

## CHAPTER 5

# The institutionalisation of the older Pentecostal churches

The process of institutionalisation in these churches, which is over fifteen years old, can be traced in their changing character. Perhaps, the most significant of these changes are the changed religious attitudes of their members, the development of church polities and constitutions, struggles for leadership and a new, albeit limited, socio-political awareness.

### AFTER REVIVAL

The rise of the later Pentecostal groups, especially of the independent churches during the 1960s and after, also corresponds with a 'cooling off process' that followed the initial effervescence of those Pentecostal churches that had been established for over fifteen years.

Leaders of older churches, especially Pastor J F Rowlands, criticised the emergence of several new independent Pentecostal congregations which emerged from about the mid-fifties onwards.<sup>1</sup> As early as in 1957 he wrote: 'Look at the pathetic number of small groups of "Independent Pentecostals" ...

---

<sup>1</sup> J F Rowlands' address at the Diamond Jubilee of the Full Gospel Church at Irene, Transvaal, entitled 'True Pentecost'.

getting nowhere and with no prospect of ever getting anywhere having mistaken wildfire for Holy Ghost Fire.<sup>2</sup> Although he still affirmed the need for 'the Spirit to function in the church' and the need for a 'definite experience'<sup>3</sup> of the Spirit, in 1976 he complained that 'the queer have certainly queered the experience'.<sup>4</sup> He also rejected the continuing practice of many Pentecostals who 'tarry, plead and agonise'<sup>5</sup> because he felt that they were 'distorting scriptural teaching', and because this was a 'demonstration of flesh'.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently he regarded with disapproval the style of several evangelists - 'travelling evangelists'<sup>7</sup> - who had encouraged organised shouting and clapping in services.<sup>8</sup> He even believed this to be part of a 'satanic plot' to bring Pentecostal churches into disrepute. Rowlands instructed Bethesda pastors not to cancel their services for the duration 'of other people's campaigns'<sup>9</sup> and warned his members not to be confused by 'a spurious emotional tingling which many believe to be the Baptism of the Holy Ghost'.<sup>10</sup>

The reaction is significant because it points to the awareness among the established Pentecostal churches of these emerging independent churches that were beginning to make their presence known and felt. A number of their members were being attracted by this new 'revivalism'. Rowlands complained that the newer bodies had made efforts 'to draw away disciples after themselves'. Some of Bethesda's members were 'being literally "kidnapped" by other organisations', he wrote. In 1964, to the question 'why do some people leave Bethesda?' he replied, 'we cannot make all our 9 000 adult members pastors. Position seekers will tramp from church to church until they gratify their lusts ... others fall to flattery and specialised attention.'<sup>11</sup>

---

2 *Moving Waters (MW)* August 1957.

3 *MW* January 1976.

4 *MW* September 1976, 168.

5 *MW* January 1976, 10.

6 *MW* November 1973 'Unscriptural behaviour', 176; in 1975 he wrote, 'It is shameful to see people attending so-called tarry meetings and being "filled with the Spirit" and "speaking in tongues" by following man's instructions.' *MW* January 1975, 8.

7 *MW* January 1975.

8 Bethesda Temple Church Council minutes 21 April 1972; *MW* March 1969, 19.

9 *MW* August 1973.

10 *MW* August 1967, 160.

11 *MW* March 1964, 19.

Aware of this 'cooling off' among its members the older churches reawakened their own interest in 'Revival' and the 'Old Fashioned Gospel'. In the mid-seventies Rowlands wrote: 'What we need in the church today is another Acts 2:15 experience. We want another genuine Pentecost.'<sup>12</sup> To help achieve this, Bethesda arranged a large church 'rally' in the Unit 3 sportsground in Chatsworth in 1976. The North American evangelist Carl Richardson was invited to preach at this rally, significantly advertised as the 'Modern Pentecost Rally'. This meeting failed to draw the anticipated crowds.

The waning of the revival that accompanied the founding and growth of these churches was accompanied not only by the proliferation and schisms of Pentecostal churches (cf chapter 4) but also by a marked change in the character, emphases and approaches of the established Pentecostal bodies.

### CHANGE IN APPROACH AND CHARACTER OF ESTABLISHED PENTECOSTALISM

From the mid-sixties, the older Pentecostal congregations began to lose their homogeneous character. Whereas, at first, the responsibilities for growth and development of the group was shared by the entire congregation (cf chapter 3), these responsibilities gradually became the concerns of only a small group within the congregation. The following are illustrative:

#### Small numbers in 'auxiliary-ministerial groups'

While all these churches still have what we called 'auxiliary-ministerial' organisations, these organisations now had only a few members left. For example, Bethesda's 'Missionary Endeavour' organisation has become defunct. Despite constant appeals during sermons for members to join the 'auxiliary ministerial' bodies, these received little response. Large mission conferences were held to encourage participation but little has been achieved.<sup>13</sup> The missionary movement of one of these churches now has only women members. A number attend the movement's Annual Missions Day to listen to speeches

---

<sup>12</sup> *MW* September 1976, 171.

<sup>13</sup> All these groups have special meetings, overseas guest speakers, Easter conventions, ministers' refresher courses, retreats etc designed to encourage participation in these auxiliary functions.

explaining the need for helpers in evangelistic work. However, these members are in the main too apathetic to do more than just make a 'lukewarm' financial contribution.

### **Lack of homogeneity in the congregations**

The older Pentecostal groups are increasingly resembling traditional Christian churches in which the 'ministerial' duties are largely the responsibility of the clergy. Pastors complained that the majority of the congregations were 'not getting involved in the activities of the church'.

In almost all of these churches far more women are now involved in the programmes of the church than men. Also, more women than men attended services. Pastors complained that there was a general lack of 'man-power' in these congregations.

To solve this problem, a few Bethesda churches and Bethshan held 'Men's Fellowship' meetings. The two fellowships that were investigated began well, but the numbers dwindled quickly.

Quite naturally, the pastors of these churches were worried about this apathy and their anxiety is clearly reflected in their sermons and in their church magazines. 'Backsliding' and apostasy are attacked and active participation in church work and offices are praised as signs of true spirituality.

### **Alienation of youth**

Pastors also complained frequently about the younger church members. One pastor described them as 'merely intellectual and not spiritual'. Only a small fraction of the youth attend the youth meetings and only about a quarter attend the other services regularly.<sup>14</sup>

This new tendency, in which the youth who no longer feel at home in their own congregations are going their own way, is very different from the earlier years of Pentecostalism when churches had strong and committed bands of young people who gave support to the activities and programmes of the churches (cf

---

<sup>14</sup> Information from interviews and personal observation.

chapter 3). Two important youth organisations in Bethesda, the Nazareth Guild and Pastor's Own, which flourished in the forties and fifties, ceased altogether in 1969 for lack of attendance.

### **Discontinuation of evangelistic campaigns**

'Evangelistic campaigns', a distinguishing feature of the life of the older Pentecostal churches, have declined in importance. In the last ten years of Rowlands' ministry, campaigns were rarely held. Even the Bethesdascope had lost its attraction and could not compete against other new media.

As late as the sixties and seventies, independent Pentecostal bodies like the Miracle Revival Crusade and Souls Outreach still considered tent campaigns highly effective (cf chapter 4). These campaigns have since diminished in number; more and more, their protagonists have found it necessary to establish permanent congregations of their own and promote themselves from 'evangelist' to 'pastor'.

The 'cooling off' process not only changed the character of the various bodies and congregations, but it also encouraged greater institutionalisation.

## **THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALISATION**

Institutionalisation meant for Pentecostal churches a transition from freedom and spontaneity to formalised structure, trained ministries, and distinct church discipline and polity. These groups had themselves emphatically criticised the established churches for such institutionalism. They had rejected formality, creeds, liturgy and officialdom. Now they too had to organise themselves, and in so doing created similar institutional forms.

### **Constitutional development**

Bethesda, the Indian AFM and Assemblies of God churches had prided themselves on their claim that their only constitution was the Bible.<sup>15</sup> However, new

---

<sup>15</sup> This is a common cliché among these groups. This view was maintained for almost 40 years by some of the leaders of the older churches.

problems forced these churches to reconsider this simplistic stance. Disciplinary, legal and doctrinal questions arose when secession from their membership occurred or when lay support flagged and nominal membership increased or the rights of the minister needed definition as did the role and responsibilities of members; doctrinal positions needed affirmation and legal standing was required for title deeds, fixed assets, marriage officer's licences, government recognition and tax relief. It was becoming increasingly clear within the changing context of the society in which they found themselves that Pentecostal congregations could no longer maintain their loose arrangements. A constitution and formal organisation were now necessary.

Despite his early affiliation to the Full Gospel Church in 1931, J F Rowlands did not refer to its constitution until 1977. The only serious reference to the polity of the white headquarters was made in the late sixties when an ecclesiastical court had to be convened to discipline a minister.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, Bethesda functioned without a constitution apart from what was called 'Bethesda's Covenant' which J F Rowlands himself devised and which was binding only on a pastor or full-time worker. In this short statement promises were made:

- \* to be loyal in all matters concerning the pastor and the church;
- \* to honour 'the prestige and good name of Bethesda and her branches';
- \* to 'refrain from disloyalty or insubordination or conflict with fellow workers';
- \* to 'strive to the uttermost to spread the Gospel';
- \* to abstain from discourteous conduct towards the pastor;
- \* to give to, or to receive from, the pastor three months notice in writing of intention to terminate service;
- \* to recognise the disciplinary powers of the pastor; and
- \* not to say anything detrimental to the work of Bethesda on termination of service.<sup>17</sup>

The 'Covenant' chiefly attempted to ensure the authority of the pastor within the church and to protect the church from vindictive criticism. As its name suggests it was also seen as an individual's covenant with God. Hence those

---

16 This became necessary during the controversy involving Pastor J Vallen and the group who left Bethesda in 1968 to join the Pentecostal Holiness Church.

17 Bethesda's 'Workers Covenant'. Copy obtained from its church offices.

pastors who left Bethesda amid controversy have been extremely cautious in expressing their opinions on Bethesda or its founder or their reasons for leaving Bethesda.

When Alex Thompson entered Bethesda as the principal of its Bible college in 1975, Bethesda was gradually made to abide by the constitution of the Full Gospel Church (FGC). Thompson was vice-moderator of the FGC at the time and he attempted to bring Bethesda more directly under the jurisdiction of the FGC, and devised special bye-laws to organise 'the Indian branch'. These dealt in detail with matters of jurisdiction and doctrine. Thus, the creed and the constitution of the Full Gospel Church also came to be fully binding on Bethesda by 1980.<sup>18</sup>

These new arrangements, which introduced a decentralised form of government, drastically reduced Pastor Rowlands' powers. For the first time, Indian pastors became chairmen of the district councils and of the boards in charge of welfare, training, evangelism, missions, Sunday school and youth. Some said in confidence that the constitution had allowed them for the first time to be leaders. The paradox inherent in the nature of these Pentecostal congregations becomes obvious here: the constitution which had attempted to structure the once 'free character' of the body allowed in effect greater freedom to certain individuals.

While the emergence of a written constitution was neither as sudden nor as clearly recognisable in the other older Pentecostal churches, the situation was very similar. The AFM developed a set of rules for its 'Indian section' only in the 1970s:<sup>19</sup> Bethshan and Peniel Assemblies of God groups, while independent in principle, were also by this time becoming increasingly bound by the AOG constitution.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Some Indian pastors pointed out to the writer that they did not understand the reasons behind the move; others said that as long as Pastor Rowlands was pleased with the move they had no reason to differ. Still others confessed that they found it difficult to object because of their respect for him.

