

# Moving Against the Tide

## Assemblies of God Polity at the Loggerhead with South African Socio and Theo - Cultural Reality

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### Abstract

The arrival of foreign missionaries played some significant roles in the formation of the Assemblies of God (AOG). The new Pentecostal denomination was originally a church of blacks, though under white control. In 1925, the Americans and Europeans in this church organised themselves as South African District of the Assemblies of God, and AOG in America recognised AOG of South Africa as a separate national church in 1932. This article traces how AOG evolved by entrenching a ‘Group’ system significantly divided along racial lines. This status quo has marked AOG as a racially divided church regardless of South African socio-cultural and theo-cultural realities in the changing demographics since 1994. This structure is the polity that reflects South African Apartheid legacy of separate development – the compromise between unity and mission.

**Key words:** Assemblies, Church, Race, Mission, Unity, Pentecostal

## 1. Introduction

2017 is the celebration of 500 years of Reformation or the Protestant faith. Meanwhile Assemblies of God (AOG) is celebrating a centenary of its operation in South Africa. This is a Pentecostal denomination that is well-known and is international in its scope. It is generally known for its diversity within the unity. However, in the Foreword of Peter Watt’s book (1992:11) David Bosch quips:

The Assemblies of God is one of the lesser-known denominations in South Africa. It rarely features in newspaper headlines and its leadership rarely makes public statements on controversial issues, political or otherwise. One would, however, be gravely mistaken if one were to think that the Assemblies of God is unimportant or irrelevant in the current South African context. The fact that it is not widely known is as much due to its general ethos as to its style and ecclesial structure.

Unlike many of the denominations, Assemblies of God is internally known as the church of groups. This has become a scum in the eyes of its critics – both socio-

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theological and socio-cultural analysts. This paper examines AOG historical and missiological development and its group system as a reflection of apartheid socio-political structure.

## **2. Historical sketch**

Assemblies of God in South Africa started both as a missionary and an indigenous church. Out of the Wakkerstroom revival, which is known as South African Azusa Street revival, the fiery Pentecostal message attracted both the locals and the foreigners together into the fellowship bound by the Spirit, accompanied by some fervent missionary zeal.

### **2.1 A historical missionary church**

The first missionary who arrived and planted the seed was a Canadian, Charles Chawner in 1908. Coming from a small Pentecostal fellowship in Toronto, he embarked on a mission field to South Africa without any financial support. He arrived in South Africa with his wife to do itinerant ministry operating from a small mission station in the then Zululand. The other missionary couple that arrived in 1908 was Henry and Anna Turney from American Baptist background. They also had a Pentecostal experience and felt led to the mission field to South Africa. Together with Hannah James from England, they formed a team ministering to the black people in Pretoria area. In 1911, this team of three moved to Doornkop near Middleburg in the then Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga Province) to establish a very successful mission station.

In 1914 when the Assemblies of God was birthed in Hot Springs, Arkansas, this team of three applied for membership and this was accepted in 1917. Immediately, "Turney registered the name Assemblies of God with the Department of the Interior in Pretoria" (Watt 1992:21). This development qualifies the Assemblies of God as a historically missionary church, since its foundations were laid by foreign missionaries.

After 1921 with the passing on of Turney, the influx of missionaries from United States, United Kingdom, and some Scandinavian countries shaped the ecclesial image of the Assemblies of God in South Africa. It was only in 1925 that the American Assemblies of God recognised the South African District of the Assemblies of God, with J.H Law (American) as the chairman and C.J.H Bennet (British) as the secretary. More autonomy was given around 1932 when American Assemblies of God reorganised South African Assemblies of God as a national church. This step

opened the way for more missionary bodies to come under the umbrella of the Assemblies of God in South Africa, and it further entrenched the concept of a church consisting of co-operating groups in a single movement (Watt 1992:26).

This reorganisation became the precedent of the current status quo where the church or the denomination is a conglomerates within a bigger entity, but these conglomerates based or divided along the racial classification. The contestations and debates regarding this evolvement is still ensuing and the central discussion of this paper. Anderson and Pillay (In Elphick and Davenport 1997:236) prepare the arguers about this:

The AOG 'groups' are mostly divided along racial lines, although some of the leaders will contest this statement.

These historians cite Watt's argument to this as a 'simplistic view' though he concedes that 'some groups were limited to a racial group, but that others were not (Watt 1992:39 & Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:236). The bottom line is that Assemblies of God is the denomination that historically and mssio-logically evolved as a church of groups – the truth that is also revealed by Naidoo (2016:28):

The structure of the AOG permitted missionaries and church leaders to form groups of their own without severing their overseas ties and yet maintaining their affiliation to the AOG in South Africa. Emerging from these groups were charismatic leaders, some of whom wielded tremendous influence and were viewed as "apostles" in the AOG.

