst of his people.

It is also necessary to make clear that a difference is made between what is the unity of the Church and a united humanity, as it is considered that this will not be achieved in this world until Jesus Christ returns for his Church. This is the hope that sustains most Pentecostals, seeking to maintain a life of holiness, with a moral emphasis in certain groups, and in others, trying to respond to the social needs of the communities in which their congregations are based.

The document says that the authority of the ordained ministry should not be exercised by domination or coercion but as Jesus showed it, by washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:3-20), but here there are differences, since in some Neo-Pentecostal denominations this is not a reality. The cases of ecclesiastical abuse in them are known. To avoid the seduction of power in the Church, other denominations have elections of their councils and boards of directors.

This brings us to the second and great difference in relation to the episcopate. We consider that “bishop” and “elder” is the same Greek word translated as “bishop” in other passages. In New Testament times, the bishop or superintendent was in charge of a church; it was not until the second century that the bishop or superintendent came to be in charge of several churches. After the apostles, there
was probably a need for a more extensive organization, but it was not yet fully centralized. Although an administration of an episcopal type is maintained, its form of application has a Reformed style.

So, whoever presides over the councils and boards is a minister elected among the others (each denomination\(^6\) has different ways of choosing them)—called president, administrative bishop, or national supervisor—who is in charge of the denomination for a relatively short designated term. Those who preside know that they must always be at the service of those among whom they preside for the sake of building the Church of God in love and truth. They also know that it is their duty to respect the integrity of local churches, give a voice to those who do not have one, and defend unity in diversity (referring to local churches). In order that those who preside comply with this, there is usually an administrative board or body of district supervisors that operates at the national level and accompanies them during their term. The members of this board are also elected. Some denominations do not elect these members by national vote; it is the bishop or supervisor who has the duty to form the board with the ministers he has.

These boards also have a collaborating wing which consists of councils, departments, or committees. Mostly, their concern lies in the growth of the church and how it addresses certain ethical problems; it also contributes indirectly to addressing issues of injustice, poverty, and marginalization related to its ministers and/or members. They are responsible for enforcing the mission of the church; its emphasis is evangelization.

The councils function as advisers to those elected to lead the organizations in their various periods. Whenever there is an important decision, the boards, bishops, or national supervisors convoke a national assembly in which the laity also participates. Sometimes, smaller committees are formed to examine the matter to be decided, then the committees inform their criteria and it is decided whether they are accepted. In this sense, Pentecostals are more participatory and communitarian: everyone has the opportunity to express their opinions, as we believe that the anointing of the Spirit enables us all to exercise decisions, nominations, and elections. It is not possible to accept a common episcopate or a single person who exercises authority, because diversity is in the heart of God.

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\(^6\) In the Church of the Foursquare Gospel, teams are formed and sent by the different zones or regions; candidates who are designated are those who have more support and are in full communion with the church. Then they form their respective committees or lists that are sent to the electoral committee. Finally, a national election is held, in which other ministers and laypeople who represent their local churches vote. The results are given in the National Assembly.
who made a diverse and good creation. Nor would it be accepted that it can be exercised in a communitarian and collegial manner unless it is within the same denomination.

In relation to the councils of the other denominations, their work is understood and accepted, but there is no intentional participation in working together on doctrinal issues; the emphasis has been mainly evangelistic. Pentecostals have shown great solidarity when there have been natural disasters, a work has been needed in the community, or some government problem has affected them with hunger and poverty; at such times, they promote human dignity in many ways.

Regarding the authority of the other councils and denominations, the persons who exercise it are recognized, but the different liturgical and/or doctrinal positions they may have do not necessarily influence the other Pentecostal denominations. Lately, we have also seen Pentecostals fighting against a more permissive morality of the state, and the denominations join with each other, with other evangelical groups, and even with the most conservative part of the Catholic Church to do so, as happened in the multitude of marches in several countries of the northern part of South America. The protest was against gender ideology, but TCTCV does not address this.

Finally, there is a point that the document indicates that is not addressed within the churches of various Pentecostalisms, but it is discussed in the Pentecostal academy. I refer to the possibility of salvation for those who do not believe explicitly in Christ and the relationship between interreligious dialogue and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. This is an issue that Pentecostals do not accept, because Pentecostal christology considers that Christ fulfilled all necessary requirements so that a righteous and just God could freely forgive sin and receive human beings again in his communion. No other form of salvation is accepted either through works or through another person. The Latin American Pentecostal Forum wanted to address this point, but it was not possible. There was a dialogue first between Pentecostals, then with the historical denominations, and it did not go beyond that. Few Pentecostal denominations are interested in maintaining doctrinal dialogues with the Catholic Church (due to fear and ignorance of Mariology), and few would participate in an interreligious dialogue—I again emphasize: unless it arises from or within the academy.
Issues Not Addressed by the Document

From my perspective, The Church: Towards a Common Vision does not address a very important issue: the participation of women in ordained ministry. In Pentecostalism, women have always been perceived as equal to men in terms of their possible aspiration to serve in leadership roles as qualified and willing servants; this includes serving as primary pastors, missionaries, and evangelistic preachers. Women have also served in prophetic and teaching roles, according to their gifts and calls.

The greatest ministerial contribution in Pentecostalism is that women can participate in and exercise such roles with freedom and spiritual authority, and this is not to feel privileged or to be criticized. As Pastor Jack Hayford says:

> The Father’s revealed plan shows that men and women are designed to be equal participants in ministry. Mary and Joseph, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Anna and Simeon—each one, enabled by God’s Spirit, ministered in ways that acknowledged their gender, and yet were neither promoted or penalized because of it (Luke 1, 2).7

The recommendation from Pentecostalism is to have discernment in interpreting the biblical passages and not to blind oneself to what God has to say about the ministry and how to exercise it, especially the ministry of women, since in many cases this is confused with the role of wives in the biblical texts (1 Tim. 2:11-14). God does not distinguish between human potential and vocational freedom (Gal. 3:28). What he wants is that we all “come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13).

We Pentecostals believe that “the gifts are not awarded by merit nor are they taught to benefit the possessor.”8 It is not a matter of masculine gender, of human policies, or of a cultural matter. The Holy Spirit imparts the charismata so that there is ministry in the body; its value therefore lies in the ability to minister in benefit and spiritual edification to the body. This is not the exclusive responsibility of men but also of women, to fulfil God’s plan for his Church and humanity. That is why equality in the ministry and the due respect to exercise it are recognized.

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The proclamation of the word is also ministerially inclusive of women. They can speak the message of God to restore and call to repentance those who are far from him, as did the four daughters of Philip “the evangelist,” who prophesied (Acts 21:9). It is thought that the gifts and ministries are not owned by an exclusive group that seeks earthly power but that the ministers act with the direction and power of the Holy Spirit.

I must make clear that, despite the fact that the ordained ministry for women is recognized, not all can exercise a high-authority leadership in historic Pentecostal churches, with the exception of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel and the Assemblies of God, since to be a bishop, superintendent, or supervisor, one of the requirements is to be male. This is still being debated in some National Assemblies.

**Issues to Be Added so that the Document has a Pentecostal Vision**

For the *TCTCV* to expand to include a Pentecostal vision, it must give more emphasis to the mission of the Church in the world. The proclamation of the gospel to all persons of every people, culture, and nation is the most important thing, since it is a missionary movement. The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ must reach all human beings. I agree that the Church is called by Christ in the Holy Spirit to bear witness to his action of reconciliation, healing, and transformation by the Father in favour of the creation.

I also believe that the hermeneutics of *TCTCV* should consider the Pentecostal experience, because the document does not give room to interpret the movement of the Spirit. For Pentecostals, there is an existential dimension, but it is linked to an individual and communitarian integration. For example, with regard to salvation, God saves and manifests his justice over the needy but also rescues the community to make his name known. The Pentecostal is conscious of his or her salvation and lives it in that communitarian dimension, where all men and women are brothers and sisters who have been liberated, transformed, and restored by the grace of God. This would help the document greatly.

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Introduction

As a pastor and Pentecostal theologian, I celebrate the publication of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV), which we will explore in this text. Helping to promote its reception among Latin American churches is an exciting task. After reading TCTCV, I realized that this deep and collegial reflexion has many elements in common with Pentecostal ecclesiology while at the same time presenting other elements that are less common to Pentecostal churches.

I must emphasize at least two questions that arise as obstacles to the proper appropriation of the paper by Pentecostals. First is the nomenclature “ecumenical” itself, which does not have a positive sense in Pentecostal settings and even in settings of other Latin American churches. Second is the characteristic of “free churches,” preponderant in Pentecostal churches, giving them a dynamic which is distinct from churches in other regions of the planet. In the first part of the text, we will describe these two elements which inhibit a wider reception in the short term. In the second part, we will analyze chapters I and IV regarding the perception of Pentecostals on church mission and *diakonia*. In the last part, we will focus on the four initial questions proposed for the dialogue in the consultation that was held in the city of Vitória (Brazil) in 2019.
Inhibitors of Dialogue: Language and Conversionism

I will highlight only two dialogue inhibitors, but if we are to watch more carefully, we will find more obstacles. However, we believe that these two are at the root of the other dialogue inhibitors. The mere fact that a Pentecostal leader declares himself to be “ecumenical” has the consequence of him or her being repelled by the group. For many Latin American churches, to be ecumenical is to be “liberal,” an arbitrary classification created by common sense and used to reject ideas contrary to the status quo. Based on this disinformation, being ecumenical means defending the return of Protestantism to Catholicism by fusing all the churches into a controlling global superstructure. Moreover, the ecumenical churches are considered to be more “progressive,” another arbitrary and dualistic term employed to cause division between “them and us,” with “us” being the good, and “them” the evil. Gender issues, women’s pastoral ministry, minority struggles, the struggle for social transformation, and other important issues are shelved according to this flaw as being “liberal and progressive,” associated with the term “ecumenical.” As an example, the statute and internal regulation of the Assemblies of God in Brazil (AG Brazil)—the largest evangelical denomination, with more than 12 million members—forbids its ministers from having any relationship with ecumenism. When an important paper like this one by the World Council of Churches uses the expression “ecumenical,” it risks being discarded even before it is read by the Pentecostals.

AG Brazil is divided into four large groups that are widely distributed in the national territory:

- The first is represented in the General Convention of the Assemblies of God in Brazil (Convenção Geral das Assembleias de Deus no Brasil, CGADB), formed by tens of thousands of pastors and thousands of churches.

- The second group is the National Convention of Assemblies of God in Brazil, Madureira Ministry (Convenção Nacional das Assembleias de Deus no Brasil Ministério Madureira, CONAMAD), which is as large as the first group.

- The third, Convention of Assemblies of God in Brazil (Convenção das Assembleias de Deus no Brasil, CADB), although the fruit of a division in CGADB in 2017, was born with tens of thousands of pastors and churches.

- The fourth group consists of thousands of pastors and churches but without an institutional link with the other Assemblies of God churches. This fourth group is more autonomous, using the name of the church but with independent local leadership.
With regard to the current issue, what all of these groups have in common is a negative perspective on the ecumenical movement.

The CONAMAD Statute determines in Article 12, item XIII, the duties of the Assembly minister: “To reject ecumenical movements that differ from the principles adopted by the Charter of Doctrinal Principles of CONAMAD.” In the chapter on “prohibitions,” the term “ecumenical” reappears with the same limiting tone. In the case of the CGADB Statute, the restrictions are broader. Article 9 has as its headline: “It is forbidden to the members of the CGADB,” and in item IV it regulates in a limiting form: “[It is forbidden] to link oneself to an ecumenical movement.” Here comes the first suggestion for a short-term dialogue with the Brazilian Pentecostal churches: adapt the language. Instead of using the expression “ecumenical,” you might use the expression “unity” or “coexistence,” among others. In the medium and long term, the suggestion is to invest in the formation of new leaders and in developing a fraternal approach.

Churches and new leaders must be made aware of what ecumenism is in order to undo some misunderstandings. Much of the resistance of the Pentecostal churches has to do with the fact that these groups ignore the history of the ecumenical movement and its positive achievements in the history of the Church and in service to the world. Encouraging new master’s and doctoral studies in more open institutions through scholarships, and assisting in the formation of new leaders (men and women) from undergraduate courses in theology, will allow for a critical and broader formation of the new cadres of these churches. It is not just a matter of semantics or etymology but of language intended to deepen the channels of communication with these new churches.

The second inhibitor is related to the very situation of Latin American churches, which is very different from European churches and from regions where churches are organized in an institutional and territorial manner. In Latin America, Pentecostal churches would be classified as “free churches,” that is, they are not official churches of the state and never had a more direct relationship with the state. This is primarily because they were minorities and acted as religious reform groups focused on themes specific to the Christian faith without being a definite project of any nation. In recent decades, when they recognized their political capital, these churches changed their relationship to the holders of power. We shall return to this issue later.

Taking as a parameter the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the Pentecostal churches would be more identified with the so-called Radical Reformation, based on spiritual leaders such as Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer than with the so-called Magisterial Reformation of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. Like the spiritualists of the 16th century and beyond, the Pentecostal
churches today assume an inner illumination from the Holy Spirit and a communitarian, autonomous, and regionalized ecclesiology. This allows for new dialogues with the local cultures, generating adaptation and differentiation in relation to the other churches. They involve a radicalness of living the gospel in the community and local environment, with only a few articulations on the national level or in relation to other churches. With this focus on local community action, the outward vision of these churches will take place in the perspective of mission as conversion and as persuading people to follow their particular postures. When they think about the state, it is not to interfere in public policies, but to make sure the state does not harm their daily activity as a corporation. Therefore, most of these churches do not have the prospect of working together with other churches in the region. The focus is on evangelization and the transformation of individuals.

AG Brazil was founded in 1911. One of the founders, Gunnar Vingren, published a basic text on its creed in 1919 in the periodical of the denomination (then Boa Semente, Good Seed; now Mensageiro da Paz, Messenger of Peace). In 1969, the official newspaper of the church began to print a “We Believe” summary statement with 16 short articles of faith and about 700 words. It was only in 2017, more than 100 years after its founding, that the denomination produced an official and more thorough document on doctrinal matters, called the Declaration of Faith of the Assemblies of God (Declaração de Fé das Assembleias de Deus). In this long-awaited version, the text has about 200 pages and expands the denominational creed. Thus we can see that this church is not governed by documents and declarations, and there is a primacy of biblical quotations to validate the arguments.

The characteristic of being decentralized, with conversionist aspects, makes the Pentecostal churches of Latin America a distinct church type. Because the institutions are not strong and there are prevailing parallel power structures, official documents, both external and internal, have little to say. In the case of AG Brazil, it is not a church governed by official documents and declarations. It is evident that there is no culture of documents or national guidelines for the conduct of work, leaving the focus of actions in local terms, in the so-called ministries, which are groups of churches led by the figure of the pastor-president. The pastor-presidents are the power centres of the denomination; they are able to decide on the use of resources and conduct the respective group of churches in a relatively autonomous way.

Furthermore, many churches in Europe, for example, retain a characteristic of territorial churches, to which one joins by birth and by infant baptism. On the other hand, in the Pentecostal churches of Latin America, belonging to a church
or a denomination is a decision made by adults in response to an invitation to belong to these churches, and with it, there is even rebaptism, since many of these churches do not accept infant baptism or baptism by sprinkling. Thus, in the Pentecostal churches there is a dynamic in the search for new members and growth that ultimately generates disputes with the other churches. Dialogue with them will not take place through documents and discussion tables with delegates, as they will hardly represent the heterogeneity of their churches. Using the proper language and knowing the history and modus operandi of these churches will be crucial so that TCTCV can have an adequate reception among Pentecostal churches.

