

Public testimony in the Pentecostal liturgy: A transformative experience approach

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Pentecostal liturgy in Africa is quite distinct from other forms of liturgies (such as mainline churches) within the Christian tradition. As opposed to the reserved liturgy in Western missional churches, a Pentecostal liturgy is participatory and lively. One of the aspects of the Pentecostal liturgy is the public testimonies that are offered during a Pentecostal service. Literature review on public testimony shows that the same has been previously used for advertising, marketisation, and commercialisation of religion in the Pentecostal movement. However, an evaluation of public testimony as a transformative experience remains under-researched. This article uses the literary analysis to bridge this research gap by analysing the value of public testimony in the Pentecostal transformation experience. This will be achieved by introducing the Pentecostal liturgy in the context of the Pentecostal movement. The concept of public testimony in Pentecostal liturgy will be outlined to understand its significance. The aim here is to demonstrate the fact that public testimony does not only serve the purpose of marketing, advertising, or selling religion but is also a transformative experience.

Contribution: This article proposes a transformative Pentecostal experience to the practice of public testimony within the Pentecostal liturgy. Public testimony is not only used for marketing and advertising but also serves as a transformative tool in the Pentecostal movement in Africa.

Keywords: testimony; Pentecostal liturgy; transformative experience; marketisation; advertising; commercialisation; Pentecostalism.

Introduction

Liturgy refers to the modality of how public worship is conducted during a spiritual service in the Christian tradition (Molehe 2022). The elements of liturgy include, among others, songs, sermons, Eucharist, prayers, hymns, benedictions, scripture reading, and so forth (Spinks 2011). Most Christian churches have a formal liturgy that they follow as a guideline for how they conduct their public worship (Dawn 2003). Liturgy in most Western missional churches is common in different churches and is routinely followed every week (Chan 2006). This makes liturgy an important aspect of Christian theology particularly when looking at public worship during a church service. Pentecostal liturgy is different from other forms of liturgies in the Christian tradition. It is a participatory and lively one as opposed to the formal and reserved one in the Western missional churches in Africa (Anderson 1999). Pentecostal liturgy does not follow a specific routine but follows the Pentecostal theology of the Spirit (Yong 2005; cf. Stephenson 2013). In other words, instead of being led by the programme, Pentecostals refer to being led by the Spirit in their liturgy. Public testimonies are part of the Pentecostal liturgy in addition to music, sermons, and prayer.

This article looks at the aspect of public testimony to argue that this aspect of the Pentecostal liturgy is not only for marketing purposes but also serves as a transformative experience. This will be established through the theoretical framework of the transformative Pentecostal experience. The article will introduce the Pentecostal liturgy to identify its distinctive characteristics in comparison to other liturgies in the Christian tradition. The article will outline the concept of public testimony within the Pentecostal liturgy, its practices, and its weaknesses. The article will also demonstrate how public testimony in Pentecostal churches in Africa is used for the marketisation of the Pentecostal movement. However, this is not the only rationale behind public testimonies; they are used in these churches for the transformative experience among the congregants and followers of these churches. As a point of departure, let me share and discuss the (discussed in the next section) background to Pentecostal liturgy and its practices.

Pentecostal liturgy

Pentecostal liturgy is different from other liturgies in the Christian tradition. Other liturgies are more leaned towards formality and are quite reserved in their approach. In addition, liturgy in other Western Christian traditions follows a certain routine which is the same every week. However, according to Vondey (2012:163), Pentecostal liturgy is very much different in form and practice from orthodox Christian worship which is the reason for the expansion of Pentecostalism in urban settings. A Pentecostal liturgy is a radical approach to public worship which does not follow formality. Its (Pentecostal) liturgy challenges the traditional forms of public worship; hence, believers in urban and even rural settings have found resonance with Pentecostal services. This is a reality in an African context where people are already used to jovial forms of worship. Pentecostal liturgy, similar to other liturgies, comprises song, sermon, prayers, worship, and so forth. The difference in the Pentecostal liturgy lies in the fact that all the liturgical activities are performed with zeal and passion. Pentecostals focus on what is normally called praise and worship as opposed to hymns from the hymn books in the traditional mainline liturgy. However, this study is not ignorant of some Pentecostals who are still using Western hymnal songs within main liturgy.

