

## The Ideal Pentecostal Church

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### The Ethos of Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada Churches: Spirit and Power

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Defining the spiritual ethos of a Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada church is a daunting task. It is somewhat like trying to describe Canadian Culture. Sometimes it appears as if there are as many characterizations as there are people endeavouring to define them. This attempt to delineate Pentecostal ethos is limited by the same kinds of burdens that prevent us from neatly capturing a nation wide picture of Canadian Culture. Our geographic expanse and our regional distinctiveness hinder this kind of venture.



Beside this, Pentecostals perhaps above all else, value the freedom to be able to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. From our beginnings in the Pentecostal awakening of the early 1900's we have held fast to the idea that obedience to the Spirit trumps ecclesiastical rules when the two are perceived to be in conflict. Our earliest forefathers chafed under the restraint of traditional denominations and their passion to follow the leading of the Spirit often led to their retreat from the church traditions that they had once embraced. This desire to follow the Spirit is in itself an essential part of the ethos of our assemblies. So while Pentecostals are a group who greatly value the leading of the Spirit, this common trait may not lead to a common approach on how we do church. It appears the Spirit does not lead in the same direction in every location. This should not surprise us given the diversity of the New Testament church pictured in the Pauline Epistles.

Our church gatherings vary greatly from community to community. There is no longer a Pentecostal trademark style of worship since not only do our churches vary in style, other denominations appear to have embraced what was once unique to us. Our preaching style also varies from pulpit to pulpit as do our programs, polity<sup>1</sup> and architecture. Perhaps what we are looking for are common threads in the ethos of PAOC churches. These threads may be woven together in a variety of ways and the fabric may vary in design and function. These common threads may not even be who we are at present, but it may be more accurate to say they represent who we would like to be at our best. In this discussion I will endeavour to point out a few of these threads that are woven into the life of our PAOC churches.

Earl Creps, director of the doctor of ministry program at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary comments that

Pentecostals are not evangelicals who speak in tongues. When our hearts are soft, our experience is about a kind of Spirit fullness that overflows in to our worldview, shifting it from Christian naturalism toward Christian supernaturalism, and shifting us from maintenance to mission. Pentecostals are all about getting full of God so we can

announce that his kingdom is the only real world and that it's arriving among us.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on mission is at the heart of our ethos. We want to be filled with the Spirit so we can be empowered for service. One of the original reasons for establishing our fellowship of churches was to enable us to better facilitate our participation in planting churches and foreign missions. Our PAOC charter of 1919 states three very significant purposes for which we exist: "to conduct a place or places of worship; to organize and conduct schools of religious instruction; to carry on home and foreign missionary work for the spread of the gospel."<sup>3</sup>

Pentecostals long for the empowerment of the Spirit so that we can fulfill the Great Commission. Spirit Baptism is for us a sign of that empowerment and tongues speaking, the initial evidence of that sign. While there are many occasions in the life of believers for Spirit empowerment, PAOC Pentecostals tend to focus on Spirit Baptism and speaking in tongues. In fact, most Pentecostals put significant emphasis upon the verbal evidences of the Spirit's empowering presence. Whether through anointed preaching, prophetic exhortation or the gift of tongues and interpretation, Pentecostals expect the Holy Spirit to speak to strengthen, encourage and comfort the church.<sup>4</sup> While Pentecostals talk about wanting more of the Spirit . . . when you catch us at our best, we understand that what we really mean is that He wants more of us. We must pour ourselves out. In other words, **more obedience.**<sup>5</sup>

But the Pentecostal ethos is not just about empowered witness, there is also an urgency to that witness. We have an eschatological perspective that the Holy Spirit has been poured out so that we can win the world before Christ returns. This sense of urgency colours much of our belief and practice. Our belief in the imminent return of Christ pushes Pentecostals out of their gatherings and into the world. It tends to make Pentecostals impatient with procedures that delay the process of enabling believers to reach the world. Ministry training programs are sometimes looked down upon if they take too long to launch their subjects into the harvest field. Decision making processes that take a long time to formulate decisions prove frustrating to those with this type of perspective. Pentecostals tend to opt for leadership structures that quickly expedite the process. Part of the PAOC ethos then is to put significant authority and responsibility upon pastoral leaders to champion the cause of Christ in their congregations and to lead with some sense of urgency in light of the soon return of Christ.

