


From small country churches to explosion into megachurches: A modern Pentecostal cultural fit for the Assemblies of God in South Africa

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Dates:

Received: 05 Jan. 2022

Accepted: 08 Mar. 2022

Published: 19 Apr. 2022

How to cite this article:

Resane, K.T., 2022, 'From small country churches to explosion into megachurches: A modern Pentecostal cultural fit for the Assemblies of God in South Africa', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2460. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2460>

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This article examines the evolutionary journey of Assemblies of God in South Africa from small country churches into explosion of megachurches. This Pentecostal denomination is categorised as a classical Pentecostal church that evolved as a missionary church from the early twentieth century. It was officially registered in South Africa in 1917. Historically, it developed as small fellowships in small structures; however today, it has exploded into a huge denomination spread in some geographical locations as local megachurches. Through literature reviews, the objectives are to reveal the rationale behind this explosion, which are the church organisation, emphasis on education, entrepreneurship spirit, apostolic heritage and local church autonomy based on the group system. Results of this explosion are accounted to vigorous evangelism, and Bible-oriented religion such as *kerygma*, *diakonia*, *koinonia* and rhetorics to be culturally and contextually relevant. Assemblies of God embrace African gregarious worldviews and apostolic practices of ecclesial life. This apostolic outlook invokes the discussions on leadership principles. It also influences the church polity exercised by many African megachurches. Shifts from orthodox Pentecostal doctrines such as *glossolalia*, divine healing and eschatological expectations are examined. The conclusion is while the neo-Pentecostal movement replaces these doctrines by prosperity gospel, personal prophecies and motivational rhetorics instead of sound biblical hermeneutics, Assemblies of God in South Africa remain rooted in their evangelical and classical Pentecostal tradition.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research study is a historical reflection based on Church History, Missiology, Pentecostal Studies, and invokes Practical Theology by referring to strong leadership principles, which leads to church stability. It further calls for Pentecostals to carry out self-examination regarding their fundamental doctrines that are invaded and influenced retrogressively by the neo-Pentecostal movement.

Keywords: Pentecostal; church; Assemblies of God; megachurch; Spirit; classical.

Introduction

The contribution that this article makes is to demonstrate how the sociocultural factors contribute towards Pentecostal explosion in South Africa. It unravels the ecclesial evolution of one Pentecostal denomination, that is, Assemblies of God. The research question is '[w]hat are the factors that contribute towards the growth of Assemblies of God from small churches to megachurches seen today?' This does not mean that there are no more small Assemblies of God churches around the country. There are still small churches, but there is some normalcy of emergence of bigger churches. This growth is part of the current Pentecostal explosion, which is an observable and significant growth of Christianity.

Assemblies of God in South Africa fall under the category of classical Pentecostalism, bred out of the Azusa Street Revival at the turn of the twentieth century (Poloma & Green 2010:6). It came into being as a result of the union of 120 pastors and small Pentecostal groups at Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914. They adopted a very simple polity of the combination of congregational and presbyterial elements. The executive presbytery elected served as a central administrative group that 'governs and ministers to the needs of the denomination' (Poloma & Green 2010:93). The initial organisational structure was that they should be in a cooperative fellowship, with no formal creed. However, by 1916, the 'fellowship' 'found it necessary to produce a statement of faith that began to regulate both religious experience and doctrinal beliefs' (Poloma & Green 2010:6). The

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prominent figure in the historical development of the Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal Movement, in general, is Charles Parham. He is known as a pioneer, a teacher and a systematic theologian who greatly influenced the doctrine of the Assemblies of God.

From the early days of its inception, the Assemblies of God became a missional denomination through some direct foreign mission involvement of planting new churches, literature publication and the Bible Institute movement that spread across the world at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the observations to make is that the early Pentecostal ecclesial expression had always been a small church at the street corner of cities, towns and villages. Congregations were small in size, maybe because of sociocultural bigotries the mainline Christianity directed towards Pentecostalism. They were regarded as sects, cults, heretics, with all other derogatory names such as the 'Hallelujah maniacs', 'handy clappies', 'tongues-people' and 'fiery sons of thunder' (Resane in Kgatle, Nel & Banda 2022:171).

As a norm, Pentecostal early history was famous for small conglomerates and agglutinations, united or cemented together for survival in the midst of socio-religious marginalisation by the mainline Christianity of the time. The clerics, sociologists, journalists and theologians of the time attributed little importance to the Pentecostals (Wilson 1997:9), and whenever they were cited by the journalists, it was in passing as an example of small-town churches that served outsider migrant labourers (Goldschmidt 1944:7). Small-church structures at the street corners were always associated with Pentecostals, and the majority of their membership was always perceived as migrant labourers or newcomers in the town, who might be foreigners.