## 2.2 A dividing church (1964): International Assemblies of God

The fast growing movement under the power of the Holy Spirit experienced its first *afscheidings* (secession) in 1964. John Bond, who was also an eyewitness to the developments that led to this split, in his undated monograph of memoirs details it as follows:

In 1964 the Americans split away, taking a number of black churches with them out of the Assemblies of God. In all, 15 missionary couples left us and two single ladies, a total of 32 missionaries (n.d.193).

The real issue that caused the split is differently interpreted. However, generally, it was regarding the American missionaries' insistence on the restriction of Nicholas Bhengu's operations. South Africans (of all races) felt that Bhengu's ministry should be national or even cross-borders, while Americans felt that he should be restricted to Eastern Cape. The real issue that concerned the Americans was that the movement was growing with a ripple effect *centrifiguring* the strong leaders.

The Americans felt that, because the movement was gathered around strong leaders such as Nicholas Bhengu and James Mullan, it was in danger of collapsing if those leaders died or fell into error (Watt 1992:62).

The character and leadership styles of these leaders and their *modus operandi* were a concern for the Americans. At the centre of their concern was the feeling “that Nicholas Bhengu was becoming dictatorial and that he wanted them to take a back seat” (Watt 1992:62-63). As for the *modus operandi*, the Americans were unsettled by the operations of Bhengu’s Back to God Crusade. For them this was “a church within a church” (Watt 1992:63). Naidoo (2016:31) points out Colin La Foy’s understanding of this schism:

Americans did not resign because of the issue around the controversy surrounding the ministry of the apostle. He postulates that they were “anti Bhengu” since he had “grown too powerful” and wielded tremendous influence over the black work.

The Americans led by Morris Williams constituted themselves under the name “International Assemblies of God” (IAG). Until today, the AOG and IAG exist side by side as two denominations with no *synergy* or *symbiosis* except in some international requests as the two communions are members of international structures above their national delimitations. For instance, both are members of Assemblies of God of Southern Africa, and Assemblies of God of Africa. And both are members of Assemblies of God Worldwide Fellowship chartered in Springfield, Missouri, USA.

### **2.3 A constitutionally misunderstood church (1981): Assemblies of God Fellowship**

Growth has its own pains. The missional fervency after the 1964 escalated. AOG, after the departure of Americans exploded like a rocket bomb in all racial groups and in the neighbouring territories such as Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. John Bond recounts that after the Americans’ departure followed by traumatic period

our work took on an increasingly indigenous character. Churches grew, stabilised and were blessed. Ministries from South Africa came to the fore. We found we did not need the Americans after all. We could manage quite well without them (n.d.193-4).

After this period, there was a necessity to draft and adopt the By-laws to protect the church property and to appeal in matters of discipline. This set of by-laws drew a

smooth wedge between John Bond and James Mullan. The wedge was exacerbated by the arrival of Sam Ennis into AOG around 1972. Ennis formed a group called Fellowship of Independent Assemblies and Ministers (F.I.A.M). This group, together with some from Mullan's group became critical of the by-laws and the constitution. This constitution was in a high demand by Nicholas Bhengu to protect the properties against the erring ministers. "Nicholas Bhengu not only wanted a constitution but he frequently called for a 'constitution with teeth in it'" (Bond n.d.265).

The other spark into the fuel was the ensuing restrictions of whites doing the ministry in the black areas. This was anathema in AOG. For instance, Johnny do Cerro wanted to plant churches among the Portuguese speaking blacks in Soweto, and with the support of John Bond, Bhengu refused. As John Bond regrettably points out:

Mike Attlee and Noel Scheepers through their reading of the By-laws had conceived a wish to establish black churches under their own apostolic leadership alongside Nicholas Bhengu's assemblies in Soweto. Nicholas Bhengu declared that if their plan was pursued, he would leave Assemblies of God with all his congregations and start afresh in a new movement. I myself pledged to follow him out if that happened (n.d.265).