<sup>19</sup> *Apostolic Faith Mission of SA Indian Church: Church Laws* (nd).

<sup>20</sup> OI L Abraham pastor of Olivet AOG, Chatsworth. An attempt at centralised control in the Assemblies of God (SA) led to 80 white congregations seceding.

The process of institutionalisation seen in constitutional development became manifest also in the changed nature of these congregations, the most important of which was the emergence of a clear division between clergy and laity.

### The clergy and the laity

Constitutional development has separated the pastor from his congregation. His functions and powers are now explicitly defined. In all the established Pentecostal denominations only pastors are involved in decision-making processes and serve on the various boards of control. Therefore, only pastors hold all key posts and all the authority.<sup>21</sup>

During this evolution in the nature of established Pentecostal congregational life, lay leadership, one of the most significant features of the revivalistic beginnings of these churches, has greatly diminished. Whereas the congregation as a whole was once involved in church-orientated activities, most members are now indifferent to them. Although leaders put this down to 'apostasy'<sup>22</sup> and exhort their members to pray for 'revival' so that the whole group would 'work for God like in the good old days', structures which place pastors in all the key posts and which ensure that only pastors make the major decisions do much to stifle lay leadership.<sup>23</sup> The *de facto* structure in all these groups is quasi-episcopal. The pastor bears all the authority and responsibilities of a bishop but without the limitations that greater experience and tradition have imposed upon the office of a bishop.

In view of the traditional Pentecostal emphases on lay involvement and upon the 'freedom of the Spirit' as the heritage of each member, which suggest an evolution towards a democratic and congregationalist polity, how did an autocratic model emerge instead? One of the reasons for this choice of an 'episcopal' model is that the confession of 'freedom of the Spirit' has itself been

---

21 Constitution and Bye-laws of the Assemblies of God, Part 11 4,6(a); AFM Indian Church: Church Laws 13 a, b, c, d, e, f, g; Full Gospel Church: Bethesda Bye-laws cf section dealing with composition of Workers' Conference and Bethesda Temple Church Council.

22 This view one gleans especially from the collected sermons.

23 The constitutions of all the older churches were studied: only pastors serve on the highest boards of these churches or are eligible for election to the offices.

radically changed since the 'days of revival'. An 'episcopal' system ensures the authority of the pastor which the congregation used to bestow on him as a matter of course in the 'good old days'. As the congregation became better educated and more self-sufficient, the 'episcopal' model seemed to protect the powers and privileges of the pastor better. This arrangement is bound to raise tension within these groups in the future, as long as laymen wish to remain involved in the leadership of these churches and as long as its members wish to share in the functioning of the church.

Furthermore, the clergy is rapidly acquiring an air of professionalism. For instance, the practice of 'stepping out in faith' which had no guarantee of a fixed or adequate stipend (cf chapter 4) has now almost entirely disappeared. Proper salaries and relevant 'perks' are now not a small part of the concerns of these ministers.<sup>24</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that some pastors move to better and more lucrative posts in other congregations or have founded their own church. In 1982 a Bethesda pastor with 20 years' ministerial experience received about R350 a month while the income of one independent pastor in Chatsworth was R1 750.<sup>25</sup> A senior Pentecostal Holiness Church pastor complained that the 'modern pastors' lacked what he called 'a spirit of sacrifice'.<sup>26</sup> The following polemical statement by an AFM pastor also illustrates the attitudes prevalent on this issue.

... we are living in the end times. Inflation is running at an all time high in our country. The recession is being felt even in the churches. 'Mushroom' churches are springing up overnight. The so-called elect are misleading unsuspecting minds. This, may I add, is being done for personal gain and for the fancies of a few. Young pastors graduating from Bible College are the biggest culprits as far as this is concerned. They want it ready made with big assemblies, attractive salaries and flashy cars. Where is the calling, may I ask?<sup>27</sup>

---

24 The need for better salaries and financial help for pastors has repeatedly been mentioned in interviews with these pastors. Financial wrangles are not uncommon at their committee meetings. The writer attended a number of these meetings.

25 Figures provided by certain Bethesda pastors and Johnny Frank of the New-Life Fellowship.

26 OI Pastor Joseph Vallen.

27 *AFM of South Africa - Westcliff Newsletter* 1982, editorial.

## Ministerial training

During this period of institutionalisation there has been an increasing interest in ministerial education and training. Pentecostals traditionally have rejected theological education and have emphasised 'dependence on the Spirit'. Part of their reaction to established Christianity was because of its dependence on 'theology' which is vaguely understood to refer to doctrinal, liturgical or 'intellectual' issues. 'Theology' has been consistently understood as the antagonist of 'spirituality'. Thus men with little or no experience of education themselves determined for others the evils of studying.

A few Pentecostal pastors who joined the ministry in the late sixties attended the Durban Bible College. In the mid-seventies this was still the only college that catered for ministers in Durban.<sup>28</sup> This college is Evangelical and Fundamentalist. Its position on the Holy Spirit offers a good insight into its theological position in relation to Pentecostals: 'We believe the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and to convict men of sin and to regenerate sinners who believe in Christ. At the time of regeneration he baptises a believer into the body of Christ, the Church. The Holy Spirit indwells, guides, instructs, infills and empowers believers for Godly living and service.'<sup>29</sup> Nothing is said about the basic Pentecostal belief that the 'Baptism of the Spirit' is an experience subsequent to regeneration and evidenced by glossolalia. Some of its graduates who later became pastors in Pentecostal churches found it difficult to accept the pneumatology of those churches.<sup>30</sup> For this reason Pentecostal churches did not give this college wholehearted support.<sup>31</sup>

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Durban-Westville has been regarded with similar suspicion. Pentecostal churches classify it as 'liberal' in spite of its fairly conservative theological position.<sup>32</sup> This indiscriminating attitude has

---

28 The Durban Bible College was established by the Evangelical Alliance Mission and is non-denominational.

29 *Prospectus* nd, Durban Bible College, Merebank, Durban.

30 Examples of those who studied at at this college and then became Pentecostal ministers are J Peters, Peter Gounden, Paul Charles, G Govindsamy. Charles and Govindsamy left to join Baptist-type churches.

31 Oosthuizen, G C in *Pentecostal penetration*, 248. The Johannesburg Bible Institute, which shares the same theological basis as the Durban College, has also trained a few Indian Pentecostal students.

32 At least three pastors made this accusation during discussions with the

persisted until very recently when three Pentecostal students, without the support of their church, attended this university and were the first graduates in their churches. Two of them have since been appointed to the staff at the Bible school of their church and have helped to remove some of the suspicion against theology.<sup>33</sup>

Confronted with the need to train ministers, Indian Pentecostal churches decided to establish their own Bible colleges: The International Bible College (1971) (International Assemblies of God); The Pentecostal Holiness Extension Bible College (1973); the Tru-Life Bible College (1982); the South African Evangelical Mission Bible College (1982); Christian Centre Bible College (1980); The AFM Bible College (reconstituted in 1983) and Bethesda Bible College.<sup>34</sup>

Some Indian Pentecostal pastors have made use of correspondence colleges such as The All Africa School of Theology, Bethel Bible College, The United Pentecostal correspondence courses and the South African Theological College.<sup>35</sup>

The proliferation of Bible schools in one small community has given rise to unnecessary duplication of efforts and inefficient use of the very limited resources available.<sup>36</sup> Except for only a few cases, these colleges have under-qualified staff, many of whom teach from their own experience in church mat-

---

writer; *Document on theological standpoint* formulated by the Faculty of Theology, Durban-Westville University, and Liaison Committee of the churches.

33 Bethesda Bible College has recently expressed interest in being accredited as an affiliate of the Faculty at the University of Durban-Westville. It did not, however, meet the academic prerequisites in 1984. In 1992 the University of South Africa granted its request for the accreditation of its diploma.

34 For a brief history of each of these colleges, refer to Pillay, G J 'A historico-theological study of Pentecostalism in a South African community' PhD thesis Rhodes University 1984, 287-290.

35 *Ibid*, 290-300.

36 For example, Bethesda Bible College, the only residential Pentecostal Bible College in Durban, is underutilised. Its hostel, which can accommodate forty students, in 1983 was occupied by only five. Many of these other schools have no library.

ters. Only five of all the lecturers at the Indian Pentecostal Bible Schools in Natal have a primary theological degree.

The qualifications of several of the students admitted to these schools are also grounds for further concern. Many lack high school education. In its first seven years, Bethesda College, with the best facilities of all the colleges, enrolled only three students with a matriculation exemption.<sup>37</sup>

Principals and leaders explain that this state of affairs is inevitable in view of the general lack of opportunities for better education in the past. They claim that many of these candidates are 'deeply spiritual people' who lack only the adequate educational requisites and that it is better to use these men rather than turn them away for someone with a better educational background but without the required spiritual commitment.

While such a preference appears to be plausible within the Pentecostal context, there are certain serious flaws in a policy which provides only basic pastoral training for those who do not have an adequate education, for example:

- \* If those who are better educated prefer more lucrative jobs with a higher social status than 'pastors' and only those who cannot enter institutions of higher learning join the ministry, as the best available alternative, then these churches will in the future be faced with the situation in which the minister is far less educated than his congregation.
- \* Furthermore, better education and social stability are likely to diminish the community's present anxieties over sickness and evil. Thus a pastor will have to learn to rely less than he had done in the past on healing and exorcisms. Instead he will be called on to guide his congregation through the new challenges presented by increased secularism and socio-cultural evolution in which his own members will question faith and the viability of the church.

A more serious problem is that the training offered by these colleges at present is to a large extent 'parochial'. Doctrinal presuppositions have set rigid parameters for training and lecturers are required to be *orthodox* Pentecostals. The curriculum strongly emphasises the Pentecostal position and the text books, almost all from North American Pentecostal churches, affirm only that posi-

---

<sup>37</sup> Bethesda Bible College records 1975-1982.

tion. Compulsory courses are 'Pentecostal Truth' and 'Dispensational Theology'. While these subjects would naturally be emphasised by a Pentecostal college, exegesis, hermeneutics and theological history are not given adequate scope. Since all its theological studies are coloured by the pneumatological bias of the Pentecostal creed, anything different is considered 'liberal', to be taken in *malam partem*.

Moreover, in order to give credibility to the training that is offered here, denominational colleges in the USA are approached for accreditation. They allow the local Bible colleges a measure of recognition by awarding local diplomas credit towards their own degrees. For example, the three-year programme of Bethesda Bible College, one of the best local Pentecostal schools, is given two years' credit at Lee College, the Church of God school in Cleveland, Tennessee. At present a few graduates from Bethesda are completing the remaining two years with Lee College by correspondence. In this way, some students who lacked the necessary qualifications for admission to a local university will gain a degree from a school in the USA. Not all of these US schools are accredited or provide the standard of education required by South African universities.

#### THE SUCCESSION CONTROVERSY IN BETHESDA

J F Rowlands took full charge of the entire church from its inception till his death in 1980. His strong 'fatherly image' allowed him absolute authority even over branch churches which had their own pastors. While these branches had some autonomy in that their committee of deacons under the chairmanship of their local pastor decided on matters concerning church management, Pastor Rowlands was consulted first on most issues ranging from members' personal and domestic problems to the procuring of church mortgage bonds and the appointment of ministers.<sup>38</sup> He chaired all the annual general meetings of branch churches and through his monthly publication, *Moving Waters*, offered advice and assistance to pastors.