One terrain that was directly affected and impacted by the Assemblies of God is South Africa. The denomination in South Africa evolved as a missionary church since the first arrival of missionaries in 1908 (Watt 1992:203). They came from different Pentecostal formations and different nationalities, such as Canada, USA, UK and other Western European countries, including Scandinavia. As can be expected, these missionaries were driven by exuberance of their faith and passion for service to God and his people. They did not come with 'Father Christmas' mentality of disbursing gifts to the masses lying in the squalid settlements of the dark continent. They came with the spirit of servanthood to serve where the gospel of the Spirit was needed. Out of the winds of theological liberalism, economic depression and social corruption that engulfed the 19th century, these leaders had confidence in their message and the promise it held for societies that seemed destined for total abyss in hell (Wilson 1997:8). Watt (1992:19) reveals of these pioneer missionaries that 'they believed that they had been led by the Holy Spirit to minister in South Africa'. They emerged as a dynamic religious alternative to the nation full of uncertainties after the skirmishes of the Anglo-Boer war. It was at the

time when political focus was in a murky water regarding the situation, future and participation of the indigenous populations within the political mechanisms of emerging South Africa at war with itself, but economically booming because of the discoveries of diamonds and gold.

These missionaries came as independent groups, with no intentions of forming any cooperative or a denomination. One of the demands in the mission field is fellowship, and this need is the one that necessitated these missionaries to have fellowship with one another. The government also played a role for formal organisation as a way of administering accessibility to indigenous populations, and the allocation of sites for church buildings. These two factors led these foreign missionaries towards the formation of Assemblies of God in South Africa. Most of these missionaries were itinerant preachers, mostly based in the eastern part of what used to be Transvaal – one of the two Boer Republics (the other one being Orange Free State), and both became the provinces of the Union of South Africa that was constituted in 1910. It is clear that these pioneers were not intending to build huge ministries but to plant churches in communities – churches that reflect the apostolic church based on ecclesiology and missiology of Acts 2:42–47. This sentiment is expressed by Watt (1992:203) that they were intending not to build a movement but to promote the values such as the love of the Bible, commitment to evangelism, and the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Historical reflection on megachurches

The term 'megachurch' became popular in the 1970s when the Charismatic Movement emerged as a revival in the church especially in North America, and the phenomenal growth spread as far as Asia, Latin America and Africa (Frahm-Arp 2016:267). The Greek *me-gas* means huge or powerful with the connotation of excellent quality or sheer quantity (Ukah 2019:323). It is a mushrooming church phenomenon, a force to reckon with and an ecclesiastical reality of the 21st century with original roots in the latter part of the twentieth century. In trying to define the megachurch, Hunt (2019) says:

[T]he growth of the megachurch (generally defined as a regular attendance of over 2,000 people) is undoubtedly one of the most exceptional religious trends of recent times, certainly within the Christian sphere. Spreading from the USA, megachurches have now become common globally – reaching different national and cultural contexts. (p. 1)

One feature of megachurch phenomenon is that:

[I]ts practices and organisational structure revolve around a principal charismatic figure believed to be a supplier of sacred or salvation goods who is cast in the mould of a profit-driven spiritual entrepreneur. (Ukah 2019:323)

In church communities, the megachurch has become a measure of success, influence, material grace and prestige.

African Pentecostalism generally measures itself by megachurches as a sign of divine approval. These churches evolved as a means of salvation economy where materialism, prosperity and prestige are the appeal to psychosocial needs of Africans whose lives are ravaged by poverty of underprivileged. Salvation economy being preached and promoted in many megachurches 'promises blessings that are accessed by living a faithful Christian life that engages God's power against the evil forces that threaten believers' well-being' (Frahm-Arp 2016:269). The problem is always pointed by observers or researchers that the motives are always wrong, ungodly or unscriptural. Holiness, contentment and generosity are always not the virtues to be pursued. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:58) is correct that 'African megachurches are frequently motivated by greed for finances and fame. In this regard, money, as a system of storing, recording and calculating value' is the golden standard to be aimed for. Sermons and prophecies revolve around money appeals cushioned in some forms of deep-seated secrets that if the listener responds positively, there are abundant blessings waiting for him or her. It is true that '[m]egachurches become what they are because they creatively respond to local religious desires and tastes' (Ukah 2019:327).

In this article, the megachurch does not necessarily refer to the membership of 2000 and above but churches that exponentially grew from 200 to over a 1000. However, it is demonstrated here that the church under the scrutiny, Assemblies of God, evolved from small isolated churches because of a principal charismatic figure in the name of Nicholas Bhengu. And some features, such as prosperity, prestige and financial successes stated above, do not feature as characteristics of Assemblies of God. It is the church that has and is still evolving from minuteness to giganticness, with proper administration in place and the doctrine of priesthood of all believers influencing the church against the emergence of celebrity cultists.