**Mission and Diakonia: TCTCV Content and Pentecostal Ecclesiology**

As for the content of the document, especially chapter I, dealing with the mission of God and with evangelization, and chapter IV, “The Church: In and for the World,” there are many items that are valued by the Pentecostal churches. In the first place, we highlight the question of the missionary impetus that projects the Pentecostal churches into the world. From their Pentecostal experience, they embark on an intense program of spreading the news of the salvation of Christ Jesus to all peoples. This missionary characteristic has generated a strong activism and a sense of urgency in the churches for the proclamation of the gospel. Pentecostal churches go out into the world to evangelize, both locally and by sending missionaries abroad. In the second place, there is the *diakonia*, which has its own characteristics. It is again different from that of the other churches, in which the diakonia is organized through national departments and develops projects through professionals. In the Pentecostal churches, the service occurs in a dispersed way and is based upon the proactivity of its members. This decentralization of service and its broad capillarity turned the social action carried out by the Pentecostal churches into a strong element of assistance in the community in which they are inserted.

In the midst of the peripheries marked by urban violence and the absence of the state, Pentecostal churches play a role of reception and security for people. These churches cooperate for the restoration of families through austere social behaviour. For example, they help individuals escape alcoholism and drug addiction through community support in the temple and countless small recovery homes. Fed by the religious fervour expressed in the high frequency of their worship in the temples, several times a week, they cooperate to meet the needs of the individual as a person as well as a social subject. Their members carry out an intense activity of visitation in homes, hospitals, and prisons,
generating a complementary chain of care that is motivated by the gospel and the power of the Spirit.

Even without strong, organized structures of *diakonia*, these churches do intense and positive work in the whole national territory. We can affirm that the Pentecostal churches play an important role in social services dedicated to society, moved by the divine call and the mission of God. At the same time, it is probable that if this work were organized centrally and institutionally, it would not achieve the same results as those which are typically available to Pentecostal communities, which are driven by the religious element in Latin America. With this in mind, we do not apologize for improvisation, nor do we deny the importance of professionals in the area of *diakonia*. We are simply trying to map out the way of being of these churches and the impact they have had on the region.

There is a long process of self-criticism needed regarding the work of evangelization and social action performed by the Pentecostal churches to broaden their reach and power of transformation. They also need to be self-critical about their relationship with other religions, taking into account subjects like religious pluralism and choices regarding allegiance to political parties. As for the former, it is necessary to move from palliative help and maintenance to a criticism of the structures of oppression in view not only of Christian service but also of a profound social transformation. They need to think of better organizing this work so it will have a more equitable distribution and can be assessed more accurately through indicators.

With regard to the evangelization of other religious groups, especially the African and Afro-Brazilian religions, a new attitude is required that does not demonize the other but instead perceives all religions from their own salvific status and even as part of God’s plan: that is, religions as a response to a provocation made by God. Different religions as well as different cultures exist in the face of the diversity of God’s own creation and can be understood in their complementary aspect. In this way, the mission must be performed with respect and a desire to understand which elements of God are already present in cultures and other religions. Hence, the interreligious dialogue presents itself as a major challenge for the capture of the richness of God’s complete revelation.

As for the aspects related to political parties, because of their connection with ultraconservative agendas in terms of morality, Pentecostal churches, as well as most of the Brazilian religions, have been held hostage in recent decades. They have been captured by the manipulations of political games that have used sensitive themes of puritanical morality as a smokescreen to conceal the dehumanization of political and economic projects that degrade the environment and promote more inequality. Thus, the power projects, which ultimately prevail,
are those that oppose the precepts of the gospel of Jesus, which is justice, love, and peace. Here, too, we have a sector that needs deepened research and critical training for the coming years.

Questions and Answers for Further Reflection

How does TCTCV reflect a Pentecostal vision or understanding of the Church and its mission?

In a positive way, TCTCV reflects the challenge that the Pentecostal missiology is facing, which is to broaden its missionary perspective. Keys to more holistic biblical and theological readings—such as the “kingdom of God,” “God’s mission” (missio Dei), “care of creation,” “the mandate of the church,” and “participation in the divine work of healing the world”—are reflexions that are gaining more space in recent Pentecostal missiological publications. We are all in agreement with the statements of the paper on evangelization: “All churches share the task of evangelization” (§7) and “The Church’s mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ (cf. Mk. 16:15). Evangelization is thus one of the foremost tasks of the Church in obedience to the command of Jesus (cf. Matt. 28:18-20)” (§59). By stressing “in word and deed,” the document draws attention to the promotion of justice and peace as constitutive of evangelization. With this, evangelization does not run the risk of being corporate activism or of merely spiritualizing.

Where are the clear differences?

The missionary drive of the Pentecostal churches is not always properly understood. As these churches are relatively new and are passing identity processes of differentiation and definition of what belongs to their own character, they see the evangelization process as something extending to the whole world, that is, to those who do not belong to their particular movement. As a result, they often end up hassling members of other churches. At first, this may indicate that there is a lack of recognition of the other churches as the Church of Christ. Although there are some leaders who recognize this fact, I do not think that this position is what underlies the action of most of these churches. Motivated by the urgency of the missionary call of Jesus, Pentecostals have thrown themselves into an intense process of evangelization. The key to understanding this action lies not in delegitimizing the other but in the sense of the duty to share the faith. Thus, if we take the concept of proselytism without much thought, we might reduce all the proactive efforts of these churches to
those of cancelling the faith of others. In contrast, if we think of using the key granted by freedom or liberty, we may realize that, on the one hand, Pentecostals should be free to share their faith and invite anyone to experience Christ, and on the other hand, the listeners must have guaranteed their freedom to listen [or not to listen] to any speech. In this world of liberties, there is room for speech and for listening. The difficulty will be to respect the free response of the other as legitimate. So, the challenge for Pentecostal churches is not to talk less or to be less active in evangelization but to work critically on the reception of the other's response to their discourse. In addition, the Pentecostal churches need to broaden their notion of promoting justice and peace, making every effort to do so beyond mere words. On this, they have developed a *diakonia*, which is decentralized and is based upon the free initiative of their members. The positive point is that they have broad capillarity and reach countless people, which can also explain their robust growth. The negative side is the lack of a more integrated coordination in this action and of a better distribution of resources, since local initiatives do not always enjoy the resources necessary to fulfil their function. Belief in the baptism with the Holy Spirit as a supernatural empowerment by the Spirit has been a powerful tool in Pentecostal evangelism.

**From your perspective, what is missing from TCTCV?**

*TCTCV* proved to be a complete paper. Thinking about Latin America and the current ecclesial models marked by its expansive church attendance, I would like to have read something about how churches in other parts of the world deal effectively with the secularization process. In recent years, a growing number of people identify themselves as “unchurched.” This is a heterogeneous group who would have in common a formal non-attachment to an institutional church. Some even meet informally, but there are those who do not, under the pretext of living the faith incarnated in the world. In this sense, I believe that there was a lack of reflection on the new challenges to the mission and self-understanding of the Church (§7).
How can *TCTCV* expand a Pentecostal vision of the Church’s mission?

*TCTCV* plays an important role in relation to Pentecostal churches. In the first place, it helps the Pentecostal churches in the perception of the presence of other churches, which are equally interested in the mission and called by God for the service. The Church of Christ is greater than our institutions and takes place in history in various ways. To sit at one table with different churches is a fraternal invitation that enhances the fulfilment of our Christian vocation together. In the second place, and linked to the first, the document helps us to walk in unity and common witness and to build intentional bonds of fraternity and partnerships.

**Conclusion**

I conclude by pointing out that a proper understanding of Pentecostal churches as free churches, missionary and autochthonous institutions, is a challenge to thinking of the convergence of churches. In order to reach these churches, it is necessary to understand their language and to approach them by seeking joint works for the kingdom of God. Finally, thinking of the very conjuncture of the Pentecostal churches that are not governed by documents and declarations, I suggest that we may think of initiatives beyond official documents to establish paths of unity based upon the life and coexistence between and among churches.
The Mission of the Church from a Latin American Pentecostal Perspective and Experience

Regina de Cássia Fernandes Sanches

We understand as “Church” the community of those who gather around the name of Jesus Christ for their worship and service in various communities in the world which express their faith in varied and creative ways and which have their unity bond in Christ and the word that reveals him through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

The mission of the Church as understood from Latin America refers to its comprehensive and contextualized action in the world in correspondence with this statement of The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV): “The Church’s mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ (cf. Mk. 16:15)” (§59). Its basis and hope is the gospel of Christ, which, as it germinates and grows in every culture and life reality on the planet in the power of the Holy Spirit and from the specific conditions of each context, is a transformation force for the promotion of life. It is in this direction that we reflect on the Church’s mission from a Pentecostal perspective and from its experience.

The Pentecostal Identity

In the initial discussion about Pentecostal identity, it is necessary to define where the mission begins. Today, we speak of Pentecostalisms: this encompasses various doctrinal expressions, conceptions, and organizational forms of Pentecostal churches. There is historical and original Pentecostalism, rooted theologically in evangelicalism, Methodism, and the Holiness movement, which is the fastest-growing strand in Latin America. The other movements can
be called derivations, since they arose in pursuit of or under the influence of historical Pentecostalism, such as the movements of healing, charismatic and spiritual renewal, and so on. Each of these expressions carries doctrinal elements of origin reconfigured in the light of the Pentecostal experience.

As for the charismatic groups, in general they remained attached to the churches that originated from the historical Protestant denominations or from Catholicism. They preserve the doctrinal orientation and ecclesiastical organization of the confession to which they belong, sometimes reoriented by the Pentecostal experience.

The churches of the so-called spiritual renewal that took place in the 1960s stem mostly from historical evangelicalism or missionary Protestantism. Therefore, their theological/doctrinal origins are similar to those of historical Pentecostalism.

**Pentecostality**

An obstacle to understanding the Pentecostal perspective is the fact that there is, at least in the Latin American context, little theological production that clarifies the distinctions of Pentecostalism and their bases, aiming at an articulation of an ecclesiology corresponding to the movement in general. As a starting point, however, it is important to assume the evangelical marks of the original Pentecostalism, according to Darío López:

> More than two decades ago, reflecting on the identity of Latin American evangelicals, Samuel Escobar claimed that being evangelical “was a special way of being Protestant”.¹ In the light of this characterization, and without altering its meaning, it can also be said that being a Pentecostal is a special form of being evangelical.²

López adds, “It is like this because the Pentecostal churches of various backgrounds are evangelical both because of their doctrinal basis and historical heritage and because of a missionary dynamism and spiritual vitality.”³ Considering the evangelical origin of Pentecostalism is fundamental to understanding its thought and missionary practice.

The relevant aspect of Pentecostal identity is what Bernardo Campos calls the “Principle of Pentecostality.” He defines pentecostality as a principle and

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practice “shaped by the event of Pentecost” which cannot be seen with the claim to be absolute, closed in on itself, or, as he clarifies, “denying others the possibility to ground themself on it as well.” In the Pentecostal churches, it refers to the experience of the faith marked by the belief in the direct relation of continuity with the biblical event of Acts 2, as the founder of the effusive action of the Holy Spirit, in the form of baptism, manifestation of spiritual gifts, and outpouring of power upon the community of those who follow Jesus Christ. However, in this dialogue it is necessary to observe what guides the TCTCV on Pentecost as a founding event of the Church’s mission: “The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the morning of Pentecost for the purpose of equipping them to begin the mission entrusted to them (cf. Acts 2:1-41)” (§3).

Another identity factor is seen in current sociological studies: the correspondence of Pentecostalisms and popular religiosity of the regions of the world where they occur. This approximation seems to be due to the fact that Pentecostalism emerged among the poorer strata of societies and their characteristic forms of religiosity.

In view of such notes, being a Pentecostal is not simply aligning with certain theological currents or being part of Pentecostal denominations but believing and allowing oneself to experience the baptism in the Holy Spirit as a blessing after, or simultaneous with, conversion, marked by the outpouring of feelings, unspeakable joy and evidence or not, through glossolalia (this varies among Pentecostal churches). It also involves belief in the actuality of spiritual gifts and their pursuit after, or simultaneous to, the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit for the purpose of the edification of the body of Christ, the development of spirituality, and mission.

**Pentecostal Theology**

Mission is not understood apart from theology, for the former requires a praxis resulting from the latter. In Pentecostal theology, this means to assume pentecostality as the reference framework from which its hermeneutics is done, which in a sense conditions the way of seeing and interacting with the world and the scriptures. This means that it will be a pneumatological or pneumatic theology, which has its hermeneutical key in the work of the Holy Spirit. The work is understood not only doctrinally but also through experience with the power of the Spirit and in the expression of the charismas. In the case of Latin America, it also means assuming the place of socioeconomic vulnerability and
popular religiosity of the majority of those who are part of the movement as a theological locus from which faith is understood and lived.

The pneumatic experience

It is in this appropriation that we affirm that the Pentecostal hermeneutical axis is not exactly the pneumatology as an area of theology but the Holy Spirit powerfully manifested and with which one can have experiences. This is one of the most important and descriptive elements of Pentecostalism. This experience with the Holy Spirit is usually described in the form of orality, using characteristic narratives and symbolisms of religious language. We note that it also has a social function—that of empowering the faithful, enabling them to occupy new spaces in the ecclesial community. Pentecostal churches recognize the authority of one who demonstrates in the life of faith experience with the Holy Spirit ("anointing"), which is subjected not to the sphere of institutionalized power but to charismatic power. In Pentecostal churches, ecclesiastical offices are usually elected by designation or are family extensions; with them, the political power spaces in the community are filled. But the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit shows that it does not distinguish women from men, Blacks from whites, Latinos from Europeans; it also shows the ability to empower people by giving them an authority that sometimes exceeds institutionalized political power.

Another Pentecostal theological/doctrinal feature with rich meanings for the mission is that the “outpouring of the Spirit” is seen as an eschatological manifestation, because it has to do with the fulfillment of the divine promises for the last days (Joel 2:28,29) as a restorative experience of life. Potentially, this aspect of the nature of pneumatic experience establishes the need for Pentecostalism to correspond to the operating mode of the Holy Spirit as a means of transformation, sustenance, and renewal of life in the world in its most diverse spheres and expressions.

It is in this sense that the conception of the constant activity of the Holy Spirit, experienced by the faithful and their community, is more than a thematic area of Pentecostal thought: it is its hermeneutical key and potentially has missionary activity in the world.

For a Pentecostal pneumatology

If pneumatic experience provides the Pentecostal hermeneutical axis for both reality in general and sacred scripture, we must identify in the reality and in the scripture the action of the Holy Spirit in the perspective of the trinitarian economy and the kingdom of God. The Spirit acted powerfully in biblical and
ecclesiastic history as *Ruah*, *Pneuma*, *Paraclete*, life force and Church motor for mission, in deeds and testimony. In the scriptures it is the creative energy, the wisdom of God, the force of Israel, the power of the Messiah, and the one who moves the kingdom of God in the world. It is the comforter and mediator between humans and Christ that clarifies the gospel and makes the movement towards God and the life created by it.

It is in view of this nature of the Spirit’s action that we affirm that the Church’s mission in the Pentecostal perspective needs a pneumatological foundation to direct it in order to decentralize the pneumatic experience of the inner sphere of Christian communities and their cultic rites, deprivatizing it for the sake of a comprehensive and transformative action in the world. Also, this is necessary so that one can see, hermeneutically, where the Spirit acts beyond the communities themselves, sustaining life and promoting peace. Certainly, this is the necessary path for the ecumenicity of the Pentecostal churches and the fulfillment of their mission.

Latin American Pentecostal pneumatology should, for example, show how the Spirit acts in favour of life in this region of immense natural wealth but abused in its resources. It needs to clarify how the Spirit intervenes in the processes of impoverishment of the populations and of the destruction of God’s creatures.

The Church with its charismas is called to mission in the world, as pointed out by *TCTCV*: “The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world” (§58), partaking of God’s mission of liberation from a life imprisoned in various ways by sin and its grave consequences, as Moltmann points out: “Whoever asks the Holy Spirit to come to us, to our hearts, to our communion and to our land does not want to escape into heaven or to be carried away into the beyond, but has hope for his or her heart, for the group of his or her communion and for this earth.”