Questions about the future of the church in the event of Pastor Rowlands' death were raised in isolated instances as early as the fifties. On a few occasions, Pastor Rowlands' absolute rule was questioned but his strong 'father image' prevented the issue from developing into a serious crisis.<sup>39</sup> While some

---

<sup>38</sup> *MW* October 1982.

<sup>39</sup> *The Leader* 28 March 1980 refers to 'numerous controversial issues raised in the past'.

individuals, discontented with this autocracy, left Bethesda to join either an established church or one of the numerous independent Pentecostal churches, the vast majority appear to have been satisfied with Bethesda's polity and leadership.

In February 1980, however, the issue was ignited. The occasion of the controversy was the appointment of the kindly Alex Thompson, principal of the Bethesda Bible College, as second-in-charge of the church. Although Pastor Rowlands' poor health seemed to necessitate such an assistant, Thompson's appointment led to a spate of sensational reporting and numerous letters were sent to local newspapers which awakened public interest and fuelled the controversy.<sup>40</sup>

The appointment of Thompson to the principalship, in the first place, was seen as interference by the 'white headquarters' but the Full Gospel Church, to which Bethesda was affiliated, was within its rights (in terms of the constitution) when it confirmed the decision of the Education Board of the FGC to appoint Alex Thompson.<sup>41</sup> Difficulties arose because this was a rare occasion on which the authority of the headquarters was perceived to be blatantly at work. Until this stage the strong personality of J F Rowlands had managed to exclude the direct jurisdiction of the Full Gospel Church. There seems to have been a unwritten policy of non-interference in Bethesda affairs between Pastor Rowlands and the headquarters.

At a church council meeting in February 1980, J F Rowlands expressed his wish to have Thompson officially appointed by Bethesda as assistant superintendent of the church.<sup>42</sup> Thompson had been actively involved in the administration of Bethesda and was gradually gaining the support and confidence of the Indian pastors. His appointment arose logically from the way Rowlands had involved him in the leadership of the church and had delegated to him authority to act on his behalf.<sup>43</sup> He had never done this with any of his Indian pastors.

---

40 *The Sunday Tribune*, *The Graphic* and *The Leader* carried articles; the *Leader* took a critical line.

41 All matters of training and education were the concerns of this board. It comprised white ministers only and was based at the Full Gospel Church headquarters at Irene, Transvaal.

42 Bethesda Temple Church Council Minutes February 1980.

43 At one stage during 1977 Pastor Thompson was doing all the administration of the church but J F Rowlands 'hung on to the reins'; he still had to be consulted on all important matters O I A Thompson.

*Moving Waters* reported the appointment as a 'unanimous decision' of the church council,<sup>44</sup> but negative undercurrents soon began to surface in private discussions.<sup>45</sup> It was reported that a section of the congregation was dissatisfied with the election<sup>46</sup> and the newspaper article that brought the issue to the attention of the public quoted Pastor Frank Victor, the most senior Indian pastor, as having said, 'Although there were many of us who were disappointed with the nomination we did not oppose it, because we wanted to avoid any unpleasantness or embarrassment.'<sup>47</sup>

Many regarded the appointment as the 'appointment of a successor'<sup>48</sup> but Pastor Thompson strongly denied this, claiming that it was only a 'temporary arrangement'.<sup>49</sup> Some members questioned the method of election. They alleged that it had not been by secret ballot and that Pastor Rowlands had influenced a council of 'Indians who would not have questioned Pastor Rowlands' suggestion because he was well loved by all'.<sup>50</sup>

Another objection was that Indians who were capable of holding the post had been overlooked.<sup>51</sup> The majority of those opposing Thompson's appointment believed that his election had been racially motivated and had resulted from the policy of 'the white church' (the headquarters of the Full Gospel Church) which 'is structured along apartheid lines'.<sup>52</sup> They claimed that in keeping with its polity they intended to ensure that a white headed the church. The Indian pastors were accused of 'remaining neutral' in order to win 'favour, and to get better positions in the church'.<sup>53</sup>

In spite of the opposition of a section, the vast majority of the church accepted Pastor Thompson's appointment. One letter seems to have succinctly stated the case for this silent majority. 'If you were to ask the 30 000 members to vote for a successor they would vote for a European superintendent who will be of benefit to the work.'<sup>54</sup>

---

44 *MW* March 1980.

45 *Sunday Tribune* 30 March 1980.

46 *The Leader* 28 March 1980.

47 *The Leader* 21 March 1980.

48 *Ibid*, 28 March 1980.

49 *Sunday Tribune* 30 March 1980.

50 *The Leader* 4 April 1980 cf letter by R N Veeran.

51 *The Sunday Tribune* 30 March 1980; *The Leader* 28 1980; *Ibid*, letter 18 April 1980.

52 *Sunday Tribune* 30 March 1980.

53 *The Leader* 9 May 1980.

54 *The Leader* letter 'Concerned but confused' 4 April 1980.

At the Covenant Workers' Conference on 26 May 1980, where all full-time workers (ministers, missionaries and evangelists) of Bethesda were present, the decision of the council to appoint Thompson was ratified.<sup>55</sup> In an unprecedented move, the moderator of the Full Gospel Church chaired this meeting, a privilege that had been granted only to Pastor Rowlands ever since Bethesda's beginning in Durban. Twenty-three of the thirty who were present, including J F Rowlands and the moderator, voted for Pastor Thompson. At this meeting, for the first time, an Indian, Arthur Naidoo, was made deputy assistant superintendent.<sup>56</sup>

When Pastor J F Rowlands died barely six months later, Thompson was elected the successor to Pastor Rowlands.

Under Thompson, who had come from a top administration post at the Full Gospel Church headquarters, a new relationship with headquarters was forged. For the first time, the constitution of the Full Gospel Church was fully applied to Bethesda; the 'Covenant of Bethesda' was scrapped and major administrative changes were effected in an attempt to bring Bethesda into line with the Full Gospel Church model of church government. This included a system of local government for individual churches directly answerable to district councils which in turn are answerable to the Bethesda Temple Church Council. The workers' conference of all Indian pastors is the highest body in Bethesda and shares the same status as similar conferences which superintend the work of the Full Gospel Church (FGC) in coloured and black communities. All three communities were under the workers' conference of the white congregation of the Full Gospel Church whose responsibility it is, as the highest legislative body, to elect the Executive Committee of the Full Gospel Church in South Africa. Only the general superintendents of the three other race groups sit on this committee.<sup>57</sup> Until the later 1980s these superintendents were always white men.

### Socio-political awareness

South African Pentecostal churches have tended to be indifferent to socio-political concerns. This has been, in the main, the result of its fundamentalist

---

<sup>55</sup> *The Leader* 23 May 1980.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 6 June 1980; Minutes of Workers' Conference 1980.

<sup>57</sup> Bye-laws of Bethesda, Indian section of the Full Gospel Church in Southern Africa, Durban: 1977.

commitment first and foremost to the 'salvation of the soul' and the necessity of gaining 'eternal life'. Hence any attempts to raise questions relating to the responsibility of the church in socio-political matters in South Africa were dismissed as unspiritual. 'Don't bring politics into the church' is a slogan widely adopted by these bodies.

Of all the pastors of established Pentecostal churches among Indians, only Pastor Rowlands appears to have ventured to criticise the prevailing political ideology. In the late fifties he condemned the Group Areas Act and its effects: 'The Group Areas Act is destined to bring unhappiness to tens of thousands of persons in South Africa. The hardest hit will be the Indians ... unrighteous legislation must be removed from the Statute Book ... The voteless non-Europeans of South Africa are at the mercy of the white voter. These voters have a tremendous responsibility to God and their disenfranchised neighbours.'<sup>58</sup> Forty-three notices appeared in the local press calling for prayer for those affected.<sup>59</sup> Rowlands also openly rejected the South African policy of racial discrimination. He wrote: 'As a Christian leader, I should be failing in my duty if I hid the Truth ... I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that, whatever happens, *debatable* and discriminative laws are now only destined for a short life.' However, he saw these as quickly passing because 'the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. He is coming for his own.'<sup>60</sup> Thus while he rejected apartheid, he saw the solution in an imminent eschatological event.

In 1941, Rowlands had expressed on behalf of Bethesda, 'strong disapproval of the expression "Europeans Only" which even recently was appended as a footnote in religious services advertised in a local newspaper, "the sooner the church rids herself of this bugbear, the better for the world in general and the Church in particular".'<sup>61</sup> He pointed out that 'there will be no "Europeans only" sign in the Kingdom of God'. He wrote:

It is our firm conviction that the policy of the present South African Government in trying to introduce 'apartheid' into the country has no sanction whatsoever in the teachings of the New Testament ... we rejoice because our citizenship is in

---

58 *MW* August 1958, 108.

59 *MW* August 1964, 87.

60 Oosthuizen, G C, *P P* 92.

61 *MW* July 1958, 102.

Heaven and there is no 'apartheid' there ... there is also no 'apartheid' at Bethesda where we are all one in Christ ... irrespective of race or colour.<sup>62</sup>

By 1964 Bethesda had to close down fourteen of its branches as people were moved out of the suburban areas into Chatsworth and other 'Indian' areas.<sup>63</sup> Since then, other congregations have also been affected. Resettlement created great financial stress as new groups and buildings had to be established in the new areas. Nevertheless, in spite of his lament about the laws of the land, at a farewell service, when the branch at Fenniscowles was formally closed, Rowlands used for his sermons Gen 12:1-3, 'As Abraham was commanded to go to a land that God would show him where he would be blessed, so believers were to look at the move as being part of a greater purpose. Many took on the challenge of the painful move.'<sup>64</sup> Inadvertently, Rowlands' optimism about the future somewhat modified his 'protest'.

Pastor Rowlands' attitude to socio-political problems was basically twofold. He pointed to the eschatological hope of living without these social ills, and he attempted to give his Indian members within Bethesda the 'freedom' and acceptance they would not know in their society. He repeatedly pointed out that Bethesda 'proved conclusively how happily all nations can live together'.<sup>65</sup> He maintained that 'Bethesda must always be a House of Prayer for all Nations'.<sup>66</sup> Thus he created within a stressful situation a haven for Indian people where, within it at least, they were able to escape from their daily dehumanisation in an apartheid society.

In the main, Indian Pentecostals because of their 'otherworldliness' acquiesced in the face of the pressing social issues confronting their members in society. Any political activism or serious evaluation of the role of the church in South African society was rejected. Rowlands himself pointed out that 'Every minister of the Christian Gospel should be far too busy winning souls from eternal damnation to have any time to spare to dabble in politics ... let the Church keep straight on her course and strive to win men and women from the world

---

62 *MW* August 1949, 87.

63 *MW* September 1964; October 1964.

64 *MW* October 1946, 113.

