

The newer Non-Denominational Pentecostal Churches in South Africa: A Critical Approach to Non-Denominationalism in Pentecostalism

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Abstract

This article seeks to illustrate that although there is a church historical significance of non-denominationalism in Pentecostalism demonstrated in numerical growth, non-denominational Pentecostal churches still require some level of order and doctrinal foundations for their sustainability. A lack of these fundamental doctrinal foundations might result in some of these churches facing closure, as calls for the regulation of churches in South Africa are growing stronger. This is done through a discussion of these non-denominational Pentecostal churches that can be categorised into four types: i) Pentecostal and charismatic; ii) prophetic; iii) Zionist; and iv) deliverance ministries. The significance of non-denominationalism in these is highlighted to demonstrate their numerical growth. However, to maintain such numerical growth, these churches would require a balanced approach to denominationalism that embraces doctrinal foundations in the Christian tradition. In other words, an escape from denominationalism should not mean an escape from the foundational doctrines.

Keywords: non-denominationalism; denominationalism; Pentecostalism; church history; doctrine

Introduction

Pentecostalism keeps on growing as new types of Pentecostal churches emerge, specifically in the African context. Scholars within the Pentecostal tradition have studied developments that describe newer and African independent Pentecostal movements in Africa (Anderson 2002, 2005; Asamoah-Gyadu 2012; Kalu 2008; Meyer 2004; Ojo 2012). However, newer forms keep on emerging that need to be studied to understand the growth of the Pentecostal movement. In addition, there are many



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variations and differences in these emerging Pentecostal churches in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa (Anderson 2001). Anderson's (2002, 2005) studies have concentrated on the newer Pentecostal churches in South Africa, especially those that arose with the coming of democracy, such as the Grace Bible Church led by Bishop Musa Sono. Many of these churches can no longer be categorised as new but are well-established denominations. This article looks at the most recent developments of newer churches, especially in the last few decades (that is, churches that have been started either in the late 20th century or early 21st century and are different from the classical Pentecostal churches). The works of other scholars such as Asamoah-Gyadu (2012) and Ojo (2012) in other parts of the continent, specifically in western Africa, look at newer Pentecostal churches in their own context and do not concentrate on the South African context. Thus, it is important to look at the most recent developments in terms of emerging churches in the religious landscape of South Africa. Therefore, denominational Pentecostals in this article will refer to classical Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, Full Gospel, and the Assemblies of God. By non-denominational Pentecostals, the article refers to other Pentecostals who do not have an affiliation to these well-established denominations in South Africa.

The article is divided into six main sections. The first section introduces the theory of denominationalism in the Christian tradition. The second section discusses the relationship between denominationalism and Pentecostalism, specifically in the South African context. In the third section, the church historical significance of the non-denominational approach within the Pentecostal movement is highlighted, and in the fourth section, the newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa are outlined in four categories: i) Pentecostal and charismatic ministries; ii) prophetic ministries; iii) Zionist ministries; and iv) deliverance ministries. These categories are important, as it is impossible to study all non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa. The fifth section looks at the significance of non-denominationalism in newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches. The last section recommends that even though non-denominational Pentecostal churches benefit from non-denominationalism, they still have to maintain order and doctrinal foundations to sustain their growth trajectory.

Theory of Denominationalism in the Christian Tradition

“Denomination” is used in the Christian tradition to describe the affiliation of different church organisations into one religious group. Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth (2017, 9) explain that as a “social phenomenon, religion is expressed through affiliation with a local church, as specific denominations, or a religious tradition. Individuals thereby share experiences that derive from their group affiliations.” Therefore, the expectation is that new religious movements would join specific religious groups with similar religious experiences or practices. As has been observed in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, there are many religious groups that do not desire to affiliate with an established religious group, thus becoming non-denominational. They see the need to

rebel against the established denominations and form their own independent and non-denominational religious groups. However, Esbaugh (2007, 81) makes an argument that although not “officially affiliated with any religion or denomination any religious movement in the Christian tradition should still be based on the principles and theological undertones in their mission.” This article builds on Esbaugh’s (2007) argument and argues that even though non-denominational Pentecostal churches do not want to affiliate with well-established churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, Full Gospel, and the Assemblies of God, they should still adhere to the fundamental Christian doctrine. This article argues that there should be a balance between non-denominationalism and fundamental Christian doctrine in an African context. Therefore, the theory of denominationalism in the Christian tradition assists in adopting a critical approach to the church historical significance of non-denominationalism in Pentecostalism.

