

## CHAPTER 5

### Experiencing a Faith meeting

Nicky van der Westhuizen was called by God to plant the seed of revival in the hearts of people. He says: 'This is not the work of humans, but the work of the Holy Spirit of God!' The anointing of the Holy Spirit on this man 'breaks the yoke' and brings salvation and healing to many people.

Confession of Faith,  
Nicky van der Westhuizen-bedieninge

The attending of a meeting at any Faith church is an interesting experience. Observations in this chapter are based on the attendance of the Rhema Faith Convention in Randburg in February 1987, and several attendances of the Tent Tabernacle of evangelist Nicky van der Westhuizen in Krugersdorp (April 1985, April 1987 and November 1987). Pentecostals, more often than not, find it very pleasant. Often they do not see a radical difference between the faith and practices of traditional Pentecostals and those of the Faith movement.

#### 1 WORSHIP

The atmosphere, especially before the start of the meeting, is much more relaxed than that of the mainline churches and even classical Pentecostal meetings. Sometimes musicians play choruses while the people are entering the church, or the attendants just chat among themselves while they wait for the service to commence. In the Rhema Bible Church, with an average attendance of more than three thousand people, the laughing and chatting will continue

until the songleaders, four to six people who lead the congregation in worship, appear on the platform. When the songleaders start singing a chorus (hymn books are completely absent in the Faith churches and are replaced by choruses projected on a screen in front of the church) the chatting and laughing will stop almost immediately.

The worship in song at the Rhema Bible Church and the Tent Tabernacle lasts for about thirty minutes. Clapping and lifting of hands, characteristic of the classical Pentecostals, accompany the singing, while there are sometimes also people jumping up and down in the pews, dancing in the aisles or even dancing in a circle in front of the pews.

For Pentecostals who believe that God should be worshipped when Christians come together, and who believe that the presence of the Lord can be experienced, this seems to be the real thing. All the people in the congregation are involved, they enjoy the singing and they seem to direct their worship to God and are not merely singing for the joy of singing.

The Faith movement has received a lot of criticism from both the historical churches and the classical Pentecostal movement for its style of worship. Thus Van Rensburg (1986:56f), who made a study for the Dutch Reformed Church, discerns a lack of dignity and respect in the noisiness of the meetings. However, Van Rensburg also criticises the clapping of hands, joint praying sessions, and the loud speaking in tongues, liturgical practices that are common among Pentecostals. Van Rensburg absolutises the liturgical practices of his own tradition. ('Hoe dankbaar behoort ons nie vir daardie stille wyding in ons erediens te wees nie' - How grateful ought we not to be for that quiet reverence in our worship service.) Without contemplating whether 'noisy' (luidrugtige) worship could perhaps be a legitimate form of worship, he rejects it simply because it does not conform to that of his own church.

The criticism of Van Rensburg is not merely criticism of the Faith movement, but criticism of *all* Pentecostal liturgical practices.

The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, the largest Pentecostal movement in South Africa, has addressed this issue on several occasions. In 1985 the Committee for Doctrine, Ethics and Liturgies (hereafter the DEL) investigated the practising of dancing of the Faith movement (Van der Spuy 1985:197f). Nicky van der Westhuizen, a prominent leader in the Faith movement, was asked by the DEL not to encourage members of the AFM to dance in meetings addressed by him. Van der Westhuizen agreed to abide by the request, although he believes that there is a place for dancing in Pentecostal

liturgy (Van der Spuy 1985:197f). The DEL then decided that dancing in a service can be a miracle of God under exceptional circumstances. However, if people are encouraged to dance, to jump or to swing their hips, so as to create an atmosphere of liveliness, then these are in fact 'merely rituals and the revelation of a spirit of fanaticism' (quoted in Van der Spuy 1985:198).

The report of the DEL does not say why organised dancing in church is fanaticism or a mere ritual *per se*. If Pentecostals accept the clapping of hands as a demonstration of joy, there is no reason why the same principle could not be applied to dancing as well.

