


# South African Pentecostal Missions Parochial or Incarnational?

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## Abstract

This paper intends to unravel the historical development of South African classical Pentecostalism missions, looking at their strategies, methodologies, and options through the epochs of colonialism, apartheid, and democracy. Each of the three classical Pentecostal denominations i.e. Apostolic Faith Mission, Assemblies of God, and the Full Gospel will be referenced throughout the paper to substantiate the research question of whether South African Pentecostalism is parochial or incarnational in their missional focus and activities. From the early twentieth century when Pentecostal missions entered South African turf, colonialism hovered over its methodology and when apartheid ascended the political landscape, Pentecostal missions complied with the political ideology in their strategies. During the advent of the current era of democracy, Pentecostal missions withdrew into a *laager*, opting for parochial strategies, while at the same time fighting for missional incarnationality. This tension is addressed through the literature study. The socio-political involvement, social justice initiatives, and economic engagement are acts of being incarnational.

**Keywords:** Pentecostal, mission, missionary, church, missional, parochial, incarnational

**Contribution:** This article demonstrates how Classical Pentecostalism in South Africa's methods was influenced by socio-political ideologies such as colonialism and apartheid. Complying with these methods created some current vulnerabilities facing Pentecostal missions. With the dawn of democracy, Pentecostal missions must embrace the new ideals of unity, non-racialism, non-sexism, and democracy. The shift from parochialism to incarnational expressions of missions is applauded.

## 1. Introduction

Classical Pentecostalism in South Africa emerged and evolved in the early twentieth century as the missionary movement from North America and Western Europe. The broad category of Classical Pentecostalism, directly or indirectly, can

trace its lineage to the famous Azusa Street Mission (Synan 1971:114). The famous Pentecostal pioneer missionary, John G. Lake was an elder from Dowie's Zion City and was greatly influenced by Azusa Street Revival. Lake, the regular visitor to Azusa has reported to William Seymour of the Pentecostal events in South Africa (Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:229). The epicentre of Pentecostal mission in South Africa was Wakkerstroom in the Mpumalanga Province where John Alexander Dowie's Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion doctrines of holiness and healing gained roots among Africans. This awakening was enhanced by Azusa Street events. Realising the unstoppable speed of South African Pentecostal fires, Dowie sent Daniel Bryant as a missionary to South Africa in 1904 (Sundkler 1976:18). By some divine design, Bryant encountered a Dutch Reformed missionary, Pieter L. Le Roux who embraced the Pentecostal experience and was water baptised along with 140 Africans.

From 1908, South African Pentecostalism started to see the influx of foreign missionaries from the West, the strategy that qualifies the Classical Pentecostal denominations (Apostolic Faith Mission, Assemblies of God, and Full Gospel Church of God) as missionary churches. It is therefore missionally legitimate to dub South African Classical Pentecostalism as a historical missionary movement that evolved due to foreign missionary sending system. Most of these missionaries were sent by their overseas agencies and very few came on their own in obedience to the Great Commission. The strategy worked for planting Pentecostal faith on South African soil.

It should be noted that Pentecostalism is flourishing and gaining ground in the African continent. Its grand success of missionary activities locates it at the center of importance in global Christianity, therefore inviting it for dialogue on the ecumenical agenda (Creemers 2018:18). Scholars like Adedibu (2015:40) are correct that 'the shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the global north to the global south has overlapped with the global rise of Pentecostalism characterised by its emphasis on mission.'

## **2. Pentecostal missionaries' historical methods**

The historical roots of Pentecostalism within the Holiness Movement of the previous century entrenched the doctrine of holiness in Pentecostalism of the twentieth century. Remembering that Pentecostal missions historically stood in the revivalist tradition, characterised by an enormous evangelistic zeal (Creemers 2018:18), accompanied by miracles, healings, and prophecies. This can be discerned in Dowie's passionate promotion of Keswick's holiness views (Gee 1971:65, 66). Healing became a manifestation of Pentecostal power (Dayton 1987:136, 137). This notion is taken further by Menzies that 'Pentecostals focus on "power encounter" and healing as central elements of the proclamation of the gospel. The triune immersion of believing adults was one of the hallmarks of Dowie's Zionism and spilled over to some Pentecostal groups out of Azusa. Central to Classical Pentecostalism is the doctrine of speaking in tongues as evidence of

the baptism with the Holy Spirit consequent to conversion. This doctrine was popularised by Charles Perham of Topeka Bible School from as early as 1901.