Driving through the old townships, especially in Soweto and the East Rand, one notices the Assembly of God structures that were built in the late fifties and the sixties that they are really small structures designed architecturally for 50–60 people. One can recall the small church building in the region of Orlando East, which had to be vacated after the construction of a double-storey building next to Orlando Stadium. This small one was used to be called *inkonzo encane* [small church]. The big one referred to here had to be constructed quickly as the congregation in the early seventies was growing. It was constructed through the assistance of some Canadian missionaries though the highest percentage of funds was from the congregants. Another example is the church building in White City Jabavu. It is very small in structure, and like many others, through the townships, occupies a small piece of land leaving no option for expansion. Even *inkonzo encane* of Orlando occupies a small piece of land with no possibility to extend it. Many of these Assemblies of God churches were erected during the zenith of apartheid when Black people did not own cars, so parking space was never a consideration when sites were

allocated by apartheid government to churches. People walked to the church or used the public transport for that purpose. A good example is the church in Atteridgeville near Pretoria and the one in the township of Delmas. The land is so small that no creativity could be given a chance to extend structures because of the booming Pentecostal growth since the eighties.

These sites are inadequate for church's influence in transforming the communities, so in many instances these force new churches to seek for bigger sites for holistic ministry activities. Mangayi (2018:3), with reference to township churches around Pretoria, decries these inadequacies such as limited space for classrooms for Christian instruction, limited sanctuary to enable concurrent meetings, limited possibilities for strategic community ministries such as skills development training and youth community development projects.

The rationale behind this small site allocation was a general knowledge that Pentecostals are not big in membership, therefore deserving smaller church sites for their church buildings. This situation is also observed in other race group areas, especially in the Coloured communities. Their churches are sandwiched between residences or other structures, because their Pentecostal make-up was in the minority. Many of the Assemblies of God churches met in the lounges or classrooms for a long time. They were always small fellowships of few families; however, once the revival hits, their numbers blossomed. This is also highlighted by Nkomonde (2021:125) that 'one of the key developments was the construction of a church building and growing the congregation from a classroom sized group to a population of hundreds'. It is a general knowledge that for South Africans influenced by the missionaries, to embrace Pentecostalism was associated with cultic or heretic options. Like in North America, they 'were best understood as a caricature of the sentimental, religious nostalgia aroused by recollections of summer tent revivals, grandma's worn Bible, and certain old camp-meeting songs' (Wilson 1997:11).

In the previously white suburbs, the Assemblies of God were predominantly an English church. Of the three classical Pentecostal churches, Assemblies of God are the only one that did not work among the Afrikaans-speaking communities, and hence, it is so rare to find Assembly of God Church in the *platteland* [small agricultural rural Afrikaans-dominated towns]. In these towns that were of course for Whites in population composition, the Dutch-reformed Church with one of the two other sister churches (Hervormde or Gereformeerde Kerke) dominated the church sites, always along the main street of the town dubbed *Kerkstraat* [Church Street], if not *Voortrekkerstraat*. The alternative would be *Apostoliese Geloofsending Kerk* [Apostolic Faith Mission] or *Volle Evangelie Kerk van God* [Full Gospel Church of God], else one of the English churches, namely Anglican, Methodist or so on. The latter was dictated by the size of the English population in that town. Around the *Moederkerk* [Mother Church or Dutch Reformed Church], there will always be a sign that says *Kerk Stilte* /Church Silence. One can

imagine a handy-clappy *Pinkster Kerkie* [small Pentecostal Church] closer to the *Moederkerk* which believes in silence in worship. So, the *Pinksters* were allocated sites few blocks away or at the periphery of the town. White Assemblies of God churches of the sixties and seventies were thus small big-city churches that could seat 200–300 people, with spacious land that could allow future expansions.

The Assemblies of God generally had the golden era of the eighties after 1964 cessation of International Assemblies of God and the 1981 cessation of Assemblies of God Fellowship had left it as an indigenous church, with no relational cooperation with any overseas body. In the words of John Bond, consequently the Assemblies of God moved 'from a struggling missionary body to a thriving indigenous South African church consisting of Blacks, Whites and Coloureds and Indians, one of the more significant denominations in the land' (Bond 2000:48). It got consolidated as a national church and started a journey out of small structures to mega structures of the current era. The outcome of this new status of the church teaches us that ecclesiology, in fact theology in general, 'like any other scientific endeavour, is not immune to a significant paradigm shift when new orientation is envisaged' (Mbamalu 2015:2). After shaking, growth spurts erupt. This explosion happened in all population groups. There are various factors and reasons that contributed to this explosion of now an indigenous church that severed formal ties with overseas or foreign partners.

