

SESSION 2

Pentecostal missions and Black churches

(Detailed church historical information concerning the AIC's and pentecostal mission churches in paragraphs 2.2 to 2.3 is drawn from Anderson 1992 and Anderson 1993)

It is clear that the first pentecostal missionaries to South Africa considered themselves to be coming to Africa to preach the gospel to Africans. The existence of a large indigenous White population apparently took them by surprise, and at least three pentecostal churches, including the two largest, developed from their ministry as mainly White-led churches with a Black 'mission' section. It might be asserted that the major pentecostal influence among Blacks has found expression in the rise of the so-called 'Spirit-type' (Anderson prefers to refer to 'Pentecostal-type') *African Initiated Churches* (AICs).

However, while the AICs have developed huge followings, the racial segregation of the classical pentecostal groups does not mean that they have not been permeated with intense fervour for preaching the gospel to Africans - so-called 'missions work'. This has been done by both Whites and Blacks, the most active of the former group often being dedicated lay-preachers.

This session deals with four aspects of this mission activity: the pre-Christian African situation; the rise of the AICs; classical pentecostal mission churches; and the current situation.

2.1 Pre-Christian African religion

African religion is usually classified as *animist*. It includes a holistic understanding of spirituality, rejecting any notion of a dualism between the spirit world and the real world. However, the invisibility of the spirit world makes the role of a shaman essential. The spirits of the ancestors are also understood to be active in events of the future - indeed, they are probably the most determinative factor of African life. The world of spirit, because it interacts so intensively with the physical world, is also often understood as being very threatening to day-to-day living, and the shaman is thus both revered and feared.

The action of spirit is detectable in the wealth or poverty of a community, in its sickness or its health. The approval of spirits is required in all processes of life, so that ritual forms an important part of African thinking.

Family, clan and tribe are also important elements, with Africans understanding well the Old Testament notion of corporate personality. It is the responsibility of these social groups to maintain the veneration and tradition of the ancestors, so as not to bring ill upon the group.

The notion of spiritual power associated with places and objects is also very strong. Herbalism is thus an important part of African medicine, since the various plants exhibit various spiritual potencies. Illness is generally considered to be spiritual in origin. Mountains, hills and streams are often considered homes to various spirit entities.

Although behind this spirituality there is understood to be one supreme God, the average African has little to do with such a being. Their lives are considered to be influenced far more by lower spirits, particularly ancestors. In some regions, there is also a strong belief in the baleful activity of witches, and the smelling-out and killing of supposed witches is again becoming current in South Africa. Traditional remedies for illness, or totemistic help for achieving personal ambitions, can also include human body parts, giving rise to the infamous *muti* murders. Current popular mythology maintains that sexual relations with a virgin will cure AIDS, and this is leading to the even more rapid spread of the disease, as well as to rampant child abuse.

In summary, pre-Christian African religion emphasises an *holistic* approach to life, persons of *power*, the activity of spirit-forces (particularly *ancestors*), *corporeal personality*, and *ritual*. This spirituality challenges pentecostal ministry in terms both of contextualisation and of syncretism.

2.2 The rise of African Initiated Churches (AIC's)

Early Christian ministry in South Africa was conducted by the historical Protestant churches. These groups had fixed liturgies, brought with them from Europe, which they communicated to their Black converts. Their services therefore were usually merely translated into a Black language, without being more than superficially adapted to Black culture. Coupled with a typical European Protestant emphasis on intellect abstracts and on individuality, the package was not tremendously appetising to Black people. Nor was it always very successfully spread.

The urbanisation of Blacks, and their struggle for autonomy in terms of land and tribe, has changed the picture in the twentieth century. Christianity came to be re-interpreted by Africans into African terms, leading to the rise of a form of Christianity that had peculiarly African elements. Literally thousands of these groups have sprung up, and are called African Initiated Churches. Their representation of Christianity runs the full gamut from almost total syncretism with the ancestor cult, to total identification with every orthodox aspect of the Christian religion.

Most of these groups have come into being this century, and many, if not most, bear the names 'Zion' or 'Apostolic' in their titles. The fact that most also baptise adults by three-fold immersion indicates that they have common roots either with the Zionist movement before the arrival of pentecostalism, or with the early pentecostal Zionists.