**The Church’s Mission in Pentecostal Perspective**

It cannot be denied that Pentecostalism, viewed from a broader concept of mission, has historically been a missionary force for the reinvigoration of Christianity in general. In the poorest part of the world it is the fastest-growing evangelical representation: “Finally, the Pentecostal movement is undoubtedly

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the fastest growing Christian Church, especially in Third World countries.\textsuperscript{6} This places it at the centre of the whirlwind of poverty where the mission needs to transform the sociohistorical situations, in this specific case, starting from the very presence of poverty and its experience. This is, originally, the distinctive mark of Pentecostalism, as Gouvêa de Mendonça points out:

actors who started the movement: they were black, like Seymour, women, like the evangelist Nelly Terry, and foreigners, like the Swedes Daniel Berg and Gunnar Vingren, and the Italian Luigi Francescon. These last three were the initiators of Pentecostalism in Brazil. It is not difficult to perceive that they were mainly lay and peripheral people in the Churches and in society, privileged victims of the social maladjustments.\textsuperscript{7}

Pentecostalism has also, in a sense, accomplished what \textit{TCTCV} points out for the mission of communion, both for the promotion of the Church’s life and for the reconciliation of the world (§1). Differing from the predominant racist tendencies at the time of its emergence, the movement showed itself to be multiracial and without social distinction. Alderi Matos adds that the meetings led by Seymour were open to diverse social groups and that the main criterion was the disposition for instrumentality by God:

A striking feature of these early meetings was their multiracial character, with the participation of blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians and European immigrants. Leadership was divided between blacks and whites, men and women. An article in the journal \textit{A Fé Apostólica} (The Apostolic Faith), founded by Seymour, stated in the November 1906 issue: “No instrument that God can use is rejected because of color, clothing, or lack of culture.” Another article reported that in an all-night worship service there were people of more than twenty nationalities. A common phrase at the time was that “the dividing color line had been washed away by blood.”\textsuperscript{8}

The origins of Pentecostalism are among groups deprived of power, making them in the various contexts where it occurred religious movements of the social bases. This aspect should be significant for the Pentecostal churches in their mission in the world, including for the construction of a missionary ecclesiology.

\textsuperscript{6} Moltmann, \textit{A Fonte de Vida}, 68.
\textsuperscript{7} Antonio Gouvêa Mendonça, \textit{Protestantes, Pentecostais & Ecumênicos} (São Paulo: Metodista, 2008), 135.
It is not a movement for the poor, but of and from them and their own condition. It is a church project that was born within the experience of poverty and exclusion. Azusa Street became not only a referential of the origins of the movement but of social liberation through pneumatic experience. It was in that modern framework of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit empowered descendants of slaves, women, and foreigners, meaning that social prejudices are the fruit of human sin without validation within the real faith guided by it.

Pentecostalism, being born within the poor masses, has become a space for social promotion, which is a distinctive missionary factor, according to Steuernagel:

> The Gospel consciously shared with the poor in the condition of the poor will avoid much of the tired polarization between evangelization and social action, which has characterized the contemporary evangelical world, as we have seen before. It will also help us to fight the capitalist mentality of the middle class that has so much marked the life of the evangelical churches in Latin America. And it will, not last, put us close to where most of the people live, not only in Latin America, but also in Asia and Africa.⁹

Another fundamental element, worship, as a theological locus of mission in the Pentecostal churches, is invariably lively, decentralized, and with great community participation through gestures, dances, testimonies, manifestations of spiritual gifts, eloquent preaching, and use of various instruments. The emphasis, in general, is not on doctrinal instruction guided by a rationality of faith but rather on the rapturous experience of the faithful with the Holy Spirit, accompanied by their narrative testimony (a common expression among them is “Count the blessing!”). It is a place of evangelization through preaching and performing miracles.

As for the reading of the Bible, it tends to be realized in the perspective of the one who suffers the damages of unjust societies, guided by theologies that are fatalistic and of high morality, resulting in the conception of an evil and lost world. However, the experience with the Holy Spirit, interpreted in an eschatological-futurist way, leads to another reality of time and place with access through ecstasy, trance, or spiritual exercises. Hope is no longer in this world, but in the future or in this other reality accessed through pneumatic experience, where all deprivation is overcome and life is full, far from the suffering

imposed by the world. The Pentecostal faithful only need to endure the sufferings of this world for the sake of the joys of the world to come, relieved by the charismatic experience that always remits, in some way, to a hope there in the future. This way of thinking, although very much in line with popular religiosities, has led Pentecostals to an isolation from the world and other evangelical communities and urgently needs to be revised by a Pentecostal missiology. It is necessary to understand that in Jesus Christ the kingdom, the reality there, is already present in the reality here and affects it, and that this can also pass through pneumatic experience.

Another theological point that needs to be worked on in Pentecostal theology, in correspondence to TCTCV, is Christology, which receives great emphasis in the text. In TCTCV, the mission is done for Christ’s sake, in him, for him, and because of the witness of the Church in the world. The pneumatological emphasis of Pentecostalism, in turn, sometimes obscures the role of Jesus Christ in faith and mission. Orlando Costas, a Costa Rican theologian, affirmed that the Spirit mediates between us and the trinitarian God, the work of Jesus Christ, and the other creatures of God. He reveals God to us and, therefore, Jesus Christ and his work by whom all things exist: “These characteristics appear as a continuum in the work of the Spirit. They show the Spirit as ‘the median and incessant dynamic communicato which operates on all the elements and processes of the material universe; it is the imminent presence of God.’”

Conclusion

From the perspective of Pentecostalism, a comprehensive and integrative mission needs to be studied, taking into account such historical, theological, social, and faith-based elements. It will hardly be a mission for the poor, but from them and from their experience of scarcity. The pneumatic experience must be valued, not as a force of alienation from reality but as a place of living it, of hope and empowerment of people for resistance to injustice and for its transformation. It is important that in this missio-pneumatology, the power of the Holy Spirit is understood together with its person and work, in view of Jesus Christ and for the sustenance of life in the world, as indicated by TCTCV: “The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry” (§1).

My tradition is Wesleyan Methodist, and the place where I live and think theologically is Latin America. The following pages attempt to share some ideas from this intellectual and geographic location to the document on which we are commenting, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*.

**Introduction**

As is often the case with consensus documents (after all, most of the documents of the Faith and Order Commission are such documents), they typically employ a theologically inclusive and general language. It could not be otherwise, because they seek to find a common level of opinion, a base that is accepted by all participants on which they can build. What could be considered a limitation is not always so, and in many cases, consensus documents express agreements and many points of view which actually unite the churches and often include points that were not previously considered.

In general terms, I believe that *TCTCV* is a good example. After many years of work and writing, and after many other documents were written and gave excellent background (I refer in particular to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*¹ and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*²), in my opinion we now have a text that expresses synthetically, a common place, where most ecclesiastical and

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theological traditions can feel well represented. This was achieved not by weakening the theology or avoiding deep theological thoughts but rather through a genuine expression of the theological thought of the member churches.

In paragraph 1, the document says, “The Church, as the body of Christ, acts by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his life-giving mission in prophetic and compassionate ministry and so participates in God’s work of healing a broken world.” This paragraph states that the Church participates in the healing work of God and that it does so in a “broken” world. Both emphases involved a consensus of today that 50 years ago would not have been as clear. Although today this seem somewhat credible, not all churches would agree that the Church in itself was an instrument of God’s work. For some, and this applies to Latin American Methodism and some other Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, the Church was considered to be an obstacle to the mission of God in the world. The true collaborator of God was the believer, the converted person, while the Church in a way was a necessary evil created by humans but without too much importance in the economy of the kingdom of God. Among theologians of my Church, the phrase “Jesus Christ came to announce the kingdom of God, and we human beings have built the Church” was common during the first half of the 20th century.

We can say something similar regarding the conception of the broken world. In certain traditions (in this case, not in my church), the world was understood as a place where you can find God and that through its paths you can find salvation. A famous religious song of the 1960s says, “The path of this world / will lead you with love, / to the Promised Land / where the Sun always shines.” And in another line, “And the meadows sing, the flowers sing, / with a harmonious voice, / and while the meadows and flowers sing, / I am happy thinking of God.” Certainly, this poem and song did not express a consensus in Catholic theology of its time, but its popularity highlighted that millions of Catholics (including some theologians in Latin America) understood that the world was a place for an encounter with God, not a place broken by sin and far from the original intention of the Creator.

Paragraph 7 says something that is particularly challenging for all the churches, but at the same time it is amazing for having arrived at a consensus:

Today the proclamation of the kingdom of God continues throughout the world within rapidly changing circumstances. Some developments are particularly challenging to the Church’s mission and self-understanding. The widely diffused awareness of religious pluralism challenges Christians to deepen their reflection about the relation between the proclamation that Jesus is the one and only Saviour of the world, on the one hand, and
the claims of other faiths, on the other. The development of means of communication challenges the churches to seek new ways to proclaim the Gospel and to establish and maintain Christian communities.

Again, it could sound strange to our ears to highlight these sentences, but the different traditions did not always accept that the “rapidly changing circumstances” would lead them to revisit their theology and practices, to consider their “self-understanding,” or to seek “new ways to proclaim the Gospel.” All of these concepts and ideas are truly a sound advance in convergence, if not agreement, and show a more mature understanding of the mission of the Church among the churches.

I could offer more examples, but I think that these two are good ones that demonstrate how far this document is not a new step but a point of arrival from which it will be possible to initiate a new chapter in the ecumenical dialogue.

Every Theological Statement Asks to Be Contextualized

Theological discourse (any theological discourse) walks between two realities. By nature, it will always be beyond the immediate context in which it arises. Theological realities are inevitably associated with a language that transcends the details of everyday life and even the immediate historical reality. It is in the pastoral task where the contextualization of the theological discourse is required and even demanded. Pastoral practice will always be a contextualization of the universal theological statements. To say this, which today sounds somewhat obvious, has taken many years of reflection in the contextual theologies of Latin America and other parts of the world, mainly the theologies engendered in the countries of the South. Perhaps at the first moment (some 60 years ago) when Christians from the South began to produce theology with different criteria and ideas than the classical North Atlantic theologies used, it was necessary to emphasize the immediate challenges and contextual situations. But today it is recognized that a true and deep theology is a discourse that puts into local and contextual language the truths that the Church accepts as claims for all Christianity.

I say this because a criticism that could be expected of brothers and sisters of the South, or from the so-called emerging churches, is that this document is too theoretical and impractical. It also uses high, technical language, which is difficult to understand for people working in the life of the Church in neighbourhoods and parishes. You will not find such comments in my chapter. I produce theology and work pastorally in Argentina; I also regularly travel throughout the extended
parish of Latin America, and in my opinion _TCTCV_ is a tool that is extremely rich in theological concepts, which must necessarily be adapted to the social and pastoral realities of our region. I have no doubt that it will be the same for each place where the Church is present, including in European and North American countries.

In my particular case, as I already mentioned, I have a double context of reference. On the one hand, it is my Methodist identity. Methodist theology places the mission of the Church in the first place. Later in this chapter, I will comment on what “mission” means in Methodist terms, but for now I want to say that it refers mainly to the responsibility of the Church in relation to what is outside the Church. In short, for Methodist theology, its ministers, liturgy, hymns, the offering, and so on find their meaning in the proclamation of the gospel to those who are outside the Church, to the “broken world,” in the words of _TCTCV_. This does not mean that for Methodists, the Church already possesses the gospel in full, but it does mean is that the Lord has called the Church in the first place to proclaim his salvation to everyone. The claim of John Wesley that “the world is my parish” is representative of this attitude. And when Wesley recommends not preaching in a room with fewer than 20 people, he is warning the preacher not to remain inside the chapel (where sometimes there were fewer than 20 people for the Sunday service) but to go out, preaching on corners and in parks, where the people are.

My second reference is the Latin American reality. For a long time, to be Methodist in Latin America meant to be opposed to and to confront the Catholic Church. There were times of theological and pastoral controversy in which it was more important to proclaim where we do not agree than to talk of those things that united us. Fortunately, this attitude was overcome long ago, and today it no longer exists in my Church and its theology. Documents such as _TCTCV_ are signs of how much has changed in the theological climate between Catholics and mainline Protestants in Latin America.

I mentioned the importance of this document for ecumenical Latin American theology. As I said, it is our task to put the words of _TCTCV_ in our words and its missionary statements in the context of our challenges and proper mission. It is also true that social emergencies and missionary demands often leave no time for this kind of task. But nobody can expect that documents (even those produced by each denomination) have to be contextual starting with their first draft; in any case, this is a mistake that we in Latin America must correct. Agencies such as the World Methodist Council produce documents to be read and discussed on Methodism around the world, and of course they must be contextualized in each place where the mission is carried out.
The Methodist Global Tradition on Mission

Usually, Methodists do not like to talk about tradition. Some Methodists will claim that Methodists have no tradition outside of the Bible. However, that is not the case. It is clear that there is no Christian expression or theological discourse that does not respond to a tradition in the history of the Church; to claim not to have a tradition is to ignore the very nature of the Church, which is built on a tradition, although different denominations will surely interpret the tradition in different ways.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement who created the basis of the Methodist Church, was a priest of the Anglican Church. He received his theological formation at the University of Oxford. He had a humanist education and at the same time studied with interest and reverence the works of the Fathers of the Church as well as liturgical and doctrinal traditions. In almost all his theological principles, he assumed the tenets of the Anglican Church and the value of the oldest Christian traditions. His contribution to theology and the Church should be found in the conception of the mission of the Church, not because he created a new theology but because he added a strong practical and concrete missionary impulse to the concepts of the mission expressed in the theology of his time.

I want to mention four points of his theology that Methodism still considers his hallmark. At the same time, I want to show the coincidence of these points with central ideas found in TCTCV.

A. The mission of the Church is directed to the whole of creation. John Wesley did not understand human beings as being separated from the whole of creation. And he considered that the salvation that Jesus Christ proclaims and offers is not limited to human beings but includes all his creatures. In his writings, Wesley speaks about care of the creation, the animals, the rivers, and the air. He thought that animals also had a place in God’s plan; for example, he specifically spoke of his horse; he saw that without his horse he could not visit cities and towns, preaching the gospel. He said that every Christian should observe animals that surround him or her and be responsible for them; that they have to be well treated; that one must feed them and not require from them more than they can support. He pointed out that if Genesis recounts in detail the creation of every aspect of reality, it is because the Lord has a purpose for each one of these areas. This led him to be conscious, in the 18th century, of the environmental problems that the world would face in the coming years. He was ahead of his time when he warned about how the people neglected God’s creation. He described the human being as “the shark of the creation” that eats and destroys everything. We read in TCTCV, “As a
divinely established communion, the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself. It is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom” (§13). This relationship between the humanity and all of creation is completely acceptable for Methodist theology.

B. The mission of the Church should be directed to any person. From a young age, Wesley realized that his church was locked within the walls of each temple. This made it difficult for the poor and illiterate to participate in masses and elaborate liturgies or to understand sophisticated theological truths. Although at the beginning it took great effort, eventually he managed to leave the temples or chapels and preach in the streets and open places. He had a significant experience in the colonies of North America when he went there to evangelize the “natives.” He showed a certain naivety, as he believed that American Indians would easily accept the gospel because they were people not stained by the problems of the European world (rationalism, the pursuit of profit, the destruction of the environment, and so on). At the same time, he thought that unlike Eastern peoples, who possessed solid religious systems such as Buddhism or Hinduism, or Islam in Arab countries, Native Americans (according to his idea) had only a very simple religion that could be replaced, without too much pressure, with the Christian faith.

C. Aside from this, Wesley felt that by the mere fact of being a human person, every individual had a need for salvation and the right for the gospel to be preached to him or her. It is important to point out that he also preached to Africans (in 18th-century England, which meant he spoke to slaves) as well as to their owners and proclaimed to the owners that they had to release their slaves because they were created by God as free people. It is clear to me that this attitude and conviction which is present in the Methodist tradition is also expressed in many paragraphs of TCTCV. Let me quote one: “It is God’s design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ” (§25). This mission of the Church is fulfilled by its members through the witness of their lives and, when possible, through the open proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. And then affirm: “The mission of the Church is to serve this purpose.”