Denominationalism in Pentecostalism

There is an association between denominationalism and Pentecostalism (see Orogun and Pillay 2021). Pentecostalism in the 20th century did not begin as a denomination but as a movement that emphasised baptism in the Holy Spirit and the initial evidence of speaking in tongues. Even in South Africa, early Pentecostalism began with an emphasis on the direct relationship with God, divine healing and other manifestations of the Spirit. However, as classical denominational Pentecostal churches in the early 20th century (such as the Apostolic Faith Mission) began to be more established, there was slow growth and some of the Black members left to start their own churches. Therefore, in becoming non-denominational, these emerging churches in South Africa are, in essence, replicating the non-denominationalism that existed in the Azusa Street Revival. The difference is that some of these emerging churches have challenges of heretic teachings and other doctrinal errors that might hinder their growth. However, before delving into these, it is necessary to provide an outline of the emerging non-denominational Pentecostal churches and ministries in South Africa. Because there are many, this article limits them to four main categories: i) Pentecostal and charismatic; ii) prophetic; iii) Zionist; and iv) deliverance ministries.

The Church Historical Significance of Non-Denominationalism in Pentecostalism

Non-denominationalism in Pentecostalism did not start in South Africa; it has a strong church historical significance that started in the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, United States of America. The Azusa Street Revival was a forerunner of the birth of the Pentecostal movement in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. According to Anderson (2006), most Pentecostal movements around the world trace their origin to the Azusa Street Revival. South Africa is included in this history, since both John G Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch had contact with the American preacher William Seymour of Azusa prior to their arrival in South Africa (Kgatle 2016b; Morton 2012; cf. Nel 2016). The main aim of the Azusa Street Revival, which lasted for three years,

was not to start a denomination. Hence, the revival received much criticism from the established denominations such as the Holiness Movement and other Protestant traditions at the time. In addition, the name “Apostolic Movement” was used not as the name of the church but as the name of the movement with the aim of bringing revival to the hearts of people (Robeck 2017). The main aim of the Azusa Street Revival was the revival of Pentecostal experiences such as baptism in the Holy Spirit and the initial evidence of speaking in tongues. It was to revive the church in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ, which many Pentecostals at the time perceived as imminent. In addition, the Azusa Street Revival was attended by people from different parts of the world who came together and prayed together without observing their differences. Thus, the Azusa Street Revival was not a denomination but an interracial movement that encouraged unity in diversity. It is important to point out that its non-denominationalism contributed to its growth and longevity of about three years.

Similarly, in early Pentecostalism in South Africa, churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission started as a movement concerned with salvation, Spirit baptism and the second coming of Christ. The Bree Street Revival in Johannesburg can be compared with the Azusa Street Revival in terms of the revival of Pentecostal experiences of the Holy Spirit. At the Bree Street Revival, people gathered in large numbers from all corners of South Africa and from different racial groups to worship together in unity. De Wet (1989) points out that at this revival, no one thought about starting a denomination; it was all about the revival of souls, like the Azusa Street Revival. It was this non-denominationalism that caused the Pentecostal movement at the time to grow in large numbers, reaching out to both Black and White members. It is also important to point out that when the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa became established as a denomination, numbers declined and cessations started to happen in the church (Kgatle 2016a, 2017). The Apostolic Faith Mission, as a denomination during apartheid, aligned itself with ecclesiastical politics of the time that were embraced by other denominations in the country. This did not work in favour of the church, but rather presented a negative aspect of denominationalism in that, as churches became part of denominations, they deviated from their main aim of reviving the people of God and focusing on their main calling of reaching out to lost souls. Thus, theoretically, there might be nothing wrong with a denomination but everything wrong with denominationalism that seeks to divide people into different racial groups, hindering church growth.