Discussions and arguments during the General Conference at Cyara (Hekpoort, west of Johannesburg) in 1981 regarding these constitutional and electoral matters resulted in Ennis leading "a split from the Assemblies of God, taking the name 'Assemblies of God Fellowship'" (Bond n.d.269). This acronymically referred to as AGF. This shows how the apartheid racial segregated settlements governed by Groups Areas Act became the holy ground for Assemblies of God. The separate development subscribers did not want racial or geographical cross ministries. This created an internal tension that led to 1981 secession. Attlee and Scheepers, together with Do Cerro had a missiological outlook which is biblical, for they grasped the truth that "To be authentically "evangelical," our ecclesiology must necessarily be "missional" (Husbands & Treier (2005:125). Missions should not be restricted by geographical or racial classifications or allocations. On the other hand, Bond and Bhengu embraced the territorial sacrosanctity. Bond at 1979 General Conference proposed a moratorium on cross-cultural administration, and his white co-workers protested vehemently that "This is unbiblical, it is racialistic." However, Bond insists that "Of course it was racialistic, but in the circumstances it was a pragmatic necessity" (Bond n.d.266).

#### **2.4 A progressive church experiences a set-back: Coastal Assemblies of God**

The adoption of the constitution and the by-laws did not just lead to the birth of AGF. One comes across another AOG identity known as Coastal Assemblies of God,

though some if not many are not found along the coast. These assemblies were led by Mike Attlee who consorted with Ennis in abhorrence of the idea of a new constitution. Amazingly, Attlee ended up drawing the constitution for his group, which “empowered him and his co-workers to seize and control church properties with absolute power” (Bond n.d.265). My subjective observation is that these assemblies are always small in stature and structure. In some places they meet in lounges or small enclosures. It looks like they have a strong eldership governing system.

If one asks of the rationale behind the secession of this group from AOG, one realises that it was not just a matter of the constitution. Top on the list will be the issue of legalism. In reference to this split, Watt (1992:70) points out:

There were many taboos and regulations regarding length of hair, jewellery, cinemas, beards, sporting events, clubs, etc. The taboos represented a withdrawal from the world in order to avoid being tainted by it. Mike Attlee and Noel Scheepers applied these standards even more rigorously.

Bond’s group believed that this is Gnosticism – the unspiritual detachment from the world that does not contribute either to holiness or one’s relationship with Christ. The missional vibrancy of AOG was negatively affected by these doctrinal insinuations.

Further than that Attlee and Scheepers conflicted with Bond because of the latter’s encouragement of ministerial formation or theological training. As a Unisa B.Th. graduate, Bond encouraged ministers to pursue theological training. This widened the wedge between Bond, Attlee, and Scheepers and saddest with Mullan. As a progressive church under Bond, AOG in general suffered a set-back for aligning to theological education and ministerial formation based on sound theological grounding.

## **2.5 An obscure church: Emmanuel Assemblies of God**

There is a scanty history of how Emmanuel Mission either combined or separated from AOG. In Mpumalanga and Limpopo one comes across Emmanuel Assemblies of God, generally known as Emmanuel Assemblies. The oral discourse with its people is that they split away from AOG because they disagreed with Bhengu’s style of leadership, especially with regard to centralisation of financial management. The primary reason was that they were refused the liberty to operate as a separate group within AOG. Bhengu wanted or aimed for all black work to be under his jurisdiction, both nationally and sub-continentially. The cluster of these assemblies is found in Mpumalanga and a bit in Limpopo, Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal. These are areas where Emmanuel Mission operated strongly in the earlier days of AOG. There is

nothing much written about this group. However, they still maintain a strong missiological expansion.

### 3. Current status quo

For any outsider and naïve insider undoubtedly concedes to obscure reality that the group system of Assemblies of God is based on the racial separation consonant with a broader South African racial division as perpetrated by apartheid system of the past. The structure currently is socio-culturally reflective of these divisions.

- The black churches pioneered by Nicholas Bhengu were constituted in 1990 as Assemblies of God Movement (AOGM); taking from the previous name of Back to God Crusade that Bhengu founded in 1950 as the arm of evangelism and church planting in the black communities across Southern Africa.
- The Coloured and Indian churches are constituted as Assemblies of God Association (AOGA). These churches sprang out of the two movements. The first been the Bethshan Gospel Mission, founded by the Norwegian, E.L. Hansen from 1940. The second movement was that of the Indian evangelist, Stephen Govendor from 1950 (Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:292).
- The white churches are generally known as the 'Group' (AOGG) which for many years were led by John Bond.

It is understandable that the rationale behind the criticism of this organisational polity is racist. "This division into 'groups' lends support to racial division, the main criticism of the AOG by its younger leaders" (Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:236).

However, a distinctive that evolved its uniqueness was the ministry among the blacks more than among the whites. Watt (1992:22) continues in the same vein:

While other Pentecostal churches worked mostly among Afrikaans-speaking whites, Assemblies of God missionaries worked almost exclusively among blacks. Even though the Assemblies of God was controlled by expatriate missionaries, the movement was a black church before any white congregations were formed – it did not develop as the 'daughter' church of a white church.