Organisationally, there was a constitutional consolidation after the departure of all groups who felt that the then constitution was working against them, and of those who considered a constitution too secular and a worldly document. Nicholas Bhengu who vied for a strong constitution to protect his interests in black areas was a satisfied man, with support from John Bond (Bond 2000:265–268), who was now left with few assemblies under his group. However, Bhengu, I think because of his ageing in horizon, started to organise his Back to God churches, generally known as Assemblies of God Movement. In 1990, this section adopted the name Assemblies of God – Back to God 'in recognition of its Back to God Crusade genesis' (Nkomonde 2021:125). Evolving out of Bhengu's aspirations, it is organisationally structured along the local and district structures, and age group regimentally. There were and still are women or mothers, men or fathers, youth, girls and children operational structures within the church. The new constitution was implemented though differently in various groups. This was the time of the apartheid regime's self-exertion of divide and rule to the other-than-white population groups. The denomination that was composed of groups found itself grouping along the racial lines that reflected the government racial classification.

John Bond, who continued to be the General Chairperson of the General Executive, consolidated his Assemblies of God Group churches (white) and continued to provide apostolic leadership to the Group. The Coloured and Indian Churches from different groups conglomerated as a unit and formed

what is now known as Assemblies of God Association, which fell under the charismatic leadership of Colin La Foy. The organisation of Assemblies of God in South Africa looks like three churches under one umbrella – three circles within a bigger circle. Concentration on constitutional issues, organograms, structures, etc. historically proved to be a springboard to the *routinisation of charismata* where *charisma* is institutionalised. This is when policies, procedures, etc. take precedence over *pneuma* and *rhema*. The leading of the Spirit and the directives of the written word (Bible) become compromised, if not marginalised. However, for Assemblies of God, this became a springboard for growth and dogmatic stability at the same time. It became the fastest growing church and the most balanced one amid erratic spurts of the then emerging Charismatic Movement. The historical missionary church has become indigenous and attained what has been hoped for: self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. This three 'selves' theory emerged as missiological theory of two missiologists, Rufus Anderson (Congregationalist) and Henry Venn (Anglican). In capturing the concept, some South African missiologists (Kritzinger, Meiring & Saayman 1994:8) point out that:

[T]he main goal of the theory was the gradual transfer of control of the mission work, as well as the evangelisation of the community, to the 'native people' themselves, by way of elected church councils in the local churches. (cf. Anderson 1988:22–27; Venn 1988:16–20)

Ecclesiastically, the broader Pentecostal denominations of 1980–1990, especially the three mentioned above, started to have in their membership some emerging vibrant charismatic young leaders. Mzondi (2019:96–104) calls them African Township Pentecostal Pastors. These felt trapped within classical Pentecostalism, and in some notable moves seceded from their parent denominations into constituted independent churches or some youth organisations. Apostolic Faith Mission followed by Assemblies of God was significantly affected by this new development. This is one of the reasons why Bhengu sought for a constitution with strong teeth – the constitution to deal with these vibrant youngsters who could easily move out of the Assemblies of God with local membership component or even with some church property. Notable emerging vibrant leaders out of Assemblies of God include the likes of A. Nene, Gladstone Botwana, Raymond Vanda and others whose ministries later fizzled into the air. The successful ones such as these three grew and made some impact on their communities through their kerygmatic and prophetic gifts of community involvement. However, their departure from the Assemblies of God did not shake her strength and stability.

Assemblies of God is a very complex denomination that is only understood by those in her membership. What is worth noting is that her group system elevates the Movement or Back to God group above all others. Because in this article, from here, the research discoveries will be basically about the Assemblies of God Back to God Crusade, which is a 'black section of the church' previously pioneered, engineered and constituted by Nicholas Bhengu who in the 1970s to

the mid-1980s consolidated it before his passing on. There is an apostolic heritage left behind for the church progress from small to megachurches.

Bhengu was a strong believer of the indigenous church based on the three 'Selves' theory (self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting), something that created a wedge between him and the American missionaries within the Assemblies of God (Mochechane 2018:78). This sounds like a contradiction, because right from 1914 when the Assemblies of God was constituted, its Assemblies of God United States of America (AGUSA) missionaries were inspired by this missiological and ecclesiological philosophy of indigenous church, and it became 'the philosophy that governed AGUSA missionary initiatives around the world' (Mochechane 2015:166).

In order to engross the philosophy of indigenous church, Bhengu organised his churches in such a way that the local church takes charge of its growth and development. The church organisation into age or gender regimentation¹ had opened the doors for both evangelistic and discipleship endeavours by the local church, where youth reach youth, women reach women, men reach men, etc. One of the notable features within Assemblies of God in South Africa, including all groups, is the absence of the Christian education hour or what some call Sunday school hour, which normally takes place an hour before Sunday morning worship service. In many parts of the world, this is one of the features of Assemblies of God church norms. In South Africa, discipleship programme is not undertaken through Christian education programme but through, in most instances, Wednesdays Bible Studies or within regiments meeting once a week in their own settings.

