



CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ENTERPRISE  
Informing South African Policy

# UNDER THE RADAR

Pentecostalism in South Africa and  
its potential social and economic role



**This project has been funded by:**

The Ahmanson Charitable Community Trust

Fieldstead and Company

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia

The Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA), Boston University

The John Templeton Foundation

The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation

The Pew Charitable Trusts

Cover: The Grace Bible Church in Pimville, Soweto. Subsidiary buildings in the complex are still under construction.



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its potential social and economic role

March 2008

CDE In Depth provides South African decision-makers with detailed analyses, based on original research, of key national policy issues.

Series editor: Ann Bernstein

This report is an edited and abridged version of a comprehensive research report on this project which is available from CDE. The full-length report was written by Professor Lawrence Schlemmer, who also designed, conducted and reported on the survey components of the research. The project was led by CDE's executive director, Ann Bernstein, and managed by two CDE research managers, Dr Stephen Rule and Dr Tim Clynick. Professor Peter Berger of Boston University – CDE's international associate – and Professor James Hunter of the University of Virginia provided valuable advice. This abridged version was written by Dr Sandy Johnston.

Published in March 2008 by

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ISBN: 978-0-9802628-3-4

# Contents

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Introduction	5
The South African context	6
Faith and development: a silent revolution?	9
The Pentecostal movement	10
Pentecostal churches in South Africa	15
The Pentecostal impact	17
The social impact of Pentecostalism in SA	23
Can the social potential of Pentecostalism be realised?	28
Research reports produced for this project	35
Endnotes	36



A ministry of the Rhema South Family Church, a branch of the Rhema Bible Church in Johannesburg's southern suburbs.

“The social and moral consequences of conversion to Protestantism are important. The ethos of (what Max Weber called) ‘the Protestant ethic’ shows itself to be remarkably helpful to people in the throes of rapid modernisation and of the ‘take-off’ stage of modern economic growth. The same ethos also continues to evince its time-honoured affinities with the ‘spirit of capitalism’, with individualism, with a hunger for education, and (last but not least) with a favourable disposition toward democratic politics ... These affinities are in the main unintended; they are the result ... of the unanticipated behavioural consequences of both doctrine and religious experience.”

– Peter Berger, foreword to David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (1993)

# Introduction

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**H**ow does organised religion continue to defy predictions of its demise in the face of modernisation, rationality, and secularisation? Why do religious faiths have more voluntary and committed adherents today than at any other time in human history?

Many political and social leaders, and the technocrats who surround them, prefer to downplay or even ignore religious faith as an element in their calculations. However, faith is a reality in the modern world as pervasive as money, technology, and all the other forces shaping it, and interacts with those forces in a number of powerful ways.

Sometimes faith is best understood by those who do not subscribe to it. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, was an atheist, but insisted that if religion did not exist, institutions would have to be created to fulfil the vital functions it performs for society and for humanity.<sup>1</sup> Durkheim saw religion as a force for social integration, a source of meaning in our material world, and a strengthener of the human spirit: ‘... a believer who has communicated with his god,’ he wrote, ‘is not merely a man who sees new truths ... he is a man who is stronger!’<sup>2</sup>

The durability and adaptability of religious faiths and their dynamic interaction with other powerful forces in our globalising world have begun to attract the attention of researchers. Among them are those whose interest lies in understanding the social, economic and political factors that promote or retard development in emerging societies. One specific focus of this kind of research has been the spectacular growth of Pentecostal Christian churches in developing societies in Latin America and the Far East.

Noting similar explosive growth in Pentecostal churches in post-apartheid South Africa, CDE, in conjunction with Professor Peter Berger of Boston University and Professor James Hunter of the University of Virginia, obtained funding to undertake research with the aim of opening up a discussion of the possible developmental implications of this phenomenon.

This project has revealed a world of activity, energy, and entrepreneurship previously unknown to an otherwise well-informed South African think-tank. Flying under the radar screens of politicians, intellectuals, academics, and journalists are a large number of institutions and individuals that are actively concerned about and working on questions of values and personal behaviour. These concerns include family life, personal responsibility and the freedom to act, unemployment, skills creation, and a range of other national concerns.

As a result, there could well be more energy and activity in civil society in South Africa today, albeit of a more religious nature, than anyone has guessed. The country might have considerably more social capital than is currently assumed in popular or political debates, and the so-called African renaissance could have a religious dimension that few politicians, intellectuals and analysts have even begun to imagine.

This report describes CDE’s project, places it in context, outlines its findings, and suggests ways in which policy debates in South Africa might take account of the phenomenal rise of Pentecostal Christian churches. It summarises a longer and more comprehensive research report which is available from CDE (see appendix 1).

This project has revealed a world of activity, energy, and entrepreneurship previously unknown to an otherwise well-informed South African think-tank



The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God nearing completion in Diepkloof, Soweto.

## The South African context

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It is common cause that South Africa is a very religious country. The 2001 national census finding that 80 per cent of South Africa's population professes to be Christian would probably surprise few people. In addition, most reasonably well-informed people are probably aware that there has been a dramatic growth in the number of people belonging to churches outside the mainstream Christian denominations such as the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the various long-established reformed churches inspired by Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Already about 12,5 million South Africans – around one third of all Christians – are members of such non-mainstream churches, and their numbers are growing fast, while those of the mainstream churches remain static. The fastest growing group of all – by 55 per cent between the 1996 and 2001 censuses – is that classified as 'Pentecostal' or 'charismatic'.

This is consistent with global patterns. According to international authorities, Pentecostal and broadly associated charismatic religions now have between 200 and 250 million adherents in 150 countries and are growing rapidly, particularly in the developing world. However, in South Africa the speed, extent and diversity of growth in Christian churches that do not fall in the mainstream is a largely hidden story, and is also not well understood.

Something in particular is missing from our understanding of this silent religious revolution. That is the failure to investigate possible connections between newly spreading and





developing forms of religious belief, practices, and organisations on the one hand, and the basics of economic growth – including work and enterprise, saving and spending – on the other.

These connections have increasingly been made in research on religion and economic development in other developing regions, notably Latin America. This research has made it clear that the importance of new Christian faiths, such as those growing in South Africa, is not confined to the worlds of theology and spiritual experience.

There are some understandable reasons why the rise of new Christian denominations in post-apartheid South Africa has been obscured and underestimated. First, churches and religious movements outside the Christian mainstream are difficult to classify and even to make sense of. This is because:

- They are a mixture of old and new (often transitory) institutions. For instance, the broad Pentecostal movement was founded in the United States in the early 1900s, but in many ways it is a revivalist (of early Christian experiences and practices) movement rather than an entirely new one in a modern sense. Organisationally it is in a constant ferment of development thanks to the spirit of independence and individual initiative – often entrepreneurial, and often prompted by dissatisfaction with existing churches – that characterises it. In this context, it makes sense to talk of ‘classical’ and ‘new’ Pentecostal churches.
- The new denominations reflect a mixture of global and local cultural influences and vary organisationally from large corporate structures (sometimes called ‘mega

Main entrance to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Diepkloof, Soweto. With a capacity of 8 000, this is said to be the biggest church in the country. Launched in Brazil in 1977, and established in at least 80 countries, this movement already has more than 200 branches in South Africa, and church officials say at least one new church is being built every week.

- churches') to tiny and rudimentary congregations following a single determined leader.
- In South Africa the existence of African Independent Churches (AICs) complicates the issue of classification. These churches have much in common with wider Christian movements nationally and globally, but their strong individual character based on African traditional religious practices places them in ambiguous (and sometimes tense) relationships with those broader movements.

### **CDE's research on Pentecostalism in South Africa**

In collaboration with Professor Peter Berger of Boston University and Professor James Hunter of the University of Virginia, CDE commissioned 11 background research reports on Pentecostal churches in South Africa. These reports are listed in Appendix 1. This abridged report is largely based on interviews with pastors and congregants, and two surveys conducted in Hout Bay and Gauteng respectively.

**The interviews with pastors** were conducted by an academic theologian, and were aimed at investigating the basic message of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in South Africa. This includes how they understand themselves in relation to the Christian mission in general and South African society in particular, how they structure themselves organisationally, and the sorts of interventions they are making in their communities. Thirty Pentecostal and charismatic pastors based in the Johannesburg and Durban areas were interviewed between September and November 2005.