For the outsiders and the insiders, the structure currently operates as follows: There is one General Executive, elected by the General Conference which convenes biennially (recently there is some proposal that this general conference and its executive's tenure should extend to four years). Different groups meet annually to confer on their issues, and sometimes propose agenda items to be discussed at the general conference. This has in the recent past changed a lot as groups seem to be entrenching themselves into a wider autonomy – a step that slowly but surely

disempowers the General Executive and General Conference. Consequently the period of the General Conference is becoming shorter and shorter; and the number of attendants decreasing, especially from AOGM constituency. Research needs to be undertaken as to rationale for this status quo. On the surface, the General Conference is becoming obscure and insignificant as it no more addresses the concerns of the disgruntled leaders, especially of those emerging educated elite in AOGM and AOGA. Their major concern is the perceived 'tri-cameral system' that governs the church along the racial segregation lines.

### **3.1 A totally indigenous church**

Assemblies of God is a racially divided church, though with the boast of indigenous flavour that the other two classical Pentecostal churches (Apostolic Faith Mission and the Full Gospel Church of God) are not privileged to have. The two major secessions of 1964 and 1981 gave it an impetus to grow. After 1981, AOG was a completely South African Church with no foreign elements in their midst. The three race-based groups (AOGM, AOGA, and AOGG) re-asserted and entrenched themselves and as a result experienced an exponential growth. As a denomination, AOG became a big church (circle) with three circles (AOGM, AOGA, AOGG) inside. These three circles fashioned themselves into different polities. For instance, AOGM under Nicholas Bhengu became a strong Episcopalian entity with a strong apostolic leadership. Centralisation played a role in fashioning AOGM. In a real sense it was an episcopacy characterised by monarchical, managerial, and pastoral overtones. In appealing to Long (2001:13), this episcopacy can be defined as follows: By monarchical it does not mean dictatorial, but the church led and managed by someone (Bhengu) because of his symbolic stature as a pioneer whose responsibility is to maintain the integrity of the church as an institution. By managerial episcopacy is when a leader uses clearly defined and officially delineated authority over ecclesiastical organisation to function with maximum effectiveness. The pastoral episcopacy is when a leader, especially the pioneer facilitates the conduct of affairs within the church, primarily by nurture and persuasion. After Bhengu's departure, AOGM endeavoured to revert to congregational polity with a strong slant of centralisation, but it failed. Legal steps were taken against few individuals who aspired to replace Bhengu. Consequently AOGM became more structured, organised, and centralised more than ever before. The autonomy of the local church in essence was abandoned. Policies and procedures laid down by Bhengu were retrieved and implemented to enhance managerial episcopacy.

The AOGA also underwent some shedding of the old skin. Under the vociferous and charismatic leadership of Colin La Foy, the movement grew and entrenched into central organisation with some limited autonomy of the local church. With

the ageing and passing on of its founders, the AOGA embraced the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) ideals. Some of the aged and current leaders were designated “apostles.” The synodical and congregational polities were mixed to meet at the central nerve, with the apostolic authority or covering from above.

According to Colin La Foy, the founder and leader of the Association of the AOG churches, both James Mullan and Nicholas Bhengu were received by a large percentage of the AOG as apostolic fathers who definitively influenced the direction of the assemblies in their day. He states that his Association presently practices their teachings and continues to recognize the need for the function of five-fold ministry in their assemblies. In continuity with these teachings, their Association has abandoned the idea of popular election and has chosen to appoint leaders on the basis of their ‘grace gifts.’ He refers to the members on his leadership as the ‘apostolic team.’ (Naidoo 2016:29).

The AOGG as a minority sub-structure went through some metamorphosis, especially after the retirement of John Bond. It became a “Group” led by Donovan Coetzee and gravitated towards “apostolic congregationalism.” Local assemblies manage their own affairs under the apostolic oversight of the National Team, wielding some apostolic authority to a certain degree. However, an observation is made that in the recent past, Coetzee endeavours to go for a cookie-cutter pattern, whereby all assemblies must conform to a certain pattern. Some enormous strain is put on the smaller assemblies to balloon into mega-churches where a hi-tech is at the centre of church service. In other words, unknowingly, AOGG is becoming the church of or for the super-elite, the wealthy, and the up-mobile sector of the community. The Great Commission and seeker-friendliness is at stake as the marginalised members of the society may feel a misfit into this type of order. This kind of operation streamlines missional task towards paternalistic approach, where the church brings charitable activities to the poor residing on the socio-economic margins of the wider society. The poor cannot be part of the church but only the recipients of the church’s acts of grace. These facts are disputable, as some AOGG will point out, but to the outsider, this is how things look like. Some may even reinterpret this as a way of keeping the church white rather than mixed or gravitating towards black majority composition. Their feeling is that of a first world church in a third world. Naturally, this trend inevitably leads to no AOGG church planted in any South African village, informal settlement, or a township. It can only exert some influence, but not physically visible.