This church is organised for growth through evangelism, not only by the Back to God Crusade only but through the different groups in the church. These groups of men, women, girls and youth focused on self-empowerment through self-reliance initiatives, such as teachings on family life, marriage, hygiene and parenting. The activities are for entrepreneurship, and not for commercialisation. For women, the Proverb 31 principles are vigorously promoted, whereby women of Assemblies of God are encouraged and taught to work with their hands. Their Thursday services are for teaching God's Word and imparting skills, such as baking, needlework, crocheting and sewing. The final products are always, after the families' needs are covered, put up for sale with financial returns going into the church through the women's department. Watt captures it that: They meet for ministry, prayer and training in skills, arts and crafts. They also collect funds, which they bring to the annual women's convention (Watt 1992:111).

Women play some crucial economic role blazed by Bhengu, who had a strong vision on empowering evangelism.

1.1 use this word in this article not to mean the strict discipline or enforced uniformity characteristic of military groups or totalitarian systems but to mean systematic order for feasible administration of the organisation.

Mochechane is correct that '[t]o this day women in the AGSA² raise millions towards Bhengu's vision of preaching the gospel from "Cape to Cairo" ...' Bhengu 'was possessed by a robust inclination to motivate his followers towards economic independence within their situation' (Mochechane 2015:26, 27). He encouraged and taught women to work with their hands in order to support their families and the church.

For men's fellowship, the same principles apply, and they teach each other on the skills such as basic building maintenance (electrification, plumbing, etc.), food production, taking care or stewardship of properties like vehicles, clothes, houses, etc. All these are not set in any curriculum cycle but are expected to be part and parcel of pedagogical essentials of the church. These are performed because 'Bhengu believed, among other things, in the worth, education and self-sufficiency of the African people' (Mochechane 2015:24). In another place, Mochechane (2015:156) extends Bhengu's conviction that 'he enabled people to ultimately take charge of their own destinies through education, self-help, skills-development, and other projects'.

Girls are organised in such a way that they are taught ethics and morals as single females. They are organised separately because 'they have special needs arising out of black culture where mothers are sometimes irksome and oppressive to the unmarried girls that their freedom in Christ was being inhibited' (Watt 1992:111). They should remain rooted in the Word of God, and in their rendezvous teach each other under an elderly or experienced leader (mother) how to keep holiness, and should they get married, how to be a wife and a mother. There are some aesthetic rudiments included such as grooming, health and hygiene fundamentals.

Bhengu's love for education is significantly displayed through the Youth Department that raises funds for a bursary that has impacted many people by sending deserving youngsters to schools, colleges and universities. That bursary has produced thousands of professionals through South Africa and abroad. Bhengu's legacy continues to be bigger even in the current South Africa. He was a visionary full of foresight:

He was motivated by an ideology of 'African consciousness' which drove him to pursue a ministry that had a strong component of social responsibility. He didn't only preach to 'save lost souls'; but he also inculcated a sense of economic independence in his followers. He emphasised education and sent hundreds of young people to universities around the country. He promoted skills development among the men and women of the AGSA, thus introducing a culture of innovation and creativity among his people. (Mochechane 2015:149)

For the Assemblies of God, these are not just the church programmes but organisational designs for church growth through evangelism. They have contributed enormously towards the Assemblies of God growth by pushing the

2. AGSA is a reference to Assemblies of God South Africa, and this acronym is commonly used by researchers, especially Mochechane (2015) in this context.

churches from small churches to big churches visible in many communities today. People who discover the importance and the power of self-reliance become professionally equipped and economically viable to build their own churches. Dependency syndrome is an anomaly to Assemblies of God, an oddity that cannot synchronise with what Assemblies of God are all about. Through the internal departments in the churches, evangelism blossoms, and discipleship blooms. Lives are reached and churches grow. Quantity is followed by quality. Poverty alleviation comes through self-empowerment skills initiated by the church. These ecclesial and missional initiatives characterise historical development of Assemblies of God in South Africa.