Sadly, the early pentecostal movement in South Africa soon became a victim of ingrained racial prejudices. This led, on the one hand, to Whites insisting on maintaining control of the structures of the churches. On the other, it led the large group of Black Zionists, who had joined the AFM with Le Roux, to reconsider their position toward the now White-dominated church. In 1917 Elias Mahlangu seceded from the AFM, starting the Zion Apostolic Church of South Africa. From this in 1920 the Zion Apostolic Faith Mission church of Edward Motaung seceded in 1920, and Engenas Lekganyane's Zion Christian Church (ZCC) seceded from this group again in 1925. The ZCC is currently the largest AIC in SA, perhaps in Africa. Over the Easter Weekend every year, anything up to three million Zionists stream to Mount Moriah in the far north of the country for the annual conference of the church.

From these initial three groups innumerable secessions have taken place, normally on minor points of doctrine or at the impulse of a new apostolic or prophetic figure. However, not all contemporary AIC's have direct antecedents in the Zionist movement - many have arisen wherever a Black 'prophet' receives an impulse to accumulate a group of followers. Some AIC's are therefore very local and very small.

Although the Zionist and pentecostal roots of most of the groups are clear, to many of them much has been added that comes from traditional African religion. This includes the incorporation in worship of often robust African expressions, singing and dancing and spirit-possession. It often involves a greater or lesser assimilation of ancestor veneration, and almost always reverence for figures of power. These people (usually termed 'prophets') are often attributed with the power to heal, or to divine, or to prophesy. Ritual elements in these churches include the wearing of uniforms, the wearing of robes, carrying of staffs, blessing of holy water, use of herbs, etc. By and large, African pentecostals tend to reject these groups as cultic heretics. That some truly *are* indeed heretical is evident in the example of the 'salt church' I encountered in Southern Angola and the Caprivi region of Namibia. This group worships John the Baptist - after all, he was born before Jesus was, and is thus more important than Jesus! They also practice prophetic activity that is induced by running in circles around a lit candle until dizziness overwhelms the runners, who then fall to the ground and "prophesy".

Whatever their relationship to orthodox Christian doctrine, the rise of the AICs has shown that the African experience of spirituality is inadequately addressed by classical Protestant European forms of faith and

worship. Of the 'straight' Christian groups, it is pentecostals in particular who have most relevantly addressed these spiritual longings and values. I have addressed the challenge this poses to pentecostalism in Africa in the paper delivered at the theological stream of the Pentecostal World Conference in Korea in September, 1998, and published elsewhere in this volume (Clark, M S 1998: The challenge of contextualisation and syncretism to pentecostal theology and missions in Africa.)

2.3 Classical pentecostal mission churches

These churches, no matter what the denomination which launched them, share a number of similarities in experiences and challenges. These include the issue of autonomy - most remained White-controlled groups until fairly recently; of ethnicity - most existed separately (in the social sense) from their White founding groups; and issues of ministry - most can attribute the larger part of their growth to the ministry of dynamic African preachers. Their existence has provided one of the greatest challenges faced by local pentecostalism at the end of this century - how to unite ethnically diverse groups that have existed for so long apart from one another, yet as part of one another?

Successful mission churches have been planted by the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Full Gospel Church Of God, the Assemblies Of God groups, the Pentecostal Holiness church, the United Apostolic Faith church, and numerous smaller groups. Non-SA pentecostal churches such as the Pentecostal Assemblies Of Canada and Elim Pentecostal Church have also established mission works in SA. Recently Brazilian and Korean groups have been enthusiastic (if often naive) newcomers to the African mission scene. The difference between all these groups and the AICs is that the mission churches are formally constituted and denominational, with church constitutions, training centres, doctrines etc that they share with a wider denominational fellowship.

These mission churches have often been seen as 'daughter' churches of the main fellowship, and have normally had their doctrines and constitutions not only set for them, but also administered for them, by the parent churches. In the AFM of SA, for instance, the term 'missionary' came to be used of someone who was administrative head of a number of Black churches in a single geographical region. The notion of a missionary being a person who lived and worked among Blacks survived only on the periphery, eg. in Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

It became clear in the early years of pentecostalism that Blacks did not need to be seen as classical 'objects of mission'. The most successful workers among the Blacks were Blacks themselves. The changes in South Africa have been accompanied by insistence from Black leaders that this be recognised, and that the White churches cease from a paternalistic attitude toward their 'mission churches'. In the AFM this has led to the official erasure of all ethnic discrimination in the church, and councils at every level now consist of people elected to positions regardless of race or language. However, in reality there are still few 'multiracial' local assemblies, for two major reasons: Whites and Blacks still live (largely) in separate suburbs, and White and Black styles of worship and assembly management are very dissimilar. White churches also use Afrikaans (a minority use English) as *lingua franca*, while the Black churches usually worship and minister in the local African language (of which South Africa has at least nine).