Newer Non-Denominational Pentecostal Churches in South Africa

Pentecostal and Charismatic Ministries

The most recent Pentecostal and charismatic churches in South Africa have not changed the fundamental teachings of the classical denominational Pentecostal churches, such as Spirit baptism and the initial evidence of speaking in tongues; however, they do not affiliate with such churches. These are the churches that have become independent from Western denominational affiliations and/or influence. It should be noted that although scholars such as Anderson (2002, 2005) studied similar churches in the past, this article

looks at chronological developments and not necessarily the characteristics of these churches. The most recent ones, those beyond Anderson's 2002 and 2005 study, are ministries such as Hope Restoration Ministries, which was started by Pastor Siphwe Mathebula and his wife in Chloorkop, Kempton Park, in South Africa. There are numerous Pentecostal and charismatic ministries in South Africa, especially in the rural areas and townships. It should also be noted that most of these churches, although new and led by young pastors, in my own observation, may have not been involved in many of the controversial acts of other types of ministries. This is not to say that these churches are holy or perfect. Rather, given their name, they have followed in the footsteps of the classical Pentecostal and charismatic churches in South Africa.

Prophetic Ministries

Prophetic non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa are known for their emphasis on prophesy, including the use of different products in healing and deliverance. Scholars have studied these churches in the last decade, including their abuse of religion, their abuse of people's belief in faith miracles and the abuse of women (Banda 2020; Dube 2020; Kaunda 2021; Ramantswana 2018; Tsekpoe 2019). An important aspect of these churches is that most of them are not affiliated with the main Pentecostal denominations in South Africa. These are churches such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering of Prophet Shepherd Bushiri (also known as Major 1), who used to operate at the Pretoria showgrounds but recently returned to Malawi, his country of birth and church's headquarters. Another non-denominational Pentecostal church of note is Alleluia Ministries International of Pastor Alph Lukau, who used to operate in Randburg (South Africa), but has relocated to the United Kingdom. A third famous prophet is Paseka Motsoeneng of Incredible Happenings, who has been caught up in one controversy after another. A fourth one is Prophet Lesego Daniel, the founder of Rabboni Centre Ministries in South Africa, who is also a controversial prophet and goes by the title "professor" without having any academic qualifications to back this up. In Cape Town, there is Apostle Mohlala, who started Shekainah Healing Ministries and Apostle Mohlala Ministries and has most recently taken the prophetic approach in ministration. Many prophets have founded and are leading non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa.

Zionist Ministries

Zionist ministries focus on using healing products in the same way as prophetic churches do (Anderson 1991, 1999, 2001; Anderson and Otwang 1993; cf. Kgatle 2021a). The challenge with this category is that some of them do not want to be categorised as such, because of fear of being judged and counted as non-Pentecostal (Anderson 1991, 2). Some of the Zionist Pentecostal churches are known for wearing a church uniform and using different objects and symbols in their religious practices (Anderson 2005). The newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches that are Zionist include churches such as Rivers of Living Waters of Archbishop Zondo in Evaton, South Africa. Zondo has spiritual sons such as Prophet FF Marima of Fire Tabernacle

Prophetic Ministries International in Vosloorus, east of Johannesburg, and Pastor November of Victorious Faith Ministries in Bloemfontein. Another Zionist ministry is Tyrannus Apostolic Church, which was founded in 2000 in QwaQwa (South Africa) by Apostle Simon Mokoena. The membership of this church is estimated at about one million members spread across cities in South Africa and some members come from other countries in Africa. Both Tyrannus Apostolic Church and Rivers of Living Waters use church uniforms and sell specific healing products to their members, hence their association with Zionism.