Theological dogma and clerical requirements were never considered prerequisites to the mission fielding. Saayman (1993:42) captures it well 'Most Pentecostal movements came into being as missionary institutions and their mission work was not the result of some thought out theological decision, and so policy and methods were formed mostly in the crucible of missionary praxis.' The missional message of Pentecostal missionaries was the manifestation of the Spirit's power demonstrated by miracles such as healing, deliverance from poverty, and gaining some higher spiritual experience evidenced by speaking in tongues. Church planting and growth within politically dictated injunctions was the Pentecostal missions' vulnerability as human relations were impacted negatively and even pastors of different race groups could not forge any fraternity. Warrington (2008:247) correctly indicates that Pentecostalism 'treats mission as the means of the enlargement of the church' and nothing else.

### **3. Pentecostal missionaries' socio-political options.**

Pentecostalism universally emerged at the height of colonialism and increased during the ascendancy of apartheid in South Africa. It was at the time when Africans, including African Americans, were sociologically and politically at the lowest ebb due to racism, discrimination, and disenfranchising making them the vulnerable masses as their dignity was trampled upon by white supremacists. This *status quo* located and settled the Pentecostal mission into some vulnerabilities. Pentecostal missionaries opted to align themselves with the *status quo* where Africans were pushed to the periphery of the socio-economic mechanisations of the time. Like their predecessors of mainline Christianity, the missionary and the colonialist became bedfellows, while in some areas they ran parallel with each other. This parallel coexistence was in tune with the separate development that both the colonialists and apartheid architects regarded as the preferred option. The prophetic role was parochial, speaking of one's internal concerns rather than one's ecclesiastical concerns. Africans became the mission field and white Pentecostal missionaries became the paternalists calling the shots as to when, who, and how should missions be done. This is expressed by Anderson (2006:214) that "'Mission" was mainly understood as "foreign mission" mostly from "white" to "other" peoples and these missionaries were mostly untrained and inexperienced.' For instance, from as early as 1908 when the Apostolic Faith Mission was founded 'white members determined the constitution, and power was vested in an all-white executive council' (Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:234). The Assemblies of God emerged and gained grounds as a missionary church, 'originally a church of blacks only, though, as usual, under white control' (Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:236). The year 1938 is crucial to Assemblies of God's history. This is when Nicholas Bhengu and his two associates, Alfred Gumede and Gideon Buthelezi joined the

movement. Indeed, their affiliation set the stage for the future participation of black leaders in the Assemblies of God national executive, a unique feature among Pentecostal churches in South Africa (Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:236). Sentiments that reigned within the Full Gospel Church of God were undoubtedly on parallel development which was in synchrony with the apartheid system. This demonstrates that Classical Pentecostalism in South Africa opted for mission activities that were in line with the parallel development ideology that synchronised well with colonial indirect rule and apartheid's self-governing under the radar of a white supremacist to ensure that African Pentecostals ran and remain within their racial or ethnic lanes. Pentecostal foreign missionaries, as per Raboroko (2014:102), 'due to their skin pigmentation took advantage and literally treated African pastors as apartheid white South Africans will otherwise treat "indigenous" Africans in general.'

White Pentecostals continued to maintain their citadels of peace (white designated areas with their white-only churches), but subliminally or unconsciously entrenched their missional activities into some vulnerable positions. Resane (2018:3) avers:

White Pentecostals were, except for a few voices, generally passive towards racial segregation. The policies of the apartheid state protected their comfort zones and their supremacist egos of preserving their European-ness and ethnic identity.