During praise and worship, the lead singers engage the church members in singing and praising God which is also not a norm in traditional liturgy. The singing is conducted with live musical instruments such as guitar, drums, piano, and so forth which also makes it very much spontaneous and jovial. It is during the singing of praise and worship songs that the audience gets passionate about the service in the Pentecostal liturgy. In the end, everyone becomes involved during the praise and worship service in Pentecostal liturgy particularly in African contexts. Anderson (1999) puts it this way:

In Pentecostal music and liturgy, pointing out that spontaneity and enthusiasm, rather than leading to an absence of liturgy, produce flexible oral liturgies memorised by the Pentecostal congregation. The most important element of these. Liturgies are the active participation of every member of the congregation. (p. 221)

What makes Pentecostal liturgy unique is its link to the Pentecostal theology of pneumatology. In other words, the Pentecostal liturgy is linked to the theology of the Spirit in the Pentecostal movement (Alvarado 2012). The Pentecostal churches, particularly in Africa are ready to abandon a formal programme in pursuit of the fulfilling and spontaneous liturgy that follows the leadership of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that Pentecostals are disorderly, but they do not allow the programme of liturgy to hinder the movement of the Holy Spirit; hence, their spiritual services are full of life (Vondey 2017). Indeed, as Alvarado (2012:136) pointed out 'Good liturgy is a key component in developing a vibrant, transformative relationship with God'. However, such a liturgy is not expected to supersede the work of the Holy

Spirit during worship service. Pentecostals do not envisage a liturgy that will stand in the way of the Spirit; they would rather choose the Spirit than a formal liturgy style of worship. But this does not mean that Pentecostals are anti-liturgist, but it also does mean that the Holy Spirit is in charge of liturgy which again makes it a unique liturgy. This kind of liturgy, according to Riches, is called an anointed worship. This means that the Holy Spirit is present during the praise and worship time which also allows the presence of God to flow during the Pentecostal service. There is a belief that the same anointing that was upon Jesus Christ is upon them through the work of the Holy Spirit. Hence, they do not talk about ordinary worship but anointed worship in Pentecostal liturgy.

The focus of Pentecostal liturgy on the theology of the Spirit is what makes it a liturgy of participation and a lively liturgy. It is the spirited liturgy that makes it a spontaneous, lively, and participatory liturgy (Alvarado 2012:147). Alvarado (2012:150) continues to say that 'Spirit-filled testimony is a powerful aspect of Pentecostal liturgy and fully engages the church in the learning process'. This pneumatocentric liturgy comprises believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit; hence, when they come together, the experience becomes very much spontaneous. Pentecostals believe that the presence of the Holy Spirit should be made manifest during a Pentecostal service. This does not happen in the Western liturgical paradigms; hence, a Pentecostal liturgy is perceived as a challenge to the same (Mbamalu 2015). This is the reason the Pentecostal liturgy is very attractive to believers in the African context who are looking for spontaneous forms of worship (Kalu 2009:16). This is because the worship styles found in many Pentecostal churches are not only pneumatic but very much accommodative to African culture in terms of music and styles of presentation (Kalu 2009:20). In the end, Pentecostal liturgy is more expressive and more spontaneous (Vondey 2018:12). One of the aspects of its expressiveness is testimony time that will be discussed in the next section. With the above in mind, let us now analyse testimony as part of worship within the Pentecostal Churches.

Testimony in the Pentecostal liturgy

Testimony is commonly used in court proceedings when a witness testifies about the events under the Juris. In the Pentecostal settings, a testimony is used to inform fellow believers or congregants about what God has done in one's life. The testimony is given as evidence of the blessing or an answered prayer in their lives. Vanyoro (2022:3) defines testimony as 'a vehicle that beneficiaries of the prophet's prayer use to describe how happier they have become after experiencing certain miracles'. Testimony is to demonstrate the difference between the life of the testifier before prayer and after prayer. In demonstrating the change that happened after prayer, the audience is allowed to see or realise how effective such prayer or prophecy is so that they too can place a demand on the same. According to Riches and Wagner (2012:25), 'testimonies are used to convince

the unbeliever to experience the same things that the believer has experienced in their relationship with God'. In giving their testimonies, the believers show the unbelievers that God is active in the world and has the power to make a difference in both the spirit world and the planet Earth. Ozanne and Appau (2019:8) state that 'The Pentecostal testimony is a witnessed account of God and the church's triumph over the evil spiritual forces in the ongoing spiritual warfare'. Most Pentecostals do testify to demonstrate that the forces of darkness have been defeated by the power of God.

Testimony is evidence that one's life has changed from being an unbeliever to being a believer, from living a life of sin to living a life of righteousness. Therefore, all new converts are expected to testify that they are now born again after the experience of accepting the Lord Jesus Christ. Testimony is about bearing witness of accepting the Lord Jesus Christ. Most Pentecostals believe that anyone who is born again should be able to testify. This is taken from the biblical text in 1 John 5:10:

Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.

