

"Between Power and Powerlessness: A personal Journey with Migrant Christians"

PfarrerIn Ursula Harfst, Springweg 8, D 45473 Mülheim an der Ruhr

Email: ursula.harfst@ekir.de

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Since 2000 I have been in close contact with Pentecostal Migrant churches. As assistant of the coordinator and then coordinator of the program "Cooperation between German and foreign language churches" I worked for understanding and unity in between Migrant churches and the German Protestant, so-called main line churches, in the area of North Rhine Westphalia. In October 2008 the work of this program ended and I changed to another position. Now I am a pastor of a Protestant congregation in Oberhausen. I am glad, that the communion with sisters and brothers of these congregations still remains. Like – my phone at home rings, I pick up and hear: "Ah, hallo Ma. God bless you. How are you doing?" I then answer: "Ah, Pastor Alewi. God bless you too. I am fine." He: "O praise the Lord!" I: "And how are you?" He: "Fine, thank you, by the grace of God!" I: "Thank God." He: "Next week I will be in Aachen. I call you then." I: "You no longer live in Ludwigshafen?" He: "O, yes, I do. But I visit Aachen. I call you, when I am there. Good bye. God bless you." I: "Ah. Yes. God bless you too. Good bye."

I was born and raised in an active Roman Catholic congregation and was very engaged in church life. Later I converted to the Protestant church. I studied theology and was ordained as a pastor in 2001. Through the work with Migrant churches I also have had intense contact with aspects of Pentecostal faith. So I speak, or better have an idea of, three languages of faith.

Viewing these different denominations I see three different answers to the question: Where do we get the assurance, that our faith is true?

The Roman Catholic Christians find it mainly in the tradition. There were so many before us who believed in God. They handed the faith down to our times. The Christians trust that they have been right and faithful – and they try to be like them.

The Protestant Christians find their assurance in the Bible – by reading it and listening to its interpretation. And they seek answers in their own conscience and thoughts – reflecting, thinking, comparing, struggling and trusting.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians find assurance in the experience. They get carried away by the Spirit in music and prayer, in trance and speaking in tongues. They get carried along by powerful preachers and encouraged through miraculous deeds like healing and deliverance.

Three notes regarding this classification:

1. There are other ways to secure and live our faith – and they – like the three possibilities I mentioned, can be found in every denomination. These are for instance:
 - We search for God in community with other believers – to become or represent the Body of Christ.
 - We help other people – to meet Christ in the person we care for.
 - We exert ourselves for peace, justice and the integrity of creation – to share in the Kingdom of God.
2. I think that nowadays many people look for experiences. They watch tv, do sports, search for relaxation. They want to feel and they want to feel good. Experience is an important category to their life. So a theology and a faith which embodies and promotes the experience meets the needs of the people and presents an opportunity to bring them in contact with the holy – or the Holy One. This theology and this faith as well have the responsibility to keep the critical aspect. As every other kind of theology, it has to be self-critical and it has to work out the balance between meeting people's needs without only offering what they want.
3. Writing “Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians find assurance in the experience” I immediately could hear the voices of my Pentecostal brothers protesting: “We don’t need assurances of our faith for we already are secured and saved. And if we needed such assurance, we wouldn’t search for assurance in experiences. We trust the Word of God as it is written in the Bible.”

I want to share with you some of my experiences with Pentecostal Migrant churches. When I talk about Pentecostal or charismatic Migrant churches, I mainly have had experiences with African rooted churches - their percentage of the approximately 300 Pentecostal and charismatic Migrant churches in the region of Rhineland and Westphalia is 70 % - and to some Brazilian, Indonesian, Tamil and Korean Pentecostal churches.

In these Pentecostal churches I find power and powerlessness at the same time. And I find the will to have ecumenical contact and community, as well as the attitude to keep to one self.

The very same – power and powerlessness as well as eagerness to work together and reservations - also exists in my own church and – in myself. I find a lot I cherish, many things that I feel close to or even embraced. Also I see lot of difficulties, regarding the differences of culture, theology, expression of faith, social status and financial possibilities. As you may already guess, I also want to mark some questions and objections.

Everything I am going to share with you can be seen under different perspectives.

One perspective I often encountered is this one:

The reason you cannot see the complete value of the Pentecostal faith is that you are not baptized in the Holy Spirit. Some even say that I am not a real Christian.

So yes, they are right. Yes it is true, I am an incomplete creature.