**The surveys** were aimed at investigating the extent to which elements of faith have penetrated the fabric of South African society in terms of values, attitudes and behaviour. One survey (sample 120) was conducted in Hout Bay, and a larger one (sample 350) in Gauteng. Both churchgoers and non-churchgoers were interviewed. While churchgoers included members of all denominations encountered in the samples, the surveys were weighted in favour of Pentecostals. The Gauteng survey was also made as representative as possible of the full range of Pentecostal churches in the provinces. The interviews were semi-structured, and contained open-ended questions allowing qualitative replies that were probed for additional depth and comment.

**A focused investigation** using less structured interviews was conducted with 75 members of 25 Pentecostal and charismatic congregations in Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria. The results were used to supplement the main surveys.

Because of its comprehensive coverage of the project themes, and its representative sample, the Gauteng survey results were taken as the anchor for the analysis. Respondents in both surveys were drawn from a general sample of the population, and were not selected as typical or leading examples of the faithful.

Respondents included congregants from several distinguishable types of churches:

- small **community churches** founded by entrepreneurial pastors without much training, or which have broken away from African independent churches;
- long-established **classical Pentecostal churches** with theological colleges and a history in South Africa dating back to the early 20th century;
- **mega churches** modelled on those established by prominent evangelists in the United States; and
- **charismatic breakaways** from mainstream churches.

These categories are built into and provide a framework for the analysis.

**CDE 2008**

The general effect, then, is that although growth in religious movements has been concentrated in non-mainstream churches, they are so fragmented and so diverse that it has not been easy to grasp the extent of their growth, and generalise about their real and potential impact.

A second hindrance to a wider and better understanding of this phenomenon is the fact that many members of the governing and other elites – and many ordinary members of society – regard unconventional religion with indifference, condescension, scepticism, and distrust. This is linked both to the power of secular influences such as socialism and liberal humanism, which have done so much to shape the basis and content of rights in our constitution, and to the hold that mainstream churches have on even unbelievers' understanding of religion.

## Faith and development: a silent revolution?

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Despite these difficulties, CDE has become convinced of the need to explore and make more of this hidden story. In particular, research on religion and economic development in developing countries which claims that the growth of Pentecostal and allied evangelical Protestantism is associated with attitudes, habits and dispositions that promote market-led growth prompted CDE to look for similar effects in South Africa.

Does the silent revolution in the world of faith, spiritual experience, and religious organisation have positive spin-offs in the world of work and enterprise, and for saving and spending? And can this be encouraged in ways that will stimulate economic growth?

In order to pursue these issues, CDE undertook a series of research initiatives with two principal aims: to investigate the rise of new Christian churches, sects and denominations in South Africa; and to examine the possible effects of their spread and growth on the prospects for economic development.

In summary, then, in embarking on this project CDE was influenced by several factors:

- A profound and sweeping global reassertion of religious faith which has left no continent untouched, and is fuelled by the conditions of modernisation and globalisation.
- The emphatic restatement by many sociologists of the importance of religion as a source of moral codes and attitudes that can have a positive (or negative) effect on economic development, as well as a source of cohesive forms of social organisation that can have beneficial (and sometimes negative) effects on both individuals and societies.<sup>3</sup>
- The rapid growth of Pentecostal and broadly linked charismatic Christian movements which have about 200 million to 250 million members in more than 150 countries,<sup>4</sup> and are by far the fastest growing churches in South Africa.
- The claims of sociologists of religion that Pentecostalism has a special affinity with market-based development, and a kinship with what historians call the 'Protestant ethic': a cluster of beliefs, attitudes, and habits that underpinned the spectacular economic growth of north-west Europe during the industrial revolution.

For these reasons, Pentecostal and broadly related charismatic Christian movements were adopted as the focal point of the study.

Does the silent revolution in the world of faith, spiritual experience, and religious organisation have positive spin-offs in the world of work and enterprise?



A service in progress in the Grace Bible Church in Pimville, Soweto.

## The Pentecostal movement

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The Pentecostal churches are centred on the workings of the Holy Spirit as a powerful force among believers. It is frequently said that while the broader evangelical revival movement emphasises Jesus as the focus of faith, the Pentecostal movement emphasises the Holy Spirit. At its core is usually a re-conversion experience called ‘baptism in or with the Holy Spirit’, harking back to the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the first Christians in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, or Shavuot (Acts of the Apostles 2–4). This experience is said to have been common in the early Christian movement; hence the new movement is often likened to ‘primitive’ Christianity. Specifically, evidence of ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’ takes the form of spiritual episodes, including trance states and speaking in tongues.

Pentecostals believe that those baptised in the Holy Spirit may receive other supernatural gifts that purportedly existed in the early church, such as the ability to prophesy, interpret strange tongues, and heal, thus leading to the Faith Healing characteristic of the Pentecostal churches. The Pentecostals also traditionally emphasised – and to varying extents still emphasise – moral rigour, a literal interpretation of the Bible, and a commitment to seeking salvation before Christ’s Second Coming.

The Pentecostal movement emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1901 students at a Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, founded by the preacher Charles Parham prayed to be baptised with the Holy Spirit, and spoke in tongues. Parham then moved to Houston, Texas, where William Seymore, an African-American preacher, was allowed to listen to his Bible classes. Seymore went to Los Angeles, where his preaching helped to spark the Azusa Street Revival, a series of revivalist gatherings held from 1906 to about 1915. The revival was characterised by speaking in tongues, dramatic serv-



ices, and interracial contact. Most Pentecostal denominations can trace their roots to the revival, or were strongly influenced by it. The revival, and the Apostolic Faith Mission, which emanated from it, gave the movement a multiracial character.<sup>5</sup>

Following those early years Pentecostalism grew in phases, attracting people who believed that established denominations had become complacent, worldly, and coldly formalistic in respect of forms of faith and ritual. Disaffected preachers from more established churches, and offshoots of the Methodist and Baptist Churches in particular, gave the movement impetus. The non-conformist urge energised these new churches, often established in informal premises, taking them further than their predecessors in their revival of earlier recorded forms of Christian practice.

At stages Pentecostals have been deeply split by doctrinal differences, and have never successfully formed a single coherent organisation. Instead, individual congregations have typically come together to found the various subdenominations that constitute the movement today.

As a result, Pentecostalism includes several subtypes and categories that reflect different emphases of belief and forms of organisation. This befits a broad religious movement whose motivating impulses include dissatisfaction with existing church forms, and a belief that initiative and adaptation in founding new churches – often on an entrepreneurial basis – are open and accessible to groups of believers or even individuals.

However for the purposes of our study, Pentecostalism is understood to comprise a group of broadly revivalist and fundamentalist Christian churches that can be distinguished from mainstream churches (and of course non-believers) by the following common features:

- intense spirituality, centring on rebirth experience and the supernatural (faith healing, speaking in tongues);

The Grace Bible Church in Pimville, Soweto. Subsidiary buildings are still under construction. According to church spokespersons, the complex will also be used for community-related activities, notably poverty alleviation, skills development, and youth empowerment. Additional facilities will include a computer school, youth hall, children's facility, lecture halls, a distribution centre for the poor, and a gymnasium.

- spontaneous, enthusiastic, and participative forms of worship;
- relatively unhierarchical and decentralised organisation, reflecting a high level of local and even individual initiative, and strongly entrepreneurial motivations;
- relative accessibility and informality in terms of ordination and leadership; and
- social conservatism and moral rigour (seen as ‘intolerant’ by secular progressives) potentially at odds with secular systems of rights and conceptions of democracy.

Despite these broadly valid common features, it is important to note some qualifications. Some Pentecostal churches are more complex and formal than others, expressed in more developed liturgy, more demanding training and ordination, and more complex governance. At the other end of the scale are churches that closely reflect the (often authoritarian) leadership styles of their individual founders, and few other influences beyond that. Churches also differ in their interest in and engagement with the material world. While some Pentecostal congregations tend towards pietism and an otherworldly focus on a ‘Home in Heaven’, the Pentecostal movement in general can be described as world-accommodating, with some pastors at least encouraging a more active engagement with social issues.