Hence, a lack of testimony is interpreted as a lack of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the performance of a testimony has something to do with the religious belief in the Lord Jesus Christ (Faimau 2017:2). A testimony is given to demonstrate a firm belief in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The reader will now realise how different this form of worship is from that of mainline churches.

Testimony is also a sign that the testifier is grateful for what God has done in their lives (Ozanne & Appau 2019:8). By giving testimony, the testifier in a way is giving thanks not only to God but also to the pastor or the prophet who has prayed for them. It is for this reason that testifiers always start by thanking God even before they give more details of their testimony. According to Ozanne and Appau (2019:8), it is common in Africa for the testifier to bring a token of appreciation in the form of money or any other gift to offer in the church as a sign of being grateful to what God has done in their lives. Similarly, not testifying is interpreted as being ungrateful to God and the pastor who has prayed for the believer. In some contexts, not coming with a gift or money to offer in the church or to the prophet might also be interpreted as being ungrateful. In encouraging believers to offer a thanksgiving offering, the pastor would mention that the lack of giving prevents another blessing from coming into their lives. In fear of stopping their blessings, believers would keep on offering more in the church and to the man or woman of God so that their testimonies could keep on overflowing.

There is an allocated time for the presentations of the testimonies in a Pentecostal liturgy. In addition to music,

praise, worship, and the ministry of the word, the pastor in charge of the Pentecostal service will call out all those who want to offer testimonies. Faimau (2018) states that:

Pentecostal churches introduce the idea of testimony time where believers are allowed to share their personal experience with the Divine and how an encounter with the Divine creates, shapes, and transforms one's life. (p. 2)

Sometimes, this can take longer than the time for praise, worship, and the word. However, the people would be patient as they want to hear what God has done in the lives of other believers. Depending on the size of the congregation and mode of operation, some testimonies are first given to the pastor so he or she can vet them before they are shared with the congregation. This is also done so that the testifier keeps the focus on the testimony and does not deviate from the key aspect of the same. Faimau (2017) explains that some of the Pentecostal churches:

[P]rovide testimony registration forms for church attendees who wish to share their testimonies. Church attendees normally register their testimonies by completing the form before they are invited to share their testimonies. (p. 2)

This also helps them in keeping order in the church and ensuring that the testimony time is used fruitfully. In the next section, the article outlines the three roles of public testimony such as advertising, marketing, and commercialisation. We now move into the area of advertising, marketing, and commercialisation in worship.

Public testimony: Advertising, marketisation, and commercialisation in Pentecostalism

There are different roles that public testimonies play within a Pentecostal liturgy. The first role discussed in this article is the sharing of testimonies to advertise the church and the pastor. Pentecostal meetings such as a conference, crusades, revivals, and so forth are well-advertised to attract crowds to these meetings. Testimonies serve as advertising tools that are used for increasing the following in these meetings. Ukah (2008:133) points out that 'pastors advertise their curing powers by publishing testimonials in magazines, as audio recordings, in handbills, and videos'. These testimonies are meant to entice the audience to the Pentecostal meetings; hence, there are always huge crowds in the same meetings. Other than the testimonies displayed in different publications, there will also be people who are called in front to give their testimonies during the meetings. It is for this reason that a meeting that initially attracted fewer crowds can suddenly attract more crowds in Pentecostal meetings because of the testimonies shared during the same meetings.

Pentecostals are very strong in the marketisation of religion. This is done by ensuring that people know about the meetings such as listed earlier in the text. As part of a marketing tool, the testimonies will be shared during the Pentecostal liturgy

so that people can inform each other about a Pentecostal meeting. Ukah (2008) points out that:

A typical handbill of testimonies includes photographs of the testifiers. These photographs function to create credibility and authenticity for the healing claims, by personifying the healed as individuals. For believers, testimonials further validate the curing power of the church leaders. Testimonial flyers may also attract new followers, as well as provide church addresses for them. (p. 133)

Therefore, testimonies are at the centre of the marketisation of religion among the Pentecostal churches in Africa (Vanyoro 2022). The more the testimonies shared in a Pentecostal liturgy, the more people will be attracted to attend the Pentecostal meetings. The marketing of testimonies is also done via mass media and social media. Appau and Bonsu (2020) say that:

With the benefit of modern marketing media, these services and the testimonies of satisfied customers are broadcast live on radio and cable TV, and/or shared on Youtube for mass awareness and consumption.