D. The mission of the Church should also refer to the interior of the Church. Wesley said at one point: “I went to convert the natives, but who will convert me?” The idea that the Church needs to renew its faith and its commitment with God each day is present in his theology. That is the origin of the famous Sunday School, in which every believer during their lifetime should continue his or her training in the study of the Bible and the practice of prayer. It is far
from Methodist theology to think that any person who becomes a new Christian and moves from the old life to the new life is at that very moment a complete and finished Christian. The idea that the Church is already complete and finished is also alien to Methodist theology. TCTCV says it explicitly, and our Methodist tradition agrees with this claim: “The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization” (§33). The Holy Spirit is the principal agent in establishing the kingdom and in guiding the Church so that it can be a servant of God’s work in this process.

E. *Faith is a road*, and for the believer, the road of faith is a path that does not end as long as one lives. In this sense, the mission is not only to invite others to conversion; it has an element of humility when one recognizes the need for a permanent renovation of our faith. At the same time, it does not set hierarchies among believers; they are all on the same level. The person who has spent many years in the faith and the one who recently joined the Church have the same value and the same Christian responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

I wish to conclude this brief paper with a reflection on the future of TCTCV. Due to its characteristics, it will be studied and used in seminars, study groups, and conferences. Although anyone can read it, its purpose does not lie in its wide distribution among ordinary laity or those who do not have a formal theological education. The importance of TCTCV is that it will help readers to understand how close the different Christian traditions are and how through study, prayer, and mutual reading of the Scriptures, it is possible to overcome barriers that divide us. Today, thanks to documents like this, those barriers are much smaller than in the past. We pray that the Lord will continue knocking down obstacles to full communion among Christians.
SECTION THREE

Perspectives from Africa
CHAPTER TWENTY

Distinctive Elements of Ecclesiology in the African Context

Berhanu Ofgaa

Introduction

This chapter, which deals with perspectives on ecclesiology in the African context, is divided into four parts. The first part is an introduction to the topic. The second part attempts to provide a brief background of newly emerging churches, such as African Independent churches (AICs), in a contemporary African context. The third part deals with the major elements of these independent church ecclesiologies. The fourth part provides major conclusions on emerging African ecclesiology.

As is obvious, ecclesiology is the way we interpret and understand the doctrine of the Church or what it means to be church. Ecclesiology in the African context has its own uniqueness and peculiar characteristics. It differs from traditional Western ecclesiology, which is influenced by Catholicism—the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church concept. Ecclesiology in the African context is shaped by Protestant views of the Church, by the assembly of saints gathered around the word and sacrament, and by AICs’ teachings. The central doctrine of Reformed Protestant ecclesiology is based on the right ministry of sacraments and the right application of discipline. This reality implies that African ecclesiology is impacted by trends of Western Christianity. On the other hand, it is also true that African churches have rediscovered their identity and sense of belonging as a result of exposure to the impacts of the following three realities:

imported faiths, traditional belief systems, and reactions to colonial mission mentality. Since AICs are missionary churches, they lack clarity in ecclesiology when viewed from the perspective of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic understanding of the Church.

Regardless of these historical facts, churches are growing very fast in Africa. As current statistics show, among the 2.3 billion global Christian population, there are over 600 million Christians in Africa, of which about 176 million are Catholic and the rest are Protestants and Orthodox. This figure includes the newly emerging African churches like the Ethiopianist or nationalist churches, the Zionists or AICs, Classical Pentecostal denominations of both Western and Indigenous origins, and more recent Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

African perspectives on ecclesiology have their own uniqueness and peculiarities. One of their strengths is the centrality of Christ and the Bible. This does not imply that the Bible is not central for other ecclesiologies, but that every branch of the African church holds scripture as the supreme rule of faith and as central to its understanding of God’s revelation in Christ. Second, African ecclesiologies are mostly Christocentric, which means they affirm Jesus Christ as the centre of their confession. Some of them see Christ as they do African ancestors: as the centre, the point of departure. Based on this conviction, they attempt to provide biblical answers for both their heavenly needs, such as salvation and spiritual blessings, and their earthly needs, such as sickness, poverty, hunger, oppression, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits, and sorcery. In Pentecostal-type AICs, the experience of the Holy Spirit becomes an essential and perhaps the most important key.

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide insights that may contribute to further research in carrying out assessments of these realities. It also aims to enable theologians from non-African contexts to revisit their own perspectives

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and articulations of African church ecclesiology.\(^7\)

I would like to approach this topic primarily using a phenomenological research method, attempting to articulate what is there rather than what ought to be there. It will reflect a typology of perspectives, trends, contexts, and challenges.\(^8\) In light of this situation, this study will not adopt the traditional research methodology of accessing books and journals on the topic of our study. Since the expansion of emerging perspectives on ecclesiology in African theology is a relatively recent development, most researchers on this topic are still finding articulation in terms of narrative and testimony rather than in literature studies. Any attempt to arrive at the theological essence of what \textit{ecclesia} means in the African context must incorporate this fact into its search for sources and a relevant methodology. For this reason, useful information is mainly derived using an eclectic approach in which descriptive and narrative sources play a major role.\(^9\)

**Brief Background to Churches that Are Emerging in a Contemporary African Context**

Before dealing specifically with perspectives on ecclesiology in the African context, I find it relevant to provide a brief background for the newly emerging churches in contemporary Africa as a point of departure. Many scholars state that the definition of an emerging church, in general, is fluid and hard to define. Some scholars say that an emerging church is a Christian movement that crosses theological boundaries. Such churches began in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The adherents of this movement include former Protestant, post-Protestant, Evangelical, liberal, Reformed, and Charismatic Christians. These newly emerging churches can be found throughout the globe, predominantly

\(^7\) The excellent work done at some centres in the North, such as Oxford Centre for Missionary Studies in the UK, and the various GloPent initiatives and projects, does something to correct the imbalance. However, the general tendency in the North remains to present material which acknowledges the movement in the South, or discusses it as “missions,” for example, but does not originate from the experience of those who have lived in and known only the South all of their lives. There is also considerable interest in Pentecostalism imported from the South by diaspora groups.

\(^8\) Mwambazambi, “A Missiological Reflection on African Ecclesiology.”

\(^9\) See Japie Jimmy LaPoorta, \textit{Unity or Division? The Unity Struggle of the Black Churches within the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa} (Kuils River: J. J. Lapoorta, 1997), as an example of such Pentecostal narrative approaches.
in North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. The term “emerging church” has also been used to describe a broad controversial movement that seeks to use culturally sensitive approaches to reach the postmodern mentalities and unchurched population with the Christian message. As some scholars state, this has been seen as a major grassroots movement among both the laity and the clergy in the mainline or old mainline Protestant denominations over the past 20 years.

There are numerous emerging churches in the present African context. In my nation of Ethiopia alone, there are over 1,000 officially registered Evangelical denominations that do not find themselves in The Church: Towards a Common Vision. Some of these denominations are locally organized into the fellowship of Ethiopian Evangelical Churches. In this brief study, I would like to provide profiles of the most popular ones.

The Zionist Churches

The Zionist churches trace their origin from two different places. First is the claim that their origin was from Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion City, near Chicago, in the United States. According to this view, in the early 1900s, Zionist missionaries went to South Africa from the US and established congregations. They emphasized divine healing, abstention from eating pork, and the wearing of white robes. The Zionist missionaries were followed by Pentecostal ones, whose teaching was concentrated on spiritual gifts and baptism in the Holy Spirit, with speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of this phenomenon. Some of these early Zion churches embraced the Pentecostal message. Second is the claim that Thomas Oduro has made: that the Zionist churches originated in South Africa in 1924. These were true Zionist AICs.

Aladura Pentecostal churches

Aladura Pentecostal churches were originally started in the western region of Nigeria. They rely on the power of prayer and all the effects of the baptism of

11. See Slick, “What Is the Emerging Church?”
the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{14} They reject infant baptism and all forms of medicine, whether Western or traditional. As a result, they initiated the Prayer Band, popularly called \textit{Egbe Aladura}. The Aladura began as a renewal movement in search of true spirituality.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{African Independent Churches}

African Independent Churches are otherwise known as African Instituted Churches or African Indigenous Churches. These churches represent over 10,000 independent Christian denominations in Africa. AICs are found in every region and country in Africa and are more adequately documented in West and Southern Africa. Even though the denominational, ritual, and linguistic diversity of these churches makes it difficult to analyze and classify them, the common thread uniting these churches is that they were all established by African initiative rather than by foreign missionary agendas.\textsuperscript{16}

Several major factors characterize these churches.

- First, they are a form of protest against European colonial rule and missionary control, replacing these with African self-expression.
- Second, most of them were inspired by their key charismatic leaders.
- Third, some of them broke away from the mainline historic churches to have the freedom to exercise their charismatic gifts, because the manifestations of these gifts were not accepted in the mainline churches.
- Fourth, some simply rebelled against an overtly Eurocentric type of Christianity and sought to indigenize Christianity and express it in African terms.
- Fifth, the translation of the Bible into the mother tongues of various African ethnic groups has also contributed greatly to this development.\textsuperscript{17}

It is also true that most AICs are syncretistic: that is, they mix Christian

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  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ezekiel and Keum, \textit{From Achimota to Arusha}, 76.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} “African Independent Churches (Religious Movement),” What When How website.
beliefs with traditional African customs and cosmology.\textsuperscript{18} This reality has great impact on their ecclesiological perspectives. Such churches are the fastest-growing churches in Africa today.\textsuperscript{19}

**Major Elements of African Independent Churches’ Ecclesiology**

Several factors define African Independent Churches. First, they view themselves as “a place to feel at home.” Since Western missionaries largely have a negative view about African culture, most Africans are not comfortable with the gospel dressed in European garments. As a result, the AICs protest the verbal and cerebral mode which puts Western Christianity beyond the reach of people’s comprehension and experience. Instead, the AICs offer a celebrative religion, making considerable use of contextual symbols, music, and dance. The AICs contextualize Christianity from below. As a result, their sermons are deeply rooted in African primal culture and are tailored to respond to the demands of their adherents. They are concerned with responding to the issues raised by the African worldview that entertains a strong belief in malevolent spirits, witches, and wizards.\textsuperscript{20}

Second, AICs often base their experiences on visions and dreams. To illustrate this fact, I would like to raise the case of Prophetess Mary Omotara Audifferen of Nigeria, who went on a spiritual pilgrimage. She said, “I met Jesus Christ, heard the voice of God, saw the Garden of Eden and heard the music of angels.”\textsuperscript{21} In this strange spiritual experience, she notes:

I came face to face with Jesus Christ in His human appearance. I did not see God, but I heard a voice telling me that I should not bother about seeing God. He is only the person one can never see. In Paradise, I saw myself with a wing just like the angels. There was something like a film that the angels spoke to me.\textsuperscript{22}

In most AICs, there are stories of this kind.\textsuperscript{23} Such strange visions claimed by prophets and prophetesses are the source of spiritual experience in most AICs.


\textsuperscript{19} Pobee, “African Instituted (Independent) Churches.”

\textsuperscript{20} Pobee, “African Instituted (Independent) Churches.”


\textsuperscript{22} Olowola, “An Introduction to Independent African Churches.”

\textsuperscript{23} Olowola, “An Introduction to Independent African Churches.”
It is also through these visions that they claim to have powers to heal. The theology of these churches is based on these and similar spiritual experiences. Theology is an introduction to independent African churches. In this religious experience, dreams and visions are important; they are viewed or treated as media of God's revelation. The penchant for such visitations reflects the mysticism of the AICs as experiences of the divine on earth.

The third factor defining the AICs as well as most Pentecostal churches is the spontaneity of worship incorporated with signs and wonders. In these churches, unlike many Western churches, worship is spontaneous and expressive. It is not liturgical and cognitive. Spontaneity in worship is the hallmark of the AICs. Their worship is vibrant and fascinating, full of lively African music, clapping of hands, and dancing, which facilitates the active participation of members. Most of the songs employ traditional lyrics, which are usually spontaneous compositions that are accompanied by traditional musical instruments. Signs and wonders are effected by praying and the laying on of hands. Most of them stress fasting during their healing process. They also practise anointing with oil, ritual bathing, and the drinking of blessed water. Most of them practise exorcism of evil spirits and cure confessed witches. Indeed, exorcism is closely associated with healing, since there is a strong belief among most Africans that mishaps, evil, and ailments are caused by evil forces like witches and demons. In most Western churches, such problems are handled medically.

The fourth factor defining these churches is an emphasis on Christ and the Holy Spirit. While Western churches emphasize Christ, the AICs make the Holy Spirit the focus of their belief and practice. Though they firmly believe in the person of Jesus Christ, they appear to feel more at home with the Holy Spirit, especially since they believe that Christ has ascended into heaven. This affirmation of the Holy Spirit does not just emphasize sanctification, as in Methodism; it also points to the Spirit as power manifested in healing, exorcism, glossolalia, and mission. This special emphasis on the Spirit confuses the difference of understanding of the spirit in traditional African religious epistemology and ontology and the Spirit as the promise Christ granted to send his followers.

The fifth factor defining these churches is the emphasis on the Bible. The AICs emphasize radically the biblicist movement. Based on the Protestant claim that the Bible is an open book for personal reading, the AICs especially apply

26. Olowola, “An Introduction to Independent African Churches.” Editor’s note: Many of these same manifestations are also characteristic of Pentecostal churches.
this to everyday experience of the people, which sometimes leads to individual interpretations. For instance, in Southern Africa during apartheid, the biblical stories on the bondage of Israel held special relevance regarding the oppression of Black people. The Old Testament accounts of polygamy have also been used for the defence of polygamous practice.27

The sixth factor defining these churches is the issue of leadership. Thorough examination of the theology of AICs’ view of leadership shows that it gives special attention to African messianism. Based on this view, too often the charismatic leaders enjoy a position of ambiguity. They compete with that of Christ. Such leaders are often called prophet, Black Messiah, visionary, president, and initiator. There are also some who “rejected any claim to personal divinity and proclaimed themselves as messengers of God and liberator of Black people.”28

The seventh factor defining these churches is the rejection of the stamp of individualism that goes against the ethos of the communal life of African societies.29

Final Remarks on Emerging African Perspectives on Ecclesiology

As the above assessment of the major ecclesiological distinctiveness of the AICs shows, several of these churches hold ecclesiological positions that have been adapted from constructions of explicit Afrocentric concepts of the Christian faith. As a result, their African ecclesiology has been perceived as the key social, political, educational, and organizational instruments of the collective and communitarian experience of African people.30 Since many historic churches have often been suspicious of AICs, considering their African emphases as trends towards the heathenization of Christianity, it is not surprising that these AICs have rarely found a place in the ecumenical movement. As a result, the World Council of Churches (WCC) currently includes only a few of them.31

As a result of this reality, some of these churches are organized into local fellowships. In South Africa, the Interdenominational National Ministers have sought to bring together ministers of historic churches with those of AICs. However, there are some notable obstacles. Many AIC leaders are unable to

participate in the business of regional ecumenical bodies because of the language used (English or French). On the other hand, AIC leaders complain that they are seldom elected for executive positions in these bodies. Ecumenism for AICs is based on a different model: the masses of people who unite in prayer, rather than the institutional leaders. Ecumenical relations between historic churches and AICs are thus largely limited to cooperation in specific ventures.  

In a similar manner, AICs have made efforts to create their own ecumenical networks. For instance, in Zimbabwe in 1972, independent churches created the ecumenical movement of Zimbabwean independent churches known as Fambidzano (a cooperative of Black–Shona churches). These churches train their pastors through theological education by extension programs. In a similar way, in 1978, the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) was founded in Cairo and registered in Kenya as an international organization. The OAIC works through seven regions, with its headquarters in Nairobi. The regions are represented in the governing body and the general assembly. The OAIC has four programs: theological education by extension, participatory development, women’s issues, and research and communication services. The OAIC is an associate member of the All Africa Conference of Churches and is working towards establishing a relationship with the WCC.

In general, in the African context, ecclesiological method begins with African existential experiences, not historic facts, and is often born of abstract philosophical musings, which do not recognize the allegedly speculative trinitarian formulation of the historic church. Therefore, as the adherents of this trend do not live in harmony and mutuality, keeping their interdependence with other missionary churches throughout the world, it requires close attention and further elaborative effort to include such churches in ecumenical forums like the WCC.