In Korean churches hundreds of thousands of people whose parental culture, if not their own, had been rural and traditional learned the bottom-line skills of a modern, market economy

## Pentecostalism and socioeconomic development

The current dramatic growth of independent Pentecostal churches can be broadly understood as a third wave of Protestantism.<sup>6</sup> The first wave was the Reformation of the 16th and 17th century, and the second was the revivalist movement in the United States – which led to the formation of a series of church groupings, including the Assemblies of God – in the early 20th century.

The evolution by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Protestant reformers of an alternative form of Christianity to Roman Catholicism fostered an approach to life that has come to be called the Protestant ethic. Coined by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), the term refers to an ethic that, directly and indirectly, gives spiritual sanction to the rational pursuit of economic gain. While Weber traced the origins of the Protestant ethic to the start of the Protestant Reformation, he identified it most closely with Calvinism rather than with Lutheranism.

As set out by Berger, the Protestant ethic is characterised by a ‘this-worldly (or world-accepting) asceticism’, a disciplined and rational approach to work and to social activity, including family life, along and with a deferral of gratification and instant consumption. These habits promoted savings, capital accumulation and economic advancement, all in a context of a world view free of magic and superstition – in other words, a context that favoured predictability and rational planning. Berger adds that Weber also emphasised the education of children and the propensity to create voluntary associations of non-elite people as characteristics of the Protestant ethic.

Central to this ethic was a particular theological interpretation of Salvation that needs to be explained, sometimes even to members of Reformed Churches. This interpretation, dating back to forms of early Christianity, is that humankind, being subject to the burden of original sin, can never be certain of God’s mercy and Salvation, since only the chosen will be saved. The only candidates for God’s mercy are those who lead exemplary and ascetic lives, and there may be signs in this world that a believer is a candidate for God’s mercy. Mortals can only demonstrate to themselves and their fellows that they are in reach of God’s election by showing signs of divine recognition and blessing. In time,

this developed into displays of super-respectability, prosperity, and this-worldly material achievement. It should be noted that anxiety about prospects of salvation became a powerful driver of material progress, impelling believers to follow the lifestyles described by Berger.

As implied by the title of his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that the Protestant ethic was a major driving force behind the development of capitalism. However, after this considerable initial impact the Protestant ethic gradually declined, and today is present only in an attenuated form in mainstream Protestant churches.<sup>7</sup> In Pentecostalism, however, there is at least a parallel interpretation, namely that the Holy Spirit, after baptism, can display gifts of mercy and salvation, and that signs of these gifts are also found in demonstrations of exemplary behaviour, prosperity, and progress in this world. Furthermore, the nature of Pentecostalism – ‘individually located, voluntarist in religious election, populist and lay-orientated in self-organisation, activist and missionary in its orientation to the world’<sup>8</sup> – comes close to the Calvinist model, and places the movement broadly within Weber’s description of the Protestant ethic. However, it must be noted that the spiritual and religious dynamics behind these behaviour patterns differ significantly from those of early Protestantism.

## Pentecostalism in Latin America and Asia

According to Berger, contemporary Pentecostalism in Latin America is associated with a desire for education, a strong work ethic, individualism, and an affinity with democratic politics. He refers to the ‘wildfire expansion of Pentecostal Protestantism’ as a cultural revolution that

... promotes personal discipline and honesty, proscribes alcohol and extramarital sex, dismantles the compadre system (which ... with its fiestas and other extravagant expenditures discourages savings) and teaches ordinary people to create and run their own grass roots institutions. The roles and contribution of women in society are recognised and expanded, as is the importance of education for children. It is a culture that is radically opposed to classical machismo ... women take on leadership roles within the family, ‘domesticating’ their husbands ... and paying attention to the education of their children.<sup>9</sup>

Paul Gifford (citing David Martin) points out that Pentecostalism helps to build strong, autonomous civil societies, as in these churches individuals

... learn how to function democratically; they elect their own officers, they learn to exercise leadership themselves, thus developing leadership skills. They learn to participate in, and run meetings, to conduct business, to handle money, to budget, to plan, to compromise, to formulate and ‘own’ a course of action, to implement it, to critique results, to change direction in the light of experience.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Pentecostalism takes the form of a ‘protective social capsule’ by allowing marginalised people such as rural–urban migrants to acquire ‘new concepts of self and new models of initiative ... in an atmosphere of hope rather than despair.’<sup>11</sup>

In Guatemala, Martin found that Pentecostal networks

Pentecostalism in Latin America is associated with a desire for education, a strong work ethic, individualism, and an affinity with democratic politics



Two Pentecostal churches in Hillbrow, Johannesburg.

... provide an intensive and extensive information service, and offer a kind of insurance as well as the emotional support of stable relationships. Beyond that they inculcate North American norms of behaviour and educate members in such matters as household budgeting, social comportment and table manners. To this one would add the way in which membership in Protestant groups provides a marriage and sexual discipline and along with that some break in the cycle of endemic corruption.<sup>12</sup>

To take an example from a different context in the developing world, Harvey Cox points to the transformation brought about by Pentecostal churches in Korea: 'Members learn from the absolutely dazzling organisational genius that these churches demonstrate.'<sup>13</sup> Paul Gifford continues:

... hundreds of thousands of people whose parental culture, if not their own, had been rural and traditional learned the bottom-line skills of a modern, market economy. They learned to communicate a simple message; to organise promotional efforts, make lists, use telephones, to solve personality clashes in task orientated groups; to coordinate efforts both horizontally and vertically, to set goals and reach them; and to come to meetings on time, run them efficiently and then to implement decisions made there. This training constitutes a 'concentrated crash course in what millions of others who fill the lower and middle echelons of modern corporations learn at business schools and sales institutes.'<sup>14</sup>

However, one should not expect mechanical consequences. Martin offers a balanced qualification of the patterns noted above:



... the impact of Pentecostal Protestantism varies according to the local channel most receptive to it, and this is true both economically and politically. ... In one situation it may console and buttress those who lose from social change; in another situation it may select precisely those that can make the most of chances that change offers to them. ... But the personality it nourishes will be one with a new sense of individuality and individual worth and, therefore, possessed of a potential for assessing its own proper activity, in which will be included activity in the economic realm. Experience of the way social mobility has come about elsewhere, as well as common sense, suggest that the capacities built up and stored in the religious group may take two or three generations to come to fruition.<sup>15</sup>

## Pentecostal churches in South Africa

As we have seen, in recent years the number of people in South Africa who have joined Charismatic or Pentecostal Christian churches appears to have grown rapidly. According to the national census, Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity are the fastest growing faiths in the country (see table 1).

Table 1: Growth in religious denominations in South Africa, 1996–2001

	1996	2001	% growth
SA population	40,58m	44,82m	10,5%
All Christians	30,0m	35,8m	19%
Pentecostal and charismatic churches	2,2m	3,4m	55%

Source: Statistics SA, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/html/RSAPrimary.pdf>.

The accuracy of the national censuses will never be known, but these figures indicate that both the Pentecostal and charismatic movements are growing far more rapidly than the Christian community as a whole, which in turn is growing more rapidly than the population. Furthermore, the figures for the Pentecostal churches may still be underestimates because the 2001 census also records 3,2 million 'other Christians', many of whom could be members of smaller Pentecostal community churches.<sup>16</sup>

Membership of South African Pentecostal churches and evangelical movements recorded under 'other Christian' – in other words, unaffiliated – churches rose by 166 per cent between the 1996 and 2001 censuses, while traditional mainstream Christian churches did not grow at all.<sup>17</sup> If the rate of growth reflected in table 1 is sustained, South African Pentecostals (excluding members of the Apostolic churches) will number almost 10 million by 2011 – almost one fifth of the population.

South African Pentecostal churches are strongly influenced by global Pentecostalism, with particularly dominant strands coming from the United States and also from Latin America, especially Brazil, as well as West Africa, especially Nigeria. However, some local Pentecostal churches have features unique to Africa, due to a degree of cross-fertilisation between them and African Independent Churches.