They could still cross the railway lines, bridges, or a *koppies* (hillocks) that were used by the regime to demarcate racial residences. Their crossing was missionary to convert Africans to Christ and become Spirit-filled so that their worldview can only be eschatological, hoping for a better life in the sweet by and by. Like their counterparts in the mainline denominations, especially the Dutch Reformed Churches, they could finish their church services at 10h00 on Sunday and cross the bridges to townships or villages for 11h00 church services that they had to dominate. It is for this reason that many township churches, even after gaining some form of autonomy continue to maintain their Sunday meetings at 11h00.

One observes that the Classical Pentecostal missiological outlook in South Africa mainly opted for racial segregation and prophetic numbness on social justice. Opposing the government was commensurate with terrorism and conterminous with communism by many Pentecostal leaders. 'Championing justice was equated with rebellion, terrorism, communism or *swart gevaar*' (Resane 2016:3). Any social justice proponent, black or white, was a communist suspect. For instance, when the International Assemblies of God split from the Assemblies of God in Mamelodi, Pretoria, the long-standing member of the Assemblies of God, John Bond, was there trying to reconcile the two factions. The meeting was chaotic with possible physical harm and injuries. When police received a call to intervene, they were told 'a communist is causing chaos at the church' (Raboroko 2014:35), and John Bond when asked 'Are you a communist?' he responded by showing his ministerial credentials. Later in his life, the same John Bond recorded that historically, Assemblies of God distanced themselves from political statements to

such an extent that ‘persons thought to be openly voicing political criticisms of the government were reproved by the General Executive’ (Bond 2000:276). For many years, Frank Chikane from Apostolic Faith Mission was dubbed a terrorist by even those in the same fold of AFM, his home church. Pentecostal missions were parochial, locking itself into a *laager* or a cocoon, wanting nothing to do with this world that was deemed evil.

#### 4. Pentecostal Missions New Challenges

The democratic era which began at the dawn of the 1990s and was fully realised in 1994, called and challenged Pentecostals to engage introspectively. Before this era, parallel missions were done along racial lines, but with the advent of democracy, changes in doing missions were inevitable. Earlier missionaries were in cohorts with political systems. Pentecostal missions’ unicity was slowly encroaching on separateness of the Pentecostal faith. In 1985, the white Executive Council of Apostolic Faith Mission called other three sections of the church to chart the way forward for the church as the new era was looming due to prevailing winds of change in the South African political landscape. The Assemblies of God General Conference drafted and adopted a Statement in 1989 in Mmabatho. The statement was formulated due to the internal unhappiness that remaining silent equaled supporting the *status quo* (Bond 2000:277). This statement is neither political nor theological. It is more apologetic – seeking to justify the then-current scenario prevailing in the church that is appertaining to a socio-political landscape where human dignity faced perilous threats. The statement was like an appeal for people to understand the historical and methodical approaches of Assemblies of God’s self-defining.

In the democratic era, South African Pentecostal missions operate in the envisaged united, democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist context. The historically divided Pentecostal missions were practically porous and vulnerable. New challenges emerged with the emerging new dawn of a new political landscape. The challenges facing Classical Pentecostals are here outlined.

1. **Unity:** The internationally and nationally divided mission endeavours are compelled to forge or work towards unity. The Pentecostal influence is not humanly viable unless by rediscovering the unicity of missionality. It is for this reason that the Apostolic Faith Mission in 1985 embarked onto the road towards the unity of the four sections of the church. The same notion or sentiment of unity was reinforced at the Assemblies of God Pentecostal Mission Consultation held in Kenya in 2011 where the Latin American Statement of Cooperation was made; ‘It does mean communication between us, and sharing our support and respect to other missionary movements in the body of Christ, even when they have a different philosophy of work’ (Miller & Lwesya 2014:178). After a century of self-assertion by Pentecostals, the reality has hit home for them to acquiesce that ‘the different faith communities should search for ways of common witness without seeking “narrow, strategic denominational benefit”’ (Creemers 2018:45).