The same trend disempowers the missional incarnation of the church through leadership development. Ecumenical cooperation for maximum output for com-

munity development becomes narrow. In line with New Apostolic Reformation (this might not be known within AOGG circles):

The local church occupies the centre stage of ordaining the new pastors or church workers. The church staff members are home grown, trained in conferences and are local church DNA compliant. The teaching curriculum is radically innovative and different from the mainstream college or seminary ones (Resane 2008:111).

Despite all this proliferation, it should be noted that the historical emergence and the development of apostolicity within the Assemblies of God reveals and engages issues such as the autonomy of the local church, apostolic succession, the ministry and office of the apostle, and the ecclesial governmental structure of the church (Naidoo 2016:32).

## **4. Rationale for criticism**

### **4.1 Foreigners do not fit in.**

One of the comments one hears about AOG is that it is parochial and silos- entrenched. This is the era of globalisation, and population movements are inevitable. South Africa has become a home of many foreign nationals. They are in our city centres, townships, suburbs, and villages. Some of them come from their home countries carrying the membership of their national Assemblies of God. Their arrival and sojourn in our land should bring some blessings but it does not. Many of them arrive here and opt to join other progressive churches in our neighbourhoods. Apartheid had damaged our socio-cultural component through Groups Areas Act. Foreign nationals feel unsafe in the townships than in the city centres or suburbs.

These foreign nationals cannot join the local AOG church that persists on using any of the local indigenous language during their service. In many parts of Africa, people speak their ethnic languages at home or on the streets, but when coming to church, they always resort to their colonial language, because they take into consideration the fact that the church is universal and multi-lingual. AOGM in the townships, or villages marginalise these people. The worst scenario is AOGM churches in city centres and suburbs still insisting to run their services in isiZulu or Sesotho, including music which may normally be of ancient hymns. Our socio-cultural reality has become our comfort zone, a holy cow never to shift or twist. This is moving against the tide. The question that remains is who will be swept under the current towards drowning?

When the church retreats into her religious enclaves and allows the world to go on its wayward course undeterred, the culture is directed by those with a point of view antithetical to the Bible (Parsley 2007:103).

#### 4.2 Out of tune with socio-cultural reality

Assemblies of God, like many if not all churches in South Africa contributes enormously to the division and separation of races on Sunday more than any other day of the week. It sounds prophetic as Rhodes (1998:222) puts it:

We are living in the last days of a century marked by wars of racial and ethnic animosity, unparalleled in their destructive capacity in the history of humankind...

The younger leaders in AOG are vociferously critical to the church's status quo. This is because they are the global citizens, and cannot find comfort within the rigid frameworks that are in line with the abhorrent racial policies of the past. Some abandon the *laager*, since they do not find explanations that satisfactorily answer their questions. Some are determined to stay to see the change coming. They associate themselves with Parsley (2007:30):

The believer must stand in possession of absolute truth and never relinquish his ground. We must remember that truth always prevails. It may be banned, blocked, burned, or buried in a borrowed tomb, but it cannot be stopped. It will resurrect itself and beat the pall bearers back to the house.

The socio-cultural reality of South Africa is that of non-racialism, non-sexism, and non-partisan. Many if not all the churches in South Africa had robustly engaged in discussions concerning race issues. AOG finds this to be a worldly issue. AOG's good historical involvement had been cluttered by silence regarding socio-cultural menaces that were infused by apartheid. There is no prophetic voice that AOG can be proud of that spoke into the apartheid evils. The leaders, such as Nicholas Bhengu and other pioneers never openly spoke prophetically to condemn apartheid and its social injustices. Watt (1992:155) in referring to him has this to say:

(H)e also believed that through the Gospel Black people would be brought to liberation from political and economic oppression. He believed in the uplifting power of the Gospel and that by coming back to God Blacks would be prepared for nationhood and political power.