Both the old and new Pentecostal movements are growing far more rapidly than the Christian community as a whole, which in turn is growing more rapidly than the population

Numerous analysts and observers have pointed out the difficulties of identifying various forms of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly true not at the level of the mega churches or classical Pentecostal churches, but in respect of community-based and township churches, where the lines between Pentecostal churches and African Independent Churches can be blurred. Allan Anderson conducted an extensive study of the religious fabric of the people of Soshanguve between November 1990 and April 1991.<sup>19</sup> A total of 1 633 families from 254 churches were interviewed. He found several Pentecostal church types that focused on experiences of the Holy Spirit, either individually or communally. These were 'Pentecostal Mission churches' started by missionaries, and 'Independent African Pentecostal churches' which closely resembled the Mission churches, but were independent from them (like the Grace Bible Church). But he also found large areas of convergence between the Pentecostal 'spirit-type' churches and the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). Furthermore, in township church culture there can also be overlaps between Pentecostal churches and certain local mainstream Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. Given the partially shared roots of the Pentecostal churches and African Independent Churches, these intersections are not surprising.

Features of the liturgy and practices of township Pentecostal and African Independent Churches that tend to overlap include the following:

Pentecostal churches have features unique to Africa, due to a degree of cross-fertilisation between them and African Independent Churches

- **Healing:** In the ZCC and St Johns AFM churches, poor Africans become involved in healing ministries, and they themselves receive healing through their communities. Some researchers contend that the healing rituals are ways of 'reinventing' social reality. There are known facilities in Pentecostal churches for helping drug addicts and prostitutes to rehabilitate themselves, and some Pentecostal churches have started food garden projects to help poor and HIV/AIDS-stricken households. In some Pentecostal churches, however, HIV/AIDS is perceived as a punishment from God for sin, regardless of how it was contracted. Sometimes the sin concerned is ancestor worship. This attitude was encountered among Pentecostal congregants in Hout Bay on the Cape Peninsula interviewed for this study. One of the congregants remarked: '... there is a debate (among us) that AIDS is a punishment from God to the people of earth because of all their sin.' These views are certainly not the formal position of the churches. However, poorer African congregants often feel besieged by the extent of social and moral decay in their communities, and punitive views about sexuality and HIV/AIDS are therefore not surprising.
- **Poverty outreach:** Pentecostal and some African Independent Churches are also involved in poverty alleviation. A key strategy is tithing: church members are taught to give generously to church work, and through this to overcome their own material poverty. Women's prayer meetings are an important means of support and solidarity in a male-dominated world, and male Pentecostals emerge as less 'predatory' and more family-oriented. For example, a Johannesburg church for refugees serves to integrate its members socially and economically into the South African host society from a comfortable base, with familiar rituals and shared cultural backgrounds. The 'Back to God' movement linked to Pentecostal churches reports successes in reducing crime in some areas.
- **Shared recognition** of a range of demons and evil spirits that are particularly African, and owe their identities to deeply rooted traditional myths and beliefs. The issue of ancestor veneration divides the Pentecostals from the African Independent Churches more clearly than their demonology.

The blurring of features between township Pentecostal churches and African Independent Churches is least evident in the mega churches of the prosperity type. These churches have a markedly American flavour that has been a key feature of Pentecostalism among white congregations (although these congregations are increasingly representative of the country's population), and thus have more in common with similar churches elsewhere in the world than with township Pentecostal churches in South Africa. However, there are wide variations in the way in which the prosperity message is conveyed.

Pastor Ray McCauley of the South African Rhema mega church holds that prosperity is granted to Christians so that they can help others. This contrasts with cruder forms of 'prosperity theology' that declare rather simply that poverty is a result of sin and a lack of faith, and that health and wealth are a sign of God's blessing.

A key feature of organised religion and the Pentecostal faith in South Africa is that individual denominations have never had to fight any official opposition to their existence and practices. This has resulted in an exceptional pluralism of religious practice and organisation, and out of this pluralism many convergent features in Christian practice have emerged.

Against this background, we summarise the results of the research undertaken for this project, and the insights that flow from it (see box, **CDE's investigation: key themes and results**, page 18).

## The Pentecostal impact

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### The views of pastors

A key feature of the Pentecostal message, emanating from the research among pastors, is what one may call a 'theology of encounter'. This perspective is rooted in the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), in which the believer surrenders his/her life to the risen Christ.

The new spiritual awareness which follows from this develops and grows within the lives of believers in a various ways, with diverse and sometimes unintended consequences. A key feature is a new realisation of self-worth and a sense of agency, with the believer no longer a victim of circumstances. It emphasises positive engagement with life, and an openness to new and fresh insights into the world of immediate and everyday experience. Hence it is life-embracing and world-accepting.

The services are intended to attract and entertain, and the ethos is highly voluntarist. They make conscious attempts not to be 'religious' in the conventional sense, modelling themselves rather along the lines of a family, community, business, or all three. Church is seen as a lively and self-affirming continuation of everyday life where one should be subjected to as little discomfort as possible and where one can be encouraged, instructed, and affirmed in one's ambitions and worldly pursuits.

Entrepreneurship and response to opportunity are central features of these churches. This is noticeable at three levels: the churches themselves have usually come about as a result of individual religious entrepreneurship; there is a considerable amount of entrepreneur-

The capacities built up and stored in the religious group may take two or three generations to come to fruition

## CDE's investigation: key themes and results

CDE's surveys covered a range of themes, and were aimed at building a broad picture of religious beliefs and practices, and socioeconomic profiles of members of different Pentecostal and other churches. Key questions were:

- **Priorities of faith:** What do congregants seek and find in their faith?
- **Key features of faith:** What are the fundamental beliefs about God and the Scriptures? What are the common forms of religious practice and observance?
- **Patterns of recruitment:** What attracted particular congregants to a particular church?
- **The impact of faith on lives:** Has faith changed family, work, career, material circumstances?
- **Moral views and the social fabric:** Tolerance and puritanism? Contribution to building and preserving the social fabric? How conservative? implications for political beliefs?
- **Personal happiness and identity:** Experience of and expectations of improvements in life circumstances.
- **Community outreach and volunteer work:** Is church membership associated with membership of associations?
- **Social capital:** To what extent are church members supported by social and community networks? How supportive are the congregations themselves?
- **Church and society:** Does the experience of faith encourage withdrawal from society or great social involvement?
- **Economic patterns:** Lifestyle measures and patterns; saving, spending, and deferred gratification; work ethic.
- **Socio-political dynamics:** Satisfaction with trends in South Africa; political interest and involvement; ideology and reactions to major political issues.

The focused investigation of congregants in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban used a more open-ended narrative approach. However, both investigations yielded very similar results, in respect of New Pentecostals in particular. Reported results of faith include:

- Greater self-confidence and self-esteem, their sense of personal agency, and their determination.
- More harmonious family and other relationships, including work relationships.
- Greater self-discipline in respect of alcohol, drugs, pre-or extramarital sex, and other temptations.
- Quasi-Calvinist pattern of deferred gratification, resulting in improvements in financial security and material conditions. Responses from both surveys suggest that 'tithing' encourages deferred gratification, financial planning, and discipline in handling family and personal finances.
- Improved occupational success, as well as an improved work ethic.
- An emphasis on the importance of education, for respondents as well as their children.
- Perceptions of improvements in health.
- Stern, conservative values in respect of public morality, corruption, and the government's stance on capital punishment, abortion, gay rights, and progressive rights issues.
- Outreach and volunteer work in the community among the poor, but largely contained within the church community, as well as strong mutual support within the congregation.

CDE 2008

ship in the membership; and in some of the churches entrepreneurship skills training features as an important intervention in the lives of congregants.

The research also provides evidence of a strong emphasis on family values accompanied by marked moral conservatism. Most Pentecostals fear that the new freedom of expression in South Africa encourages pornography, abortion on demand, alternative sexual preferences, and idolatry.

Although Pentecostals were generally politically inactive before the first democratic elections in April 1994, since then a few prominent leaders have aligned themselves with the spirit and goals of liberation from apartheid. At the same time, opposition to South Africa's socially 'progressive' constitution has been expressed because it is seen to encourage rights above obligations, challenge the authority of God, and contradict the moral values commonly associated with Christianity. Many of the pastors interviewed had firm views about the political situation in South Africa, but most preferred to emphasise spiritual rather than social and political convictions. Their political reserve can be criticised as a spiritual comfort zone; however, overt political stances by religious leaders are always difficult to reconcile with spiritual commitments, and create stress among congregants.