65 Oosthuizen, G C, *PP*, 34.

66 *MW* August 1957, 111.

to Christ.<sup>67</sup> He repeatedly pointed out that 'A voteless prayer can do more for South Africa than a prayerless vote.'<sup>68</sup>

The publicity that was given to the 'succession problem', for the first time, focused seriously on the racial policy of the Full Gospel Church. After 14 weeks of consistent reporting the issue in the newspapers shifted from the 'succession problem' to the problem of the 'apartheid' polity of the Full Gospel Church and its acceptance of the State's apartheid ideology. One of these articles raised the question of whether the racial structure of the church had prohibited it from assisting in the fight for social justice in South Africa.<sup>69</sup>

At the Annual General Meeting of Galilee Temple, the Merebank branch of Bethesda, the question was asked whether Bethesda should not 'break away from the Full Gospel Church' altogether. At another branch in Umhlatuzana, Capernaum Temple, the following resolution was taken: 'noting the fact that we are subject to the constitution of the Full Gospel Church and grieved by its prejudices ... we resolve that the said constitution should be amended, eliminating all hints of racial prejudice, in consultation with all affiliated population groups ...'.<sup>70</sup>

There were also reactions from other sections of Bethesda's congregations. One member in a newspaper article lamented: 'If the church does not function as God intended it to, free of systems and ideologies of man, then we are going to view a society of God-less people who will find comfort in the isms of this world'<sup>71</sup> and that 'for too long we have been victims of a system of divide and rule'.<sup>72</sup> On 21 April 1980 five laymen were elected by a few pastors and members of Bethesda to study the issue of racial prejudice in the constitution of the Full Gospel Church.<sup>73</sup> The committee unearthed various points of racial prejudice in the constitution such as its acceptance of the policy and laws of the South African Government on the grounds of Romans 13 (which commanded that the powers that rule must be obeyed) and the fact that the white con-

---

67 *MW* April 1945, 45; cf also AGM Report of Bethesda of 8 January 1949; also in *MW* February 1949, 15.

68 *MW* May 1953, 55.

69 *The Leader* 18 April 1980.

70 *The Leader* 2 May 1980.

71 *The Leader* letter 'Bethesdaland Waterloo' 23 May 1980.

72 *The Leader* 23 May 1980.

73 *The Leader* 2 May 1980.

ference of all white pastors was the highest legislative body of the church.<sup>74</sup> The committee called for *inter alia* the General Council to be composed of all ministers irrespective of race, and the removal from the constitution of any mention of different races, and urged that all laws should be applicable to the entire church irrespective of race.<sup>75</sup>

By the beginning of 1983, these proposals had not yet been accepted. Constitutional amendments require the approval of the white conference of the FGC which meets each year at Easter. In August 1982, at a meeting in Durban, the moderator of the Full Gospel Church openly rejected apartheid but at a meeting of the ministers of Bethesda in February 1983, which he chaired, only a compromise amendment to the constitution was sent to the white conference. Even this watered-down amendment, which proposed a federal system of church government, was rejected by the white conference which met in April 1983. In 1989 the matter came to a head and the Indian, black and coloured members of the FGC together with a handful of white pastors constituted the United Full Gospel Church. The remaining white congregations have remained separate, calling themselves the FGC (Irene Association).

The Bethesda experience encouraged further scrutiny of the politics of the AFM and AOG. In 1980, a short while after the Bethesda controversy, the 'Indian section' of the AFM rejected that church's policy of racial separation. The AFM still distinguished between 'members' (whites only) and 'adherents' (those of other racial groups).<sup>76</sup>

The Indian section questioned the 'unjustifiable division' within the AFM which it considered to be the result of 'schism and aloofness' and which it claimed 'testifies to a sinful state'.<sup>77</sup> It rejected the AFM's white-dominated church structure which was 'prone to perpetuate or promote division or separation, a form of entrenched apartheid'.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum of the Committee of five addressed to Bethesda Temple Church Council (mimeographed); Preamble of Full Gospel Church Constitution, paragraphs 3 and 4; Principles of Operation Bethesda Bye-Laws: Article 7, 60; Article 8, 74.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum op cit, 6. From Bye-laws: Article 7; 7.1.1.4, 7.1.1.5 and 7.1.1.6; Article 8; 8.1.1., 8.1.2. Examples of unfairness to the Indian group were found in Bye-laws: Article 6.5.1.1, Article 6.5.2, Article 1.3.2.

<sup>76</sup> Letter by J du Plessis, General Secretary of AFM to Secretary of the Indian Section dated 13 August 1981.

<sup>77</sup> *Unity in the Church* document published by Pastors of the 'Indian Section', p4.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

On 29 June 1982 the Indian and 'coloured' sections of the AFM drew up a declaration of intent to 'work towards full spiritual co-operation and organisational unity of the AFM of SA'.<sup>79</sup>

In August 1981 at the meeting of the AFM white executive, its general secretary, J du Plessis, pointed out that since 1961 the position had changed and that 'whites, coloureds, Indians and blacks who belong to the AFM are full and equal members of the church as a whole'.<sup>80</sup> The executive declared, that 'the old dispensation has ended' but pointed out that 'the possibility does exist that language and cultural differences as well as socio-economic standing may in time disappear and when this does happen then the external structure of the church should also be adapted to this'.<sup>81</sup> By 1984, the various races still functioned separately.

In 1981 the Bethshan Assembly of God underwent a similar crisis. From its inception, its affairs had been controlled by its founder, F L Hansen. A group within Bethshan raised questions regarding the ownership of its properties and who would succeed Pastor Hansen.<sup>82</sup> This created rancour between the officials of the church and this small group. The council of Bethshan cancelled the membership of the thirteen members who made up this group, on the grounds that 'they had undermined the Pastor's authority'.<sup>83</sup> This led to a great deal of tension in the congregation. At the 1982 AGM when the 13 were asked to leave the meeting there was open conflict between a few supporters of the 'rebel group' and the rest of the congregation.<sup>84</sup> The development of Bethshan to a more congregation-centred polity has proved a slow process.

---

<sup>79</sup> Declaration of Intent, 29 July 1981 made at 'Skogheim', Port Shepstone, Natal (mimeographed).

<sup>80</sup> Letter by J du Plessis to 'Indian Section' dated 13 August 1981.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Information from members and pastors of this group; B David's letter to Pastor Hansen which states former grievances 10 September 1981; Letter to Pastor C R La Foy to whom the group of 13 appealed 31 December 1981.

<sup>83</sup> B David's information; Petition signed by Bethshan members asking B David to leave 6 October 1981; Letter of excommunicating from Bethshan to B David 29 October 1981.

<sup>84</sup> Letters (some anonymous) addressed to Balchand David, the 'leader' of this group, in which threats were made; information from eyewitnesses at this AGM 1982.

This socio-political awareness is also apparent among a few independent congregations. Some of these independent churches banded together into a group called the South African Fellowship of Indian Ministers (SAFIM). Inaugurated in August 1972 it aimed at providing mutual aid to independent pastors and at assisting in the stabilisation of their groups. It hoped to be a basis for uniting 'Indian Christian ministers of all denominations for fellowship' and it agreed 'that SAFIM be organised and controlled by Indian Christian ministers and layworkers'.<sup>85</sup> However, after a short while the Fellowship became defunct largely because of leadership struggles.

Another fellowship of mainly independent pastors was formed in Chatsworth in the early 1980s. This fellowship like the SAFIM rejects white missionary control in any form. It attempts to create a forum in which Indian pastors can meet to help one another, in which the implications of white control can be analysed and in which the Indian pastor may 'come into his own'. So far this body has not called for a 'moratorium' on foreign missionaries, but it is attempting to encourage Indian leadership.

These few 'incidents' of socio-political awareness cannot be taken as an indication that Indian Pentecostals are changing their hitherto apolitical attitude. On the contrary, these Indian Pentecostals, in spite of their socio-political woes have in the main avoided any risk in criticising the apartheid government. A more recent example was the lack of support by Pentecostals in June 1984 for a statement rejecting the apartheid basis of the institution of a tricameral parliament in South Africa: 105 Indian Pentecostal pastors were invited to a meeting to discuss the legal and ethical implications of the new constitution - only eight attended.

### **Sect or denomination?**

So far both terms have been used rather loosely to refer to the churches in this study. They need more precise definition:

Peter L Berger, E D C Brewer, Howard Becker, Liston Pope and J M Yinger generally agree with the following characteristics of sects and denominations put forward by Bryan Wilson.<sup>86</sup> A 'sect' is a voluntary association; membership

---

<sup>85</sup> Resolutions taken at first meeting of SAFIM held on 28 August 1972 at the AFM church, in Merebank; cf also Oosthuizen, *G C Pentecostal penetration*, 143.

<sup>86</sup> Peter L Berger 'The sociological study of sectarianism' *Social Research* 21

is by proof to sect authorities of a conversion experience; exclusiveness is emphasised and there is strong censure for defaulters of doctrinal, moral or organisational precepts; it conceives of itself as an elect, gathered remnant, having special enlightenment; personal perfection is emphasised and it maintains the belief in the priesthood of all believers; there is a high level of lay participation and opportunities for members to express spontaneously their commitment and the sect is hostile or indifferent to secular society or to the state.

A 'denomination' is a formally constituted voluntary association which accepts adherents without imposition of traditional prerequisites of entry and employs formalised admission procedures; breadth and tolerance are emphasised; discipline on lax members is not harsh, its self-understanding is unclear and its doctrinal position is not stressed; it is content to be one movement among others, all of which are thought to be acceptable in the sight of God; it accepts the standard and values of the prevailing culture and morality; there is a trained professional ministry; lay participation is restricted to particular sections of the laity and to particular areas of activity; services are formalised and spontaneity is absent; education of the younger members is of greater concern than the evangelism of the outsider; additional activities of its members are largely non-religious in character; the denomination accepts the values of the secular society and the state; membership will tend to limit itself to those who are socially compatible.<sup>87</sup>

The groups under discussion cannot easily be fitted into one or other of these categories. Using the above as working definitions we find that the churches discussed in chapters 2 and 4 vary between 'sect' and 'denomination'.

All the churches under discussion began as sect-like groups that affirmed their exclusive possession of truth, and claimed to have sole monopoly of the 'fullness of the Gospel'. The fact that early Indian congregations functioned under the auspices of the Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Faith Mission or, as in the case of Bethesda, affiliated to the Full Gospel Church, does not appear to have affected this exclusiveness as these churches functioned in racial isolation from the white headquarters.

---

Winter 1954, 467-485; E D C Brewer 'Sect and Church in Methodism' *Social Forces* 30 May 1952, 400-408; Liston Pope *Mill hands and preachers* New Haven: Yale University Press 1942, 11 8ff; J M Yinger *Religion in the struggle for power*, Durham: Duke University Press 1946.

87 Wilson, B 'An analysis of sect development', 4.

All of these early Indian churches saw themselves as part of *the* 'faithful remnant' and this is evident in their strong reaction to established Christianity which they considered to be largely apostate. Their group solidarity and vital communalism in some cases insulated them from the upheavals of the society in which they lived by encouraging what we have described earlier as a 'club mentality'.

Furthermore, their commitment to 'holiness' (cf chapters 2, 3 and 4) was expressed in religious practices that emphasised separation from 'the world'; group affiliation was accompanied by a rejection of 'worldliness' which included prohibition of smoking, drinking, cinemas, theatres, and Sunday sports. The 'experience of the Spirit' was the *raison d'être* of the group.

The criterion which determines the movement of sect to denomination is basically 'accommodation': through contact with society at large there is a gradual move from the first stage of reaction and exclusiveness to an acceptance of the challenges of coexistence with 'the world'.<sup>88</sup> We found that while not one of these churches was willing to accept the prevailing morality of its surrounding society, among the older groups and even a few of the newer groups, an accommodation to the social environment was clearly taking place. For example, theological education is now considered to be essential for ministers and a trained and well-paid minister is becoming the accepted type. This new preoccupation with training, especially among the younger pastors, is enhanced by the rapid rise in the education level and the economic improvement of the Indian community at large. The latter has obviously influenced the former.