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Introduction

When Christians ask about vocation (or calling), it usually means, “Is God calling me to a particular job, profession, or type of work in his vineyard?” This is a significant question because the work we do is important to God.

In the Bible, God does indeed call people—some people, at least—to particular work and gives all people various kinds of guidance for their work. Although scripture seldom uses the word “call” to describe God’s guidance to jobs, occupations, or tasks, these occurrences in the Bible do correspond to what we usually mean by a vocational calling. So, as a preliminary answer, we can say “yes,” God does lead people to particular jobs, occupations, and types of work.

But in the Bible, the concept of calling goes deeper than any one aspect of life, such as work. God calls people to become united with himself in every aspect of life. This can only occur as a response to Christ’s call to follow him. The calling to follow Christ lies at the root of every other calling. It is important, however, not to confuse a calling to follow Christ with a calling to become a professional church worker. People in every walk of life are called to follow Christ with equal depth, commitment, and dedication. As The Church Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) underlines, the whole people of God is called to be “a priestly people, offering the sacrifice of a life lived in discipleship” (§19).

Thus, this chapter will describe how our church, The Church of the Lord (Prayer Fellowship) Worldwide (TCLPFW), approaches the issue of vocation and calling, both in its theology and in its practice.
Sometimes a person may feel clear that God is calling him or her to ordained ministry; at other times, he or she may still be unsure. In any case, all such persons should have been worshiping regularly in a home parish of our denomination for at least one year, long enough to be known by the minister(s) in-charge and other church members (elders of the church).

The minister in-charge may then send such a person to see the director of studies or dean of Aladura Theological Institute. They are there to help the person explore his or her sense of call. They will want to hear his or her own personal sense of being called and will also talk with that person about the call of the church. It is important that prospective students of Aladura Theological Institute are informed and realistic about the joys and challenges of ordained ministry and that other people can hear and recognize God’s call in that person’s life.

Ordained ministry is rigorous and requires deep searching as well as courage and patience. An interview will then be conducted for prospective students, which will be followed by counselling.

After a number of interviews with the authorities of the institute, the candidate(s) will be interviewed by the Board of Education before the final decision will be made either to admit the student(s) or not.

Following the approval of the Board of Education, an ordinand (a person who is being trained to be ordained as a priest or minister) will be trained for one, two, or three years, either full-time or part-time, depending on age, qualification, prior learning, and experience in church work as a lay officer. It is important to discuss options carefully with the principal of the institute.

### Conditions for Admission

Aladura Theological Institute (ATT) is an institution of TCLPFW.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” (1 Cor. 1:18-19)

. . . we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

God has called us into communion in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:19; 1 John
This calling and gift of communion grants us responsibilities for our common heritage and life before God to do his good will and live a life that is pleasing unto him as a community of discipleship (TCTCV§2).

The work of the Institute is designed to offer professional training for priests, pastors, evangelists, and those engaged in various forms of Christian educational work.

ATI seeks to equip these leaders with skills which will make them effective in their service of the word through the life of the churches and denominations.

ATI recognizes other agencies. However, transfer credit is determined by the institute alone. One can never be too young to be called by God. Many people can trace their earliest sense of calling to their childhood or teenage years.

**Aladura Discipleship Ministries**

The Discipleship Ministries of TCLPFW serve those called to serve Christ Jesus and his Church through legal ordination to the holy priesthood.

All persons seeking universal and apostolic succession and ordination into a Holy Spirit–empowered priesthood and apostolic ministry of Jesus Christ in TCLPFW must be able to show that they are called and able to serve the people of God faithfully.

The Church of the Lord Discipleship Ministries serves those in the body of Jesus Christ and those called to serve Jesus Christ in the priesthood.

TCLPFW Discipleship Ministries holds the holy scriptures and the traditions of the one, holy, universal and apostolic Church as means by which the teachings of Jesus Christ have been handed down to his followers and as the recording of the faith journey of the Church.

The offices of cardinals, archbishops, bishops, archdeacons, senior prophets, and so on within the TCLPFW Christian Discipleship Ministries exist for the service of the faithful in providing them with spiritual guidance and support as well as in the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments and other functions pertaining to those ordained to holy orders.

All those who sincerely wish to join with TCLPFW Discipleship Ministries as followers of Jesus Christ are welcome to share and participate fully in our liturgies, sacraments, and other expressions of our mystical union with God.
The Tenets of The Church of the Lord (Prayer Fellowship) Worldwide

TCLPFW is conscious of her mission to spread the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ to every corner of the world and live as witnesses of the kingdom of God (\textit{TCTCV} §20). The cross of Christ Jesus is our guide. TCLPFW is a covenant church revealed from above. The solid foundation of the church is laid on love, faith, and hope. Every adherent of the church is enjoined to abide and practise these virtues.

The theology of TCLPFW is based on the scriptures, natural law, and divine revelation (“The Lord says”) as interpreted authoritatively by the Supreme Council of Prelates, which is also known as the Council of Bishops. TCLPFW is manifested in its six tenets, which can be described as:

a) Pentecostal in power

b) Biblical in pattern

c) Evangelical in mission

d) Prophetic in ministry

e) Social in responsibility

f) Ecumenical in outlook

\begin{itemize}
\item **Biblical in pattern** in the sense that in all matters of faith, conduct, doctrine, rituals, character, and discussions, our Supreme Court of Appeal is the Holy Bible. Thus, the Holy Bible is our spiritual constitution.

\item **Pentecostal in power** in the sense that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ is the administrator of the church through which the church is guided, directed, filled, influenced, administered, and managed. Our power of attorney is “in Jesus’ name.”

\item **Evangelical in mission** in the sense that we carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, and we preach the good news to all, irrespective of background, race, or gender. Matthew 28:19-20 says: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

\end{itemize}

\footnote{1. Rufus Okikiola Oluibiyi Ositelu, “African Independent and Pentecostal Approaches to Theology and Development,” Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany, 24-27 May 2017.}
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- **Prophetic in ministry** in the sense that God endowed the founder of the church and promised to endow all that will follow him with prophetic virtue for the benefit of humanity. This is the genesis and the pillar on which TCLPFW is anchored. The gifts of prophecy, dreams, visions, revelation, speaking in tongues, healings, signs and wonders, teaching and administration, and so on are bestowed on the church. On outpouring of the Spirit, the Lord said: “Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28-29).

- **Social in responsibility** in the sense that the church believes it should be a blessing to the community where the church is situated and the inhabitants of the state in general. We therefore endeavour to provide social amenities through the NGO of the church: Justice, Equity, Peace and Empowerment Foundation (JEPEF).

- **Ecumenical in outlook** in the sense that we embrace and encourage brotherly and sisterly love among the believers, and we do not forsake the saints, for the prayer of the High Priest—our Lord Jesus Christ—for the Church is “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). We believe in unity in diversity and share in fellowship, unity in the bond of peace with all believers who worship and serve Jesus Christ as Lord, Saviour, and Redeemer. We are told in 1 Corinthians that “just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:12-13). And our Lord Christ Jesus said in John 17:20-21: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

We believe that God’s revelation, in and through Jesus Christ and in addition to being present in the sacramental life of the church, also has a personal or individual aspect. We thus believe that understanding the divine comes from our
personal encounter with God through prayer, meditation, etc. We strive to form a community of faith with love, devotion, and abandonment to God in and through Jesus Christ as our foundation.

Go and make disciples of every nation: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Ordained Ministry in TCLPFW

In the sacred Tradition of the universal Church, all ministries of the body of Christ, both the leadership and followers, are important for the people of God. As TCTCV (§51) emphasizes, we all minister in collaboration with one another. Lay church officers and ordained priests serve the church through the sacrament of holy orders. They minister as the hierarchy of the church by virtue of their ordination and exercise the hierarchical gifts proper to them.

Laypersons, who include reverend-canons, reverends, pastors, evangelists, deacons, deaconesses, exemplary elders (male and female), and vowed religious sisters and brothers, are called to serve the church by the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, eucharist, and ordination. They exercise the charismatic gifts of the Spirit in various ministries to build up the body of Christ for the common good of all.

Some are employed or volunteer at their parishes. Others who are specifically educated, appointed, and installed in a ministry are designated lay ecclesial ministers to distinguish them from hierarchical ordained clergy. Only ministers of religion preside “in the person of Christ,” the head of the body of Christ, for all members of the body of Christ. Bishops and priests share in the ministry of teaching, governing, and sanctifying in their dioceses and parishes. Lay ministers serve in liturgical capacities at the pulpit and the altar as well as performing charitable works in their parish and community as directed by the ordained minister in-charge of such diocese or parish.

Liturgies and sacraments are proper to the hierarchy of the church; these ministries are ordained to the deacon, priest, and bishop. This is their sacramental identity for the good order of the church.
Discipleship and Ordination of Men and Women in TCLPFW

God is calling a great diversity of people to many different roles. God calls each person to become their unique self in Christ and often to take on specific tasks, jobs, or ministries. This calling is what we describe as “vocation,” the call to follow Jesus in a specific way of life in a particular context. This call is developed through a prayerful relationship with God, through Christian experience, and through those who discern and encourage the others. For a growing church, all Christians should be encouraged and supported in discerning that to which God is calling them. To this end, Growing Vocations is about enabling a culture where calling is nurtured and celebrated.

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church as the body of Christ also discerns what is needed to be an effective participant in the mission of God in the world (see also TCTCV §18-20). Our licensed, authorized ordained, and lay ministers are a vital expression of the vocation of the church. They are our workers who will gather in the plentiful harvest.

To understand how to prioritize our efforts and allocate resources, we aspire to this outcome, keeping in mind that it is God who calls, and we cannot recruit those who are not called. We can only remove barriers for those who are.

God wants each of us to be the person he has called us to be. For some, that message is a call to serve in his church in one of a variety of ways.

The church abhors, in all of its ramifications, membership in any secret society or cult.

Female Priesthood

The ordination of women to priestly office is a regular practice among some major religious groups at the present time, as it was of several religions of antiquity. It remains a controversial issue in certain religions or denominations where ordination, the process by which a person is consecrated and set apart for the administration of various religious rites, or where the role that an ordained person fulfills, has traditionally been restricted to men. That traditional restriction might have been due to cultural prohibitions, theological doctrine, or both. In some cases, women have been permitted to be ordained but not to hold higher positions, such as that of bishop in many of the mission churches. Where laws prohibit sex discrimination in employment, exceptions are often made for religious organizations.

The debate on female priesthood is still ongoing, especially among the mission churches. Even those who have come to terms with female priesthood
are still debating whether women should be allowed to hold higher positions, such as bishop or archbishop.

In contrast, according to the founder of TCLPFW, both males and females are called into the priesthood in TCLPFW. The church that was founded in 1925 ordained her first female priests in 1937. Therefore, the female ministers in TCLPFW are at par with their male counterparts.

**Ordination of Women in TCLPFW**

Since some of the mission churches have decided to ordain women and some are still discussing the ordination of women, TCLPFW has from its inception been ordaining women in the church. This is so because the man of God who founded and was the first primate of the church in 1925, Prophet General Dr. Josiah Olunowo Ositelu, said that God instructed him that both men and women were being called into the vineyard; therefore, both men and women were to be ordained to minister unto him. For instance, Rev. Mother Juliana Ajoke Ositelu was elevated as a bishop in 1964. She was elevated to the rank of archbishop (Rev. Mother Superior) in 1976 and was finally elevated to the rank of cardinal (Rev. Mother General) in 1992.

**Ministerial Structure**

For every male rank in TCLPFW, there is an equivalent female rank:

- Primate / General Overseer
- Cardinal / Apostle General / Rev. Mother General
- Archbishop / Apostle / Rev. Mother Superior
- Bishop / Rev. Mother
- Venerable / Archdeacon / Archdeaconess
- Senior Prophet / Prophetess
- Prophet / Prophetess Grade-I
- Prophet / Prophetess Grade-II
- Probational Minister
- Disciple / Seminarian

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2. Olubiyi, “African Independent and Pentecostal Approaches to Theology and Development.”
At the time of writing (Spring 2018), TCLPFW has produced 11 female archbishops and one female cardinal. I would contend that this makes TCLPFW the foremost female-friendly church in the Christian world. To God alone be the glory!

Thus, as can be seen from the above, TCLPFW includes a substantial ranking of participants who lead, and it has a multilevel network of people who serve in the ministry, church administration, and discipleship formation, including both men and women, and deriving from the tenets of the church. While the titles used on some of these rankings or structures may be different from those used by other churches, there are also various elements that are common. It is hoped that the above description of TCLPFW is a contribution towards showing an African perspective on discipleship and ordained ministry, as a step along the way of the ecumenical pilgrimage towards a global vision of the Church.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Discipleship and Ordained Ministry in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Christian Tsekpoe

Introduction

The growth and expansion of Christianity in Africa is evident in different forms. Besides demographic research, the visible presence of people who troop to church on Sunday mornings and on weekdays corroborates this assertion. Furthermore, the numerous church buildings, billboards, posters, and electronic and social media platforms that publicize church services, prayer meetings, and other Christian activities within the continent are evidence that Africa has indeed become a heartland of Christian vitality. 1 What is not so clear is the extent to which these large numbers of people who go to church are being transformed into disciples of Christ. Although it could be a daunting task to measure the extent to which discipleship is taking place in the churches, discipleship activities can be evaluated as evidence of the churches’ discipleship efforts in Africa.

There is a growing awareness of the understanding that evangelism must not be reduced to preaching the gospel and bringing large numbers of converts into church buildings. It must embrace all that will make the good news profitable to the converts and the communities in which they live. Thus, the urgent need for the churches in Africa to intensify discipleship intentionally, recognizing it as the core mandate of the Christian vocation, is now being felt and practised by some

African churches. As The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV) states, the Church is to be a community of discipleship (§2) and hence disciple-making is at the core of its mission.

This chapter is an attempt to explore current discipleship structures within one such African church, the Church of Pentecost, which has its headquarters in Ghana and has branches in 135 nations globally.² The chapter will describe how ordained ministers and ordained lay leaders use these structures to disciple church members to achieve what they believe to be God’s purpose for discipleship.

**Ordained Ministry in the Church of Pentecost**

Although the Church of Pentecost is grouped among the Classical Pentecostal Churches in Ghana, together with the Assemblies of God, Christ Apostolic Church, and the Apostolic Church, some scholars tend to describe it as an Indigenous Ghanaian Classical Pentecostal church for various reasons, including the fact that it has acquired a certain Indigenous character that makes it different from other Classical Pentecostal churches in Ghana.³ The Indigenous character of the Church of Pentecost is evident in various practices of the church, including the vernacularization of liturgy, the use of Indigenous Ghanaian songs, costumes, and dance forms, and, more importantly, Indigenous appellations in praising God at church. These appellations have been described as self-theologies of the Ghanaian people.⁴ For example, the popular Ghanaian woman known as Afua Kuma, who uses Ghanaian traditional religious praise in

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Discipleship and Ordained Ministry in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

...poetic forms to praise God at church, was a member of the Church of Pentecost.\(^5\) Her prayers and praises became a model in the Church of Pentecost that was a major primary source for what Kwame Bediako called “grassroots” theology in Ghanaian Christianity.\(^6\)

Despite its Indigenous character, the Church of Pentecost (like the Apostolic Church – UK, from which it emerged) believes that ministerial gifts such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers still exist today and that they were given to the Church to equip the saints for the work of ministry, including discipleship (Eph. 4:11–13). As *TCTCV* also states, “strengthened by the Spirit, Christians are called to live out their discipleship in a variety of forms of service” (§18). The Church of Pentecost also believes in the priesthood of all believers and as such depends heavily on the ministry of lay leaders (a topic not adequately addressed in *TCTCV*, which focuses almost exclusively on ordained ministry) for evangelism, church planting, and discipleship of church members. Although women are not ordained into full-time ministry in the Church of Pentecost, they are ordained as deaconesses and given various lay leadership responsibilities in the church.