I will mention just three highly effective Black ministers who did much to spread the pentecostal message in South Africa. The current generation is producing men of equal ability.

Elias Letwaba was converted under the ministry of the pentecostal pioneer, John G. Lake. He returned to his Northern Transvaal home and converted his father, and then preached throughout that province. His ministry was characterised by great miracles and fervent preaching. He launched, on his own initiative, the Patmos Bible School at Potgietersrus. This was the earliest school of its nature in the AFM, and although never officially recognised as a Bible School for pastors, trained thousands of people, many of whom are still ministering in the AFM today. Like most earlier pentecostal Black leaders, he accepted the racial divisions in SA as natural, and did not become involved in politics. This has led such men to come under the criticism of recent commentators for 'fleeing the burning issues of this world'. However, it was an

attitude characteristic of all pentecostals at that time, and Black leaders of the period should not be unfairly branded as ineffective or socially irrelevant because they too represented it.

Nicholas Bhengu was converted to pentecostalism at a Full Gospel Church Of God crusade in 1929. However, he soon left that group to work under the auspices of the Assemblies Of God's Immanuel Mission. He never considered himself a servant or employee of the AOG, but considered that that group gave him a legitimate outlet for his ministry. Most of the growth in the AOG can be attributed to his ministry, and most of it took place among Blacks. His insistence is one reason why the AOG never developed into a segregated church in SA (this AOG is now the official group relating to John Bond). Before his conversion Bhengu had been a trade union representative and Communist Party member. As a pentecostal preacher he preached against both racism and political activism. His preaching ministry was particularly dynamic, and involved many healings, although at the time of his death it was still not clear whether he ever endorsed the doctrine of tongues as initial evidence - or that he ever spoke in tongues himself.

Richard Ngidi ministered a generation later than Bhengu and Letwaba. Together with Letwaba he must be counted as one of the great Black leaders of the AFM. I can testify personally to the power of his dynamic preaching, which I first heard as a young man in Kwa-Zulu-Natal. Ngidi was fluent in both Zulu and English, and was a sought-after preacher by Whites and Blacks. He can be said to have contributed to Black pentecostalism in a number of ways:

- by using the method of tent campaigns for evangelism, sparking a certain amount of very effective emulation. Indeed, his campaigns may well have been the fore-runner and model of Rheinhardt Bonnke's highly successful Africa-wide ministry;
- by teaching by personal example the value of fasting and prayer;
- by re-awakening in his generation the expectation that God can heal miraculously;
- by opposing any and all involvement in political matters.

Much of the success of the AFM of SA among Blacks in Natal and Zululand (contemporary KwaZulu-Natal province) can be attributed to the ministry of this powerful evangelist.

2.4 The current situation

In most of the classical pentecostal groups in Africa there is no longer a division between Blacks and Whites. Structurally, at least, the old divisions have been healed. At leadership level tensions still occur from time to time, but on the ground there is a large store of goodwill between the races. This is especially true outside of South Africa, where local pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique and East Africa are gladly welcoming contacts with the South African groups. It is particularly in the area of theological training that South African help is being sought, and many AFM teachers find that they can do as much teaching work in Africa as they are able.

Moves are being made toward some of the less syncretistic AICs, but primarily by White pentecostals. Black pentecostals will have little to do with such people. Help is being offered particularly in terms of Bible training.

The involvement of the current vice-president of the AFM, Frank Chikane, in the ruling political party in South Africa, has once again raised the challenge of pentecostal pastors being involved in political activities. (Chikane serves on the Executive Council of the African National Council, and is Director-General in the department of the Deputy President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki.) So far there does not seem to be the danger of a split in the church (as happened when Gerrie Wessels followed the same course into politics), although if Chikane is ever elected president of the AFM this could lead to many conservative Afrikaners becoming disaffected.

A greater challenge to Christianity at large must be faced in South Africa. The new government, while posing as 'secular', has promoted two areas of spirituality in particular that concern pentecostal ministry

among Blacks. The *first* is traditional African religion, which is receiving official government sanction and protection. Any religious divergence in the name of Christianity is therefore often considered socially detrimental - not to mention renewed evidence of White cultural imperialism. The *second* is the disproportionate influence of Muslims in the new government, despite the fact that they constitute less than 2% of the population. Aggressive propagation of Islam (with some of the more violent aspects included) is a major factor on the SA religious scene.