The 'denominationalisation' of these groups has been accompanied by a stabilisation in the rate of conversion: established groups obviously have smaller growth rates than independent groups; nominal membership has grown and lower levels of lay participation were observed. *Ecclesiolae in ecclesia* came into being with discernible boundaries between clergy and laity; these groups have gradually lost their totalitarian hold on their members. The former religious rationale of the group ceases to be the determining factor in the lives of its members.

It is clear then that one cannot speak of 'Indian Pentecostalism' as if Indian Pentecostal churches are a homogeneous group: the initial stages of the group fairly closely resemble those of a *sect* while many share the characteristics of

---

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, B op cit, 6; cf also B Johnson 'A critical appraisal of church-sect typology' *American Sociological Review* XXII (February 1957), 88-92.

denominations. Indian Pentecostalism finds itself in a dynamic context which has encouraged institutionalism. This in turn has led many of these groups to develop into *denominations*, a development which for many of these bodies is still going on. What we have called the process of institutionalisation and its corollaries are in effect this development into 'denomination'.

## SUMMARY

(a) The older Indian Pentecostal churches, which were established during the 1930s and 1940s, became gradually more institutionalised as the religious fervour of their founding years died down.

Growth and development of the church ceased to be the concern of the entire congregation but became that of a group within it, an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. Membership of lay-led organisations declined; there emerged a lack of homogeneity in the congregation itself and the youth have become increasingly indifferent to church activities.

Methods of evangelism changed. For example, the erstwhile protagonists of campaigns, tent meetings and evangelistic outreaches have found it necessary to establish more permanent congregations of their own.

(b) The 'cooling off' process itself not only changed the character of the various bodies and congregations, but also forced them towards greater institutionalisation: transition from free and spontaneous groups to institutions with a formal structure, a trained ministry, constitution and polity.

The earlier, charismatic leadership was sometimes arbitrary rather than 'free'. Within the new organisational structures there occurred a decentralisation of power and authority. Indian pastors in the older Pentecostal churches which had been founded by whites were now gradually given more leadership opportunities.

A corollary to institutionalisation has been a new clericalism. Pastors hold all the key posts and only they are involved in the decision-making processes, a development which stifles lay participation and leadership. A quasi-episcopal system has evolved instead of a congregational polity which corresponds more to the Pentecostal affirmation that *all* are 'equal in the spirit' and are 'ministers of the Gospel'.

(c) This trend towards establishing a professional clergy has been accompanied by an unprecedented interest in theological training on the part of

pastors who hope to gain credibility in the now more education-conscious community, and to gain governmental recognition for their churches, from which would follow land allocations, marriage licences for pastors, and other benefits.

(d) During this period of institutionalisation internal crises emerged over the problem of succession, not uncommon when the rule of a strong charismatic individual ends. In the case of Bethesda, J F Rowland's recommendation that 'the reins' be handed over to A Thompson at the time may well have been the best possible course of action, given the unavailability of trained or experienced Indian leaders, or rather, the lack of foresight in not preparing the many good men available for leadership. But in view of the questionable racial policy of the FGC an administrative move was easily politicised. The FGC was challenged to remove apartheid principles from its constitution. Thus there emerged, for the first time, a clear socio-political awareness among a section of an otherwise apolitical congregation.

(e) Institutionalisation has also been accompanied by denominationalisation of Pentecostal 'sects'. Almost all began as sects which with time came more and more to resemble denominations. The move from sect to denomination has been influenced by the attempts of these churches to accommodate themselves to their changing socio-economic and religious contexts.

What has been shown in this chapter amply substantiates Richard Niebuhr's view that 'the fervour and commitment of members cannot be sustained past the founding generation and that the denomination is the sect that has accommodated itself within the mainstream of society and has become "routinised"'.<sup>89</sup> The tension that Peter Berger described which exists between the sect and the larger society gradually disappeared.<sup>90</sup>

This 'routinisation' of the early groups has also been accompanied by the upward social movement of their members (cf chapter 3 for a fuller description of this process). Susan Budd has described this process thus: 'As members grew richer, their commitment would become attenuated, they would press for more ritual and a less emotional form of service, and for formal entry qualifications rather than constantly renewed signs of grace such as spirit possession, glossolalia and being saved.'<sup>91</sup>

---

89 Niebuhr, H Richard *The social sources of denominationalism*, 182, 72f.

90 Berger, P cited in Haralambos, M *Sociology. Themes and perspectives*, 468.

91 Budd, S, *op cit*, 75-76.

Malcolm Calley, J T Nichol and D L Edwards<sup>92</sup> also found evidence of the correlation between the denominationalisation process and the upward socio-economic development of the Pentecostal members in their studies. J H Chamberlayne, R Currie and E D C Brewer<sup>93</sup> in their study of the Methodist sects which had developed into denominations also observed a similar socio-economic progress.

(f) B Wilson suggests a subdivision of sects which he believes explains their nature more clearly:

- \* *conversionist* sects whose teaching centres on evangelism are hostile to clerical learning and modernism and indifferent to other groups;
- \* *adventist* sects which are characterised by a pessimistic determinism;
- \* *introversionist* sects which emphasise higher inner values through their rejection of the 'world's' values; and
- \* *gnostic* sects which have a wishful mysticism, where the 'world's' goals are accepted but new and esoteric means are used to achieve these goals.<sup>94</sup>

J Milton Yinger argued for a threefold classification which does not markedly differ from Wilson's except that he groups adventist and conversionist sects together under what he calls 'progressive sects' because they are 'power orientated'.<sup>95</sup> Wilson places fundamentalist and Pentecostal groups within the category 'conversionist'.

Neither this category nor Yinger's 'progressive' group fully describes the Pentecostal groups of our study, because at least in their incipient stages the older churches and the independent groups share some of the characteristics of both Wilson's 'conversionist' and 'introversionist' sects. Not only are these

---

<sup>92</sup> Calley, M, op cit, 6; Nichol, J T, op cit, 237; Edwards, D L Religion and change, 267.

<sup>93</sup> Chamberlayne, J H 'From "sect" to "church" in British Methodism', 139-149; Currie, R *Methodism divided: a study in the sociology of ecumenicalism* which examines the economic and social factors that led to the schisms and to reconciliation of Methodist groups; Brewer, E D C 'Sect and Church ...' 400-408; Refer also the following studies: Dynes, R R 'Church - sect typology and socio-economic status', 555-560; Whitley, O R 'The sect-to-denomination process in American Religious Movements: the Disciples of Christ', 275-281.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson, B, op cit, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Yinger, J Milton *The scientific study of religion*, 275-278; Wilson, B, op cit, 6.

churches given to evangelism and the rejection of formal training, but they also place great importance on the 'experience of the Spirit' as a talisman of divine approval and rely totally on the 'illumination of the Spirit' as the introversionist group does. Doctrine and creed are not as important as 'the voice of the Spirit'. On the other hand, the other characteristics of the 'introversionist' category such as neglect of evangelism, eschatology and lack of ministers, does not apply.

(g) In view of what has been covered so far, we need finally to examine Gerlach and Hine's thesis that Pentecostal movements are movements of social change.<sup>96</sup> These scholars infer from the fact that many people seemed 'changed' and 'transformed' when they became Pentecostals, that Pentecostalism has the potential to change and sometimes transform society.<sup>97</sup> Gerlach claims that Pentecostalism is 'a movement of transformation and revolutionary change ... a group of people who are organised for and ideologically motivated and committed to the task of generating fundamental change and transforming persons, who are actively recruiting others to this group, and whose influence is growing in opposition to the established order within which it develops'.<sup>98</sup>

It is beyond doubt that conversion to Pentecostalism indeed transformed the lives of many Indians (cf examples cited in chapters 3, 4, 5). It seems, however, that Gerlach and Hine have overestimated the ability of Pentecostalism to transform or change society. We found no correlation between personal change and social change as Gerlach maintains. In fact Gerlach himself admitted that in the North American context 'the main focus of Pentecostals' efforts' has been to 'transform persons, not change the social order'. 'But', he adds, 'social changes do follow'<sup>99</sup> - he provides no further proof for this claim.

Anderson, holding the opposite view, claims that the Pentecostal movement in the USA 'served', after a while, 'to *perpetuate* the social order'.<sup>100</sup> He adds that 'even the practice of tongues, exorcisms and healings are conservative in effect because they kept the Pentecostals busy in activities which have no impact whatsoever on the political economy or social relations of American society and because they serve to reconcile the Pentecostals to things as they are ...

---

96 Gerlach, L P 'Pentecostalism: revolution or counter-revolution?' op cit, 682.

97 Gerlach, L P and Hine, V H *People, power and change: movements of social transformation*, 99.

98 Gerlach, L P 'Pentecostalism: revolution or counter-revolution?', 683.

99 *Ibid.*

100 Anderson, R M *The vision of the disinherited*, 8.

they have been mere rituals of rebellion, cathartic mechanisms which in fact stabilise the order .... The radical social impulse inherent in the vision of the disinherited was transformed into social passivity, ecstatic escape, and finally, a most conservative conformity.<sup>101</sup>

We must agree with Anderson here for the following reasons:

- \* Firstly, as we have shown in this chapter, the highly motivated, homogeneous and lay-led groups were routinised within thirty years as these churches soon accommodated themselves within the larger society.
- \* Secondly, the recruitment process of others by the members themselves is an important factor in Gerlach and Hine's thesis - but the enthusiasm of the first generation did not last. The conversion rate, as we have shown, stabilised and evangelism ceased to be the concern of the whole group.
- \* Furthermore, Pentecostals are a minority group not only in the context of our study but also in South Africa at large. The majority of the Indians are still Hindus.
- \* Finally, as we also have observed, only a few of these pastors showed any interest in socio-political issues. In the main Indian Pentecostals remained a-political if not conformist.

In spite of legitimate grounds for socio-political complaints, Indian Pentecostals did not participate actively in changing or criticising the prevailing order in South Africa. They claimed that 'politics should not be brought into the church', a claim which Fundamentalists and many Evangelicals have often made. Pentecostals and Fundamentalists share an ideology that is essentially otherworldly - for example their doctrines of an imminent eschatology, secret rapture, extreme futuristic pre-millennialism and the emphasis on the 'salvation of the soul'. These aspects of their doctrine militate against Gerlach's claim that their ideology 'provides a vision and master concept of the future' which affects social change.<sup>102</sup> Indian Pentecostals either were reconciled to their social position and economic lot because they were primarily concerned with their future bliss in heaven or they worked within the social structures of South Africa to improve their socio-economic status. The latter has accompanied the routinisation and institutionalisation of these churches.

---

101 *Ibid*, 240.