And I have never had experiences yet that I could unambiguously interpret as God's voice or fire of the Spirit.

But I believe, I try, I pray, I help, I feel God's presence, I read, I think, I make mistakes and I am moved by the Spirit. And I cannot always stand it, when other Christians think that they are Christians on a higher level.

My perspective is that I talk, ask, cherish and criticize from the inside- not from inside the Pentecostal churches, but from inside the whole body of Christ which we altogether build.

My first experience with Pentecostal Migrant churches was a visit of a worship service in the town where I lived. I entered a Methodist church – that was the place where the congregation met, mostly people from African background. I was offered a headset – for the translation into German. I took it and was accompanied to a pew. In the front a lady was praying – very loud into the microphone. People in the pews were praying aloud too – so many people prayed different prayers at the same time. I thought something like: Ok, if that's their way. I bowed my head and prayed silently.

Prayer

Later on, after having encountered this way of praying on many occasions, I asked a pastor I had started to build a trustful relationship with: "why they are doing it that way – and how does this correspond with the word of Jesus in Matthew 6:7 not babble like the pagans?" He told me: "We pray that way, because we address God in a very personal and direct way. And if someone does not know how to pray, he may listen to

his neighbour and so he learns. This has nothing to do with praying like the pagans. They prayed standard prayers – that is babbling.” The first part of the answer convinced me very much. The second didn’t. I very much like the participation of the members. So in my services I have adapted that way of prayer for the intercessions – I name the topics and then let time for the congregation to pray – silently – by themselves.

It is often assumed that Roman Catholics only pray standard prayers, like the rosary or the Lord’s Prayer. In my family I was taught to talk to God with my own words. But I also learned to cherish the standard prayers as one possibility we have, in times when we lack words.

In the Protestant church, I experienced prayers in prayer groups. And I came to know whether it was appropriate to offer a prayer while counselling somebody. At first, I could not understand this question. But then I learned that you can manipulate and even hurt somebody with your prayer. And this is a point worth thorough thought in Pentecostal Migrant churches. So in the Protestant community, one started rethinking, and reflecting about prayer in counselling situations. And some had the opinion on the other end of the spectrum – not to offer prayer at all. But during my seminary times, at the end of the nineties, we were not taught to refrain from praying. And so I often have offered prayer when I counselled and visited people. In the Pentecostal churches I again was even more encouraged to pray for people. I have appreciated the intense and trustful prayers in everyday life. Bowing the head and praying when having entered a car, thanking God for arriving safely, asking God for things beyond our own expectations and hope, praying in a way that does not limit the expectations in God’s power. For instance, when we pray for healing, many Protestants, when they pray for healing, pray in advance for the situation, that the person they pray for would reside, in case he or she does not receive the healing. And I also like that. But the Pentecostal Christians taught me not to pray too cautiously. On the other hand, some prayers seem to me to limit the power of God to one specific goal, and the person who prays then interprets their prayer as successful, when this goal is reached. Trusting in the power of God means to me not to cease in prayer, for example for healing, but also to accept that a life with a disease or a disability can correspond with the will and the plan of God. So to me it is always the question of how we are able to pray and believe that everything is possible, while at the same time to completely surrender to God’s will, and to help people to do so.

Back to the first service of this Ghanaian-rooted charismatic church I took part in:
I was impressed by the technical equipment – songs projected on the walls, diverse instruments, and quality microphones. When they started singing I remember that I thought: “O wow – this music is nice. And the singers are good. But it’s too loud.”

Music

I love praise and worship. The songs are easy to sing. I can join in. Also the equipment of many congregations helps a lot with participation – the song texts projected on the wall, the music of the band, the solo and chorus singers. The songs are easy, repetitive and heart touching. They can carry people away – or into the presence of God. Singing some of them I feel comforted, encouraged and close to God.

My favourites are

“I’m trading my sorrows, I’m trading my shame, I’m laying it down for the joy of the Lord, I’m trading my sickness, I’m trading my pain, I’m laying it down for the joy of the Lord. We say yes Lord, yes Lord, yes yes Lord amen.”¹

“My Jesus, my Savior, Lord, there is none like You;
All of my days I want to praise the wonders of Your mighty love.
My comfort, my shelter, tower of refuge and strength;
Let ev'ry breath, all that I am, never cease to worship You.

Chorus

Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing
Power and Majesty, praise to the King;
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar
At the sound of Your name.
I sing for joy at the work of your hands,
Forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.”