2. **Democracy:** South African Pentecostalism is paternalistic, parochial, and patriarchal and faces challenges of democratic ideals that have been insulated into South African democratic and cultural fabric. Decision-making and policy direction do not necessarily come from top to bottom, from white regime to the mission field, which is Africans, from patriarchy to matriarchy, and from the racially privileged minority (whites) to the marginalised or segregated majority (Africans). For Pentecostals to be relevant in democratic South Africa, Volf's inclusion and embrace (1996) is an inevitability. Racially separate synodal processes are no more a norm. The case in point here is Assemblies of God in South Africa which still maintains some synodal processes based on or dictated by the "Group System" that historically aligned with apartheid's racial segmentation. In this system, the polity still maintains Black (Assemblies of God-Back to God), Coloured and Indian (Assemblies of God Association), and White (Assemblies of God Group) components. According to Resane:

These groups disintegrated, reformed, and ultimately reformulated into the current tri-cameral or tripod structure based on racial lines as per the dictates of the apartheid government's ideology of separate development (2018:3).

Claiming one elected General Executive, one Constitution, and one General Conference (Anderson & Pillay in Elphick & Davenport 1997:217), though separately governed by a "group system" does not reflect unicity in missionality. Divided denominations cannot express or reflect a united mission. It remains vulnerable as it receives scathing attacks from epistemological constructs such as theology, sociology, philosophy, and contemporary religion studies. Cultural compositions lead to cultural worship styles, but these though welcome and encouraged, are not to be barriers to expressing democratic ideals in missions' guidelines and directions of the church. Pentecostal missions in South Africa face no other direction to be missionally assertive than to embrace democratic principles where equality, power-sharing, and inclusivity are embraced as a missional culture and *praxis*. This is captured by Mampane (2023:23) that 'Democracy in Africa has also meant the empowerment of women, which has resulted in a relative transformation in gender relations.'

3. **Non-racialism:** Classical Pentecostalism in South Africa is historically known for entrenching racism in its missional endeavours. According to Warrington (2008:234) 'racism has been a painful and segregating issue in especially US and South African Pentecostalism.' When other churches denounced apartheid and its subliminal psychotic impacts, Pentecostals resorted to spiritual vacillation and eschatological utopia. A certain leniency towards premillennial dispensationalism in Pentecostalism contributed towards its prophetic passivism 'because it was assumed that Jesus was soon to return and therefore there was no time for political engagement' (Warrington 2008:235). Pentecostal converts were duped into believing that the world and its systems such as seeking justice, fighting for one's rights, etc. was evil as the

better world is yet to come. Pacifism ruled supreme as Pentecostals were not to engage in any fights because 'Christ sent his disciples into all the world, not to improve society using laws, nor to settle international quarrels using wars but only to save men' (Booth-Clibborn in Pipkin & Beaman 2016:7). This historical appendage continues to locate Pentecostal missions to some vulnerability as theologians, church historians and sociologists continue to refer to it as a negative image irremovable from South African Pentecostalism. In the new democratic dispensation eclipsed by the culture of human rights, racial discrimination is not only unconstitutional but is also criminal. Places of worship should now be open to all races where Pentecostals can experience *perichoretical* communion with the Triune God, especially as this trinitarian God is missional in character. Entering sociality with God is identifying with this missional God who is the Creator of all things visible and invisible; and that with him, no discrimination of any categorisation is observed.

4. **Non-sexism:** Patriarchy works against democracy, unity, and inclusivity. Patriarchy is a sexist attitude towards females and people of different gender preferences. Generally, and historically classical Pentecostals ordained women to do mission work, but not to pastor the churches, especially when men are present. Paul's texts (1 Timothy 2:9-15; 1 Corinthians 14:33-38; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16) are used as hermeneutical principles and policies to deny women pastoral leadership. It can be historically pointed out that many women were part of the Pentecostal missionary upsurge since the birth of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century. McClung (1986) alludes to this that many women became missionaries and functioned in ways that were close to them in their original countries. This is confirmed by one noted Assemblies of God historian, Edith Blumhofer (1989:137) reinforces by saying that:

In the early Pentecostal movement, having the "anointing" was far more important than one's sex. As evangelistic hands carried the full gospel across the country, women who were recognised as having the anointing of the Holy Spirit shared with men in the preaching ministry.

