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**Forum 2015**

**Monday 28 September to Wednesday 30 September 2015**

**at The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire.**

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**The Pentecostal Churches in England: a background paper**

**Who are the Pentecostal Churches?**

Pentecostalism is the fastest growing sector of Christianity world-wide. Growth is particularly rapid in the global south. Some estimates suggest that there are 600 million Pentecostal / Charismatic Christians world-wide, but most scholars emphasise the difficulties involved in such figures because of the varying criteria used. Suffice it to say that it is a considerable constituency. The American scholar Harvey Cox regards Pentecostalism as the ‘…unanticipated reappearance of primal spirituality in our time’. Pentecostals however tend to associate their emergence with the explosion of Spirit power at the start of the Christian Church recorded in Acts 2.

England’s Pentecostal and Charismatic churches owe their origin to four ‘waves’ of activity.

1. The first belongs to the early years of the twentieth century which saw the emergence of an indigenous English Pentecostalism which had its roots in the holiness movement of the nineteenth century, the Welsh Revival of 1904/5 and the remarkable ministry of the Anglican Alexander Boddy in Sunderland. From these varied roots came the Elim Pentecostal Church (1915), the Assemblies of God (1924), among others.
2. The second resulted from Caribbean immigration in the 1950s and 60s in response to the request for Commonwealth workers to come to Britain. Some simply brought their home Pentecostal churches with them whilst others found a warmer reception amongst Caribbean Pentecostal gatherings than they did from the historic English churches.
3. The third resulted from the charismatic movement which in the 1970s spawned a series of ‘house churches’ or ‘new’ churches. These were apostolic in style, often gathering around a leading figure.
4. The fourth wave was a result of African immigration into England in the 1960s, bringing with them a range of African indigenous churches.

That brief summary immediately indicates that this is a very diverse and varied sector of English Christianity, engaging many different ethnic cultures and theological styles. It is both indigenous and the expression of a rainbow diaspora. There is also a ‘permeable membrane’ between this family of churches and the ‘historic churches’ (ie those founded before 1900) because almost all churches were affected by charismatic renewal and have congregations, communities and individuals who would describe their Christian experience as ‘charismatic’.

**What is Pentecostalism/charismatic Christianity?**

Pentecostal and charismatic Christians are united in their embrace of the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in 1 Cor 12:7-10 and as experienced in Acts 2. They believe that the absence of these gifts during centuries of church history was due to their neglect rather than their withdrawal. Many, but by no means all, expect speaking in tongues as evidential of Spirit ‘baptism’ or as prayer language. Pentecostalism is restorationist (ie. it seeks to replicate the life of the earliest church as recorded in Scripture), and it is also a seeking of renewal. However ‘restorationist’ and ‘renewal’ are also used in scholarly literature to distinguish respectively between those who express their faith outside the historic denominations and those who experience charismatic gifting within those denominations.

Pentecostalism is firstly about experience of the Holy Spirit. It is that experience of the indwelling Spirit which constitutes the body of Christ. At the heart of that experience is prayer, which is a response to God’s revelation. That stress on experience, particularly in the early days of the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in San Francisco, was profoundly ecumenical – a breaking down of barriers between black and white, male and female, rich and poor. As the movement developed, Pentecostals looked for the unity of experience rather than analysing theological differences, or belonging to formal ecumenical instruments. Their aim was to unite the children of God and proclaim the gospel throughout the world before Christ came again (which they believed was imminent).

That spiritual instinct inevitably dissipated as the movement grew and developed institutions and theological statements. However, it is still true that the heart of Pentecostalism remains the experience of the imminence of God in prayer, worship and the gifts of the Spirit. Worship is lively, participatory, oral more so than written liturgy, with liturgical shapes that may not be immediately obvious to the visitor. Pentecostals place great value on testimony, prayers for healing, and the expectation that God will act.

Pentecostalism has always been an international phenomenon. Because it is experience based, it has proved remarkably adaptable to different cultural contexts as its success in contexts as varied as South America, parts of Africa and Korea illustrates. It has a precious freedom to incarnate the gospel into different cultures.

Because of its focus on experience and its adaptability, there is no one ecclesiology amongst Pentecostals. Some churches are episcopally ordered, others are independent and congregational. Some ordain their leaders, others do not. There is no world confessional body for Pentecostals, although there is a World Pentecostal Conference which meets every three years.

**What are some of the distinguishing features of Pentecostalism?**

* Experience of the Holy Spirit (for some called baptism in the Spirit)
* Manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit
* Reverence for Scripture
* A sense of unity in the Spirit rather than institutional unity
* Participatory worship
* An entrepreneurial, church planting culture
* Evangelism

**Which Pentecostal and charismatic churches are in membership of Churches Together in England?**

The churches and bodies listed below are very varied. Some are British denominations, others are part of huge international organisations, whilst others are umbrella bodies, providing resources and standards for independent churches which are a characteristic of this most dynamic part of Christianity. Yet others are fellowships which grew out of the charismatic revival, and others again African initiated churches who self-describe as Pentecostal. These notes are simply intended as guidance. A conservative count would suggest that these members represent between them well over 3,000 local congregations, some small but some of very considerable size.

* Apostolic Pastoral Congress
* Assemblies of God
* Church of God of Prophecy
* Churches in Communities International
* Council of African and Caribbean Churches UK
* Elim Pentecostal Church
* Ground Level
* Ichthus Fellowship
* International Ministerial Council of Great Britain
* Joint Council of African and Caribbean Churches
* New Testament Assembly
* New Testament Church of God
* Pioneer
* Redeemed Christian Church of God
* Ruach Network
* Transatlantic and Pacific Alliance of Churches
* Unification Council of Cherubim and Seraphim Churches (Europe Chapter)
* Wesleyan Holiness Church

**Further reading**

* Babatunde Adedibu Coat of many colours: the origin, growth, distinctiveness and contributions of black majority churches to British Christianity (Gloucester, Wisdom summit, 2012)
* Joe Aldred Respect: understanding Caribbean British Christianity (Peterborough, Epworth, 2005)
* Allan Anderson An introduction to Pentecostalism (Cambridge, CUP 2014, 2nd edition)
* Mark Cartledge Encountering the Spirit: the Charismatic tradition (London, DLT 2006)
* William Kay Pentecostalism: a very short introduction (Oxford, OUP 2011)
* Mark Sturge Look What the Lord Has Done!: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain (London, Scripture Union 2005)