Other people labelled Bhengu along these lines in a critical way. Anderson (1992:47) says Bhengu was not a politician, and he did not challenge the status quo; whilst Dubb (1976:119-120) says Bhengu was described by African nationalists as a "sell-out"; hence received several threats to his life. Bond (n.d.101) points out:

In the 1960s some black radicals regarded Bhengu as a “sell-out”. He received threatening letters in the post. “Bhengu, look what you’re doing to us!” “When we get you, we will boil you in oil”

His critics will add that he fulfilled Marx’s critical thesis that religion is an opium of humanity. This is especially as Dubb (1976:27) puts it that Bhengu’s belief in national redemption was through non-violence, good relations with Whites, obedience to the laws of the land and, above all, through faith in God rather than in political action. The fact of the matter is:

To ‘liberate’ the people within the system without changing the social structures that oppress them would be the equivalent of ‘liberating’ people within a prison (Boff in Doyle 2000: 125).

Assemblies of God, like many Pentecostals, historically lacked prophetic address into the structural injustice. They departed from the early church of swimming against the currents of heathenism in socio-political structures. The missional voice has been dampened by rigidly holding on to the outdated approach to universal missional tasks. It is true that:

Many Pentecostals’ preoccupation with their own community at the cost of cooperation with other Christian denominations, management and leadership styles that do not represent the leadership style of Jesus as suffering servant, and their lack of involvement with social issues that determine the welfare of groups of people, are only some factors that Pentecostals should heed as a warning not to conclude too easily that they represent the distinct living style of early Christians (Nel 2015:159).

This is also confirmed by Masuku (2014:157-158) regarding the Pentecostal churches in general:

Members of churches with Pentecostal characteristics regard themselves as passers-by in this world. They do not get involved in ‘things of this world’, commonly referred to as ‘worldly things’. Their concern is mission, to get as many converts (with personal commitment to Jesus Christ) as possible before the return of Christ.

One of the errors that AOG will carry the brunt of, for the generations to come, is passiveness or absence during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is one of the few evangelical movements that cloaked itself with self-righteousness. On the other hand it is in the public domain that there were white AOG policemen who carried out the slaughtering orders of the black people; the white AOG members enlisted in the South

African Army, slaughtering the innocent people in our townships and fighting at the national borders to allay the “terrorists” or “communists” threat to the national security. They sent some chaplains to serve the South African Defence Force or the Police Force. Some white AOG pastors made the black pastors to sleep in the garages of their homes on the way from conferences; and some black pastors had to wash the white pastors’ cars before they could be offered a meal. Coming to the black churches, their disengagement to the hurting world around them necessitated an apology. Preaching peace while there was no peace; and joining the consortium with some puppet leaders such as the Bantustan leaders (Bond elaborates on this courtship in chapter seventeen of his memoirs, including with the monarch, King Sobhuza of Swaziland), Urban Bantu Councils etc. all call for AOG to come back to its senses and apologise to South Africa. Hiding behind “apolitical” component of church membership is a fallacy of not accepting the corporate sin. The excuse of Bond (n.d.266) : “... but in the circumstance it was a pragmatic necessity” should be reinterpreted. The fact remains that AOG is part of the culture that is permeated with social injustice and therefore as a corporate body cannot escape unscathed. “Culture and the incarnated church, the *oikos* of God, are in an inescapably symbiotic relationship” (Rhodes 1998: 112). Failure to appear before formations such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the current Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) is the declaration of the denial of anomalies in the church, qualifying the church to be *odium generis humani* – haters of mankind. Like the early church, Assemblies of God will stand the test of time if “they refused to serve in the army or civilian office” (Nel 2015: 147) where they would be compelled to trample on human dignity and rights.

### 4.3 Out of tune with theo-cultural Pentecostal ecclesiology.

The Pentecostal ecclesiology since Azusa Street days had been marked with multi-racialism. Pentecostals are known over the world to transcend the cultural enclaves and barriers. Where racism is entrenched like in South Africa, Pentecostal Christianity, unfortunately swam against this spiritual surge. The three classical Pentecostal churches in South Africa (AFM, AOG, FGCG) bear witness to historically intertwine themselves with racism. Kärkkäinen (2002:69-70) agrees with other Pentecostal leaders that:

From its beginning, Pentecostalism has been characterized by variety, and therefore any kind of classifications are at best generalizations. One obvious reason is its multicultural, multinational beginnings and growth in so many cultural settings.

Generally the Pentecostal ecclesiology views itself as a charismatic fellowship. In this fellowship, there is an experience of the Spirit which brings a sense of part-

nership. This fellowship is deeper and more satisfying than any mere human love whether social, parental, conjugal or other. The Pentecostal fellowship is *koinonia* which carries a rich meaning of fellowship, partnership, sharing or even stewardship. It significantly carries the meaning of God's relationship with His people. This means Pentecostals are bonded together with God in Spirit for a common purpose.