Deliverance Ministries

Deliverance ministries are known for their emphasis on deliverance from demonic forces and other forms of oppression caused by the spirit world. There are churches that believe that salvation is not complete until it is complemented by deliverance from different forms of evil such as illnesses, misfortunes, witchcraft, failures, miscarriages, barrenness and unemployment. Thus, deliverance is a phenomenon that confronts evil coming from the spirit world (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a; Hunt 1998; Onyinah 2002). Deliverance in Africa is also associated with the phenomenon of generational curses, with many Africans associating their current challenges with the sufferings of past generations. Therefore, even when someone is a born-again Christian, the perception is that they need deliverance from the curses or challenges that their past generation experienced. While there are churches that minister deliverance through healing and deliverance products such as anointing oil and anointing water, there are some newer churches that strictly minister deliverance through prayer in the name of Jesus alone. One such church is the New Generation, which was founded by Bishop MB Mphahlele in Limpopo Province of South Africa. There are numerous deliverance ministries that are led by other African residents in South Africa, but operating in South Africa.

The Significance of Non-Denominationalism in Newer Non-Denominational Pentecostalism

There are some significant highlights in this article which show that non-denominational Pentecostal churches are benefiting from this approach as opposed to their denominational counterparts. First, while most classical denominational Pentecostal churches require a proper place of fellowship to start, non-denominational Pentecostal churches are started anywhere (including in the homes of church members, tents, schools, open-air, community halls, and hotels). Churches such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering of Prophet Shepherd Bushiri used to have fellowship at the Pretoria showgrounds (also known as the Tshwane Events Centre), an easy-to-visit place unlike an ordinary church building (Kgatle 2021a). In other words, people who were shy to visit church buildings could visit the showgrounds. Another reason is that people were used to visiting the Tshwane Events Centre prior to Enlightened Christian Gathering starting a church at the centre (Henama and Sifolo 2018). In addition, the showgrounds could accommodate a large group of people at the same time, as there are many buildings.

Second, while the classical Pentecostal churches require an ordination certificate for an assembly pastor, non-denominational Pentecostal churches do not have this requirement. Although ordination is proper and necessary for well-established churches, its processes can hinder the growth and expansion of churches. While a denominational church is started by an ordained minister with proper training acquired at an accredited theological college, the non-denominational Pentecostal church is started by someone with basic training or no training at all. The majority of the pastors highlighted in the preceding sections either received basic training from an unregistered Bible college or did not receive any training at all. In addition, most of them are self-claimed, meaning they were not properly ordained, but rather requested someone from an established ministry to endorse their own ministry. Masenya and Masenya (2018) point out that non-denominational Pentecostal churches are started by anyone, including those who have never received any theological training. This article does not endorse the lack of theological training but points out the fact that these churches can be started by those who have not received theological training, which adds to the proliferation of these churches in South Africa. In other words, as classical denominational Pentecostal churches wait for the training and ordination of pastors, non-denominational Pentecostal churches have as many branches as possible. This means that non-denominational Pentecostal churches are instant churches that can be started at any given moment without rigidity or following due processes (Resane 2017).

Third, classical denominational Pentecostal churches have formal programmes such as Sunday services and midweek prayer meetings, but non-denominational Pentecostal churches go beyond these formal services and host other services such as night prayers, deliverance services, meetings with business leaders, and prayers for employment (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a). These multiple services help them to reach many people at a time and introduce some flexibility. In some churches, prayer services are hosted in the morning on every weekday. In addition, most pastors and prophets avail themselves to pray with their congregants during the week, which is not common among the classical denominational Pentecostal churches. The all-night prayers and deliverance sessions, hosted on Fridays by the prophetic and deliverance ministries, can attract many people from local areas and across borders (Daswani 2015). In addition, these churches (especially the prophetic and deliverance ministries) have different television ministries to connect with their members and followers on a weekly basis (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a). The television ministries make it possible for followers to have access to sermons and other programmes, even if they were not present at the formal service. Some of the members and followers are prayed for during these television ministries—a concept called “touch the screen” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005b). This basically means that the prophet can pray for the sick, unemployed and anyone looking for a miracle if they touch their television screens during prayer.