The topic of women's ordination within the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) has been a subject of significant discussion and debate. In recent years, some Apostolic Faith Mission congregations and regions embarked on ordaining women, in recognition of their calling and contributions towards the missionality of the church. These bold steps reflect some developing trends towards gender equality in this Pentecostal denomination.

However, the AFM has been ordaining women as pastors since 1991. These ordained female pastors are always complaining about 'a lack of equity with their male counterparts in terms of salaries, serving of the Lord's Communion, and administering Water Baptism' (De Jager, Botes, Savhasa, & Smit 2022:53). Local assemblies seem uncomfortable to call a female pastor.

Historically the Assemblies of God ordained women as pastors since 1914, and this was reversed in 1935, when women continued to be credentialled as workers and not as pastors. South African Assemblies of God is in one accord with Assemblies of God internationally regarding this practice. The topic of women's ordination is a hot potato in South African Assemblies of God. It is a topic that is avoided and circumvented by all men possible in all three groups (Back to God, Association, and the Group). As can be expected, the Pauline texts are taken as concrete rationale for repudiating women pastoral authority and leadership. The bottom line is:

There is a predominately masculine culture within the AOG. This culture finds its way into the nature of movement events and public communications and, even more insidiously, into the very structures of church and pastoral leadership (Resane 2018:9).

Women's ordination within Full Gospel family churches is diverse, and different affiliations maintain varying stances. There is a greater element of supporting women's ordination, allowing them to serve as pastors, ministers, and evangelists. Full Gospel Church thinks that the active role of spiritual gifts includes imparting leadership gifts equally to women as to men. However, there are still some conservative elements holding to traditional hermeneutics that bar women from positions of ecclesiastical authority over men.

Women's ordination into pastoral ministry and church executive positions will demonstrate that Pentecostals are non-sexist, and they embrace people of different genders. As things are, the Apostolic Faith Mission seems to be forging ahead to destroy hostilities towards women ordination, while Assemblies of God continues to debate the issue without concluding due to some cultural biases, specifically based on some ethnic stereotypes. For instance, while some progressive thinkers in highly urbanised areas such as Gauteng and liberal provinces such as Northwest feel comfortable with women's leadership issues, the traditionalists concentrated in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces hold to conservative proclivities that women cannot lead men. This is captured by Jali (2020:2) that:

Xhosa cultural practices view women as perpetual minors and inferior to men in all respects. These attitudes and beliefs translate into the church where women are consequently perceived as not cognitively competent enough to lead and dependent on men in all leadership matters. (p. 2).

The lament for marginalising women from ordination echoes from ecclesiastical, academic, civic, and political formations. Mampane (2023:26) highlights this:

Scholars lament the lesser numbers of ordained female leaders in Pentecostal spaces in spite of the fact that the beliefs of Pentecostalism are based on a democratic practice of spirituality and respect for spiritual gifts, regardless of class, gender or race.

It will take a long time to deal with the vulnerabilities of women in Pentecostal missions since 'Marginalisation and restriction of women within religious circles have become a social norm' (Resane 2024:5).

## 5. Pentecostals incarnational methods.

Paternalistic and parochial tendencies within South African Classical Pentecostalism, including rivalries such as the proliferation within Assemblies of God, where there is International Assemblies of God, Assemblies of God Fellowship, Coastal Assemblies of God, and Emmanuel Assemblies, ecumenical co-operation is difficult. Proliferated and divided confessional faith makes weak missionality as an explanation of differences or similarities with other fraternal partners take time to explain. Paternalism where white missionaries still dominate creates a reluctance to listen to the opinions of nationals (Anderson 2006:215). This paternalism is intertwined with racism, though there are always some noble exceptions (Anderson 2000b: 193). The wheel has turned around, Pentecostalism continues to gain indigeneity, and white dominance is diminishing. Autonomy of missions takes root as every local community seeks to exert itself missionally by presence or incarnational evangelism. Incarnational ministries contribute to exponential growth of churches. The growth is largely attributed to Pentecostal missions' resilience and adaptability to African cultural values and expressions (Kangwa 2017:157). Despite historical flaws due to parochialism and paternalism, 'their evangelistic methods continue to be flexible, pragmatic, and astonishingly successful' (Anderson 2000a:2). Their flexibility ensures their contextual character to provide answers to pertinent questions out of the culture of African spirituality proliferated with witchcraft, demonic activities, poverty, sickness, etc. Their *kerygma* addresses practical needs like sickness, unemployment, infertility, poverty, cosmic powers, etc. Power encounters and healing are the central elements of the proclamation of the Gospel. According to Menzies (2010:6), 'this is seen as the reason for the Pentecostal effectiveness in mission, at least in some parts of the world.'