The believers of the Azusa Street Revival had fellowship in what some English Bibles call "one accord" or "together in one place" or habitual meeting together" For instance "They *all joined together* constantly in prayer..." (1:14). "When the day of Pentecost came, they were *all together* in one place" (2:1) "All the believers were *together and had everything in common*" (2:44). "Every day they continued to *meet together* in the temple courts... and *ate together* with glad and sincere hearts" (2:46). "All the believers were *one in heart and mind* (4:32). "And all the believers used to *meet together* in Solomon's Colonnade" (5:12) etc. Wagner (1994: 104) clearly comments on this fellowship:

While they were growing in their vertical relationship to God, the new believers were also growing in their horizontal relationship to each other in Christian fellowship. This relationship is heavily stressed here, mentioned in four of the six verses in the passage. One of the key factors of church health is to design ways and means for fellowship to be an integral part of church life week in and week out. If it is absent, the church will tend to plateau or decline. New members must be absorbed ferily rapidly. This is one of the reasons he cell church movement is having an increasing impact, not only in Korea where it is most highly developed, but also in many other parts of the world.

Pentecostals remind the broader Christian faith that Unity is Strength. It means brothers living together in unity (Psalm 133). For "There is no genuine community without active communion, without the active and mutual sharing of life, love, and truth" (Lawler & Shanahan 1995:9). As Moltmann (1992:118) says; "We give one another life and come alive from one another." Pentecostal assemblies are intended to have a positive and helpful outcome, which is encouraging one another.

There is no doubt that immeasurable influence for good can come from powerful example of right-minded people in association with others (Guthrie 1975:337).

Fellowship is having that which is in common. It means partnership with others. It is principally the idea of sharing together. It is the communion of the faithful with God in Christ through the Spirit, and hence their common participation in Christian goods. The racial division in any format is not in tune with the biblical teachings on unity.

The unity that Assemblies of God in South Africa was to concern itself with is that of living and a vital unity. It is not a mechanical unity. It is the unity of the Spirit that starts from within and works outwardly. It is something essentially organic and vital, therefore not artificially produced. It is something which is inevitable because of its very nature. It is not just external, but an internal unity. It is the unity that can only be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Assemblies of God's testimony as Pentecostals should be that of a strong sense of unity that makes a great society. The church is God's new society, held together by the unity of the Spirit (Duffield and van Cleave 1983). This experience of unity must be visibly demonstrated in all socio-cultural realities such as church polity, structure, ethos, and demographics of contextual location of the church. The liturgies and politics embraced should respect people regardless of who they are. Assemblies of God Church,

as people made in the image and likeness of God, *should* bear the very character of God. Any condition that dehumanizes humanity must be interrogated because God is concerned with every human being, especially the most vulnerable (Okyere-Manu 2015:128).

Racism, whether legislated, subliminal, structural, or criminalised, dehumanizes people, therefore should be condemned, eradicated, or de-legislated in order to enhance Christian witness in the world.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the marginalisation of rhetoric voices speaking against this "group" system, there are certain traits emerging from within the AOG that are noteworthy. For instance, there are strong indications of dissatisfaction by emerging church leaders with the *status quo* in their denomination. The call for reform and restructuring poses the question whether the AOG in South Africa is reaching the crossroads particularly in the area of ecclesiology. Does the AOG need to review their hierarchical structures? Should the call by the progressive and younger AOG leaders for reform be taken seriously by the AOG General Executive, this would necessitate a study of the original intent of the founding fathers of the movement. AOG is not a new movement but a missional movement rising from within the ranks of the Pentecostal tradition. The broader Pentecostal ecclesiology challenges their structures, ministry and mission as the church. The departure of some influential leaders away from AOG structures is not a move away from Pentecostal truth and constructs. It is out of frustration that the structural organization of their church and its formulation of doctrine is divorced from the socio-cultural and theo-cultural realities of

the context in which they operate, the ecclesiology they confess, and the biblical text they preach.

Since 1994, South Africa had changed socio-politically and socio-culturally. Racism is no more legalised, and the Constitution of the land embraces human rights. Socio-politically, South Africa is a democracy that embraces freedom of association. Socio-culturally, South Africa is now a multiracial and multicultural state where no human being should be discriminated against based on race, tribe, sexual orientation, or economic status. The church should lead in these initiatives. Assemblies of God evolved out of the “Group” system that articulated and evolved into racialized conglomerates. This is moving against the tide of multinationalism that embraces all initiatives mentioned here (multiculturalism, democracy, multiracialism etc.). It also moves against the ideal of the church as a charismatic *koinonia* where all people are accepted regardless of their race, ethnic origin, social status, disability etc.