Clark (1983:19), a classical Pentecostal, raised the same reservations about the liturgical practices, and especially the worship of the Faith services. He blames the services of using emotions as goals in themselves and the 'pop' beat of the music, combined with haranguings from the pulpit, as manipulation of the emotions of the congregation, often in order to get people to give money to the church or to submit to the leader of the church.

Although Clark may be right that emotions are sometimes exploited in meetings of the Faith movement, this is not always the case. A true spirit of unity and a real desire to worship God were present in all the meetings I attended. I did not find the services more emotional than ordinary Pentecostal meetings and the music was not so different from that at Pentecostal meetings.

Very few of these practices seem to be as dangerous and unscriptural as the critics make them out to be. Although the danger of mechanical worship does exist, this is not only a problem in the lively Faith gatherings, but also in the more stable liturgy of the classical Pentecostals and perhaps even more in the formal liturgical practices of the historical Protestant churches and the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

It falls outside the scope of this study to go into the biblical foundation of dance in the church. However, from a Pentecostal point of view, it is difficult to condemn it in principle. Dancing as a form of worship has been practised by Pentecostal churches from the beginning of the movement, and although it has become less frequent in some of the larger Pentecostal movements since the fifties, it has never really been abandoned. It is still common practice in many black classical Pentecostal assemblies in both America and South Africa. It is doubtful that the DEL committee of the AFM would have come to the same conclusions had there been representatives of black congregations serving on it.

Although the style of worship of the Faith churches will not be acceptable to everybody, many Pentecostal believers experience it as real worship. It is interesting that the choruses sung in the Faith churches, (new ones being produced at a tremendous rate) have taken the place of both the hymn books and traditional choruses in many Pentecostal congregations. The executive council of the AFM has in the past few years often tried to re-establish the use of hymn books in the church, mostly with little success.

## 2 THE OFFERING

A much more disturbing element of the worship in the Faith churches, is the taking of the offering. Unlike the situation in most churches where this is an almost incidental practice, the offering takes a major place in a meeting of a Faith group.

It is during the offering that many of the prosperity teachings are given to the congregation. Benny Hinn, a prominent faith teacher in America, officiating at the offering during his appearance at the Rhema Faith Convention in Randburg in February 1987, read from Malachi 3:10 and took almost forty-five minutes to explain the text. He put tremendous pressure on those present to give abundantly. In the presentation of the Scripture he read, Hinn (1987) took no notice of the historical background of the text. The fact that the prophet directed his words at members of the people of Israel who failed to give their share to the building of the temple, was not taken into account in his presentation. For him it simply meant that in order to receive spiritual blessings, Christians must give 'for the Lord'.

This kind of pressurising into giving is not foreign to the Faith movement. In a meeting at the Christian Centre of Theo Wolmarans in November 1984, the pressurising was even worse. Wolmarans preached a long sermon on giving when people suffer from the lack of money. At the end of the service he said he knew that there were many people present who were suffering because they did not have sufficient means to enable them to give in order to receive the blessing of the Lord. He then invited those to stand up, who could not give, but were in need of the blessing of the Lord. He assured them of his compassion for them and that they should not miss the blessing of the Lord. He then told those who remained seated to each accompany one of the needy to the front and to make two offerings to the Lord, one for him or herself and one for the person who did not have to give. He then assured them that the Lord would return the offering hundredfold to them. After a while the ushers came back with the good news that the Lord had met the needs of the congregation with the offering.

Much can be said of the psychological dangers of such methods. Something also needs to be said about the inconsistent theology behind these and similar methods. When it comes to the church the message is clear. God provides for its needs through the contribution of the members. Steele (1986:126) gives many examples of the miraculous ways in which God provided for the Rhema Bible Church. However, when it comes to the provision of the Lord for the individual members, they must always rely on a supernatural intervention.

Anderson (1977:11f), a critical supporter of the Faith movement, sees the fact that the Faith movement regards the individual not only as a soul, but as a human being with spiritual, physical and material needs as one of its positive aspects. He points out that the message of the movement with its emphasis on the tendency to pressurise audiences for money is not uncommon in the international Faith movement.