The Church of Pentecost has a central administrative structure governed by a 15-member executive council which is accountable to the general council. Administration is, however, decentralized to the area level, headed by an area head, who is normally an apostle or a prophet and, in some cases, a mature evangelist or pastor. This is further decentralized to district levels, headed by a district pastor, and finally decentralized to the local congregation, headed by a presiding elder. The presiding elder works with a local presbytery, the district pastor works with a district presbytery, and the area head works with an area presbytery.\(^7\)

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5. Afua Kuma was an illiterate Ghanaian woman. Her real name was Christina Afua Gyan, but she was commonly known as Afua Kuma. She was a native of the forest town of Obo-Kwahu on the Kwahu Mountain ridge in the eastern region of Ghana. She was a peasant farmer and also practised as a traditional midwife. Although her prayers and praises of Jesus were in her mother tongue, the Akan language, they have been translated into English by Rev. Fr John Kirby to give the reader a good indication of their depth of Christian experience conveyed in the thought-forms and categories of the Akan worldview in her rural setting.


7. An area in the Church of Pentecost is made up of administrative districts (usually between 8 and 30). A district can consist of two or more local congregations (usually referred to as local assemblies). In a few exceptional cases, a district is only one local assembly. An assembly is normally headed by a presiding elder supported by other elders as well as deacons and deaconesses.
Disciple making takes place at all levels of its administrative structure. The Church of Pentecost believes that the responsibility of the ordained ministry is “to equip [God’s people] for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). Though ministers may be involved in other useful ministerial activities, their core mandate is expected to be disciple making. From this understanding, their first responsibility as disciple makers is to be authentic disciples themselves. It is expected that as the minister abides in Christ, the fruit will be evident for others to behold (Matt. 7:16–20; John 15:5). The beauty of these fruits will speak louder than the words of the minister and will attract many to seek the source, who is Jesus Christ.

The minister’s key responsibility in the discipleship process is that of mentoring, training, and developing other leaders. The minister, together with the local presbytery, carefully selects faithful, available, teachable people who are to lead the discipleship groups. The minister is expected to invest himself in these leaders so they can in turn disciple the members of the groups and serve as models of Christlikeness to the people they lead. The training of these leaders normally takes place during a weekly or monthly training session, called preparatory classes.

Again, the minister is expected to transmit the discipleship vision to the local assemblies under his leadership and help the church members understand their role as partners in the discipleship agenda (Eph. 2:10). As TCTCV highlights, the whole people of God (not just the ordained) is called to be “a priestly people, offering the sacrifice of a life lived in discipleship” (§19).

Also, the minister is expected to creatively implement the discipleship structures in the local assemblies to provide new converts with every opportunity to grow into Christlikeness. The pastor also has the responsibility for creating an accountability system where he meets regularly with the lay leaders of the various discipleship groupings for prayer, fellowship, feedback, and further training.8

**Discipleship Structures in the Church of Pentecost**

From its inception, evangelism has been part of the church’s core values. Although discipleship has also been part of its evangelistic approach, this has not been formally absorbed into the church’s administrative structure. Discipleship was carried out as mentorship or, more appropriately, as

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8. Personal conversation on 13 January 2018 with Apostle Samuel Gakpetor, national coordinator for discipleship and leadership development in the Church of Pentecost.
Discipleship and Ordained Ministry in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Thus, mature members were expected to train and mentor younger ones in Christlike living and personal commitment and devotion to God and church. This was carried out through personal relationships, interactions, church meetings, and conventions. Indeed, this resonates with the Church of Pentecost’s general understanding of discipleship, which is “the process of helping to produce Christlike character in a believer by another person.”

Discipleship has, however, evolved over the years; eventually, intentional structures emerged and are now formally instituted, becoming part of the vision statement of the Church of Pentecost: “To become a global Pentecostal church that is culturally relevant in vibrant evangelism, church planting, discipleship and holistic ministry.” The current structures for discipleship in the Church of Pentecost include the following: ministries, Sunday morning Bible studies, Sunday evening home cell meetings, pastoral care groups, and new converts’ classes. These activities are coordinated by the National Discipleship and Leadership Development Committee (NDLDC). The work of this committee is further decentralized to the Area Discipleship and Leadership Development Committee (ADLDC). As of December 2021, all 73 administrative areas of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana have an ADLDC, under the leadership of an area head. Further decentralization is extended to the district level, with the district pastor as the coordinator, and finally to the local congregations, where implementation takes place (the presiding elder is the local coordinator). A brief description of these structures and their implementation is discussed below.

**Ministries**

There are five major ministries in the Church of Pentecost: women’s ministry, men’s ministry, evangelism ministry, youth ministry, and children’s ministry. These ministries are age-related, gender-based, mission-oriented small groups that were established to disciple the members and provide them with opportunities to use their gifts to serve Christ and his Church in their homes, workplaces, and communities. These groups are more homogenous, making it

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11. Ministries in the Church of Pentecost include women’s ministry, men’s ministry, youth ministry, evangelism ministry, and children’s ministry. There are meeting days for each of these ministries where intentional discipleship activities take place to equip the members with age- and gender-specific skills for holistic maturity.
easier for their discipling needs to be met. Ordained ministers equip the leaders
of these ministries so they can address the peculiar needs of their members.
Presiding elders and district pastors are expected to enable new converts to
belong to at least one ministry where they can be further discipled among their
peers. Each ministry has its own study syllabus and is allocated specific meeting
days each month for its related activities. Discipleship activities are not limited
to Bible studies but flexibly include domestic, educational, professional, and
emotional issues, among others.

New converts’ class
The new converts’ class is established to teach new believers the fundamentals
of the Christian faith and encourage them to develop a closer relationship with
the Lord Jesus Christ. It provides a safe nest for the new convert to learn, grow,
ask questions, form new relationships, and be integrated into the fellowship of
the saints in the local congregation. The class, which meets once a week, is
handled by lay leaders who are committed to walking with the new converts
until they mature. With the help of the discipleship manual produced by the
NDLDC, each new convert is expected to attend the classes for about six
months.

Home cell groups
A home cell group in the Church of Pentecost is a group of members (normally
8 to 15), usually living within the same community, who meet weekly in a
home/community for prayer, worship, fellowship, evangelism, and study of
God’s word. As a community-based ministry, it also provides pastoral care for
church members and helps to “close the back door” of the church. The home
cell groups meet twice a month on designated Sunday evenings and follow a
study manual produced by the NDLDC. The main discipleship functions of
the home cell group are to provide members with the opportunity to observe
the practical lives of their leaders, who mostly live with them in the community,
and to provide a community for believers within the same locality.

Bible study groups
Small Bible study groups meet weekly in the church to study the word of God
in a systematic way in order to know more about God and his word for the
growth of both new converts and mature members. In each local assembly,

12. The Church of Pentecost, *Lay Leadership Training Manual, Advance Level I*
(Accra: Pentecost Press, 2016), 56.
Discipleship and Ordained Ministry in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Members are divided into small groups with leaders who, together with other mature leaders within the group, serve as disciplers for the members of that group. The groups are meant to be as permanent as possible, and the leaders are not normally changed. The Bible study groups meet each Sunday morning, except on Communion Sundays. The NDLDC produces an annual manual used for this purpose. These manuals contain lessons and activities for the home cell groups as well. The manuals are written in English and translated into French and some of the major languages in Ghana, such as Akuapem Twi, Asante Twi, Dangme, Ewe, Fante, Ga, Konkomba, and Nzema.

Training Structures for Discipleship in the Church of Pentecost

There are other structures within the Church of Pentecost for leadership training for effective discipleship. These structures are used to equip both ordained full-time ministers and ordained lay leaders in the church so they can disciple the members of the congregations. Some of these structures include officers’ retreats, lay leaders’ schools, and the School of Theology, Mission and Leadership programmes at Pentecost University. Their activities have also been discussed briefly in this section.

Officers’ retreats

The officers’ retreat, also known as “Apostolization,” is an annual retreat aimed at training all ordained ministers and other unpaid ordained officers of the Church of Pentecost to equip them for effective ministry and discipleship. This is done at three levels. First, all national heads, area heads, and heads/directors of ministries and institutions within the Church of Pentecost meet in November each year for a five-day residential retreat to discuss the church’s theme, which is considered the focus of teaching and discipleship for the year ahead. This is followed up with another five-day residential retreat for all the clergy (ordained full-time ministers and their wives), normally held in January.

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13. In the Church of Pentecost, holy communion is celebrated on the first Sunday of each month. This Sunday is referred to by the church as Communion Sunday.

14. Unpaid officers of the Church of Pentecost are ordained lay leaders made up of elders, deacons, and deaconesses. Each assembly is supposed to have several; they represent the district minister in administering the activities of the local assembly.

15. A national head is either an apostle, a prophet, or an experienced minister who is in charge of the administration of the Church of Pentecost in a nation other than Ghana.

16. Apart from the five ministries described earlier, there are other institutions such as Pentecost University, Pentecost Hospital, and various committees within the Church of Pentecost which are headed by directors.
At this retreat, seasoned ministers of the church are mandated to prepare and teach on various topics given to them in relation to the theme of the year. Time is normally allowed for small-group discussions, questions and answers, and prayers. The third level is held in February and March each year. It involves all ordained full-time ministers as well as all lay leaders. This third-level retreat is held at the area level, since the numbers involved are very large. Here again, teachings are taken from the same topics as those treated at the ministers and wives’ retreat. In addition to taking part in small-group discussions, participants are led in times of prayer, and time is allowed for questions and answers. The teaching materials for these meetings are prepared for inclusion in a book, which becomes a guide for teaching in all local congregations in the church for that year.

**Lay leaders’ school**

This annual training programme is targeted at developing and sharpening the leadership potential of all lay leaders of the Church of Pentecost. In May each year, the first-level training, referred to as Training of Trainers (TOT), is organized for delegates from each administrative area of the church to attend and be trained in different leadership and doctrinal issues that are important to the church. After the TOT, each area is expected to organize the same sessions in August, where those who attended the TOT become the facilitators at this level.

The school has a five-step structure for training leaders in the church. It begins with the foundational level, also known as the pre-ordination course. All prospective lay officers are expected to go through this before ordination. Next are the advanced levels 1 to 4, which are specifically for ordained lay officers. Certificates are given to those who successfully go through all the five levels. Those who have completed all five levels continue to attend the school, where a special class is prepared for them each year for discussions on topics relevant to their personal and ministerial growth. Explaining the Lay Leadership School, the then-chairman of the Church of Pentecost, Apostle Professor Opoku Onyinah, said: “The training programmes are not just designed for academic stimulation, but to give leaders practical insights and opportunity for deeper reflection and action in the light of the challenges of our contemporary society.” Study manuals for all the stages have been prepared and translated into major

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Indigenous Ghanaian languages. Updates are prepared each year to meet the contemporary needs of the church.

**School of Theology, Mission and Leadership, Pentecost University**

The School of Theology, Mission and Leadership (STML) is a faculty at Pentecost University. The university developed from Pentecost Bible College, which was established by the Church of Pentecost in 1972 to train its ministers. Pentecost University has become a thriving private university in Ghana, with five faculties. The STML is one of these faculties: here, different levels of theological education, ministerial formation, and training take place.

At STML, ministerial formation and training was purposely structured to train ministers, ministers’ wives, and lay leaders of the Church of Pentecost. New ministers who have been called into full-time pastoral ministry of the Church of Pentecost are taken through a one-year intensive pastoral formation. During this period, the ministers go through a structured curriculum that aims to equip them holistically for ministry. There are also extracurricular activities. One such important activity is a supervised internship or practicum. During this internship, the ministers in training are attached to other experienced ministers who are already in the field. The ministers in training spend weekdays on campus and weekends with their mentoring pastors in the field. As part of their supervised internships, they learn the practical ministry of discipleship, pastoral care, counselling, officiating weddings, naming children, conducting funerals, and baptizing converts, among other skills.

After this year of training, they are sent out into the field for a second full year of practical ministry, where they serve as district ministers while working under the close supervision of an area head. After that second year, they continue with their theological education, but this time it is offered on modular basis: that is, in short-term modules offered through extension courses, during which they continue to serve as district pastors until they complete a bachelor’s degree. The various options for theological study include theology, mission studies, and biblical studies. This new structure was introduced into the training of Church of Pentecost ministers in 2019.

Ministers who completed their ministerial formation before 2019 have the opportunity of going through the Ministers Advanced Training Course. This short refresher course is for Church of Pentecost ministers in the field. It is organized in batches at the STML to update ministers on contemporary ministry issues. Furthermore, all Church of Pentecost ministers’ wives are given modular theological training periodically at STML. They are required to go through the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels before graduating with a Certificate in
Christian Ministry. The courses are structured to prepare them to be in the position of playing a key role in discipling church members, since they are considered important ministry partners with their husbands. In addition, a Certificate in Theology and Pastoral Studies programme has been started for all elders of the Church of Pentecost. This trimester programme is offered within one year. It is expected that all elders of the Church of Pentecost will go through it in batches to equip them further for effective discipleship.

STML also offers theological education to pastors of other denominations. Unlike the ministerial formation programmes, which are only for Church of Pentecost ministers, their wives and lay leaders, the theological education offered at this level is open to both Church of Pentecost and other Christian ministers as well as people who are simply interested in theological education. These offerings include various certificate programmes, a Bachelor of Theology programme, and a range of postgraduate programmes. These programmes are structured to offer holistic theological education to people who want to further their vocation or career in the fields of theology, mission, and leadership for effective ministry and discipleship in Ghana and beyond.

Conclusion

The Church of Pentecost recognizes that Jesus did not call his disciples only to preach the gospel and make converts. The Great Commission requires the Church to make disciples of all nations. This mandate is what propels the Church of Pentecost to put these structures together to make discipleship intentional. It is hoped that the structures and training taking place at different levels will provide the needed awareness, skills, and motivation for effective discipleship in the Church of Pentecost. Since the Church of Pentecost plays a leading role in Ghanaian Christianity, it is hoped that these efforts will serve as a model of discipleship for other denominations in the Ghanaian context.

What is less certain is the level of effective implementation of these discipleship structures at the various levels of the Church of Pentecost, including

19. At this time, STML offers a Certificate in Theology and Church Administration, a Certificate in Leadership and Counselling, and a Certificate in Counselling and Family Therapy.

20. The Bachelor of Theology programme has options in Theology, Mission Studies, and Biblical Studies.

21. The postgraduate programmes include the MA in Pentecostal Studies, MA in Theology, MA in Church Leadership and Administration, and MPhil Theology programmes.
the local congregations. As a minister of the church who is deeply involved in many of the discipleship processes, I have observed that these structures are working well in some local congregations, while others are not able to use them effectively to disciple the members. Also, it is not clear what tools the church can use to measure the success of these discipleship structures. There is therefore a need to develop an effective tool for measuring the success of these discipleship structures in the Church of Pentecost while evaluating, monitoring, and receiving feedback on their implementation at all levels of the church’s administrative structure. This, of course, is a challenge for many other churches globally as well. Hence, as TCTCV points out, “one blessing of the ecumenical movement has been the discovery of the many aspects of discipleship which churches share” (§68) and I would also add that they also share many challenges of discipleship – and it is exactly for this reason that cooperation and exchange of insights in discipleship can be an enriching ecumenical journey for all involved.
Introduction

African Independent Churches (AICs) have been active in mission from the late 19th century. Discipleship is a theme that calls for clearer understanding. Drawing from Matthew 28:19-20, the risen Christ, speaking to the team of disciples with whom he had walked, sent them out to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that I have commanded you.”