Hundred years of active participation in the missional activities had passed, but the socio-cultural reality is expressively race-based. This calls for self-search that may lead to spirituality where arrogance, denialism and ignorance will fizzle in the air. To arrive at this there must be:

### 5.1 Biblical hermeneutics on multiracialism.

Assemblies of God in South Africa is reputable for passivism or reservation towards theological scholarship. It is generally known that “The obvious weakness of the majority of Pentecostal preachers has been the lack of sound hermeneutical guidelines to move from text to exegesis and to exposition” (Mbamalu 2015:5). This opens the gap for the necessity of biblical understanding of the menaces of racialism within and by the community of the saints. Archer (2009) gives a focal thesis on Pentecostal hermeneutics whereby Spirit, Scripture, and Community collude to bring a better understanding of the Bible. The fundamental truth is “Tolerating and embracing one another is very important in the journey to reconciliation after the long time spent walking our separate paths during apartheid” (Baloyi 2016:57). Biblical hermeneutics should lead to critical reflection of ecclesiology. This inevitably leads to the fundamental integration of unity and mission.

### 5.2 Pentecostal spirituality

Is there spirituality among the Pentecostals? This is picked up even within the Assemblies of God fraternity regarding the leading of the Spirit in the polity. The people who claim to be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led yet perpetuating the racialistic organogram or operating principles leaves many with questions that cannot be easily associated with spirituality. Many Assemblies of God problems are internal and external

criticisms. This is because spirituality is construed. A passion for the kingdom does not exonerate *koinonia* from responsible structuring. As Land (2010:182) points out that Pentecostal spirituality which is the fundament of all theology, is construed; hence the integration of beliefs and practices in the affections are compromised. Pentecostal spirituality is in agreement with African spirituality which places no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular; as Nkurunziza (2013:62) points out:

Their spirituality does not separate physical and spiritual, natural or supernatural, personal and social – all are interconnected. African spirituality emphasizes oneness over categories, commonality over individuality, enchantment over materiality, wholeness over separation.

### 5.3 Togetherness leads to learning with critics.

Currently, it can be hypothetically pointed out that Assemblies of God is splintered into few independent autonomous groups that do not relate to each other. This article pointed out the Assemblies of God (AOG), which is composed of three groups (AOGM, AOGA, and AOGG), International Assemblies of God (IAG), Assemblies of God Fellowship (AGF), Coastal Assemblies of God, and the Emmanuel Assemblies of God. Hypothetically, can all these groupings confederate and become groups (small circles) within a bigger circle called Assemblies of God in South Africa under one General Executive with one General Assembly every five years or so? This will perpetuate the founding culture of “Groups Church” with each group maintaining its culture, operations, and internal structure. It is an open secret that Assemblies of God has a track record of subsequence, elitism, and divisiveness from its early inception. It disintegrated due to structure, constitution, freedom, administration, and rigidity to a certain degree. There is a call for re-interpretation of the doctrine of the Spirit for each group. This is well-stated by Macchia (2006:156):

The Spirit is the Spirit of communion. Spirit baptism implies communion. This is why it leads to a shared love, a shared meal, a shared mission, and the proliferation/enhancement of an interactive charismatic life.

The divergent groups cannot only convene for unity in mission without an in-depth dialogue. Dialogue is to be pursued within the theological framework and passion for *they may be one* – our Messiah’s plea and cry. The critics, after hearing the other side of the story, tend to understand and come closer. “Critical debate about propositions and doctrine can indeed be liberating and transformative” (De Villiers in Venter 2016:41). This enables participatory knowledge that transcends all

kinds of boundaries. Parochial self- assessment of each “Group” should embrace transparency and come closer through dialogue.

Dialogue is a special kind of discourse that enables people with different perspectives and worldviews to work together to dispel mistrust and create a climate of good faith (Resane in Venter 2016:62).

The time is now for Assemblies of God to come back to the senses of seeing the importance of entering “into a new awareness of sanctity in deep communion with everyone and everything that exists past, present and future” (Moss 2009:57). If there is any price to pay for reconciliation, so be it. “True reconciliation in South Africa is a necessity, although it is an expensive project” (Baloyi 2016:51). Striving for the unity of Assemblies of God will become a witness to Christ while its mission will become an obligation to draw all Christ’s people together. “It is this essential (=belonging to the very essence of) ecclesiological integration of unity and mission that has yet to take place” (Saayman 1988:113).

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