102 Gerlach, L P 'Pentecostalism: revolution ...', 682.

Examples of studies of the Pentecostal movement elsewhere support this view: M Haralambos claims that in the shanty towns around large Brazilian cities, where Pentecostalism is growing rapidly, Pentecostal ministers tell their poverty-stricken followers that their poverty results from their sins. Some Roman Catholic priests, however, have blamed the social structures rather than the poor themselves - the Brazilian government, therefore, condones Pentecostalism, but has gaoled some of the more outspoken Catholic priests.<sup>103</sup> C L d' Epinay observed that in Chile also 'Pentecostalism teaches its initiates withdrawal and passivity in socio-political matters; [and is] limited only to the commandment to be submissive to authority ... These components make it, in the last analysis, a force for order rather than an element of progress; a defender of the status quo and not a promoter of change.'<sup>104</sup>

P Wagner, however, in his discussion on Pentecostalism in Latin America attacks d' Epinay's views strongly.<sup>105</sup> Using Dean Kelly's argument that conservative churches in the USA are growing because these churches have 'the greatest social strength',<sup>106</sup> Wagner asserts that if the Pentecostals in such countries as Brazil and Chile were to be involved in bringing about social change they would actually lose social strength. Kelly had pointed out that religious groups accumulated social strength by 'believing that they alone are in truth, that others are in error, and that dialogue is a waste of time'. Kelly has even considered the tendency towards conservatism to be a 'healthy and valuable trait' which gave 'coherence and continuity to human society'.<sup>107</sup>

Wagner, therefore, concludes that 'when Pentecostal churches blur the clear line of priorities ... [when they do not place] the salvation of the soul first, when they become ashamed of their lower class members and seek more "respectability", when they introduce more "dignity" into their liturgy, and when they decide to upgrade the educational standards of the ministry, trouble may just be down the road. Building more and more social activism into their church programmes becomes another step towards an almost sapping of social strength.'

Wagner's interpretation is problematic for reasons which have to be dealt with briefly:

---

103 Haralambos, M *Sociology. Themes ...*, 462.

104 d'Epina, C L *Haven of the masses ...*, 145.

105 Wagner, O *Look out! The Pentecostals are coming*, 138.

106 Peter Wagner cites Kelly, D M *Why conservative churches are growing*, 95.

107 Refer to Wagner's discussion of Kelly's views, op cit, 141.

- \* Wagner shows no serious appreciation of the markedly differing socio-political and economic contexts that exist; he uses Dean Kelly's assessment of conservative churches in the USA to evaluate Pentecostalism in the Third World. In South Africa, for Indian or black churches not to address the injustices that affect them daily is tantamount to accepting their disenfranchised lot without complaint. In the USA, lack of socio-political involvement does not have that implication.
- \* Wagner's warning that Pentecostal churches should not change their character 'lest trouble may be just down the road' fails to take cognisance of the inexorable institutionalisation process which we have attempted to describe in this chapter. As Monica Wilson points out, 'it is false... to suppose that religious ideas can escape reformulation as societies change'.<sup>108</sup> In a society as dynamic as the one in which Indian Pentecostals find themselves in, it is wrong to suppose also that their church structures would remain the same and escape reformulation.
- \* Kelly's lack of appreciation of religious dialogue which meets with Wagner's approval shows a failure to understand the complexities of a religiously plural society which provides its own challenges to the Christian message.

---

<sup>108</sup> Wilson, *M Religion and transformation of society*, 5.

## CHAPTER 6

# Indian Pentecostalism in a changing religious context

Indian Pentecostalism thrived within a mainly Hindu context. The dynamic that has been produced by the impact of this community and its immediate religious neighbours is an interesting one.

### HINDU REACTION TO PENTECOSTALISM

Almost all the converts to Pentecostalism were formerly Hindus; very few Muslims converted. Hindu leaders quite understandably have been distressed and have criticised Christian churches for 'proselytisation'. Bethesda, because it has gained the most converts, has come under the greatest criticism.<sup>1</sup>

Hindu reaction to these conversions has taken three forms:

Firstly, some converts were either ostracised or turned out of their homes by their families, though Hindus are generally very tolerant and quick to reconcile.

---

<sup>1</sup> There were incidents of threats to Pastor Rowlands' life (*MWa* 29).

On another level, a few chose to use local newspapers to vent their displeasure. Letters to the following effect have appeared:

The actions of the few whites who feel that they must inculcate godliness into Indians are open to ridicule. Does not there exist the need for that same teaching to the whites of South Africa rather than the Indians, that there are higher values in life rather than resort to white supremacy in all day to day activities.<sup>2</sup>

The writer goes on to label all converts as 'pariahs' who 'have discarded everything of their forebears, literature and culture, except their black skins'.

Another example is a letter to the press signed 'Rather Amused':

One religion is just as good as another .... Only those who are ignorant believe in conversion ... 'a rolling stone gathers no moss.'<sup>3</sup>

These public criticisms had often been provoked by the thoughtless behaviour of Pentecostal preachers and evangelists. For example, *Moving Waters* published an article comparing Christ with Krishna, which drew widespread criticism, and Pastor Rowlands was accused of 'defaming Lord Krishna'. J F Rowlands was quick to apologise and the matter rested.<sup>4</sup>

On another occasion, late in 1976, an Indian woman was interviewed on South African television by Pastor Rowlands and the North American evangelist Carl Richardson. The woman held her previous 'holy lamp' while she testified that she had now 'come to the true light' and no longer needed to light the lamp as an aid to devotion. The programme also drew widespread reaction as Hindu leaders interpreted it as flagrant disrespect for the Kamatchee lamp, on which centres the daily prayers of Hindus. The service at which the woman had testified was recorded to be shown in the USA by Carl Richardson: an Indian women, converted from Hinduism, who publicly disowns the ritual lamp of her former religion and witnesses to her new faith would make good viewing for

---

2 *The Graphic* 12 November 1955.

3 *The Leader* No 4, 1955. *The Daily News* 16 June 1973 'Concern over conversion of Hindus'.

4 O I J F Rowlands' information.

fundamentalist USA audiences largely ignorant of the nature of Hinduism. Here again, Pastor Rowlands was quick to see the implications of this unfortunate incident and apologised.

Except for these two examples, Pastor Rowlands himself cannot be blamed for the provocation of Hindu criticism.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, Rowlands was generally cautious in his Evangelistic approach and openly expressed deep respect for Indian culture and tradition. On a visit to North America in the mid-seventies he used in his sermon the Hindus' devotion as an example of what he believed should shame Christians for their widespread lack of piety.<sup>6</sup> The following letter to the press from a Hindu expresses the ambiguity of Rowland's position:

It is a puzzling situation ... we know that Pastor Rowlands' chief work is to convert as many Hindus as he can to Christianity, and while no one can quarrel with that in a free country, what is baffling is that he should give publicity to Hindu achievements ... in recent years Bethesda has been going ahead with its work without directly attacking any other religion. But the latest riddle leaves me scratching my head.<sup>7</sup>

The Evangelistic programmes of some other Pentecostal leaders, especially those of the independent groups, have been provocative if not blatantly insensitive.<sup>8</sup> At their open-air and tent meetings, several statements have been made concerning Hinduism as 'idol worship' or 'Hindus are destined for Hell'. Evangelistic tracts as well as door-to-door canvassing have been a source of great irritation to some Hindus.<sup>9</sup> Pentecostal evangelists have often shown little respect for the devotion of Hindus or even little knowledge of Hindu religious views and have thus given justifiable grounds for this reaction.

---

5 Pastor Rowlands in discussion with me said that other religions must be respected but he believed that every Christian should give witness of his faith to non-Christians; Pastors V R Enoch, F Victor, C Geoffrey and J Vallen all absolve J F Rowlands from any charge of disrespect to Hindus.

6 *Sermon* at Mt Paran, Atlanta, Georgia (taped).

7 *The Leader* 21 October 1955; in *MW* November 1955, 131.

8 Information obtained during visits to these tent meetings and services, and from the study of the sermons and statements of Pentecostal pastors.

9 The better educated are especially antagonistic - interviews with Hindu scholars at the University of Durban-Westville.

On a few occasions Hindu leaders have publicly condemned proselytisation. For example, in May 1936 a visiting guru, Swamiji Adhyandgi, said at a meeting in the Durban City Hall:

We have enough troubles in the world, in political, economic and social spheres with the materialist philosophy of greed and hatred, and the survival of the fittest ... the votaries of the different faiths should not add to that trouble by the mad run for proselytising.<sup>10</sup>

About the same time another Hindu scholar wrote:

During the earlier periods advantage was taken of the ignorance and lack of unity among the Hindus and quite a number were converted to Islam or Christianity. Nowadays proselytisation is not carried out on the same large scale, yet the number of converts is large.<sup>11</sup>

Christianity (mainly Pentecostal groups) was blamed for exploiting a situation created by socio-cultural upheaval. Pundit Vedalankar, a Hindu scholar and priest, even argued that 'the economic position of the poorer Hindus is exploited and inducement is offered for conversion'. Vedalankar added: 'Many young men, especially those educated in English and devoid of vernacular knowledge, have embraced Christianity for the sake of marriage etc .... Due to ignorance of the true teachings of Hinduism many people went into other faiths.'<sup>12</sup>

In 1982 the Hindu Dharma Sabha again focused on the issue of conversion to Christianity. It considered the techniques of Pentecostal evangelists to be

---

10 Cited by N P Desai 1960 *A history of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha*, 92. The writer of this book goes on to state that 'Hinduism has not yet heeded to the problem of proselytisation which is sapping the vitals of the community'. The advice that was tendered 24 years ago fell on deaf ears it seems.

11 Pandit Nardev Vedalankar *Religious awakening in SA: history of the Arya Samaj movement in SA*. Arya Pratinidhi Sabha nd Natal, 48.

12 *Ibid*, 48.

manipulative.<sup>13</sup> That same year the Sabha decided to create a million rand fund to stem the tide of proselytisation.

The third reaction has been a serious self-examination by Hindus in the face of this loss of members. In 1960, N P Desai lamented that 'although there has now resulted an awareness [of the crisis facing Hinduism] little has been done by Hindus themselves'. He wrote:

As is usual with our people, we are content with enumerating the disabilities and emphasising vociferously and frequently from platforms the dangers to which the community [Hindus] was exposed. We considered this the height of our patriotic fervour. No thought was ever given to their solution; no machinery was set into motion to solve even a fraction of the problem. The lack of ability to influence masses resulted in failure to achieve anything of substance.<sup>14</sup>

The neo-Hindu movements have done most in continuing this self-examination and addressing the problem of the loss of Hindus to other religions.

### **The influence of Pentecostalism on Hinduism**

Stimulated by the challenge of Christianity, Hinduism in India produced during the last century a renaissance as well as a reformation that rejected ritualism and images in worship.<sup>15</sup> Neo-Hindu movements have taken root among Indians in South Africa as well. The best known are the Arya Samaj, the Saivaite Sungum, the Divine Life Society, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Krishna Consciousness Movement. These organisations reject all caste distinctions. They promote a simplified and more philosophical religion. Their services consist of prayer and worship not unlike the pattern adopted in Christian services.

---

13 Unpublished address by J G Desai, lecturer in Indian Philosophy at the University of Durban-Westville (1982).

14 *Ibid*; refer also to *The Leader* April 1973, article entitled 'Hindus Beware'.

15 Nowbath, R S 'The Hindus in South Africa' in *The Hindu heritage in South Africa*, 20; Thomas, P 1960 *Hindu religion, customs and manners* Bombay: D B Tara Porevala & Sons; Stephen Neill 1961 *Christian faith and other faiths* London: Oxford University Press, 70-98; Thomas, M M 1969 *The acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* London: SCM Press.