It is the process of teaching what Christ commanded us that resulted in the questioning by some African Christians regarding the way the gospel is communicated in different contexts and eras. In this chapter, I will attempt to lay down part of the journey of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) with its member churches, in following Christ and being part of his mission with authenticity as Africans. The OAIC, which was founded in 1978, brings together churches from multiple traditions, hence multiple theologies and different understandings of the mission of God in local contexts. What is common among the AICs is their uniqueness in finding Africa’s resourcefulness in the mission of God. This chapter explores some of the work of the OAIC with the AICs as a journey of church communities that are continuously seeking to understand the leading of the Holy Spirit over time as they assert their role in the mission of God. The mission of the OAIC is bringing together African Independent Churches into fellowship and equipping them to preach the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. It provides the framework for walking
Mission in the Founding Context

The context in which the AICs were born influenced the mode of doing mission that they developed, to a great extent. It was at a time when missionary work was expanding on the African continent. It was also the time that colonization was taking root in Africa. As the Africans received the gospel, they celebrated the opportunity of accessing the good news and started playing a role in propagating it in their contexts. The church, the school, and the health facility were the major points of intersection between missionary work and the people in local contexts. Apart from formal education that was offered by missionaries in the schools that they established, adult literacy education was a key part of missionary work. And the Bible was a major tool in adult education, especially in places where missionaries from Protestant churches were established. This enabled Africans who converted to Christianity to read the Bible with the guidance of the missionaries or the local people (especially catechists) who were trained by the missionaries. To a great extent, these processes started reshaping Africa in several ways. Priesthood was redefined from the traditional African framework, where women played a major leadership role as priests, to a framework that confined priesthood to men. The mode of education changed, which meant introducing Western processes and patterns of acquiring and passing on knowledge. Colonization aggressively redefined the politics and governance of communities. The economic structures were redefined as the use of land was commercialized; mineral extraction and the expansion of access to foreign goods aggressively redefined trade, hence changing wealth acquisition and consumption patterns.

As African Christians read the Bible in this context, several of them started stretching the interpretation of the scriptures beyond what they were being taught by missionaries of mainline churches. This meant redefining the understanding of the mission of God and following Christ from the position of an African Christian who understands the will of God for Africa. This African Christian listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit in the midst of rapid sociocultural and political change. This led to patterns and processes of communicating the gospel with an appeal to follow Christ the Saviour, healer, and deliverer with the Holy Spirit as an enabler of Africans. This was done by breaking out of the frameworks set by the missionaries and the missionary-founded churches which had not fully brought forth the role of the Holy Spirit in the way the AIC founders read it in the Bible. Further, it meant breaking out of frameworks that
had not dealt with or hesitated to deal with the reality of the relationship between Christianity and cultural domination as well as political domination, which the missionaries and colonizers practised.

By inviting Africans to follow the risen Christ, who affirmed the resourcefulness of African cultures in the mission of God, AICs started redefining mission by placing the gospel in the realities with which Africa was faced. Authenticity in discipleship meant using the scriptures to engage several areas for transformation. It meant engaging the local cultural contexts, hence proclaiming the good news in a way that brought in the local resources in music and poetry while at the same time being counter-cultural in relation to what they considered to be holding people in bondage. This meant confronting some of the cultural dimensions that held people in bondage. It also meant using the scriptures to critique what was an emerging trend in Christianity that was linked to cultural, economic, and political domination. These processes led to the emergence of multiple founding visions and modes of doing mission from them. Several AIC traditions emerged from these processes and still tend to define the way AICs are involved in mission.

Re-engaging the Founders’ Vision in Changing Contexts

The understanding of the second chapter of the book of Joel and the second chapter in the book of Acts influences the way AICs get involved in mission. Common people who have been transformed by the Holy Spirit proclaim the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. From inside the AIC understanding, a person filled with the Holy Spirit is at the centre of God’s mission in proclaiming the message of the risen Christ. This person or community is not at the margins, because in the kingdom of God they are important actors working with God in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the message of salvation and healing; as community builders, who work in all circumstances; they enable the people they lead to deal with the economic uncertainties they face.

The reflection process on the founders’ vision was initiated by the OAIC in the mid-1990s. The decade of the 1990s was another critical phase for Africa. The Berlin Wall had been brought down, so there was a rearrangement of the discourse in politics and economic development. Africa had been caught up in the ideological and political differences of the East and West divide. The drive for democratization was immense, as churches and civil society organizations were involved in democratization processes on the continent, and the debt burden on African countries was heavy. Consequently, the impact of poverty and the complexity that came with HIV/AIDS was visible in the lives of people—
especially in the rural areas and informal urban settlements where the AICs have a presence. Yet, in this very context, acceleration of the ecclesiastical changes in the Church came in Africa, where newer churches, which are not mainline, was a reality.

These challenges provided an opportunity for the OAIC to walk with member churches in order to grasp the issues at hand while at the same time looking at their future in mission, basing it on their resourcefulness. In *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, a fundamental assertion is made: “One challenge for the Church has been how to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a way that awakens a response in the different contexts, languages and cultures of the people who hear that proclamation” (§6). This is relevant to the membership of the OAIC. Going back to the founders’ vision became a rallying framework. This led to a collective process of re-examining the way the founders of AICs understood the mission of God during the founding era: how the founders read the scriptures in context, how they listened and responded to the Holy Spirit, and how the action they took in building church movements affirmed the resourcefulness of Africans in the mission of God.

The search for effectiveness in mission in relation to the HIV/AIDS challenge is a concrete example. It required reflection processes on the theologies of AICs and the cultural values and practices of the communities where the AICs minister. Abundance of life (John 10:10) became a major theme that led to the process of examining values and practices in terms of the reality the AICs faced in HIV/AIDS. The OAIC walked with the AICs in a way that challenged them to move beyond what I may term as “borrowed” or “generic” responses, which lacked specificity in relation to the way AICs understand disease and suffering.

As the prevalence of HIV/AIDS increased, AICs found themselves in a dilemma. This was reflected in different ways of action. In a generalized response, some AICs attempted to accept people with HIV/AIDS, rejecting any stigma that others might attach to the disease. There was acceptance among some AICs, which attempted simply to fit it in the generalized responses. In some other quarters of AICs, there was outright rejection of the generalized responses, and still others took a wait-and-see approach. The OAIC changed this approach in mission by calling on the member churches to look at the threat of HIV/AIDS through their cultural and theological positions, in line with the founding values of protecting the community from harm. This involved a process of reading the scriptures, analyzing the socio-economic vulnerabilities, and understanding scientific facts. Cultural practices were analyzed in relation to how they contributed towards abundance of life or lives of misery. Major areas were identified: listening to the voice of women; listening to the voice of young
people; and listening to the voice of children. The AICs that participated in the
process took responsibility for dismantling the judgmental and stigmatizing
positions they had formed around HIV/AIDS. Consequently, the AICs brought
a major contribution together with the other churches.

An emphatic voice from women and young people was one of the results of
this process. They played a major role in responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic
by working with local churches to provide care to people who were sick as well
as caring for orphans. They asserted the fact that if the founders’ vision was left
as it was—located in the initial founding era—then the younger generations
would be left out in their contribution to finding solutions to the challenges of
current and future generations. This position contributed to the shift from the
founders’ vision to founding visions. This gave the OAIC the impetus to work
with the theme that is owned by the member churches as a rallying theme for the
AICs: to affirm their place in the mission of God out of their resourcefulness.
The founding vision provides a reflection and action framework that recognizes
the work of the Holy Spirit during the various eras: the work of the Holy Spirit
during the initial founding period of over a century ago and the continuing work
of the Holy Spirit in the Church and society during the ensuing periods up to
the current era. It takes the founding work of the Holy Spirit beyond the human
limitations of the founders and focuses on identifying the values and principles
that are embedded in these visions that cut across generations and can be applied
in different mission contexts. Some of these principles are ownership at local
levels, the Holy Spirit working through common people, community building,
generating resourcefulness in difficult social and economic contexts, and, above
all, the resourcefulness of Africans and their cultures in the mission of God.

The reality is that the founding visions are located largely in the oral
tradition, passed on from one generation to another in the multiple traditions of
AICs. Getting the resources from the founding vision has required the OAIC to
walk with the member churches in recovering, documenting, and updating the
founding visions. This multigenerational process involves bringing together the
older generations and young people, including theologians, in conversations.
These conversations focus on the trends of the churches through different eras
and how the churches have understood and practised their mission. This process
provides an opportunity for the critique of some positions, such as the place of
women and young people in the leadership of AICs and recognizing the work of
the Holy Spirit in the young, issues with which the older generation has to
grapple. On the part of the younger generations, tempering the elitism that they
bring with them from Eurocentric educational processes, including theology,
that could undermine the resourcefulness of African educational processes and
knowledge systems are issues with which they must deal.

Our realization is that this is a win-win situation, despite the intergenerational tensions that emerge during the conversations. It becomes a process of learning, unlearning, and walking with each other as we work as partners in the mission of God. This is a process that is redefining the OAIC’s work in theological education and action in community building, to respond to the societal issues that are present in the communities where the AICs are located. To enrich this process, the OAIC invites scholars from Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions as observers who bring a contribution from an outsider position. This enables the AICs to benefit from the critique of the wider Church. It also enables the non-AIC scholars to understand the journey of the AICs. The documents that are being produced from this process are beneficial to the AICs for the affirmation of their self-understanding. They are also beneficial to the wider Church in the understanding of the AICs, and they make a contribution towards enriching theological education beyond the AICs.

**Mission into the Future**

The conversations on the founding work of the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the gospel of the risen Christ beyond Africa is a new frontier for the OAIC and its member churches. AICs are advancing beyond the earlier definitions given to them. They are also breaking out of their self-understanding. This section deals with two of the many definitions and assumptions made of the AICs: migration and mission, and working for a flourishing society.

Here is a critical question that comes to the surface as migrant churches and the church in host communities work together towards a common vision: Can the AICs agree to go beyond self-focus and reshape their modes of doing mission so that the resourcefulness they bring with them is received? This is a question that demands engagement as the OAIC walks with the member churches that are involved in mission beyond Africa.

The earlier definition of AICs as churches started by Africans in Africa has been redefined by the action of the AICs in mission beyond Africa. AICs are now in multiple continents: Africa, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Australia. Doing mission in these contexts is a little different from the way mission is done in Africa. The AICs in these contexts are largely serving people who are in migrant situations. This requires the AICs to shape their mission work in a way that responds to the needs of Africans in sociocultural and economic environments that are completely different from the contexts of their origin in Africa.
The AICs are faced with new realities in the mission contexts of the global North. They find themselves in contexts of cultures that have been made dominant. This dominance is due to economic power which has been wielded from the period of slavery and colonization. It is also due to the established modes of theological education and other educational processes that are located in knowledge production processes that are Eurocentric. Community building in these contexts is different from being community in Africa. They have to find a balance between the realities of local communities and the realities of migrant communities if they are to establish multicultural church communities that bring the North and South together. The reality of a young African generation that has been born and reared outside Africa brings another dynamic of a generation that is, to a certain extent, multicultural in its worldview.

On the other hand, the host communities may find themselves with people with whom they identify through television footage and other media as hungry, running away from war, as well as other depictions that affirm the continuation of dominating vertical relationships. This is complicated by the glaring presence of racism that has made Africans and other minority ethnicities keep working for their dignity. This makes the AICs serve as Black majority churches, even in contexts beyond Africa, as they attempt to build communities that support each other in these contexts. So, working for the well-being of Africans who are in foreign lands is central to the mission of the AICs in these contexts.

The challenge and opportunity is that being effective in mission demands of the AICs that they break out and bring their gifts to the new communities of which they are a part, listen to the Holy Spirit afresh in these contexts, and walk with one another to enhance resourcefulness in the mission of God in these contexts. It will take the initiative of Africans who are migrating to other continents to reshape their drumbeat so that the host communities can be part of the song and dance from Africa. It will also take partnership with the churches in the host communities for the AICs to grow in the understanding of the local realities.

Beyond Resilience to a Flourishing Society

One of the major issues with which the AICs are confronted is that much of the literature produced about them has been written by people from other church traditions. As much as this is appreciated, certain notions about AICs have been established. The first is that AICs were founded as a reaction to the way missionaries and mission-founded churches handled mission in Africa; the second is that AICs are resilient communities in their service within a context
of poverty or other difficulties. These two notions, if accepted by AICs, come with many limitations.

First, churches being founded as a reaction to something with which they disagree builds an image of reactionary movements that are in place to counter the way mainline church traditions carry out mission. The AICs are churches which have been founded by people who read the scriptures, listened to the Holy Spirit speaking to them in their contexts, built communities that listened and responded to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and moved out to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit as witnesses to the risen Christ who saves, heals, and delivers people from bondage. This was done while affirming the place of Africans in the mission of God as they came with their music and other resources.

Second, the self-understanding as communities that are resilient in a context where poverty is prevalent limits the AICs to being carers of communities impacted by poverty. Many AICs, in their founding ethos, looked at colonization as marginalization, community shattering, and exploitative. This provides the AICs with the resources to engage present-day socioeconomic and political structures with an aim of working for abundance of life for all. The conversations of the new millennium have resulted in the crafting of an ambitious vision of the people of Africa:

- transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ
- blessed by the Spirit of God
- building on their cultures
- living an abundant life in their community for their children and the world

This widely encompassing vision led to the development of a framework called “Visions for a Better World.”

The OAIC strategy, namely, a flourishing society, reflects the direction of the OAIC: the organizational review process and the multiple evaluation and reflection processes have enabled us to listen to each other as we discern what the OAIC of now and of the future should be. We have heard the member churches say that they want to see the following:

- an OAIC where they are participating fully
- an OAIC that works with theological processes that bring out the theological resources of AICs and also enables them to deal with the barriers that impede their mission
• an OAIC where children, men, women, and young people all bring their resourcefulness to the building of the church and society
• an OAIC that confronts the reality of poverty in a transformative manner
• an OAIC that is futuristic, investing in young people and providing them with the space to serve and to grow
• an OAIC that is prophetic in addressing the issues that have kept the continent in poverty and other forms of indignity
• an OAIC that accompanies the member churches in the multiple mission contexts of which they are a part
• an OAIC that works with communities for shared prosperity and ecological harmony

The future is well spelled out in the assertion by member churches that they expect the OAIC to accompany them in their search for effectiveness in the mission of God. The OAIC’s role is to harness the resources in the founding visions of the multiple AICs that are members. This is another phase of recovering, documenting, and updating the founding visions together with the churches and working with the Holy Spirit to bring these visions into action in the mission of God for abundance of life. And we are calling this listening to the Holy Spirit afresh.

Conclusion

Walking together in mission is an enriching journey for the OAIC and its member churches. It is a process of learning and unlearning as we engage with each other. It takes faith in the scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and enables us to be resourceful to one another as we play a role in the mission of God. It requires openness as we continue to understand our place in mission and allow the founding work of the Holy Spirit to continue in our midst. What keeps us going forward in this process is our reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide us, a reminder the we are in the mission of God with divine guidance; critical analysis of contexts and understanding how we are resourced; and critical solidarity, where we agree to walk together, yet with a stance to critique each other and involve the wider church in our journey, which enables us to affirm our resourcefulness and deal with the barriers in our midst as we play a role in the mission of God.
Introduction

The effort of the Faith and Order Commission to encourage ecumenism and help the Church to see itself as the body of Christ is evident in the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV). This commitment is evident in the various conference themes, workshops, theological statements, and numerous publications of the commission over the years. For example, one of the major themes of the first World Conference on Faith and Order, held at Lausanne, Switzerland, on 3-21 August 1927, focused on the “relation between the one Church we confess and the divided churches we experience in history.”

Following the activities of the Faith and Order Commission reveals its deliberate efforts to bring the Church together as one body and to seek a closer fellowship and visible unity on ecclesiological issues that have bifurcated the Church throughout history. The current text, *TCTCV*, is comprehensive in its approach; the topics are clearly presented and thoroughly discussed to reflect the delegates’ understanding of God’s will and purpose for the Church to be one. This observation is corroborated in the preface to *TCTCV*, which states that “the delegated representatives of the Standing Commission “have sought to uncover a global, multilateral and ecumenical vision of the nature, purpose, and mission of the Church” (vii).