Megachurches because of Bible centralism: *Kerygma*, *diakonia* and *koinonia*

Assemblies of God because of the influence of Bhengu, whose vision of his calling to the ministry was shown 'a Bible as a tool to use to liberate his people' (Mzondi 2019:79), and as Dubb (1976) explains, this vision further:

[H]e showed me an open Bible and said:

[T]his is the Word of Life; study this Word and through the words of this book, you will break these fetters and free your people from the chains of sin, in which they have been bound for centuries. I wish you to do this. (p. 10)

This vision entrenches and engrosses Assemblies of God as a strongly word-based classical Pentecostal church. *Kerygma* is activities of preaching the Word of God. It encapsulates all activities that intend to spread the gospel, and it is mostly done through preaching. The Back to God Crusade, which is the evangelistic arm of the church, centres its activities around the Word of God. In their campaigns, preaching, not miracles, occupies the central place. Many Assemblies of God testify that they were more attracted by the Word of God than the miracle. Watt (1992) says that preaching in Assemblies of God creates a sense of uniformity among all the groups within the movement:

[P]reaching is held in the highest esteem. The movement came into existence on the basis of preaching, it has been led by preachers, it has grown through preaching, and preaching remains basic to its ministry. Because preaching holds this prime position, the modern tendency to turn the sermon into a 'chat' is deplored within the movement. (p. 103)

When one meets an Assemblies of God person who is mission-minded, one hears the burning passion verbally expressed as *batho ba nyorilwe* [people are thirsty]. If you prod further, this thirst is nothing else but for the Word of God. One important note is that because Assemblies of God as a denomination never had their theological institutions where preachers are shaped and honed, preaching is carried out differently with two common features: authoritative and exegesis of Scriptures. There is no cookie-cutter, or one size fits all types of preaching outcome. For instance, *kerygma* in black Assemblies of God is textually based and homiletically

conversational with illustrative stories in order to contextualise the text. Dubb (1976:23) mentions that preaching in Assemblies of God is accompanied by passionate emotional outbursts. Watt talks about Bhengu's preaching and generally black and coloured Assemblies of God preachers are 'characterised by clarity of content and structure, a well-modulated voice and, occasionally, a dramatic impact' (Watt 1992:104). This methodical narrative preaching is one of the legacies that Bhengu left behind, as Lephoko (2018) asserts:

Bhengu was a great storyteller. He told stories to explain his messages – like the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3–9) and the parable of the seed (Mt 13:24–30). He talked to people about spiritual things using earthly examples people could relate with. (p. 108)

In the white churches, the preachers 'are more didactic and reflective' (Watt 1992:105). Like in many, if not all the Pentecostal churches, *kerygma* is:

[A] joyful invitation to communion with Jesus and His followers. However, it is not a means of scaring people to God with the fear of hell. Proclamation brings the preacher and the audience closer. (Resane 2019:1)

Kham's (2000:7) address to World Assemblies of God Congress in reference to Assemblies of God pioneers said, '[a]lthough they might not have the best hermeneutical understanding, early Pentecostals were committed to the authority of the Bible'. This is what should keep Assemblies of God on tracks. A good and welcomed Assembly of God preacher 'is one who is easy to listen to, who faithfully expounds the message of the Bible, and who speaks with the power of the Holy Spirit' (Watt 1992:105). The Word and the Spirit (*rhema* and *pneuma*) operate in a balance. They never clash or contradict each other. Constantly, whenever there is a confusion in the black Assemblies of God congregation, one hears the quotation of one Sesotho hymn: *Moea o latela lentsoe* [the Spirit follows the Word meaning the Spirit bears testimony to the Word]. The dynamic character of Assemblies of God pneumatology is that the leading of the Spirit should take precedence over formulas for success; and this must never contradict biblical principles (McGee 1986:168). The local Assemblies of God continue to remain 'the living testimony of the prophetic purpose of God in history. It is also a prophetic community which is to preserve and accurately proclaim the Word of God' (Bickle 2012:240).

Kerygma has set Assemblies of God Church in South Africa on the path to numerical and quantitative growth. This phenomenal growth led the movement out of small churches into megachurches. This confirms the expression that *batho ba nyorilwe*, thirsty for the Word of God. The secret and the rationale behind this phenomenal growth are the Word of God. Preaching is attractive as it exudes charisma and forceful presentation. People rally around the eloquent preaching of the Word of God. It becomes attractive to them as it conveys the message of hope and better life that comes through special relationship with Christ.

Diakonia speaks of the acts of service. The Greek word 'diakoneō' means to serve or to minister – to render any

kind of service. This refers to the various forms of ministry and service in which, the Christian community, in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth (who was among us as one who serves), puts itself at the service of the whole world (Kritzinger et al. 1994:37). These services had been variously expressed in and by the Assemblies of God. Resane (2019) is correct that:

[S]ervice evangelism is embraced in institutional work such as schools, hospitals, community upliftment projects, training, working with those with special needs etc. This can also be expressed in community development programmes, where people are trained in life skills (hard or soft) to redress menaces such as poverty, diseases, unemployment etc. (p. 6)

The diaconal services push the church out of the nest or comfort zone to express herself in the public squares. These make the church visible beyond the walls. These services are outreach-orientated and evangelistic in nature. The Assemblies of God people exert themselves in public spaces wherever they find themselves. One finds them participating in prayer meetings in offices, institutions, hospitals etc. They understand that evangelism is engagement, and not isolation. They accede and concur with Kim (2004) that:

[E]vangelism is engaging in the act of wonder, and inviting others to share in that wonder, recognising that the story of God is greater than our capacity to grasp it. (p. 13)

This results in bringing people into the church, where the small structure becomes inadequate to accommodate worshippers on Sundays. This is the journey from a small country church to a megachurch.