## Profiles of congregants

Because much of the evidence is based on a broadly representative survey in Gauteng, the congregants discussed below were drawn from the full Pentecostal spectrum: older or 'classical' churches (Assembly of God, the Full Gospel Church, and various Apostolic churches); new Pentecostal churches in the middle-class suburbs; mega churches; and small community churches, mainly in poorer black areas. Charismatic groupings in the mainstream churches were also covered. Because of marked differences in community culture and the culture of worship in poor black areas and mostly white middle-class suburbs, the analysis distinguishes between these two types of areas.

### *Black Old Pentecostals*

These congregants yielded a fairly clear profile. They reflected a propensity to save money despite being among the poorest respondents; an above-average commitment to their children's education; a determination to shape their own lives; an above-average tendency to translate faith into discipline; a tendency to work hard, study, and improve themselves; and a clear conception of what business success requires. They also conveyed an understanding that education is not only about concrete skills, but must also imbue wisdom and judgement.

They have large numbers of close friends within the church community, and a relaxed, trusting, and positive attitude to new acquaintances. Despite deep faith, there is no slavish reliance on divine guidance but a clear concept that 'God helps those who help themselves'. All told they were perhaps closest to the ideal type of an early 'Calvinist' approach to life, although their responses lacked the theological/doctrinal underpinnings typical of this world view.

Responses from both surveys suggest that 'tithing' encourages deferred gratification, financial planning, and discipline in handling family and personal finances

### *Black New Pentecostals*

Although many black Pentecostal churches have an 'up-market' character, and therefore resemble the New Pentecostal churches, the majority of black congregants are members of smaller churches better described as community churches. It is these congregants who are profiled here.

Their recruitment into their congregation is often precipitated by life crises and illnesses, and faith healing is a major attraction. Many of them are also converts from African Independent churches, and many have experienced inner conflict because of a simultaneous emphasis on Christian and African spiritual cosmology. These New Pentecostals have high levels of spiritual awareness, and have a strict moral conscience. Their religious experience is the most intense of all. They are also more altruistic than average, and most inclined to believe in good works. They are generally more encapsulated within their religious activity than old Pentecostals, and do not have the same level of commitment to shaping their own lives. They tend to hand over to a spiritual agency more than the old Pentecostals, and also emphasise spirituality most in the upbringing of their children. Whether or not it is a direct goal of the churches' doctrine, their faith gives them self-confidence.

However, their social networks are relatively weak; they acknowledge fewer close personal friends than Old Pentecostals, but are similar to them in low levels of involvement in voluntary organisations. Although they are most dissatisfied with policies and politicians, they are also very patient and accepting in their work and lives generally. They enjoy high levels of personal happiness. They do not seem to have the same level of commitment to shaping their own lives as Old Pentecostals, and tend to be 'otherworldly' and self-sufficient in their faith.

### *Suburban Old Pentecostals*

Analysing suburban (in contrast with township) congregations requires a change of gear. Although many suburban households are not affluent, and a significant minority are



The Rhema Bible Church  
in Randburg.

financially constrained, most are nonetheless relatively comfortable, and worlds away from the material conditions in the black areas. Hence issues of socioeconomic development are much less pressing.

To understand the Old Pentecostals one has to bear in mind that many of the congregants – perhaps even a majority – come from a background in the Dutch Reformed Churches (DRC). Inevitably, many features of Afrikaans community life have become part of the culture of these churches. Many of these Afrikaans-speaking people have withdrawn from the DRC because of its abstract and complex doctrines and biblical interpretation, and because they have sought a warmer and more supportive church culture. Furthermore, many of the Old Pentecostals are from working class backgrounds and might have experienced a measure of discomfort in a Calvinist setting that tended, perhaps inadvertently, to emphasise middle-class respectability.

Today the Old Pentecostal churches have adopted many of the features of the New Pentecostal churches, which will be discussed below. Old Pentecostals, however, have an even greater concern with the wider family, with immediate families, and with community life across religious boundaries. Hence they are also more involved in civil society at large than New Pentecostals. They are less spiritually intense than the New Pentecostals, and for many of them Afrikaans ethnic consciousness is almost as important as their spiritual commitment. This also contributes to a fairly high level of dissatisfaction with public policies in the new South Africa.

They reflect a great emphasis on personal discipline that translates into hard work and occupational commitment. However, they are morally more tolerant than the New Pentecostals, some of them to the point of accepting premarital sex and alternative lifestyles. Their spiritual commitment, however, is almost as strong as that of New Pentecostals, and it is also their top priority, despite other commitments. Today these congregants tend to be the epitome of solid citizens, well-organised, usually avoiding debt, and eschewing extravagant lifestyles. Their churches and services are formalised to the point where a middle-class Methodist, for example, would be comfortable with large parts of the pro-



Congregants gather for a service in the Rhema Bible Church.

ceedings. However, Old Pentecostals retain an immediate connection with the Holy Spirit and a propensity for spiritual episodes among congregants.

### *Suburban New Pentecostals*

In socioeconomic terms, the New Pentecostals are positioned midway between the Old Pentecostals and the mainstream denominations. They are more interested in politics than any other denomination, although their responses to political issues are fraught with paradox. They tend not to vote, but would do so if suitable religiously oriented candidates were to stand. Despite being highly dissatisfied about high levels of crime, health policies, public morality, and government performance generally, they are the group most satisfied with trends in the country.

Hence their satisfactions tend to derive largely from the economy and their own adjustment to the opportunities and constraints in the society. This suggests that they are much more materialistic than their overt religious commitments would suggest. They also tend to be happier personally than members of mainstream churches.

As regards the criteria they would adopt in judging progress and a better life for all in South Africa, the New Pentecostals are progressive in that they endorse better education, more generous welfare provision, anti-poverty strategies and affirmative action for previously disadvantaged people. They are also inclined to support charity. They are, however, cautious about state involvement in social affairs.

In socioeconomic terms, the New Pentecostals are positioned midway between the Old Pentecostals and the mainstream denominations

They have many friends in their congregations, and luxuriate in the warmth of the religious community, but tend to be less trusting of people and more cautious with strangers than Old Pentecostals. Although they value education, and express an interest in further education for themselves, they do not burn with ambition to make personal material progress. This is because they are so thoroughly captivated by their spiritual rewards. Of all categories in the sample, the new Pentecostals are most enmeshed in their relationship with God, which to them is immediate and joyous. Nearly 90 per cent of them regard themselves as having been saved and reborn.

Asked how their lives have been changed by the church, the spiritual rewards of their faith tend to dominate. They seem to live in a constant state of spiritual arousal. At the same time, this immersion in the experience of the Spirit seems to impart a confidence and even a greater determination to their working lives. It is almost as if their spiritual lives release their energy and performance in the material realm because the latter means so little. Many New Pentecostals have experienced material progress, which they attribute to their faith. Hence, in their choices about spending money they include quite a lot of consumer durables and adult 'toys'. They are not rounded ascetics by any stretch of the imagination.

There are some fairly large contradictions in their lives. Amid all the warmth, their solidarity with their religious community, and their progressive concerns about poverty, inequality, and racial reconciliation, they erect some very high barriers. Some 70 per cent of them regard inter-race marriage as a form of sin, and they are cautious towards strangers. The most impregnable barrier of all is their moral fortress (the dubious side of intense religious conviction across all faiths). The New Pentecostals are more puritanical in respect of moral issues than many Christians. Although South Africa desperately needs greater moral sanctions on a whole range of issues, the New Pentecostals are in some ways reminiscent of the morally and socially ultra-conservative 'bloukkies' of several



decades ago. Their progressive veneer and expressions of concern about poverty and race relations can be a front that disguises some very judgmental people.

### *Members of the African Independent Churches*

These churches define themselves as an authentically indigenous and African branch of Christianity. However, they are included in this review because they have partly emanated from the outreach tradition of the Azusa Street Revival, a key founding contributor to Pentecostalism. They have many of the orientations of black Old Pentecostals, but have a handicap in that the main attraction of their religion is its promise of working miracles and curing illness, which are played down in the Old Pentecostal churches today.