In this way, the Pentecostal churches can reach out to as many people as they can for the expansion of the Pentecostal movement in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Public testimony has a role in the commodification and commercialisation of religion, particularly testimonies about material possessions. Some of the testimonies presented in Pentecostal churches in Africa are very much materialistic (Ukah 2008:133). This means that instead of testifying about the Lord Jesus Christ, the testimony would be about material things like cars and houses. In a Pentecostal church called Charis Missionary Church in the east of Johannesburg, South Africa that is pastored by Apostle JB Makananisa and his wife, there are testimonies of cars displayed before the congregants during a church service (Charity Missionary Church 2017). This is rather a disturbing practice as it is more about displaying lavish lifestyles before other poor congregants. The congregants who bought new cars are welcome to drive into the tent of the Charis Missionary Church to give testimony about their blessing. The cars are brought to the Apostle Makananisa so that he can pray for them and show fellow congregants that God can bless one with a car. This in a way displays the materialistic part of the testimonies within the broader Pentecostal movement. This further propagates the message of prosperity among Pentecostal believers. It is a belief that following Jesus translates into a material blessing in the form of cars and houses. Therefore, the testimony time about cars is to demonstrate that the gospel of prosperity is indeed working in churches such as Charis Missionary Church. Other people would go into such a church with the belief that they too can drive a new car not necessarily for their salvation.

In the end, testimonies are shared to demonstrate the power that is at work in the life of the prophet. It is to show the audience that the prophet, the pastor or any other church leader is mightily used by God (Vanyoro 2022:3). This testimony is

shared through the same work of the Holy Spirit who lives in the life of the believer. The aim is for the audience to be very much attracted to the man or woman of God who is mightily used by God. Hence, the testimonies always refer to the clergy praying or prophesying to the believer, to show fellow congregants that prayer or prophecy works particularly when made by the prophet. Pentecostal believers are encouraged to testify about things that could not have happened if the prophet in their lives had not prayed for them. Appau and Bonsu (2020:166) describe how believers during the testimony are enticed to the spiritual powers carried by the Pentecostal pastor or prophet. This in a way increases the confidence of the congregants and Pentecostal followers in the person of the prophet. However, this article argues that testimonies are not only used for advertising, marketing, and commercialisation. They also serve as a tool of transformation. In the following section, the article frames the transformative experience in the context of Pentecostalism.

Framing a transformative experience in the context of Pentecostalism

A transformative experience is a theory developed by Laurie Ann Paul in the book *Transformative Experience* (2014). In this book, Paul (2014) discusses various approaches to receiving change but with a focus on a transformative experience. The main argument in this theory is that in a transformative experience, the experience fundamentally transforms the person experiencing it, making it a more personal transformation. This means that to see change, the one who demands it should be willing to go through an experience of change. In this case, religious experiences become an agency of transformation in which people undergoing them can see a change in their lives. This makes the Pentecostal movement a relevant one for the transformative experience because it is a movement of experience. In addition, Pentecostals believe that the work of the Holy Spirit is to bring transformation in their lives through pneumatological experiences (Nel 2018:59). However, it is important to note that in the context of Pentecostalism, such a change does not exclusively happen to the one going through the experience, it is also able to change others. In the case of testimonies, change does not only happen to the one giving the testimony but also to the audience listening or watching the testimony. This explains the reason Pentecostalism has spread to different parts of the world changing people in different contexts through the testimonies of Pentecostal believers.

Transformative experience is defined by Gaggioli (2016:98) as 'a sudden and profound change in the self-world, which has peculiar phenomenological features that distinguish it from linear and gradual psychological change'. This means that a transformative experience does not follow the different steps that are required to bring change to an individual, but it is a change that comes suddenly. Change can happen in two ways. Firstly, through a step-by-step gradual change where the person in need of change follows the instructions for such

change to happen. Secondly, through a sudden transformation that happens without following the steps of change (Gaggioli 2016). The transformative experience belongs to the latter because change happens unexpectedly through an experience. Bain, Brady and Corns (2019:166) add that 'such experiences are personally transformative, fundamentally changing one's values, preferences, and desires, and, therefore, transforming one's identity in substantive ways'. In summary, the transformative experience happens in two ways. Firstly, the change that comes through an experience. Secondly, it is a change that comes without observing the steps for the change. In the following section, the article discusses these two ways in the context of public testimony from a transformative Pentecostal experience point of view.