Early in 1987 Oral Roberts, someone with close ties with the Faith movement, both past and present, announced that the Lord revealed to him that He will take him away if he does not raise the money needed to enable him to send missionary doctors to the mission field (Letter to Prayer Partners, 1987a). The announcement was followed later by a letter from his son, Richard Roberts, pleading with the prayer partners not to let his father suffer an untimely death (Letter to Prayer Partners, 1987b).

Barron (1987:139) tells of a television transmission of Bob Tilton in which his appeal for money lasted longer than the sermon. Barron quotes Tilton who gave ten cheques of \$1 000 each to Copeland and said:

Each of these \$1 000 checks I am now giving to you will return one hundredfold to me, according to God's Word. One for my church, one for my school, one for my wife and myself personally. Folks, these checks will return a total of \$100 000 each! Can you say 'Praise the Lord'? What are you waiting for? Get on your feet and get in on this! Let's take the biggest offering ever! I want it now! Who will do what I did? Who will sow in famine and reap hundredfold? Well come on, come running you sower!

(Quoted in Barron 1987:140)

Barron (1987:139) states correctly that the fund-raising practices of the Faith movement 'caused some observers to wonder if these preachers really believe what they teach about trusting in God for prosperity'.

Anderson (1977:11f) sees in the teaching on healing, prosperity and a positive attitude an attempt to provide for the whole person and not only for the soul. He denies the accusation that members of the Faith movement are selfish people who neglect the poor. According to his experience, they are often generous. He concludes that the real emphasis of the Faith movement is not on giving in order to get rich, but rather on giving in order to get more that can be given to the needy (Anderson 1977:10).

It is true that many Faith churches have moved into caring ministries - contrary to the expectation of observers like Morran and Schlemmer (1984:182). And it is also true that the movement succeeded in broadening the field of care for the individual. Whereas many evangelicals and Pentecostals overemphasise the spiritual side of the gospel, the Faith movement also addresses other human needs. But until the movement recognises the fact that God wants to meet the needs of His people in the same way as He provides for ministries - through His people and not necessarily in some supernatural way - the fundraising methods of the movement will remain suspect. The caring ministries of the Rhema Bible Church and other Faith churches are positive signs that the movement might move towards a more rational approach to the material needs of its members. The development could prevent the Faith message from being bad news to the poor who must 'sow in famine' without any guarantee that their personal needs will be met, the sales pitches 'only setting the stage for massive heartbreak and disillusionment' (Barron 1987:140).

### 3 HEALING PRACTICES

The healing practices in the meetings of the movement create another area of concern. In the service of Benny Hinn at the Rhema Bible Church he announced that he was going to pray for sick children. In the course of the service he often stated that the Lord was going to heal all the sick children present that night. He even approached a woman with a little girl who was in a coma and assured her (and the audience) that the girl would be healed that night. However, when he prayed for her, nothing happened, neither were any of the other children present healed. Another woman then came to the microphone and told the audience that her little daughter had also been in a coma. At the previous Faith Convention, Hinn had prayed for the girl. She was not healed immediately, but after a while the child became better and was now perfectly healed. Hinn then assured the first woman that her daughter would also be healed within six months.

After attending several meetings of the Faith movement, I came to the conclusion that the occurrences of healing at the meetings are much less frequent than the enormous claims made by the movement. The excitement generated at the meetings often precludes all critical questions. The day after the service of Benny Hinn, I spoke to several members and ministers of the church, but nobody seemed to be either worried or puzzled by the unfulfilled promises of the previous night. Some admitted that they had expected more, but they still adhered to the healing doctrines of the Faith movement, stating that one cannot build one's faith on personal experience.

The possibility that their healing practices and teachings might cause tremendous spiritual problems for those who do not receive healing, seems to be ignored by many Faith teachers. Farah (1980:2) claims that at least seventeen members of the church of Hobart Freeman died over a period of three years as a result of the refusal to take medicine. 'What is most distressing about the story is the response of Freeman's associate to a query concerning the deaths, "That's his (Freeman's - JNH) interpretation of the Bible"'. Barron (1987:23) is also concerned: 'By the end of 1984 the number of documented, unnecessary deaths had risen to ninety'.