George Hunter, (not a Pentecostal) in *Radical Outreach* notes another of the threads in our Pentecostal ethos. It has to do with our acceptance of everybody who is empowered by the Spirit. This springs from our emphasis on the Acts 2:17 passage where Peter quotes the prophet Joel indicating that the Spirit's empowerment is for all people regardless of gender or race.

Every interpreter of Pentecostalism is impressed by the movement's engagement and inclusion of many poor, uneducated, marginalized, disinherited, left-behind, and even outcast 'losers' at the bottom of society's social ladder, and by the movement's power to convince them that they need to change and that the Spirit can empower their change and will 'gift' them for ministry and make their lives significant. The movement, on every continent, makes 'losers' into 'winners.' Pentecostalism seems more able to achieve interracial fellowships, and to recognize and empower women for ministry,

than any other branch of Christianity. In addition to reaching 'the masses,' many people of 'the classes' are attracted to Pentecostalism's hope, life, changed lives, and more inclusive humanity. The movement has often observed that cynics 'come to scorn and stayed to pray.'<sup>6</sup>

At our best we welcome all those who have been saved and gifted by the Spirit. This is part of our heritage from the Azusa Street revival of 1906. As Frank Bartleman, one of the earliest commentators on the Pentecostal movement noted: "Pentecost has come to Los Angeles, the American Jerusalem. Every sect, creed and doctrine under heaven . . . as well as every nation is represented."<sup>7</sup> Our ethos has been to welcome people regardless of race, class or gender into our gatherings and into our ministry. As our movement has aged many of our congregations no longer appear to be a collection of the disenfranchised as we were at Azusa.<sup>8</sup> But we still value the Spirit's calling and anointing as perhaps the most important qualifications for ministry. This is not to say that Godly character and relevant credentials are dismissed. There is tension here in our ethos. Our Wesleyan holiness roots impress upon us the importance of Godly character. Our first Bible College set relatively high academic standards for its graduates.<sup>9</sup>

PAOC churches tend to lean toward a Luke/Acts understanding of the Spirit as the source of empowerment for witness rather than the Apostle Paul's emphasis on the more soteriological dimensions of the life of faith.<sup>10</sup> Pastoral experience in Pentecostal settings teaches that it is not an either/or but a both/and understanding that is necessary for healthy leadership. We need both Spirit empowered and Spirit changed people in ministry in our churches. We need to know both the work and the character of Christ among us. Pentecostal churches and in particular, PAOC churches, are a diverse group. We hold to a common Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths. We agree to a nation wide set of criteria for ministerial credentials. We support a joint missions program. But other than these three underpinnings our churches are relatively free to be their own expression of Christian Community in their particular city, town or village. If you catch us at our best we will be seeking the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to reach the world for Christ. There will be some urgency in this pursuit. We will be working with the Spirit to see changed lives. We will be learning from the Word of God how to live Godly lives in an ungodly culture. And we will be training and releasing a diverse mix of Jesus' followers into Christian service.

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1 At our national conference in 2004 the PAOC agreed to accept an alternative form of church government which allows the church board to appoint future board members upon ratification by the membership.

2 Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 159.

3 This is as stated in our PAOC web site, <http://paoc.org/>

4 PAOC Pentecostals are insistent that these verbal inspirations are reliable subject to both the testing of other church members and the authority of Scripture. Their Statement of Fundamental truths states that Scripture is "absolutely supreme and sufficient in authority in all matters of faith and practice." *Local Church Constitution* (Mississauga: The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, 1994), 33.

5 This quote is from a sermon by Dr Van Johnson at the PAOC 2006 General Conference published in *The Journey Forward*, (Mississauga: The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, 2006), 37.

6 George Hunter, *Radical Outreach*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 64.

7 Cited in Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven*, (Reading: Perseus Books, 1995), 45.

8 As Cox notes: "The fire from heaven descended on April 9, 1906, on a small band of black domestic servants and

custodial employees gathered for prayer in a wooden bungalow at 214 North Bonnie Brae Avenue in Los Angeles, California." Cox, 45.

9 Bill Gibson in an unpublished paper entitled "Winnipeg and Early Pentecostalism" presented at our last National Conference Symposium in Winnipeg notes that A.H. Argue modeled the Winnipeg Bible College curriculum after Wycliffe College in Toronto.

10 William W. and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 47-62. 1