The incarnational ministries such as food distribution, bursaries, taking care of the sick, orphanages, political involvement, seeking justice, etc. all make Pentecostal missions incarnational and visible in the hurting cosmos. To impress this, Lowenberg (in Miller & Lwesya 2014:170) highlights Africa Assemblies of God's mission's stance as follows:

Our priority missional activity is apostolic function, bringing the good news of the kingdom to peoples yet unreached in order to establish churches that will become *self-leading, self-supporting, self-evangelising* (among their own people and language group), *self-sending* (to people groups different from themselves), *self-theologising* (making the gospel, worship, and expressions of faith culturally relevant while biblically consistent), and *self-assisting* (believing communities sharing with the poor and needy among them with priority on believers).

This incarnational ministry calls for strong partnerships where all stakeholders work together in synchrony to impact communities missionally for the sake of the kingdom of God. It calls for a kingdom mentality where the love of Christ reigns supreme rather than the individual's affiliation or association. This calls for Pentecostal missions to move out of parochial chambers to join

the ecumenical arena to advance the kingdom of God. Anderson (2006:234) identifies parochialism and rivalry as contributory factors towards ecumenical disengagement. This disengagement leaves the Pentecostal mission in some vulnerable state of triumphalism which works against what Yong (2008) calls the welcoming Spirit that brings together a theology of hospitality and interreligious practices issuing in the practice of interreligious dialogue.

## 6. Conclusion

Classical Pentecostal missions started in South Africa with salient features of paternalism, parochialism, and patriarchalism. These missions evolved into the missionary denominations such as the Apostolic Faith Mission, Assemblies of God, and the Full Gospel Church of God. The western missionaries aligned themselves with colonial and apartheid ideologies, tainting their missional endeavours with racism and oppression of the indigenous population. This evolved into some vulnerabilities enhanced by supremacist ideals. Their supremacist attitudes crippled their missionality. However, in the new era of democracy, Pentecostal missions did some introspection by looking into their missions' strategy and how they govern themselves in a united, democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist society.

To be relevant, Pentecostal missions opted for incarnational ministry, moving away from promoting eschatological utopia by acknowledging that the world needs the incarnation of the love of Christ in the hurting world. There is a new emphasis on trying to move from vulnerabilities of historical criticisms towards maintaining a 'dialectic between the social and the spiritual... whereby it is believed that it is only by the Holy Spirit that a true vision of reality can be perceived. This vision sees both the spiritual and social needs of humankind' (Johns 2010:96-97). Pentecostals now address the felt needs of the people by providing for the poor, orphans, the sick, etc. Furthermore, their socio-political involvement is the expression of their desire for natural and social justice. Their soteriological experiences and pneumatological encounters propel their missional endeavours. Richie (2011:102) captures it well that:

Pentecostals have unique missiological and pneumatological concerns and can make unique missiological and pneumatological contributions. Unique missiology and pneumatology arise naturally, perhaps even inevitably and irretrievably, out of Pentecostal history, identity, spirituality, and theology.

Pentecostal missions remain vulnerable regardless of their exodus from parochial mode towards incarnational exertions. History and oppressive ideologies remain the marks they carry even in the new dispensations. New reforms within Pentecostal communities are needed as the passage out of the

Pentecostals are called upon to engage in robust debates on women's ordination to allay criticisms that they are patriarchal and sexist in their socio-theological hermeneutics. There is a need for Pentecostal scholars to immerse themselves in

social exegesis in order to reassert and realign in the humanistic societies guided by inclusiveness where people are embraced without any regard to gender or racial classification.

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