What their faith does give them is the confidence that they can succeed – in other words, they have abundant spiritual capital. On the other hand, their faith comes a little too close to being a crutch in life, a feature that derives from the fact that many of them have converted to African Zionism in a search for relief from ill health and the stress of poverty.

There appears to be considerable religious tension within these churches because some of them, or some of their congregants, have a ‘dual spirituality’ in that they embrace both reverence for ancestral spirits and the Christian Trilogy. The criticisms directed at these churches by the Pentecostal churches in particular have caused many congregants to leave the African Independent Churches and join Pentecostal churches. Another tension is the fact that the ‘social’ culture of the African Independent Churches is dominated by the culture of deprivation and poverty in black areas, and this tends to motivate better educated members to join either the mainstream denominations or Pentecostal churches. Of all the churches surveyed, the African Independent Churches have the lowest mean educational levels.

On the other hand, their strict moral codes and self-discipline reminiscent of the Old Pentecostal churches, as well as considerable support from congregant networks, have endowed the ‘Zionists’ with an enviable reputation as employees. Hence their economic circumstances are often better than their educational levels would predict.

It is remarkable how little South Africans in general and members of the mainstream churches in particular know about Pentecostal churches and their members

## The social impact of Pentecostalism in SA

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It is remarkable how little South Africans in general and members of the mainstream churches in particular know about Pentecostal churches and their members. Exceptions are the well-organised mega churches led by nationally known pastors with high levels of communication skills and persuasive messages about which theologians, intellectuals, and ordinary people are quite deeply divided.

Media coverage of the Pentecostal movement paints a contradictory picture. Most reports are brief and oversimplified accounts of the flavour of services in which the spontaneity, emotional arousal, and dramatic expressions of spiritual ardour are played up. Readers are not frequently reminded that these features are not new or ‘alternative’ expressions of Christian spiritual passion, but stretch back to the very beginnings of organised Christianity. Hence the image created is often of deviant or even ‘primitive’ forms of worship.<sup>20</sup> Mainstream Christianity has changed considerably in recent decades, and established rituals are blended with informal Christian fellowship and generally warmer commu-



A faith healing session at the Church of Christ Ministry in Soweto. This is one of many Pentecostal congregations which meet in a marquee.

nication within services, but many still expect church services to be ‘dignified.’ By these standards the Pentecostals are seen as excessively spontaneous – the journalist Nomavenda Mathiane has described the Pentecostal message as one of ‘red-blooded spiritual sustenance.’<sup>21</sup> But Dr Isak Burger, president of the Apostolic Faith Mission, correctly points out that, while the Pentecostal faith may be ‘childlike,’ it is far from being ‘childish or superficial.’<sup>22</sup>

By far the most criticism is directed at the ‘prosperity message,’ however. For example, the *Sunday Times* recently ran an article headlined ‘Evangelists prey on a nation seeking succour: Pentecostal churches, with their promises of prosperity and easy solutions, are booming in Nigeria.’<sup>23</sup> The report may well have been about Nigeria, but the concern is local as well. The South African religious journalist Anastasia de Vries calls this the assumption that the faithful have a right to lay claim to prosperity.<sup>24</sup> Pastor Moss Ntlha, general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa, is himself critical of some local charismatic churches, saying: ‘The balance sheet of the church has overtaken the spiritual well-being of members ... they are run like commercial vehicles.’<sup>25</sup> He is emphatic that the prosperity message should not be seen as anything more than the biblical concept of ‘as you sow, so shall you reap.’<sup>26</sup> But the concern is pervasive, fed by appearances of great wealth and expensive technology in some mega churches.

Perhaps the greatest concern is that some of the entrepreneurial pastors in smaller community churches are enriching themselves at the cost of devout but naïve followers. There is much to be said for religious entrepreneurship in the establishment of new denominations in concert with followers with intense spiritual needs – there is merit in pluralism, diversity, and competition in most spheres of life – but the concern is about the presence and extent of a pure profit motive. This tendency is apparently a major problem in some African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo,<sup>27</sup> and many of these ‘religious entrepreneurs’ are arriving in South Africa as unrecorded immigrants. These problems do not appear to be serious in South Africa at the moment, but it would be hazardous to ignore them.



There is reason to believe, however, that the positive impacts of Pentecostalism outweigh the concerns. To a lesser or greater extent, all the Pentecostal churches reviewed above are characterised by a moving sense of spiritual encounter and a corresponding sense of joy, happiness, and optimism among congregants. More often than not, these reactions are associated with feelings of self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of viability – what we, following Martin,<sup>28</sup> have described as ‘personal agency’. At the very least, these feelings create higher levels of personal energy that also find outlets in a more intense family life, working life, and business activities. These themes boil down to something approximating the central features of original Calvinism, as described by Max Weber: a sense of purpose and therefore confidence in worldly engagement, strengthened by this-worldly asceticism.

Martin has identified specific impacts of Pentecostal movements in Latin America and elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Our studies have confirmed many of these impacts in South Africa. He mentions, for example, that Pentecostalism in the United States, although vibrant, is subordinate to other denominations. The same applies in South Africa: the mainstream churches usually command the bulk of attention from the media, whereas the Pentecostal churches are overlooked. He also notes that the Pentecostal economic virtues are discounted by the American liberal establishment. The same may again be said for South Africa, where liberal corporate capital operates at a level of sophistication that obscures the valuable feeder effect of small enterprises as foundations for a market economy.

A vital function of Pentecostalism isolated by Martin is that it has provided an avenue for the recognition and integration of marginalised people: calling the movement ‘... the mobilisation of the culturally despised’,<sup>30</sup> he talks of the evangelical upsurge creating ‘... autonomous social space within which people may participate in the creation of a different kind of sub-society. In this subsociety, those who count for little or nothing in the wider world find themselves addressed as persons able to display initiative and to be of consequence.’<sup>31</sup>

The Pentecostal churches in South Africa have performed this role in various ways. The narrative interviews which supplemented our main surveys have confirmed this with

reference to the exclusion of blacks under apartheid; a number of black respondents described how their conversion helped them overcome a crippling sense of racial inferiority. It has also done much the same for former traditionalists who have been able to facilitate their own modernisation by moving from African Independent Churches to Pentecostal community churches. Earlier, the Assemblies of God, the Full Gospel Church, and the Apostolic Churches provided a refuge for poor and struggling Afrikaners who felt uncomfortable in the abstract formality of the Reformed Churches. And, in all groups at all times, the Pentecostal churches have offered a degree of spiritual support that has enabled people whose lives have been disrupted by disease, alcoholism, family breakdown, or other ills to recover their self-respect.

Martin also notes that, contrary to superficial perceptions, the ecstatic spiritual release in Pentecostal faith actually complements self-control and discipline in other spheres of activity, something that may also be observed in the South African setting. However, the extent to which various churches spur economic aspirations and motivations to succeed in business and become prosperous varies between subtypes. The prosperity message is played up in some and played down in others, but the underlay of the prosperity orientation is general.

All these features counter the glorification of wealth for its own sake, the rush for new consumer technologies, and the obsessive lifestyle and image concerns that characterise new class formations. Most importantly, however, these features of Pentecostalism provide a genuine relief from the stress of grinding poverty, and could throw lifelines of identity to the 30–40 per cent of South Africa's population who are sidelined by most of the new development and opportunity in the country. As such, they could be an important counter to the political opportunism and overpoliticisation of certain social issues common in South Africa.

This last comment, however, raises the important question of whether or not the Pentecostal movement serves the purposes of the political and economic status quo by taking mass demands and protests out of the equation. Does it ultimately have conservative political consequences? We will return to this question later.

A further word of caution is necessary at this point. Organised religion in South Africa is highly plural, and there is no stuffy ecclesiastic hierarchy in a denominational monopoly imposing doctrinal conformity or social norms. Even at the height of apartheid the governing party-linked Dutch Reformed Churches had to compete in a wider religious marketplace. Hence there is and always was much less consolidated opposition to the growth of the Pentecostal churches than in Latin America, for example. This also means that the attractions of Pentecostal services are somewhat less unique than they are in societies formerly characterised by doctrinal conformity. Hence the impacts of Pentecostalism are also in some respects the impacts of many other denominations today.