Lastly, while denominational churches have a history, such as racial segregation that existed in many classical denominational Pentecostal churches like the Apostolic Faith Mission, Assemblies of God and Full Gospel Church (Resane 2018, cf. Kgatle 2021b),

most of the newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches do not have such a history or do not allow it to interfere with their ministries. History, such as that of racial segregation, can be a stumbling block for churches to reach different racial groups in the country. In addition, most classical denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa are still racially divided in that there is still a church for Black people and a church for White people. Because many non-denominational Pentecostal churches are not dragged down by this kind of history, they are able to reach as many races and ethnic groups as possible. Beyond racial issues, the newer non-denominational Pentecostals also encourage multinationalism; they are rarely xenophobic, ethnocentric, and racist. It is for this reason that churches such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering are multiracial, not only in terms of membership but also in terms of people who are allowed to attend the church services. In addition, these churches appeal to different age groups and racial groups given their liturgy, worship songs, and use of different music genres in worship.

In summary, non-denominational Pentecostal churches are able to grow without limits. The newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches are growing, although this growth cannot be compared to that of the established Pentecostal denominations. In other words, classical denominational Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission remain larger, with a membership of 1.2 million. However, the non-denominational Pentecostal churches have the potential to grow even beyond the current growth of denominational churches. The reason for this is because these churches can reach diverse members in terms of age, race, ethnicity and economical class. These churches are not rigid in terms of who is able to start them and who is able to pastor them; they are started by anyone at any time. These churches have spiritual services other than the formal services hosted mid-week and on Sundays. These services, including all-night prayers and deliverance sessions, attract many members and followers. Lastly, the non-denominational Pentecostal churches do not have a long history of racial segregation that divides the church into Black, White, Indian and Coloured members. Non-racialism in these churches means that they can have multiracial and multicultural services.

Discussion and Recommendation

The newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa have the potential to expand even beyond the borders of South Africa into other African countries and the rest of the globe. However, to do so this, they need to restore order in their churches and not become the laughing stock of religious communities and society. There is nothing wrong with prophetic and deliverance ministries, because prophesy and deliverance were also practised during the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, but they should be done properly. Even with great power and gifts, prophets should be able to control these gifts as led by the Holy Spirit and cease from engaging in barbaric and dangerous faith acts. They should be able to restore order in their churches, while fulfilling their main calling and using their gifts. The very same God, who apportioned gifts to the prophets

in non-denominational Pentecostal churches, is the God of order. This suggests that anything disorderly does not come from God, but from the evil one. A prophet cannot claim to be led by God and His Spirit while at the same time engaging in acts that bring disorder to their churches and the corporate body of Christ.

Another important factor is that these churches should have basic doctrinal foundations that form part of their founding principles. These foundations will help these churches to avoid doctrinal errors and heresies in their practice of religion. In their performance of dangerous faith acts, most of the prophets interpret the Scriptures, but confuse basic doctrines such as conducting holy communion. Pastor Daniel Lesego of the Rabonni Centre Ministries asserted that the grass and petrol turned into blood and bread when partaking in holy communion (Kgatle 2021a). This is not only a misinterpretation of the Scriptures, but also a sign that many of these pastors do not have a basic understanding of doctrinal issues in the church. Lesego is not alone in this; many other prophets and pastors in prophetic and deliverance ministries lack an understanding of basic church doctrines; hence, they speak of the appearance of angels at their church services, the resurrection of dead bodies and other miracles that show a lack of doctrine. Therefore, in South Africa there is a need for the revitalisation of such doctrines for the sustainability of these churches.