Several Faith teachers believe that not everybody will receive healing. The distressing aspect of their meetings is that, because they do not want to sound negative, they preach something quite different in their sermons. I have already referred to Nicky van der Westhuizen, who admitted to me in personal conversation that there is a mystery in the healing of the sick. In his sermons this insight is completely absent.

Another alarming practice of the Faith movement is to proclaim people to be healed after they have been prayed for, only for the sick to 'discover' that they have not been healed. An embarrassing occurrence of this practice was screened by the South African Broadcasting Corporation Television services in 1985. A healing service at the church of pastor Theo Wolmarans (Christian City) featured in a documentary on the Faith churches. Wolmarans prayed for a woman with one short leg. The short leg 'grew' in full view of the TV cameras, the lady confessed her healing and the pastor proclaimed her healed. When SABC-TV phoned her a month later, she admitted that she had not been healed, but was still waiting for the Lord to heal her.

It is true that many people, like the woman referred to, do not lose their faith in spite of disappointments and are somehow able to stay in the movement. It is also true that many other sick people receive no comfort but only condemnation from the healing message of the Faith teachers (Magliato 1981:135). Those who eventually die, may be convinced that God has forsaken them.

According to Farah (1980b:158f) 'death is the unforgivable contradiction for anyone expecting perfect health'. He condemns the Faith teachers for 'heaping unjust condemnation on those who haven't "exercised faith" during the terminal stages' (Farah 1983:160).

One would expect a more realistic theology and practice from the Faith teachers in the face of the reality of death. Barron (1987:64) maintains that the Faith teachers deal with death in such a way that it does not pose a problem to their theology. According to them God guarantees at least seventy years and then death can come without sickness and pain as in the case of FF Bosworth and E W Kenyon.

The reality of sickness and death could eventually have an influence on the healing practices and the preaching during Faith meetings. In his sermon at the Rhema Bible Church, Benny Hinn, echoed all the views of the Faith movement on death and sickness. As mentioned previously he referred to Kathryn Kuhlman, a well-known healing evangelist and associate of Hinn, who died because she had often confessed wrongly that sickness and healing were mysteries and that even she could die of a heart attack. Christians should experience divine health, those who are sick should be healed, old people should die without pain or sickness and God does not bring sickness, neither does He want us to be sick. Hinn added that there are nevertheless cases between God and the individual that are sacred and cannot be explained. He told the congregation that the death of David du Plessis, a prominent Pentecostal minister, was one such case. David du Plessis was a man of high esteem in both Pentecostal and Charismatic circles worldwide. Nobody could accuse him of a lack of faith. Yet he died after a long sickbed. Hinn said his death was one of those sacred occurrences between God and humans.

Hinn then recounted his own experience a year previously. He got serious heart problems. When he spoke to the Lord about it, the Lord reminded him of a covenant he had made with the Lord. He had promised the Lord that he would remain in his congregation and not become an evangelist again. He had

asked the Lord to prevent him from leaving his congregation, even at the cost of his life. Before he got the heart problems, he had decided to go into the evangelistic field again. The Lord had made him ill to remind him of their covenant. He then decided to stay in his congregation, and was healed instantly.

Although Hinn contradicted himself, and although his stories of the 'sacred relationships' are actually evidence against his belief that God wants everybody to be healthy, his honesty certainly constitutes some progress in Faith thinking. It is far from a balanced theological view on healing, but it is already a more acceptable position than that of radical Faith teachers like Hobart Freeman who refused to accept any exceptions to the rule that God wants to heal everybody, and even that of Nicky van der Westhuizen who confesses to a more balanced view in private without referring to it in his sermons.