The Arya Samaj, for instance, insists on imageless worship and it rejects the pujas, rituals and ceremonies of orthodox Hinduism. Its only scriptures are the Vedas; all other sacred books, including the Ramayana epics and the Mahabharata with its Bhagavadgita, are rejected. God is spoken of in 'personal' terms and the ideal of the religion is 'doing good to all men', a kind of ethical monotheism.<sup>16</sup> The Krishna Consciousness Movement, on the other hand, accepts only the Bhagavadgita as its scriptural basis.

The Ramakrishna Movement has been described by C P le Roux, who studied the movement in Natal, as a 'religious action system which has at its highest level of actions, a superordinate meaning system comprising of [sic] the verbal symbols of the unity of religions, selfless service, ... and oneness which functions as *fides qua creditur* and integrates the Movement as a whole, giving meaning and coherence to values, norms, organisational and situational facilities within the Movement'.<sup>17</sup>

P D Devanandan, the Christian theologian from Bangalore, India, maintained that the essential quest in Hindu renaissance is the discovery of 'a religious basis for [a] new secularism which could lend support to the ... call for active involvement in ... the re-ordering of time honoured social institutions and for determined efforts to concentrate attention more on the present welfare of all men rather than on the realisation of the ultimate destiny of the individual'.<sup>18</sup> Hindu reformers such as S Radhakrishnan had already seen the need for Hinduism to come to terms with the changing world and not to recede into ritualism or into an introverted quest for personal salvation. Radhakrishnan maintained that it was necessary to recognise 'spiritual realities not by abstention from the world, but in its life, its artha [business] and its kama [pleasure], the controlling power of spiritual faith. Life is one and in it there is no distinction of sacred and secular'.<sup>19</sup>

---

16 Information from Pundit Nardev Vedalankar, lecturer in Gujarati at Durban-Westville University; leader in the Arya Samaj movement), Tilayvel Naidoo, researcher in Science of Religion Department, University of Durban-Westville, author of *The Hindu way* (draft manuscript loaned to the writer); also cf Nowbath, R S 'The Hindus in South Africa', in *The Hindu heritage in South Africa*.

17 Le Roux, C P 1965 *The Ramakrishna Movement in South Africa: a socio-religious study*, DPhil thesis: Stellenbosch University, 251.

18 Devanandan, P D 1962 'Contemporary Hindu Secularism', *Religion and Society* Vol IX, March 1962, 22.

19 Cited by P D Devanandan, *ibid*, 25, 27.

Neo-Hinduism has perceived that the greater number of educated young South African Indians no longer look to ritualistic Hinduism for spiritual guidance. In 1960 B D Lalla wrote:

The educated young Hindu who in the last decade was abandoned as a force lost to the cause of Hinduism in this country, has reacted psychologically not only to his inferior status as a citizen of this country but also to the frustration of the age. He has realised with painful experience that in spite of his western education qualifying him to participate in and contribute to the political, social, educational and economic institutions of the country, he is paradoxically ostracised from them and relegated to a position of inferiority.<sup>20</sup>

In 1983 T Naidoo, a Hindu scholar, confirmed this view when he pointed out that it was 'increasingly clear and quite understandably so, that older forms of worship, especially those quite obviously outmoded, should be replaced by new approaches that befit modern thinking'.<sup>21</sup>

Neo-Hinduism emerged as an organised force in South Africa partly as a response to the emergent activities of Pentecostal Evangelism. The Hindu Maha Sabha was reconstituted in South Africa in 1935, soon after a spate of Evangelistic campaigns which Bethesda had held in Durban. This meeting of the Sabha in 1935 bore a striking resemblance to Bethesda's larger campaigns: the Durban City Hall was used and the Mayor of Durban was also invited to open the proceedings. The meeting highlighted the conversion issue.

In the mid-seventies a 'back-to-the-Ramayana-campaign' (a parallel with the Back-to-the-Bible campaigns) was organised in Pietermaritzburg. The priest of the Ramakrishna Centre in Durban delivered illustrated sermons (a parallel with the 'Bethesdasopes') and the Ramakrishna Centre in Avoca, Durban, established the 'Children's Club' (a parallel with the Sunday schools).<sup>22</sup>

---

20 Lalla, B D 'The future of Hinduism in SA' in Nowbath *et al* (eds) *The Hindu heritage* op cit, 79-80.

21 Naidoo, T *The Hindu way*, 61.

22 Oosthuizen, G C *Pentecostal penetration*, 38.

Thus without being aware of it, Pentecostal churches had contributed to the renaissance among their Hindu neighbours who had already begun to evaluate the viability of Hinduism in the face of economic and educational development.<sup>23</sup> Now they met to consider the loss of members to Pentecostal churches. The following view succinctly describes this re-awakening in Hinduism:

A vast labyrinth of [ritualistic] practices has been built on the core of Hinduism and to masses it is this that represents the Hinduism to be believed and practised .... Educated young Hindus in increasing numbers are displaying their disapproval of these overshadowing anachronisms. They view these vestiges as part of man's spiritual struggle in an age that has long since receded into the oblivion of the past.<sup>24</sup>

Before looking more closely at the religious development among South African Indians, a further point on the nature of neo-Hindu movements: some of these renascent organisations, such as the Divine Life Society, the Ramakrishna Movement and the Brahma Samaj venerate all the founders of religions including the Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed.<sup>25</sup> Their approach is not unlike that which John Hick has more recently proposed, namely a universalism which sees all religions as partial revealers of God. This approach absorbs Christianity into the Hindu fold, making conversion taboo.<sup>26</sup>

Against this universalism D P Niles maintained that:

If the intolerance of Christianity, which is the other side of mission, is on placing itself over against other faiths in a position of superiority, the intolerance of Hinduism is [its] neutralizing specificities and historical particularities and at best flattening all differences or at worst reabsorbing other faiths' positions into itself.<sup>27</sup>

---

23 *The Leader* 8 June 1956.

24 Lalla, B D The future of Hinduism op cit, in Nowbath *et al The Hindu heritage*, 81. C M Brand, who studied the Indian community in the Cape Peninsula concluded that 'as soon as incipient assimilated tendencies appear within a solitary group which threatens to change its very nature, certain developments which are aimed at buttressing and maintaining the cultural heritage of the group can be expected'.

25 Thomas, P *Hindu Religion* ..., 51.

26 Hick, J *God and the universe of faiths*, 139f.

27 Niles, D Preman 'Christian Mission and the people of Asia', 288.

Pentecostalism like all types of Christianity in this community appears to face two major challenges in connection with inter-religious coexistence: the first is the removal of its often arrogant manner of proclamation based on ignorance of other religions around it. The other challenge, as Niles maintained, is to ascertain what exactly is its distinctive message vis-à-vis other religions and to proclaim that truth in a meaningful way.

### **Pentecostalism within its present changing religious context**

In the only two comprehensive surveys on the religious context of Indian South Africans, made in 1979 and 1981, G C Oosthuizen and J Hofmeyr analysed the role of religion in the Indian community.<sup>28</sup> Both research reports supply information about religion among the poorer, socially unstable Indians in Chatsworth (Survey 1 Sr1) and among the more affluent and better educated Indians in Reservoir Hills and its environs (Survey 2 Sr2). In the absence of any other study of sub-groups within this community, these surveys provide useful material on Pentecostalism.

### **Conversion patterns**

In Chatsworth the rate of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, especially to Pentecostalism, was 'phenomenally high' (75 per cent of the Christians surveyed were former Hindus).<sup>29</sup> In Reservoir Hills and the surrounding areas the rate of conversion was much lower: only 44 per cent of the Christians surveyed had been converts from Hinduism to Christianity and 50 per cent of these were members of Bethesda.<sup>30</sup>

In Sr1, 69,9 per cent of the Christians were Pentecostals;<sup>31</sup> in Sr2, 33,7 per cent. Bethesda in both areas was the largest Pentecostal church though to a smaller extent in Sr2 (Sr1 43,7 per cent; Sr2 28,3 per cent).

---

28 Both surveys were entitled *Religion in a South African Indian community*. Durban: Institute for Social and Economic Research of the University of Durban-Westville 1979 and 1981.

29 Sr1, 44-49.

30 Sr2, 11; 4.

31 Sr1, 41.

Further, it appears that conversions have been less frequent in those sections of the Indian community whose traditional life-style has been best preserved, as the following table shows:<sup>32</sup>

Traditional language	% who retained usage in home	Upper income bracket	Converts to Christianity
Gujarati	23,8	68,8	0
Hindi	12,8	31,2	1,6
Tamil	7,4	16,1	5,9
Telugu	6,5	0	4,2

The table indicates that converts have come mainly from the lower income groups and from those homes whose native linguistic competence (an important sign of the extent of traditional cultural allegiance) had been least maintained.

Pentecostalism, it seems, has been able to articulate better than other Christian denominations the life anxieties of the lower echelons of this community. The socio-economic and cultural upheavals were its *praeparatio evangelica*. Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr, even in the eighties, still found grounds for the view that 'The impact of the conversion process in the Indian community has been mainly prepared by non-religious factors.'<sup>33</sup>

They also point out that the lower income groups most exposed to 'culture shock' are also more susceptible to change. On this basis they concluded that Reservoir Hills and its environs are 'less fertile ground' as 'Pentecostalism does not flourish in the more affluent Indian communities'.<sup>34</sup>

32 *Ibid*, 9; Refer also to Stander, E 1968 *Problems and progress in Indian areas of Durban: a study in urban geography*, Durban: University College Research Institute, 141, for the various per capita incomes of Hindus, Muslims and the earlier Christian denominations.

33 Sr2, IX.

34 Sr2, IX.

While this is basically true there were certain other contributing and supporting factors:

- \* Those canvassed in Sr2 were from a section of the community comprising mainly landowners who had built or bought their own homes. In Chatsworth, the sub-economic housing schemes meant that people lived in small, low-cost housing which included very closely grouped communal flats. Thus over and above the question of affluence, Chatsworth, unlike Reservoir Hills, preserves better the communal consciousness and group mentality of traditional Indian society. This group solidarity, the basis of the Pentecostal rationale (cf chapter 4), is lost or less preserved in the area covered by Sr2.
- \* The diminished impact and extent of missionary and evangelistic preaching among the better educated is also because Pentecostal leaders themselves are, in the main, educationally ill-prepared for such a task (cf chapters 4 and 5). To say that Pentecostalism *per se* is ill-suited to this class is perhaps saying too much.
- \* In seeing conversion as *the result* of socio-cultural upheaval, one is prone to commit the error of the 'social disorganisation' and 'deprivation' theorists (refer to the critique of these theories in the introduction), namely, of assuming a causal relation between them. Further, their generalisation that Pentecostalism does not flourish among the more affluent is called into question by a resurgence in the last decade of the Pentecostal movement among whites in Durban, where the richer and better educated have also been attracted to Pentecostal-type Christianity. The emergence of the Christian Centre in Durban (cf chapter 5), the Rhema Church in Johannesburg and the Hatfield Christian Church in Pretoria, together with numerous other white Pentecostal communities, are striking examples of a 'combination' of relative *affluence* with the Pentecostal-type religion.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Several services were attended at the Christian Centre (Durban), the Rhema Church (Randburg) and the Hatfield Christian Church (Pretoria). Many of their members were formerly from established Christian churches.