For example, the surveys show that Catholic and Dutch Reformed congregants are at least as likely as Pentecostals to feel that their faith sanctions a commitment to personal careers and future prosperity. If spiritual liberation and personal empowerment are the issues, then all denominations seem to be converging.

The impacts of the Pentecostal churches, therefore, have to be seen in a wider context of the role of organised Christianity, and indeed other worshippers of the God of Abraham – Jews and Muslims – should be drawn into consideration as well. But, while they are not

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unique, the Pentecostal churches do represent the most consistent and intense emphasis on the power of the Gifts of the Spirit.

Some data also suggests a certain convergence between Pentecostals and members of mainline Christian churches in that in both groups faith seems to lead to optimism, confidence in the future, and other positive attitudes. But, in order to understand what this means, one must take the respective social contexts of these churches into account. Suppose an upper-middle-class Anglican living in an affluent suburb and a poor Pentecostal living in a township both make the following statement: 'My faith helps me cope with the problems in my life.' While they have used exactly the same words, the statement has entirely different meanings in the two contexts in question. In the first case, it will probably have little or nothing to do with the life chances of the individual concerned. In the second, however, it will have everything to do with it – for here the statement reflects precisely the 'Protestant ethic' which, as Berger argues, is conducive to social mobility and, ultimately, to economic development.

It is clear, therefore, that Pentecostal churches in particular have a highly significant potential role to play in society. What are the chances of this potential being realised?

## The impact of religion in general

Before attempting to answer the question posed above, we have to refer to a key feature of Pentecostalism, namely the 'redemption lift' long associated with conversion to Christianity.

This draws attention to the broader dimension of the findings of the Gauteng survey in particular, which led to a preliminary conclusion that religion beats politics in the search for a better life. For a whole variety of reasons, the expectations raised by faith do not seem to end in the kind of disillusionment that politics can generate. Perhaps this is because the ways of the Almighty are too mysterious to generate categorical expectations and disappointments. Both in the townships and in the suburbs, responses to our surveys suggested that religion had done far more to improve lives and morale than the political programmes and promises of recent years. The buoyant mood among the faithful contrasted significantly with a relatively hesitant mood among non-churchgoers. People in the suburbs and black areas alike felt oppressed by crime, the opportunism of politicians, unemployment, and the lack of delivery by government, but personal spheres of life seem to be insulated from these harsher realities. Certainly, the insulation offered by faith seems thinner in the black areas than in the suburbs, but is still effective in ensuring overall wellbeing. South Africa's overpoliticised and myopically secular media miss this point almost completely.

There is independent evidence of even more tangible effects. In the field of physical and social health, both marked by a powerful interaction with the human spirit, the impact of religion seems incontrovertible. A recent review of 669 mainly medical studies found that religious faith had beneficial effects in the areas of hypertension, longevity, depression, suicide, sexual behaviour, alcohol and drug use, youth delinquency, well-being, hope, self-esteem, and educational attainment.<sup>32</sup> Religious faith has also been linked to educational attainment in a survey of 19 studies.<sup>33</sup>

In studying our survey results, we were surprised at how little impact political disillusionment seemed to have on personal morale among believers as opposed to non-churchgo-

Responses to our surveys suggested that religion had done far more to improve lives and morale than the political programmes and promises of recent years

ers. Politics invades the attitudes of all people, but among churchgoers in particular its effects are relatively superficial. Signs of acute political aggravation were most common among non-churchgoers.

Religious commitment in general promotes a buoyant mood, and 'spiritual capital' seems to be correlated with social capital, confidence, patience, and fortitude. Religion seems to insulate people from political and economic stress, even without 'otherworldly' seclusion or fatalism. Our respondents were quite willing to respond to political issues, but did so at a somewhat greater distance than non-churchgoers. Importantly, all categories of churchgoers reflected sentiments of self-reliance – a crucial finding in view of the mass dependence on state support among the population at large. This tendency can very easily be seen as a 'panacea for the masses' in crypto-Marxist terminology, but we did not get the impression that religion is a soporific and a source of generalised false consciousness. As already suggested, what religion does seem to do is insert a cushion between the individual and the realities of economics and politics without obscuring the latter.

## Can the social potential of Pentecostalism be realised?

We believe the results of our research provide cause for optimism about the impact of Pentecostalism on social life and development in South Africa. Four factors are particularly prominent.

The first is the morality and life orientation of typical Pentecostal congregants. Our results broadly confirm Berger's depiction of the Calvinist social character, meant to frame his



Two pentecostal churches in Hillbrow, Johannesburg.

review of Pentecostalism in Latin America, as a: ‘... worldly asceticism ... a disciplined attitude to work; an equally disciplined attitude to other spheres of life; a deferral of instant consumption [in favour of] savings, eventual capital accumulation, and social mobility.’<sup>34</sup>

This is more or less applicable to other denominations as well, including mainstream churches, but the fact that the consequences of Calvinism have become generalised beyond the Reformed Churches does not detract from its importance in the Pentecostal context.

The second concerns the inadvertent effects of faith that can often be more salient than organised religious goal-seeking activity. In their study in Hout Bay, Schlemmer and Bot conclude that ‘it is almost as if their [local respondents’] emotional rejection of worldly concerns relaxes them and releases energy for the same worldly matters, precisely because these things mean so little to them.’ In other words, the relaxed and patient approach to work and life that so many Pentecostals reported may help them to respond to challenges more effectively. Perhaps it is this quality of motivation that has produced the remarkable upward shift in lifestyle (LSM) scores among Pentecostals recorded in the course of this study.

A third factor, also noted by David Martin in his review of the Pentecostal movement, is that it ‘works by constant adjustment on the ground ... (it) belongs by nature to open markets ...’<sup>35</sup> This entrepreneurial feature of the movement, which emerged in various ways in the course of our research, means that pastors influence the mindsets of congregants in ways that incline them not to moral flexibility but strategic adaptability, with obvious implications for development.

This entrepreneurial quality of many Pentecostals, which Martin also refers to as ‘voluntaristic and competitive pluralism’, will help the movement to continue renewing itself,



protecting it from the formalisation and operational conservatism that Weber noted in religious denominations in general.<sup>36</sup>

Fourthly, development assumes that social decay and the debilitating aspects of community life be countered, and the Pentecostal moral discipline that we have pervasively recorded in our findings promises this. Berger describes the effect in a compelling way:

As long as the individual can indeed find meaning and identity in his private life, he can manage to put up with the meaningless and dis-identifying world of the mega structures. ... The situation becomes intolerable if 'home,' that refuge of stability and value in an alien world, ceases to be such a refuge - when, say, my wife leaves me, my children take on lifestyles that are strange and unacceptable to me, my church becomes incomprehensible, my neighbourhood becomes a place of danger, and so on.<sup>37</sup>

Pentecostalism, and other denominations, as our findings show, have indeed protected the family, the home, and the personal spheres of millions of people. This has helped to insulate growing segments of the population from the effects of severe socioeconomic alienation in South Africa.

Pentecostalism and other denominations have indeed protected the family, the home, and the personal spheres of millions of people

Hence Pentecostalism reveals promising signs of a positive role in development. It is important, though, not to overestimate the likely effects, nor to misunderstand how they might be achieved. Direct engagement by these churches to influence social and economic policy, either directly or through political surrogates, is unlikely, and many would argue that this would be unwelcome in any case. Instead, Pentecostal churches are likely to have the greatest effect if they extend their existing mode of influence to a wider propagation of goals and targets in our democracy, and to economic life at the community level. According to Alan Aldridge, Pentecostal activity is at its most powerful when it is able to impose its own definition of a situation on its own spheres of activity and interaction.<sup>38</sup> The problem in South Africa is that, despite the large numbers of Pentecostals, their definitions of situations and challenges are largely unknown within local politics, or other spheres of organised development activity.

This raises the issue of the relative seclusion (not withdrawal) of Pentecostal churches from public debate about community issues. Pastors do speak out about community matters, and sometimes intervene in them, but those who do are usually in the larger churches, with a bigger public profile. The community churches that are closest to the real needs of the majority of Pentecostals have almost no public profile at all. Furthermore, the media exposure of the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa is minimal, and it is not well known for raising issues for public debate very consistently.

