

## SESSION 4

### Challenges for the future

The pentecostal movement in South Africa enters a new millennium faced with a number of formidable challenges, as well as with some significant opportunities:

#### 4.1 The challenge of Africa

*TIME* magazine's evaluation of the world's economic situation at the beginning of 1997, published in January 1997, ran to an article of about 8 pages. In those pages of fine print, the word 'Africa' did not occur once. Similar articles in early 1998 and 1999 repeated this omission. In terms of development in the world, Africa is the forgotten continent. With the passing of *apartheid* in South Africa in 1994, the decolonisation struggle has been completed. However, this process, which began in the 1950's, has not brought the freedom and wealth that was envisaged, and Africa is considered by many to be the basket-case of the world, both politically and economically. Recently raised hopes of a so-called African Renaissance have been optimistic, but subsequent events in the Congo and Lesotho have created such tensions between Southern and Central African leaders that it seems unlikely that anyone else in the world can take those hopes seriously. Instability, tribalism, war, famine and disease - this is what the world sees of Africa - despite 4 decades of pouring in economic aid and advice, the downward spiral goes on.

Yet South Africa itself stands somewhat apart. It has the only true Developed World culture and infrastructure on the continent. Many of its people are culturally and economically people of the North rather than of the South. They bring to the South African market place an understanding of the market forces that currently dominate world trade, and an ability to operate effectively among them. These positive factors are currently under siege, however, with a massive growth in crime, militant trades-unions, and revolutionary sentiment among political leadership (that still comes to the surface at critical times), stemming the flow of capital into the country. A high fertility rate among the Third World component of the population places immense strain on the small tax-base, which is less than 25% of the population. Land redistribution is placing commercial farmland in the hands of subsistence farmers, and the falling gold-price is undermining the viability of this large portion of the GNP. Yet despite this siege, there is much that South Africa can offer the rest of the continent - this is most true in terms of pentecostalism.

The single greatest need of the pentecostal movement in Africa is training. This is acknowledged by everyone everywhere. Yet all such training *has* to be offered as a service, since the beneficiaries are simply not in a position to pay for it. Even those who can do so are hampered by the low value of their currencies - the weak SA Rand being a shining light compared to most other African currencies. (In 1980 the Zimbabwe dollar was worth Sa Rand 1.20. Today it takes more than 6 Zimbabwe dollars to buy R1.00.)

Para-church organisations, colleges, local regions and assemblies are responding to this challenge with vigour. Many local churches have members whom they sponsor somewhere in Africa (or elsewhere e.g. in the 10/40 window). Distance training is offered by a number of Colleges. The AFM of SA is slightly hampered in that it has its own developing component in the church that needs help, while the sentiment among those who are able to assist is directed mainly outside of the country. There are political reasons for this sentiment, primarily the reaction of conservative White membership to the oft-stated assertion (by Black pentecostals) that South African Blacks should not be seen as 'objects of mission'.

However, the reality of the pentecostal situation in Africa is that assistance can not be given purely for religious training, but that it is required for development itself. Even this is a challenge, since the social needs are so great that, before positive development can take place, crisis management is already absorbing a huge portion of available resources: orphanages for AIDs orphans, feeding schemes for flood and famine relief, etc. The AIDS epidemic alone is confronting the church with a frightening scenario - many central African countries already face the challenge of a 60 to 70% AIDS infection rate (based on tests) and of more than half a million AIDS orphans.

Some pentecostal groups are currently attempting to address this area, acting as channels between the needs and the resources. Overseas aid is often sought, and attempts made to get local governments to help distribute aid packages where the need is greatest. Both are difficult in Africa, since overseas helpers are often sceptical about where the aid might actually land up, and local governments do not have a good record when it comes to

spreading the 'gravy'. The development of a significant infrastructure is also hampered when periodic outbreaks of local or national unrest lead to the wanton destruction of property by whichever dissidents take it upon themselves to express their dissatisfaction. These are the challenges of Africa. Since the AFM operates primarily in the more stable former British colonies of Southern and Central Africa, however, this church has a great opportunity to help with the development of a lasting church and social infrastructure in this region.

Pentecostals need to pray for Africa. In terms of the warmth and simplicity of their faith, their genuine commitment to the Christ who redeemed them from spirit religion, and the often very real persecution they are called upon to suffer, African Christians are in many respects a wonderful example to Western Christians. It is always a pleasure to walk with them, to worship among them, and to encounter their real love for the Lord and for his church. It is heart-breaking to see and encounter the depth of need that is Africa, and not to see any real hope in the near future for a lightening of the continent's load. At present the eyes of Africa are on the outside world to help them survive in their need. Pray that soon Africa may arise and take its place with dignity among the people of world - not least because Africans have found out how to live and walk with Jesus Christ in the power of his Spirit.