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1. World Conference on Faith and Order, Lausanne, Switzerland, 3-21 August 1927.
Although *TCTCV* was first published in 2013, it is evident that its development has travelled a long way. Its origin is embedded in the the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982, which engendered many responses and subsequently contributed to the birth of *TCTCV* in 2012.²

Despite its comprehensiveness and depth, the absence of the African Pentecostal-Charismatic voice is readily apparent when reading the text and the various responses. Notwithstanding the mention of “Pentecostal” as one of the traditions involved in the development of the whole process, it is obvious that the African Pentecostal-Charismatic voice is almost absent in this growing conversation. This chapter is an attempt to respond to this lacuna by highlighting some reflections from the Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic perspective, with specific examples from the Church of Pentecost, Ghana’s largest Pentecostal denomination.

### Biblical Basis for Pentecostal-Charismatic Ecumenism

Before we settle on ecumenism in Ghanaian Pentecostalism, it is important to discuss briefly some biblical bases for Pentecostal-Charismatic ecumenism in general. Undoubtedly, one of the miracles of Christian mission in the 20th and 21st centuries is the global expansion of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement. Apart from its global expansion, the tradition has been one of the most diverse, multidimensional, and variegated strands of Christian traditions the world has ever witnessed. How can these diverse waves of Pentecostal innovations experience the unity of the body of Christ as a response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*? The biblical foundation of *TCTCV* is anchored in Paul’s body metaphor, expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 as follows: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” In its affirmation, Pentecostals would readily accept this biblical passage as a call to unity in the body of Christ. In reality, however, the diversities experienced by the various Pentecostal innovations bring about the fragmentations that make it very difficult for the movement to unite internally and with other Christian traditions. This paradox of unity and diversity in the body of Christ is not peculiar to Pentecostals; it has always been a difficult puzzle for the Church. Paul’s body metaphor should, therefore, be taken

seriously in response to this paradox irrespective of the ecclesial tradition to which one may belong.

The description Paul gives in verses 15 to 20 makes it clear that, although each of the body parts is different from the others, none of them is more important than the other. Rather, they provide complementary roles for sustaining the human body as a whole (1 Cor. 12:17-20). If, by interpretation, we equate the body parts to different Christian denominations, then just like all Christian traditions, Pentecostals should listen to Paul’s admonishment that “there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one other” (1 Cor. 12:25). The high priestly prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one” (John 17:21) seems to have informed Paul’s understanding of the Church as one body; this is the core of TCTCV.

Pentecostals generally affirm the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the accounts of Acts 2 as the foundation of their experience. In this narrative lies powerful evidence of unity in diversity to which Pentecostal-Charismatics must pay attention. The records of Acts 2:4-12 indicate that while the disciples spoke in other tongues, the crowd that gathered around them comprised God-fearing Jews from different parts of the world.

The miracle of this scriptural passage should provide a vital response to the paradox of unity in diversity. One would think that the different tongues spoken would cause division among the people, as had happened at Babel (Gen. 11). On the contrary, the crowd came together in bewilderment and amazement when they heard the people speak in their own languages. The difference between the Babel experience and the Pentecost experience is that at Babel, none understood what the other said, but at Pentecost, each one heard their own language being spoken (Acts 2:11). The ability to hear your language in the midst of diverse voices and manifestations is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring people together in unity. This is the spirit of Pentecost, which must not elude Christians.

David Tarus and Stephanie Lowery argue that “in Acts 2, ‘God does not reverse Babel by removing ethnic or linguistic diversity. Rather Spirit-filling enables people to hear and declare God’s greatness in every language (a foretaste of heaven – Rev 5:9, 10).’” They further contend that “at Babel, people sought homogeneity outside God’s intended purpose; Pentecost restored unity-in-diversity as God intended.” In effect, unity is not the absence of diversity. It is

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the ability to understand each other and live together in harmony, learn from each other, and work towards a common vision in spite of diversities.

Quoting from the 2012 bylaws, the preface to *TCTCV* clearly indicates that

The primary purpose of the Commission on Faith and Order is “to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.” (vii)

This must encourage the Church, including African Pentecostal-Charismatics, to seek closer relationships with one another and with other Christian traditions.

**Relationship of Pentecostals and Other Christian Traditions**

The modern Pentecostal movement was hardly accepted by historic mission Christianity. In its initial stages, Pentecostalism was largely considered as heterodox while the historic mission churches were accepted as orthodox.\(^5\) During the Edinburgh 1910 conference, which provided the impetus for ecumenism among the churches in the 20th century, for example, Pentecostals were neither recognized nor invited.\(^6\) This is understandable; modern Pentecostalism was, at this point, in its infant stages and struggling to receive that level of acceptance as a legitimate Christian tradition. Moreover, Pentecostals of the time were not interested in articulating their theology; they were more interested in going and preaching the gospel.

By the time of the Edinburgh 2010 conference, however, there was clear evidence of some level of acceptance for the Pentecostal tradition among the ecumenical bodies. Pentecostals were represented at the conference; the publication of the edited volume *Pentecostal Mission and Global Christianity*

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provides the proof of this acceptance. The editors of this volume—Wonsuk Ma from Asia, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen from Europe, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu from Africa—reveal the global nature of the Pentecostal movement at this point. Also, the volume was sponsored by two Pentecostal denominations from Asia and Africa: The Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul, Korea, led by Senior Pastor Dr. Younghoon Lee; and The Church of Pentecost, Ghana, led by Apostle Professor Opoku Onyinah (the then-chairman of the church). This act, according to the editors of the volume, “attests to the leadership of the ‘Southern’ Pentecostal churches in the development of global Christianity. Both leaders exemplify today’s prevalent Pentecostal spirituality and deep theological scholarship.”

More striking about this volume is the front cover of the book, which features a picture of a group of Ghanaians in what appears to be a gospel campaign. One can confidently say they are Ghanaians because of the combination of the Twi and English languages on the cards they carry in this photograph. (Globally, Ghana is the only country where both English and Twi languages are dominantly spoken.) This suggests the significant role that Ghana (and, for that matter, Africa) plays in the growth of Pentecostal mission and world Christianity. The rest of this reflection will therefore concentrate on Ghana’s Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and proposals for unity among Pentecostals themselves and with other Christian traditions in Ghana as a contribution to The Church: Towards a Common Vision.

**Ecumenism among Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches**

From its inception to date, the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in Ghana has experienced a relatively high numerical growth. Within a century of its birth, growth and expansion, demographic statistics reveal that the movement has become the fastest-growing Christian tradition in Ghana, representing “the most cogent, powerful and visible evidence of religious renewal and influence in Ghana.” Todd Johnson’s 2014 article entitled “Counting Pentecostals Worldwide” seems to have corroborated this claim. The article shows that Ghana was among the top ten countries in the world with the highest percentage of Pentecostals as of 2010. Also, Ghana was placed among the top ten countries with the highest-percentage annual growth rate of Pentecostals between 1910

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and 2010 (13.25 percent). This publication also shows that Ghana’s Pentecostal Christianity has an appreciable percentage rate of both the total Christian population and the total Ghanaian population.\(^9\) Beyond statistics, there is enough visible evidence of a high growth rate of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Ghana. This makes the movement quite important in the discussion of Christian ecumenism in the country specifically and in Africa in general.

In Ghana, just as has been the case of the movement elsewhere, the diversities experienced within the movement contribute to different waves of Pentecostal innovations at different epochs within the past hundred years.\(^10\) At the moment, it is possible to count around five distinct waves of Pentecostal innovations in Ghana, which are represented in around 400 different Pentecostal denominations.\(^11\) Despite these diversities within the movement, it is also not in doubt that Pentecostalism in Ghana is bound together with unique features that can serve as the nexus, bringing the movement together as a response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. For example, the common emphasis on the practical experience of the power of the Holy Spirit provides grounds to group them under the inclusive category of Pentecostals or Pentecostal-Charismatics.

The attempt to unite the Pentecostal movement in Ghana dates back to 1969, when four main Pentecostal denominations—The Assemblies of God, the Christ Apostolic Church, the Apostolic Church, and the Church of Pentecost—came together to form the Ghana Evangelical Fellowship. In 1977, the name was changed to Ghana Pentecostal Fellowship. This name was subsequently changed to Ghana Pentecostal Council in 1981 and eventually to Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC) in 2011.\(^12\) The purpose for this change of name was to make it more inclusive and to embrace Neo-Pentecostal movements, which were generally referred to in Ghana as Charismatic Ministries. As of December 2021, there were over 200 member churches in the council. This indicates an increasing openness and flexibility of the member churches and the development of unity that is growing among the Pentecostals in Ghana.

The vision of GPCC is “To unite the Church and Christian organizations to be a voice that shapes the growth and development of our people and impact

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11. See Tsekpoe, “Navigating the Shades and Nexus of Ghanaian Pentecostalism(s).”
society through the gospel of Christ.” This vision reflects the ecumenical ethos of GPCC to unite the Church towards a common vision and develop people for the purpose of impacting society through the gospel of Christ. At the regional levels, GPCC is well organized among the member churches, where joint fellowship and prayer meetings are held periodically to promote unity among the churches. Once a year (usually in October), a week is set aside for all the member churches to meet in one church at the zonal level to pray and to discuss issues of common interest and unity. These meetings have been very successful over the years and have promoted a level of acceptance among member churches. The challenge, however, has been churches that consider themselves as Pentecostals but do not belong to the umbrella organization. These churches may not benefit from the efforts of the member churches to work towards unity.

The GPCC took initiatives in ecumenical relations during the tenure of Apostle Dr Michael Kwabena Ntumy as president in the early 21st century. He collaborated with the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) to coordinate opportunities of national interest. Under the presidency of Opoku Onyinah in 2016, the GPCC strengthened ecumenical ties with the CCG by signing a memorandum of understanding to cooperate on issues of church and national interest.

Apart from the GPCC’s efforts to unite the Pentecostal movement in Ghana, some of the member churches in Ghana have made other attempts to encourage unity among the Christian community in the country. The Church of Pentecost (CoP) is one example. In 2002, the CoP hosted a consultative meeting of the World Council of Churches’ Commision on World Mission and Evangelism on Faith, Healing, and Mission in Accra, Ghana. In 2011, the CoP participated in the Second Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum in Manado, Indonesia. Significantly, in 2017, the CoP hosted a consultation of the Global Christian Forum on “The Church’s Call to Mission and Peceptions of Proselytism.” Furthermore, in 2022, the CoP, under the chairmanship of Apostle Eric Nyamekye, organized a conference of all pastors which was attended by nearly 3000 pastors who represent 468 Evangelical/Pentecostal churches in Ghana. The theme of the conference was “Rediscovering and Fulfilling the

13. Official website of GPCC.
15. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Pentecostal Movement and Charismatization, 154.
16. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Pentecostal Movement and Charismatization, 155.

The CoP’s Model of Unity in Diversity

Christian Tsekpoe has argued that the CoP’s ability to accommodate around four different waves of Pentecostal innovations, such as the prayer centres, Pentecost International Worship Centres (PIWCs), and Pentecost Students and Associates (PENSA), alongside its traditional congregations within its fold, can serve as a model of unity in diversity for Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Ghana in particular and Africa in general.

Each of these innovations has its unique features and emphasis but operates under the administrative structure of the CoP. The prayer centres in the CoP, for example, are places of worship that can be considered as congregations of the church. They are, however, different from traditional CoP congregations because some of the prayer centres provide accommodation facilities for the sick and the afflicted who may spend days, weeks, or even months seeking spiritual solutions to their troubles. As of August 2017, there were 42 recognized prayer centres in the CoP in Ghana.

Some practices of these prayer centres, such as emphasis on healing, deliverance, and prophetic directions, are similar to such practices in churches described as either Prophet-led, Prophet-healing, or New Prophetic churches. What distinguishes the CoP prayer centres from the other Prophet-healing churches in Ghana is that the CoP prayer centres have been absorbed into the established structures of the church, and so the leaders of the centres are accountable to the leadership of the CoP. This provides the opportunity for the church to organize annual seminars for all prayer centre leaders and their teams, training them in how to handle some spiritual, ethical, and other related challenges associated with the healing and deliverance ministry. One benefit of this practice is that spurious manifestations and manipulations are mitigated to the barest minimum.

PIWCs are urban-type model congregations that developed within the CoP in 1993. The rationale behind the establishment of the PIWCs is to provide a

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well-organized, cross-cultural church for the emerging generation of Ghanaians who prefer to worship in the English language or in a multicultural environment. It is also to provide a place of worship for people of non-Ghanaian cultural backgrounds who reside in Ghana and may want a place of worship. Right from their inception, the PIWCs do not adhere to some of the traditional practices of the CoP, such as gender segregation in church and women’s head covering. These congregations are much closer in outlook to the churches normally referred to as Charismatic Ministries in Ghana, especially in their ability to incorporate global influences into their liturgy and thereby attract a youthful membership. What distinguishes the CoP’s PIWCs from the churches called Charismatic Ministries is the latter’s overdependence on the founder-leader, while the former operates under the centralized administrative structure.

PENSA is the student wing of the Youth Ministry of the CoP. This comprises CoP and non-CoP students on second-cycle and tertiary campuses who come together in fellowship and worship. PENSA has the characteristics of non-denominational student groups such as the Scripture Union and the Ghana Fellowship of Evangelical Students on university campuses in Ghana and elsewhere. The word “Associates” in the name “PENSA,” for example, makes room for students who are not CoP members but want to have fellowship or associate with the group while on campus.

Concluding Remarks

TCTCV is an important document that needs full attention and engagement by the Church from different traditions and different locations. From the Ghanaian context, the study has shown that the GPCC has attempted to embrace ecumenism in its operations in Ghana. In addition, it has been argued that the ability of the CoP to accommodate these different waves of Pentecostal innovation within its fold provides a model for unity in diversity for the Church moving towards a common vision of unity in Ghana. It demonstrates a possibility of different waves of Pentecostal-Charismatic innovations to function together, albeit with a different emphasis. These various waves provide checks and balances for each other, thereby making the church stronger. For example, the PIWCs in the CoP have challenged the traditional CoP congregations to be

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innovative and more flexible in their missional approach, because all the young people were leaving the traditional CoP and joining the PIWCs. Today, many of the traditional CoP congregations have adopted the use of technology and contemporary music in their liturgy. On the other hand, however, traditional CoP congregations have been able to regulate some excesses in the PIWCs and the PENSA groups in terms of moderation in showy dressing and playful dancing at church.

Similarly, the prayer centres have challenged many of the CoP congregations, including the PIWCs and the traditional CoP congregations, in terms of their emphasis on prayer and the testimonies of healing and other miracles that are recorded in these churches. CoP congregations that were becoming complacent in their growth began to rethink their spirituality when many of the members were drifting towards the prayer centres. Meanwhile, the administrative structure of the church in general regulates the manipulative tendencies of the prayer centres, bringing some level of responsible balance to their fold.

Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Ghana in particular and the Church in Africa in general can provide these kinds of checks and balances for each other, grow stronger, and learn from one another if they are able to unite towards a common vision. There is the need for intentional efforts that aim at breaking the barriers of division and uniting the Church towards a common vision in Ghana and, for that matter, Africa.
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What does it mean to be the Church within the contemporary context of world Christianity?

As a part of the reception process of the convergence document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision (TCTCV)*, the ecclesiology study group of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order undertook a landmark task. The commission broadened the ecclesiological table by opening a wide range of conversations on global Christianity and ecclesiology. This broadening included perspectives from various regions (especially Asia, Africa, and Latin America), denominational families (such as evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and independent churches), and forms of being church (such as ecclesial movements, new forms of monasticism, and online churches) which have not always been clearly or strongly represented in the discussions on the way to *TCTCV*. Thus, the study group took the opportunity to explore the understanding of ecclesiology held by such churches and engaged in fruitful theological reflection with them.

This series of two volumes offers a taste of the insights, contributions, lively dialogue, diverse perspectives, and mutual exchange of ecumenical gifts between the members of the commission and theologians from all around the world, which took place through a series of international consultations between 2015-22.

Most interestingly, although various aspects of ecclesiology from these regions and denominational families may initially seem distant from, or even incompatible with, more “traditional” ecclesiologies, dialogue with them unearthed much common ground, which ultimately led to significant growth in convergence.

This first volume offers a taste of this growth in convergence through the commission’s consultations with theologians from the global South. The fruit of this work is offered with the hope that it will contribute towards a clearer, global vision of the Church in the 21st century.