This means that important views and messages are lost to the general public and to decision-makers. One can understand that a public role comparable to that of the Anglican Church, for example, is not the preferred mode of interaction of Pentecostals. Furthermore, as in the United States, they do not have the status of the mainstream churches, and this makes it difficult for them to penetrate the media. It is probably up to the media to do something about this rather than the Pentecostal churches themselves. Fortunately some newspapers, particularly Afrikaans-language ones, are improving their coverage of religious activity, mainly because they have realised that public interest in religion outstrips that in most other topics.

Unfortunately, the success of the 'prosperity churches' in mobilising the energies of congregants for commercial and occupational success is one of the more controversial aspects



of Pentecostalism, as the churches themselves have admitted. As noted earlier, prominent church leaders emphasise that the prosperity message has a theological grounding, but the concern is pervasive, fed by the appearance of great wealth and expensive technology in some mega churches.

This image would make it difficult for the movement as a whole to co-operate with the ecumenical agencies of the mainstream churches in any public action. In any case, some key aspects of the potential contribution of the Pentecostal churches might be overshadowed by the much greater public profile of heavyweights in the mainstream churches, and the more politicised approaches that characterise mainstream ecumenical agencies. Another danger is that the particular quality, passion, and flavour of the Pentecostal churches and their congregations might be obscured.

## Emerging possibilities

In thinking about the potential consequences of CDE's research for South African development, its executive director, Ann Bernstein, has raised a number of issues.<sup>39</sup>

Will the growth in the number of Pentecostals continue? Can we distinguish their social influence – direct and indirect, intended and unintended – from that of members of other religious groups? And, ultimately, to what extent can the considerable social capital embedded in this movement be utilised for the benefit of broader South African society?

One of the most striking themes emerging from our research, and arguably the distinguishing feature of this group of religious denominations, is that Pentecostalism encourages a sense of agency in its participants. In many respects, the positive possibilities of the continued growth and development of these churches stem from this characteristic.

The message which Pentecostalism conveys in numerous ways to its adherents is: you are a worthy person, and you can change and improve your life. This message may also be contained in countless self-help articles and seminars, but does not have the driving force of religious experience behind it.

This is a different message in many respects from that conveyed in South Africa's democratic transition. The ruling party and government has long emphasised public sector 'delivery', and the duty of the state towards citizens. Even they are now becoming concerned about a growing sense of entitlement among citizens and communities, and token warnings on this score have become an intermittent feature of government communications.

Too many South Africans seem to perceive their role as that of waiting for the government to deliver, with far less emphasis on what it is that citizens should be doing for themselves. Can Pentecostalism be said to be a force promoting a different set of attitudes, encouraging often very poor people to take charge of their own lives and not wait for every aspect of 'delivery' from an overstretched state?

Fascinating indications of this sense of agency at work, and hints of the role it could play, emerged in CDE's research results:

- A notable feature of the growth of the Pentecostal churches is their entrepreneurial character. Is this one of the outlets for entrepreneurial energy in the country? If so, why is it taking this form, and what does this mean? According to numerous surveys, South Africa lags far behind many other developed and developing countries with respect to levels of entrepreneurship. Apartheid prevented Africans (and other black groupings)

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One of a growing number of tent churches: The House of God in Mofolo, Soweto.

from developing their entrepreneurial skills, and exploiting opportunities for business. As more opportunities open up for black South Africans, will these Pentecostal entrepreneurs find other outlets for their talents? Will this entrepreneurial approach lead their congregants into more effective participation in the economy – through creating enterprises themselves, or finding jobs more readily?

- One of the intriguing questions hinted at but not resolved in our research concerns the extent to which participants in Pentecostal churches are gaining skills they did not have before. Among these are the skills needed to start churches and congregations, and manage and participate in their activities – from the most basic administrative skills to people management skills. Many Pentecostal churches also say they offer workshops aimed at imparting basic skills – for example, how to look for a job, how to apply, how to approach the interview, and so on. This is a feature of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America, and was certainly talked about in our interviews. This is another important potential contribution in a developing country whose education system is struggling to deliver, whose formal economy is not generating enough jobs, and in which many families only have experience of manual labour, and some of no employment at all.
- There is much talk in South Africa of what communities and individuals can do to combat crime. Many of the pastors we interviewed want to be involved in crime prevention, and believed they had an active role to play. Whether it's talking to the local station commander every week, asking the police to come and talk to members of the congregation, or finding out which churches offenders belong to, there is a range of strategies being talked about and applied. And yet no political, business, or any other leader in South Africa has ever mentioned these communities or group of pastors as possible resources in combating crime.
- There is evidence that, as Africans move to the cities, they also tend to move away from the African Independent-type churches to Pentecostal churches. Will Pentecostal churches harbour ever increasing numbers of Africans as they start to become more



settled urban dwellers, and their prospects improve? And does the spectrum of Pentecostal churches offer them an ordered, progressive means of continued religious participation as they become more affluent and their prospects improve? Mega-churches seem to be an important marker of aspiration and upward mobility. Therefore, as some black South Africans move from the townships to the more affluent suburbs, they tend to move from community-type churches to churches such as Rhema. Even if you can't yet move into the more peaceful, settled formerly white world of suburbia, however modest, you can at least go to church in those areas and associate with people from the materially more secure world to which you aspire. Therefore, Pentecostalism may well perform better at retaining congregants than other denominations as they move up the social ladder.

- Pentecostal churches are often 'bottom-up' institutions. An individual decides to 'plant' a church, and then has to attract congregants. The pastor is frequently accountable to that local community, and if they don't approve of what he says or does or how he spends their donations, they are free to leave at any time. The voluntary and entrepreneurial nature of the 'movement' means that, at any time, a particular pastor could suffer a schism in his local community, with a future pastor and his followers walking away from his church and starting another one. This is a very direct form of local accountability, which raises interesting questions about the consequences of this experience for the communities and individuals involved. Is this pattern of behaviour carried over into the political sphere? Can these local level churches start to form - in David Martin's phrase - 'little platoons of democracy' where they start to apply principles of local accountability to local politicians or members of parliament, for example?

Policy debate in South Africa is essentially secular. However they may differ, policy-makers in government and the analysts in dialogue with them draw on essentially the same repertoire of scripts and actors. This research project has given CDE the unusual

Palm Bible Church in Dlamini, Soweto.

Of all the denominations, the Pentecostal churches are probably best able to reach out to South Africa's marginalised communities

– and salutary - experience of looking outside this world. Again unusually, it has not led us to a package of firm policy proposals and prescriptions, but presented us with intriguing questions and possibilities. South Africa's president often talks about an African Renaissance. Could this renaissance be driven more effectively by the entrepreneurial and moral energies of a burgeoning Pentecostal 'movement' than by politicians? Put another way, can the efforts of the politicians to create sustainable democratic politics and more effective enabling environments for business activity be bolstered by the 'little platoons' or enclaves of local civic religious and other activities encouraged by the Pentecostals?

Proactive engagement with key national challenges does not feature strongly in our findings. Nevertheless, there is evidence of social capital upon which the religious faithful can draw as a means of dealing with the pervasive pathologies in South African society, to the extent that these affect their personal lives. Such social capital is not something that can easily be generated by state intervention, and the state would therefore be well advised to promote and encourage the growth of the Pentecostal movement and the religious sector in general.

Ultimately, the largest social challenge facing South Africa is the integration of the divided, unequal, and alienated sectors of our economy and society. Of all the denominations, the Pentecostal churches are probably best able to reach out to South Africa's marginalised communities.

For the rest, the Pentecostal churches should go on doing what they are already doing so well – protecting the social fabric from further decay, and giving people who are otherwise sidelined in our society a sense of purpose and mission. What they deserve, however, is greater recognition from major role players in our society that they, the churches, have a role where grandiose policy has failed.

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### Synthesis report

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Designed and produced by Acumen Publishing Solution, Johannesburg.

Printed by The Bureau, Johannesburg.

Photographs by Riaan de Villiers, Oupa Nkosi (*Mail & Guardian*), and Stephen Rule.



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