#### **4.2 The challenge of identity**

The pentecostal movement in Africa is confronted by many pressures to conformity and syncretism. The following are representative of this challenge:

Involvement and sympathy toward *ecumenical issues* creates pressure for what was an apocalyptic movement to become involved in the political processes of this world. The recent promulgation of an a-millennial eschatology by a former leader of the church (Möller 1998, Vol 7) has elicited a debate in which this challenge comes sharply into focus, from a doctrinal rather than a socio-political perspective.

The influence of the Faith movement, and the tendencies of Black Zionism, brings pressure toward a *guru-cult* - respect for 'anointed' leaders of unquestioned authority, whose revelations and visions should not be tested or questioned.

The influence of *Reformed theology and practice* remains attractive to those who are embittered by the superficiality of the new sensationalism, and many prominent pentecostals are expressing desires to move that way, away from pentecostalism. No prominent South African pentecostal has yet become a *post-pentecostal* in this way, but many agree that it is purely a matter of time before it happens.

Pressure toward *de-centralisation of church structures* is making of many pentecostal congregations virtually independent churches, where everything happens with no reference to the wider body of believers.

Political tensions are at times not far below the surface.

At the same time the pentecostal movement has been operating *pragmatically* rather than scripturally. Little emphasis is placed on Bible knowledge or education, much is placed on leadership training and functionality. This is perhaps the greatest challenge to pentecostal identity - that it is becoming identified as a Spirit-movement (in all its post-modern relativism) rather than as a Scriptural movement. And the history of the church shows that there is scant hope for such a movement that follows such a course.

#### **4.3 The challenge of the world**

The pentecostal movement in Africa, like its counterpart elsewhere in the world, enters the twenty-first century in a significantly different situation to which it began almost 100 years ago. It is no longer always composed of the deprived, disenfranchised, disadvantaged and uneducated. It has resources, influence, education and opportunity. It no longer operates apocalyptically, waiting for this world to pass away. Its members rarely understand themselves as pilgrims, just passing through this 'vale of tears'. The 'movers and shakers' are not people of prayer, humility and passion, but are the well-heeled, the charismatic leaders, whose strengths are organisation, application of resources and presentation of marketable spiritual packages. This means that the world is no longer a hostile environment for the average pentecostal, but is an environment full of opportunity, knowing the rules of which provides a passport to success.

It is probably true that neither end of the pentecostal time-spectrum dealt adequately with the relationship between the church and secular society. Both perceptions require some mitigating correction. Apocalyptic

expectation, when overdone, can lead to a Thessalonian withdrawal from the processes of the world. Total involvement in a socio-political agenda set outside of the church, can lead to a loss of Christian identity. The truth is also probably not some sort of a 'balance' between these two - a type of compromise. Just what the truth of the matter is, is what pentecostalism is challenged to discover, for the sake of its own identity and mission.

On the one hand, theologies of Dominion and Kingdom Now encourage the church to Right-wing political involvement, while those of liberation encourage it to the Left. Reformed influences encourage the notion of state-church co-operation, while many influences from e.g. the Faith Movement leave such current trends as consumerism and media-directed living totally unchallenged. The pressures to become part of, or uncritically involved in, some secular agenda are overwhelming.

On the other hand it is becoming increasingly difficult to limit the pentecostal understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit to the 'church' - i.e. its meetings, members and liturgies. Without detracting from the reality that the Holy Spirit's work is linked irrevocably and solely to the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, renewed emphasis on e.g. the 3<sup>rd</sup> parable of Matthew 25 indicates that it is not un-Christian for the Spirit-filled Christian to get to grips with 'worldly' need. However, there are such pressures to a 'correct' understanding of what and where this need is, that pentecostals, as new kids on this socially and politically activist block, are readily bedazzled. And in Africa, where 'correct' issues lurk around every corner, the challenge for pentecostals to find their own peculiarly pentecostal way through the minefield of these issues, is stronger each day.

With a genuine desire to be true to our Lord, to not quench the Spirit which is the Spirit of Christ, and to not be led into pathways that are incompatible with our pentecostal ethos - pentecostals in Africa will still have to do a lot of serious homework if we are to continue to be in the twenty-first century what our Lord desires us to be.

Maranatha.