Public testimony: A transformative Pentecostal experience

Pentecostal liturgy, as opposed to other liturgies, is a liturgy of experience including the performance of testimonies (Alexander 2016). Transformation in Pentecostalism happens in the process of these experiences such as singing, praising, worshipping, prayer, healing sessions, and so forth. Testimony is part of these experiences that has the potential to bring change to the person giving the testimony and those who are listening to the same. This means that while somebody is giving out their testimony, the person is changing. In addition, the people who are listening to the testimony also experience change. Whether direct or indirect, the point being made here is that Pentecostal experiences including testimonies during (Pentecostal) liturgy are a source for a transformative experience. The believer does not have to wait or follow certain steps or routines for change; they can receive change through their experience in Pentecostal liturgy. Therefore, Pentecostal liturgy is not performed to follow a programme but is rather performed to bring change in the life of a believer. This change happens as worshippers (Pentecostals) undergo different experiences in their lives.

The public testimony is expected to cause others to experience transformation in their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ (Hunter 2010). Non-believers are expected to receive a sudden change in their life by listening to or watching the testimony of the believer in a Pentecostal liturgy. The testimony of the Samaritan woman is a perfect example in this regard to the above issue, because fellow Samaritans, after sharing her experience, believed in the word of God after they heard her testimony. After her encounter with Jesus in John 4, she went back to her community to share her testimony with others. This means that even the gospel of Jesus Christ spread in the form of a testimony. However, for this to happen there has to be an experience of the believer such as the Samaritan woman. Once the testimony of her experience was shared with others, they also began to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition, once the audience of her testimony also had their own experience, they no longer depended on her, but on their own experience with Christ. John 4:42 states that they said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man

is the Saviour of the world'. That is the blessings and encouragement they received from the message of the saviour.

The public testimony on what God has done for someone can serve as a source of encouragement for others (Lackey 2010). Public testimony on healing can make others believe that they can also be healed in their predicaments. Therefore, public testimony does not only have the function of advertising, marketing, and commercialisation, but it is also meant to encourage those who are sick because they too can receive their healing. Testimony is given to encourage those who are facing suffering so that they too can receive their healing. Testimony in an African context is given to encourage those who are facing various challenges coming from the spirit world so that they can conquer the evil one. When the testimony is given on victory over sickness, a disease, or an evil spirit, it propels others into believing that they too can receive their victory against the same. Experience is a common factor because, if someone has undergone a challenging experience and was able to overcome it, the rest of the audience listening to the testimony also believes that they too can overcome it. This means that we cannot look at testimony only through the lenses of advertising, marketisation, and commercialisation; we also have to look at it as a source of transformation.

Therefore, transformation in Pentecostal liturgy does not only concentrate on music or sermons but also on the testimony of a believer. This is the reason Pentecostals believe in the power of testimony. Its functions extend beyond marketing the brand of the church or the prophet to changing the lives of Pentecostal believers. However, it is equally important to deal with malpractices of testimonies such as commercialisation and other abuses. The testimony of individuals should not exceed the testimony of God about his son who died on the cross of Calvary for the redemption of humanity (1 Jn 5:9). The testimony of tangible things should not be prioritised over and above the testimony of the redemptive works of Christ. This means that testimony time in the Pentecostal liturgy should be reserved for the glorification of the son of man, Jesus Christ. It should not be a time for bragging about material things of the world, particularly in a continent where many are still living below the poverty line. Therefore, a testimony should not glorify the believer or even the prophet but should bring all the glory to the almighty God. It should be grounded in the work of the cross of Calvary rather than in the works of human beings.

Conclusion

This article studied the concept of public testimony during the Pentecostal liturgy using a literary analysis. This aspect of Pentecostal liturgy is very common among the Pentecostal churches in Africa. In addition, public testimonies are unique to the Pentecostal liturgy forming part of other aspects such as music, prayer, and sermon presentation. The literature review shows how public testimonies are used for advertising, marketing, and commercialisation of Pentecostal churches. While this article is not dismissive of these aspects of public

testimonies, it goes further to highlight the other value of public testimonies. This article found that public testimonies in Pentecostal liturgy also act as transformative experiences. In other words, when other believers hear the testimony on healing, blessing, and so forth, they can be transformed in their lives. Therefore, public testimonies act as change agents for other believers who are in difficult situations. This changes the way Pentecostal scholars perceive and study public testimonies. They should not only look at the advertising and marketing of Pentecostal churches, but also the transformation agenda. This means that public testimonies add value to the study of Pentecostal liturgy within the Pentecostal movement in Africa. However, Pentecostals around the world should take caution about testimonies that seek to commercialise the gospel and glorify the person of the prophet rather than bringing glory to the almighty God.

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M.S.K. contributed to the conceptualisation, formal analysis, and writing of the article.

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