Assemblies of God express its ecclesiology and missiology through the text, Acts 2:42–47. A good Assemblies of God pastor is the one who skilfully teaches this text to the congregation. Apart from the apostles' doctrine that comes through *kerygma*, there is such a great and deep sense of *koinonia* [participation, engagement] – the fellowship of the brethren. This participation, according to Corrigan (2016: 21–22), involves engagement, community and the whole person. Growth in God with each other coins and shapes Assemblies of God ecclesiastical – cultural configuration. This is one of the hallmarks of evangelical-Pentecostal features as explained by Wagner (1994) according to the texts in the book of Acts:

[W]hile they were growing in their vertical relationship to God, the new believers were also growing in their horizontal relationship to each other in Christian fellowship... One of the key factors of church health is to design ways and means for fellowship of being an integral part of church life week in and week out. If it is absent, the church will tend to plateau or decline. New members must be absorbed ferily rapidly. (p. 105)

The church gathering on any day of the week is not a routine or a norm but is the time of exertion into *homothumadon* (togetherness) for mutual growth and empowerment, not only for spiritual, but also for all spheres of life. Resane (2019) points it out that:

[F]ellowship is one of the marks of the Spirit-filled community. Living in fellowship with one another is one of the effects of Pentecost. When people are baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit, they start to enter the new era of cordial relationships. (p. 4)

It is a quality time of sharing and receiving, imparting and receiving, ministering and be ministered to. Sunday morning services in Assemblies of God are characterised by *nako ya ditumiso/isikhathi sok'dumisa*, the open ministry of the gathered church based on 1 Corinthians 14:26–40. This time is an opportunity for sharing, contributing and thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord. For many devotees, this is the sacred time never to miss as the body shares from itself to itself – mutual building, encouragement and, of course, exultation and praises to the Lord. Many members will tell you how they do not mind being late for the service, but not for *nako ya ditumiso/isikhathi sok'dumisa*. This is the *kairos* moment to meet God. For them, these are the testimonial services where 'everyone listens to everyone else "giving" their testimony', for ... Pentecostal testimony becomes a 'dynamic example of Incarnational Christianity' (Richie 2011:4, 136). It is the time when their meetings are electrified by the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit (Watt 1992:191). It is the time when people discover that the Spirit sets them free from the inherited rigid dogmas and legalistic liturgies, and are now released into the leading of the Spirit in their personal lives (Shaull & Cesar 2000:182).

Their coming together is becoming the idea of what the Swiss theorist Wenger (2006) calls *communities of practice*, where 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. To take it further, for Assemblies of God 'Communities of practice' become an event where people learn things. 'They form in all areas of life, wherever people do something, interact about how they do it, and, as a result, end up doing it better' (Corrigan 2016:26).

This *koinonia* attracts many people to the church as it is another expression of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, whereby any person can minister either in or through a song, reading of the text, or a word of testimony of the goodness of the Lord. Many South Africans come from the ecclesiastical traditions of liturgical leadership dictating procedures and processes. When they come to the Assemblies of God, they are left with an awe factor that they, as ordinary members, can be part of and contribute to the fellowship of the saints, when they discover that testimonies of what God has done in the life of the individual believer and the local community of faith forms 'an integral part of Pentecostal worship and faith' (Ellington 2000:49).

Paradigm shift – Apostolic or prophetic?

The traditional doctrines of *glossolalia* and the baptism of the Holy Spirit consequent to conversion seem to be regressing

into the small corner of classical Pentecostalism. Bhengu's ministry was bibliocentric and Christocentric. Mokhoathi (2016:31) points out that Bhengu's Pentecostal Christocentrism was in agreement with that of other Pentecostal teachers such as Wigglesworth, who cited by Coulter (2010) constantly spoke of transformation in the journey with Christ:

[T]here must first be the inner working power of God. It is He who changes the heart, and transforms the life, and before there is any real outward evidence, there must be the inflow of divine life. (p. 48)

The baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues were not the focus but the power of Christ. He was never against or reserved about it, but he never vehemently promoted it:

He did not emphasise that speaking in tongues is the evidence of being baptised in the Holy Spirit; instead he encouraged people not to seek the gift but the giver (Jesus). (Mzondi 2019:79)

However, as Watt (1992:106) says, '[b]aptism in the Holy Spirit, and speaking in tongues, are viewed as the norm for every believer', The bottom line is that Bhengu 'believed that a spiritual salvation provided the moral fibre required for people to begin to rise up from their social and economic degradation' (Watt 1992:178).