Having a basic doctrinal foundation is pivotal for these churches to avoid unnecessary pressure and confrontations with Chapter 9 institutions such as the Commission for Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Commission). In other words, when the churches are sound in their doctrinal foundation, they will be able to self-govern without the influence of external forces (including the government). Bishops, pastors and prophets such as Bushiri, Zondo and Lesego will benefit from sound doctrine and not constantly appear before the CRL Commission. In addition, having a basic doctrinal foundation might go a long way in helping pastors and prophets to avoid court appearances and many of their legal woes. Although doctrine has nothing to do with acts of criminality, it prepares the pastor or prophet to minister properly to people, thus avoiding actions that are against the law. In simple terms, as prophets in these churches learn more about conducting holy communion, running the finances of the church and other duties, they will be strong in leading their churches properly and avoid illegal actions.

Sound doctrine is important for the sustainability of non-denominational churches in South Africa since some of them end up closing because they lack order and sound doctrine. The non-denominational Pentecostal churches should not settle for their current growth rate, as there are indications that they can grow beyond their current trajectory. In addition, even their current growth is under threat because of their actions, heresies and legal battles in the South African courts. All these call for a revisitation of their practices that will contribute to their growth and sustainability. The non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa have the potential to exceed the numbers in the classical Pentecostal churches, given their diversity and different

approaches to liturgy and ministration. However, this is not enough; there should be an appreciation of the fundamental teachings and doctrine in the Bible that are embraced by denominational Pentecostal churches. This does not mean that these churches should move away from their zeal for Pentecostal experiences and manifestations, but they should recognise and uphold basic doctrine.

The current non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa have established movements and ministries that are not affiliated with current denominations. These churches are consistent with their forefathers in believing in the manifestation of the Pentecostal experiences as activated by the movement of the Holy Spirit. However, the difference is that the forefathers were very strong in the doctrinal foundations that helped them to minister Pentecostal experiences without heresies, dangerous faith practices and lack of order in ministry—as happen in some non-denominational Pentecostal churches. At both the Azusa Street Revival and the Bree Street Revival there were no incidents of dangerous faith acts such as eating snakes, drinking petrol and eating grass. In addition, at both Azusa Street Revival and Bree Street Revival, real revival and real miracles were experienced, as opposed to fake miracles that happen in prophetic non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa. At both these revivals, people were ministered to without payment to access divine healing and other miracles. In other words, the Azusa Street Revival and the Bree Street Revival did not sell healing and deliverance products to their followers, as sometimes happens in the prophetic, deliverance and Zionist ministries.

Therefore, as much as the newer non-denominational Pentecostal churches are consistent with non-denominationalism of early Pentecostalism, they have to be consistent with sound doctrine. To move in the Spirit does not mean that pastors and prophets have to take advantage of the people of God and abuse their human rights and belief system. Believing in God and miracles do not have to be the source and motive for the violation of human rights. To be gifted should not result in the abuse of the people of God, regardless of their desperation to receive a miracle or a blessing as proclaimed by the prophet. To be spirit filled does not mean that there should be a performance of bizarre and unusual miracles. Similarly, spiritual gifts such as healing, prophecy, deliverance and performance of other miracles do not have to be sold to the highest bidder, as some prophets have commercialised their gifts and graces. The commercialisation of the gospel is a source of fake miracles and other unusual practices, because prophets want to prove that they are more powerful than others in order to make more money through the gospel. Therefore, there is a need to restore order and doctrinal foundations among the non-denominational Pentecostal churches in South Africa.

Conclusion

This article looked at the newer non-denominational churches in South Africa within the denominationalism theoretical framework or approach. These churches are categorised into the four main types: i) Pentecostal and charismatic; ii) prophetic; iii) Zionist; and iv) deliverance ministries. These churches can grow beyond classical

Pentecostal churches that are located within the main denominations in South Africa. Non-denominationalism is an advantage that has made these churches grow without limits within the broader Pentecostal movement in South Africa. Hence, the non-denominational approach has church historical significance that dates back to the foundations of the Pentecostal movement in the 20th century in America and South Africa. However, this article suggests that in order for these churches to maintain their growth in South Africa, the restoration of order and doctrinal foundations are important. Failure to be rooted in the fundamental doctrine and to maintain order in these churches might result in some of them closing, as calls for the regulation of churches are becoming stronger in South Africa.

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