#### 4 AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP

It is not uncommon to hear ministers stating that they are only preaching the Word of God. Reformed ministers call their sermons the Word of God because they followed all the exegetical rules and found the real meaning of the original text. Contextual preachers believe they preach the Word of God because they contextualise the Biblical text to bring a relevant Word for the situation. Pentecostal ministers believe they received their messages directly from God, etc.

The authority of Scripture can in all traditions easily be abused to establish the authority of a specific person. This temptation constitutes a real problem for the teacher of the Faith movement.

The leaders of Faith churches furthermore often claim that they have had a supernatural calling from God. Nicky van der Westhuizen is a good example of an authoritarian leader with a special calling. In 1976, while he was still a minister in the Pentecostal Protestant Church, the Lord called him with an audible voice to a revival ministry for the whole of South Africa, which will eventually affect the whole world (Nicky van der Westhuizen-bedieninge 1986:8). Two years later the Lord called him to an independent ministry.

In his independent church Nicky van der Westhuizen is recognised as an apostle, prophet, evangelist and pastor (Nicky van der Westhuizen-bedieninge 1986:10). His prophetic ministry is recognised by the fact that he is called to bring the clear Word to the nation and that he can say 'Thus sayeth the Lord' with authority when he speaks about the future. His name appears in the Confession of Faith of his ministry under the heading: 'The Man':

Nicky van der Westhuizen was called by God to plant the seed of revival in the hearts of people. He says: 'This is not the work of humans, but God'. The anointing of the Holy Spirit on this man 'breaks the yoke' and brings salvation and healing to many people.

(Nicky van der Westhuizen-bedieninge 1986:10)  
[Own translation]

In practice Nicky van der Westhuizen takes full advantage of this authority vested in him. In a personal conversation (Van der Westhuizen 1986), Pastor Van der Westhuizen said to me he does not believe in a church board or a Presbyterian church government, because he cannot see how it is possible for elders or a board to stop someone with a five-fold ministry.

In his sermons he often says 'The Lord told me', 'I heard from the Lord', etc. In one of his sermons (Nicky van der Westhuizen 1980), he said someone asked him if it was the Lord's will to hold an Easter convention. He told this man that he does not do anything that is not the will of God.

Hagin makes the same authoritarian claims with reference to his prophetic ministry:

When the Lord was dealing with me concerning the prophet's ministry, He said that if a church doesn't accept my ministry, then I should go away, shake the dust off my feet against them so to speak; but He would remove their candlestick. He would take away from them what power they had left .... He said that judgment must begin in the house of God, and if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the sinner and the ungodly appear. If a church won't accept this ministry, then they don't accept His Word and He can't help them.

(Hagin 1974:19)

The consequences of this statement are clear: Hagin is speaking directly from God and anyone who is not obeying Hagin, is actually disobeying God.

This attitude is often manifested in the services of the Faith movement. The preacher will tell the audience that he had a vision from God and that only those who refuse to listen to God anew will reject this clear and anointed message.

Those who attend the Faith churches are taught not to question the leaders of the movement. In an introduction to the material of the Rhema Correspondence School, students are taught not to have a rebellious spirit and question the teachings, but to be submissive.

The result of the authoritarian leadership is that little room is left in either the meetings or the daily church life for fruitful interaction between leaders and members. It also leaves almost no room for the correction of an erring leader.

There is little chance that the authoritarian style of the leadership in the Faith movement will be changed if the movement develops into a denomination. In South Africa, where a new denomination, the International Fellowship of Christian Churches, has already been formed (although the leaders will not admit that it is a denomination), authoritarian tendencies are unmistakably present. Unlike any other denominational constitution, the names of the four leaders are written into the constitution of the IFCC (Amended Constitution 1986:2).

## 5 CONCLUSION

Worship and enthusiasm are the most attractive marks of the Faith movement. The warm atmosphere and the dedicated worship are especially attractive to Pentecostal worshippers.

The fund-raising methods, healing practices and authoritarian leadership are negative aspects of the movement that are disturbing for those outside the movement.

It is possible that the healing practices of the movement will eventually become more balanced. This cannot yet be said of the style of leadership and the fund-raising methods adopted by the Faith teachers.

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