Broadly speaking, in both the Classical and neo-Pentecostal churches, one hardly hears, observes or views the event or the promotion of both *glossolalia* and/or the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The pioneers of Assemblies of God possessed certain apostolic authority, driving these distinctive teachings with passion, or unlike the likes of Bhengu, providing them the space to come forth with spontaneity. Regardless of this perceived diffidence of these distinctive doctrines, the current church leaders are convinced that their pioneers were:

[C]alled and sent by Christ to have spiritual authority, character, gifts and abilities to successfully reach and establish people in the kingdom truth and order, especially founding and overseeing local churches. (Cannistraci 1996:29)

The disparage of these gifts by current leaders does not deem pioneers negatively, but respectfully for their faithfulness to their calling. The current Pentecostal phenomenon is much on the 'prophetic' purpose, which has raised some concerns within evangelicalism at it accentuates extra-biblical revelation, accompanied by some utterances that disrespect human dignity, therefore showing no sign of 'To the glory of God'. This contributes to the proliferation and mushrooming of splintered independent groups all over the place. The Assemblies of God remains rooted in apostolic legacy, and outsiders, who yearn for engrossed devotional walk with God, find Assemblies of God as a spiritual home for their growth. This apostolic legacy, unlike the current prophetic fads somewhere else, contributes towards church growth and stability. People look for substance, holistic and tangible things of faith. After running for fads, they seek reality, and they arise and go back to the Father's house. It is after

returning to the Father's house they rediscover the fundamental truth that '[s]cripture is the ultimate trumpet of God's heart, purpose and will' (Bickle 2012:240). These returnees contribute to the welfare of the church and help it grow numerically. A good example to cite is the famous Sandton Assembly of God, a megachurch pioneered mainly by those who grew up in Assemblies of God, seceded and had decided to come back home. The 'apostolic covering' seems to be providing hope, stability and security than spurious prophetic gimmicks.

While the neo-Pentecostal movement replaces distinctive Pentecostal doctrines of *glossolalia* and baptism in the Holy Spirit by prosperity gospel, personal prophecies and motivational rhetorics instead of sound biblical hermeneutics, Assemblies of God in South Africa remains rooted in its evangelical and classical Pentecostalism. These rhetorics carry no substance, although they mushroom all over Africa like wildfires. They sound appealing to Africans who are still reeling in socio-economic self-positioning. In many cases, they become a cult around a celebrity. These are the aspirations in Africa, they are the magnet that results in Pentecostal explosions towards megachurches, but at the end, Pentecostal truth remains the foundation on which denominations such as Assemblies of God are built on.

Conclusion

While there is a significant exit of young vibrant leaders out of Assemblies of God, pursuing their personal independent ministries, there is an internal exodus from small to big churches. Somebody once said that the Assemblies of God is like a moving train, remaining on tracks, stopping at the right stations and platforms where others disembark while others embark. It is a movement that evolved from being a missionary church to indigenous church that has become mega in its membership composition. Resane (2021:62) correctly points out that 'the church has gone through some historical and evolutionary shapes to finally qualify as an indigenous church'. There are still many small Assemblies of God churches in existence (Nkomonde 2021:121), especially in townships and villages, but they are not static, they are growing exponentially. There are great examples of Assemblies of God to cite, which demonstrate how the Assemblies of God is evolving from small country churches to megachurches. This list is not exhaustive, as there are others out there. One can consider the following locations, where South African Assemblies of God evolved into megachurches. In Gauteng province, there are Katlehong, Orlando, Rockville. In Mpumalanga, there are Nelspruit and Kanyamazane; while in Limpopo, there are Seshego, Shayandima and Giyani. The KwaZulu-Natal province has the likes of Umlazi, Ulundi; while the Eastern Cape has Mdantsane, and Northwest has Mmabatho. These are all churches that sprang out of churches planted by Nicholas Bhengu or the Back to God Crusade. It will be another study to undertake research of megachurches in the Assemblies of God Group (predominantly white) and Assemblies of God Association (predominantly Coloured and Indian).

The explosion of Assemblies of God into the megachurch can, therefore, be ecclesiastically equated with the Pentecostal explosion phenomenon in South Africa in the last four decades.

The Assemblies of God is on the eschatological journey from small churches to megachurches, but it remains an ecclesiocentric movement still propelled by missional passion for church growth and remain rooted in its evangelical-Pentecostal heritage. This is because of the charismatic pioneers, who promoted 'Pentecost' that is bibliocentric and Christocentric in missionality.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

K.T.R. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This study followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research work received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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