It is not inconceivable that the established denominations among Indians such as the Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists, and even the established and more institutionalised Pentecostal churches, could also experience a similar resurgence. This may be possible even after these Christians have become better educated and economically more stable.<sup>36</sup>

Institutionalised Indian Pentecostalism is, therefore, challenged to reassess its mission to a changing society, particularly, to temper and to develop its Evangelistic approach, for although in Chatsworth, Pentecostal gains outnumbered those of traditional churches by three to one, in Reservoir Hills and its environs the gains were even.<sup>37</sup>

### Reasons for conversion

In the responses obtained in Sr2 a very small sample of converts to Christianity emerged and they listed their reasons for converting as follows:<sup>38</sup>

Reasons for	Conversion Traditional	Church Pentecostal	Grouping Total
<i>Material factor</i> (e g healing)	3	7	10
<i>Personal factor</i> (e g marriage)	5	2	7
<i>Abstract factors</i> (e g found the truth)	1	1	2
<i>Total</i>	9	10	19

<sup>36</sup> The widespread influence of the charismatic movement within the established churches shows that this type of religion cannot be stereotyped. Many of the established churches which draw a middle-class membership have also changed their style of worship to cater for members who have come under the influence of the Pentecostal-type religion.

<sup>37</sup> Sr2 p.

<sup>38</sup> Sr2, 11.

The sample of converts in Sr2 was too small to be statistically significant but when compared with the much larger sample obtained in Sr1 in the Chatsworth survey, some interesting differences emerge:

In Chatsworth the most common reasons given for conversion were grouped under 'material' factors, such as healing, whereas in Sr2 the 'personal' factor (marriage or influence of a relative) was almost as common as the 'material'.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the table above indicates that the numbers of conversions to both 'traditional' Christian and Pentecostal churches were almost equal. On these grounds, Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr maintained that conversion in Chatsworth had resulted mainly from 'material' factors.

In the earlier descriptions of these churches, faith healing and exorcisms have indeed featured prominently in the life and worship services (cf chapter 4). Yet Bethesda, which had made the greatest gains, did not emphasise either faith healing or exorcism, but grew because of its group solidarity and the ability to give its people a sense of belonging (cf chapter 4). Therefore, when Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr point out that the material factor 'was the most important reason for conversion', their view must be seen to refer to the later independent Pentecostal churches, not to all of Indian Pentecostalism throughout its history.

Furthermore, the surveys did not define clearly what was meant by 'material', 'personal' or 'abstract' factors. For example, healing alone was mentioned as the most important of the material factors. The assumption was made that 'material factors' meant economic benefits as well, implying that Pentecostals used finance or material goods as inducements for conversion.<sup>40</sup> This is how certain Hindu leaders, in any case, understood these conclusions.<sup>41</sup> The numerous testimonies of converts themselves do not bear this out.

Also 'marriage' and influence of a 'converted relative' are placed under 'personal factors'. But the latter reason does not preclude 'finding the truth', a reason placed under 'abstract factors'. Conversion, which for the Pentecostals is a total religious experience that may be mystical, enthusiastic or of a deeply fervent kind, may also include an experience like healing and exorcism which are listed under 'material factors'. Indeed, Stanley Samartha in his study of conversion patterns of Hindus to Islam and to Christianity in India, pointed out

---

39 Sr2, 7.

40 *Ibid.*

41 These surveys, for example, laid the basis for J G Desai's talk to the Dharma Sabha in 1982.

that 'motivation in any conversion is a complex affair'.<sup>42</sup> A person who has converted because he believed he was healed would also believe that he has 'found the truth'. To separate or isolate these responses is not possible or valid.

### Present changing religious attitudes of Hindus

The second survey showed convincingly that more complex subgroupings were developing in the Hindu community than in either the Islamic or Christian community.<sup>43</sup> Hindus claimed group allegiance in the following way:

- \* 49,8 per cent used their home language to distinguish themselves from other groups. The Tamil-speaking group formed the largest section;
- \* a very small section used their caste as a distinguishing mark;
- \* 30,6 per cent claimed they 'did not know' or they consciously refused to be identified with any particular Hindu group;
- \* 6,9% belonged to neo-Hindu groups.<sup>44</sup>

Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr point out that this tendency among Indian South Africans to identify themselves in terms of 'home language' is paradoxical since these languages are being rapidly replaced by English.<sup>45</sup> It is conceivable that many from this group may gradually come to be classified with the third and fourth groups. Also, the large number who have consciously rejected group affiliation suggests a move to greater homogeneity in the Hindu community. Again, most of this group were young.<sup>46</sup> This fact further strengthens the view that the tendency towards homogeneity will become even more important in the future. Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr suggest that: 'It may be that Hindus will become fully secularised, having only a nominal commitment to institutional religion whatever the form.'<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, while caste distinctions are very minimal, a sizable neo-Hindu affiliation has emerged.<sup>48</sup> Also, of all the religious groups surveyed, Hinduism

---

42 Samartha, S J 'Indian realities and the wholeness of Christ', 309.

43 Sr2, 2.

44 Tabulated statistics in Sr2 table 1:1, 10.

45 Sr2, 3.

46 Sr2, 3; Sr2, 11 cf table 1:2.

47 Sr2, 4.

48 Sr2, 3 cf table 1:1, 10.

of the older traditional type had the smallest attendance at temple worship but adherents of Neo-Hindu movements attended their places of devotion more frequently than other Hindus.<sup>49</sup>

A comparison of the two surveys reveal some interesting features:

- \* The single most striking finding of Sr1 was the high rate of conversion of Hindus to Christianity, especially to Pentecostal groups. In Sr2 it was not conversion to Christianity but a 'movement towards homogeneity as traditional intra-group barriers break down'.<sup>50</sup>
- \* There has been increasing secularisation particularly in the areas covered by the second survey. Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr asked whether this trend 'is not perhaps the most significant re-orientation of commitment to which Hindus are subjected in South Africa'.<sup>51</sup>
- \* In respect of neo-Hindu groups, the Sai Baba movement, which emphasises healing, appears prominently in Sr1 but not in Sr2. In Sr2 the Arya Samaj and the other similar bodies feature prominently but not in Sr1. These movements have rejected much of ritualistic Hinduism as superstition.<sup>52</sup>
- \* According to both surveys, Hindus seem to have little knowledge of the basic tenets of their religion. The researchers used for their test the fundamental Hindu doctrines of Moksha and Reincarnation.<sup>53</sup>
- \* All religious groupings except the Muslims in Chatsworth rated religion more highly than those in the second survey. In Chatsworth, 41 per cent of the Hindu sample and 67 per cent of the Christian sample regarded religion the 'most important aspect of life' but in Sr2 only 9 per cent of Hindus and 34 per cent of Christian responded similarly.<sup>54</sup>

---

49 Sr2, 29 cf table 2:1; 26.

50 Sr2, 7 cf table 1:1, 1:5.

51 Sr2, 7.

52 Sr2, 6.

53 Sr2, 63 also, IX; Sr2 cf table 4:9 and 4:10; 'Moksha' is the Hindu doctrine of salvation or enlightenment; 'Reincarnation' is the teaching that souls may return over and over again until they eventually attain Moksha.

54 Sr2, 63-65; 90. Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr concluded that Western education appears to have had a 'real and destructive impact on ritual religious orientation' and they think that this tendency will continue because 'Hindus have assigned a very high value to Western education' Sr2, 64.

These findings seem to confirm the view that traditional religion has been eroded throughout this community, accentuated by the average Hindu's lack of understanding of his or her religion, socio-economic improvement and by Western-orientated education in the medium of English.

H J W Rocher in his study of Hindu religious practice among Tamil-speakers in Durban found that the decline in traditional Hindu thought and practices had already set in during the mid-sixties. He wrote that 'detachment from one traditional aspect causes detachment from other aspects, for example, the lack of interest in the reading of the traditional sacred literature causes a lack of interest and loss of knowledge in the religious duties of the family'.<sup>55</sup> He found that 'the social influences of western culture, with which the Hindus are in very close contact, appear to be playing an important contributory role in the process of deviation from traditional Hindu thought and practices'.<sup>56</sup> Subhita Jithoo in her study of the break-up of the joint-family system among Hindus in Durban arrived at similar conclusions about the acculturation process among Indians.<sup>57</sup>

Two clearly defined attitudes towards traditional religion appear to have emerged among the more affluent and better educated. A large group has become areligious and secularised and another group has reconstituted the religion of their parents.<sup>58</sup> While both groups reject temple worship and ritualism the latter joins one or other of the neo-Hindu groups.

'The future success of Hinduism in South Africa,' Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr hold, 'would appear then to depend upon the extent to which neo-Hindu move-

---

55 Rocher, H J W 1965 A study of the theory and practices of the Hindu religious tradition among a selected group of Tamil-speaking Hindus in South Africa: a sociological approach, unpublished MA dissertation: University of Pretoria, 116.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Jithoo, S 1970 Structure and development cycle of the Hindu joint-family in Durban, unpublished MA dissertation: University of Natal. The role that the use of English had played in this acculturation has been shown by Budhwan, D An investigation into the use of English by the Indians in South Africa with special reference to Natal, unpublished DLitt et Phil thesis: University of South Africa.

58 Sr2, 64.

ments succeed in eliciting real commitment from Hindus in an environment where most needs are satisfied by Western culture.<sup>59</sup>

## SUMMARY

This changing religious context has important implications for Indian Pentecostalism:

(a) The upheavals among Pentecostal groups have been caused by precisely the same factors as in the Hindu community, namely better education, greater wealth and the emergence of questioning minds. It is logical to expect that as socio-cultural changes occur, religious institutions must also develop. M Singer, for example, in his study of the impact of modernisation on society in India stated that 'if social institutions like Kutum [joint-family] had to be changed then Hinduism which identifies the divine with Kutum ... must itself be modified'.<sup>60</sup>

Pentecostals, on the other hand, need to realise that the ever-increasing number of educated Indians are well able to appreciate a quasi-theistic, non-iconic and non-ritualistic worship. Unless Pentecostalism is to remain mainly the church of the undereducated and, as Elena Cassin described it, 'the religion of the proud poor',<sup>61</sup> its own life and religious approach would need to change and develop.

(b) For the greater part of its history, Pentecostalism addressed itself to a community whose traditional religion was in a state of flux. This community is now more settled. The emergence of neo-Hindu groups now presents a new challenge as conversions will become increasingly difficult to effect.

---

59 Sr2, 9.

60 Singer, M 1972 *When a great tradition modernizes*, New York, NY: Praeger. Singer disagrees with Max Weber that classical Hinduism with its joint-family system had impeded economic development in India. (Weber, M 1958 *The Religion of India* NY: The Free Press, 328f.) Cf Stackhouse, M L 'The Hindu ethic and the ethos of development: some Western views' *Religion and Society* XX(4), December 197e, 5-33, for a discussion of this debate.

61 Cassin, E 'Lat Vita religiosa' in Jean Meyriat (ed) *La Calabria*, 325-372, cited in Oosthuizen, G C *Pentecostal penetration*, 325.

(c) Pentecostalism with its integrated system of providing for individual worth and group solidarity and with its hold on the whole life of its members has hitherto been very successful in addressing a section of this community which has traditionally possessed a common religious world view. In the future, Pentecostalism will have to face the challenge of handling the quest of educated and even secularised Indians, a task which it has so far neglected and which it is still largely ill-equipped to handle.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> In these surveys it was found that the Hindu opinion of Christianity is based to a large extent on Pentecostal evangelistic tracts. These tracts thus far have been very Fundamentalist (many of them are written by Fundamentalist organisations in the USA) and deal with questions of eternal life and damnation, hell, judgement, idolatry, etc, subjects which have little appeal for the educated Hindu.