But after a while I would like to sing something else – songs a little more challenging regarding tune and text. I would like to sing songs with a broader variety of names for

¹ Integrity’s Hosanna Music.

God and Jesus, not only “Lord”, “King” and “Saviour”. After two songs about “washed in the blood of Jesus” I long for some other topics – God’s love, companionship on our way, our responsibility for the earth, and so forth. I see that these songs reach many people better than classic music, or jazz, or the Protestant songs from the seventies. And I like that their simplicity brings people to participation – as singers and musicians on the floor as well as people in the pew. Often the singers and musicians are not well trained. In some churches I ask myself how they could balance participation and quality. Often I hear about controversies with neighbours about the high sound level of the music. I regret that my African sisters and brothers seldom reflect what the sound does to different people. I think we should ask whom it attracts and whom it pushes away, not only argue about loudness with theological reasons (“the Bible says, we should clap our hands”).

In the service I started to tell you, at one time during the service, the pastor crossed back and forth through the church. And where he passed – praying and shouting – people just fell, altogether at least 12 or 15. I was very sure that I wouldn’t fall. I figured that it had something to do with the presence of the Holy Spirit, with the power of the preacher, with trance and surrender.

Faith systems and power

Since then I have thought a lot about it. I personally sense myself an intuitive and rational person. No matter what I do, I keep observing myself, to a larger or smaller extent, depending on the situation. Sometimes I imagine it could be attractive for me to let completely go, to feel that I totally surrender to God.

Up to now I have never fallen. I have not been able to jump from my faith system to the other one. I think if I fell in the presence of a Pentecostal African brother or sister it would mean something very different for them than for me. I picture them thinking, if I fell:

“Ah, now she completely gave her life to Christ.” No. For me, faith is a development. I have grown in the faith since I was a child. I always have seen myself close to God. There is not a special date, when I started or started anew. In my life I had times of joyful and productive nearness, and I had times I could not make much sense of what I believed. But through all my joys and my doubts I kept going and believing that God in Christ comes as close as possible to us, that God loves me deeply and expects me become more and more the person I was created to be.

Maybe they also would think, if I fell: “Something was wrong with her. She fell because an evil power, a demon left her”, for which I see no evidence in my life (thank God).

Demons, evil powers and how we see them in our various denominations would also be a very interesting topic. But I doubt that my time will be sufficient for that. Just this comment: My church is very much influenced by rationalism. And this is one aspect I don't want to lose. But we have to acknowledge that our post enlightenment rational view of this world is also only one picture of the world. A colleague recently put the condition of many today's Protestant Christians like this: “Within ourselves we have a modern rational side and a post-modern antirational side.”² So I think that evil powers are at work. But they are not necessarily personal. They are not everywhere that my African sisters and brothers see them. We, for example, at a little conference in October, are about to think about how deliverance can be done with responsibility in our different churches.

Back to the falling: In my experience falling down has also to do with power; with the power of the Holy Spirit as well as with the power of the person who leads in the falling. I have never seen pastors or church leaders falling down, except at ordinations I visited I had the feeling that the pastor who was going to be ordained was expected to fall. In one case the pastor of a congregation of Gospel Light International Church and his wife were kneeling in front of the bishop. The bishop started praying and pushing the forehead of the pastor. Pastor and wife were trembling a bit. The bishop continued praying, blessing, shouting and pushing. Then, when he finally finished the pastor and his wife rose.

Let me say something more about

Authority and Power:

The status of a pastor or leader of a Pentecostal Migrant church is very different from the status of a pastor in a Protestant main line church. The position of a church leader is shaped by cultural, social and spiritual issues. Due to our time frame I am not going into details here, and I will skip the cultural role models of leaders and also the role models of men and women. I just want to mention a connection between the social and

²

Hans-Hermann Pompe in Publik-Forum 7, April 2009, S. 59.

financial situation of church leaders and congregation, and the spiritual habits pastors have and are expected to have. Many of the pastors I know don't get a regular salary. Also, they are seldom installed through a church board, or elected of an elder committee. Generally, they founded a church after they got their call through visions, dreams or prophetic words. To get and keep the members, they have to show that their authority is based on their special spiritual gifts: giving a powerful word, healing, deliverance. They have to have a special relationship to God so that they can function as mediator. Their prayer is believed to be more effective than that of ordinary people. Therefore they have to live a special spiritual life with times of fasting, intensive prayer and Bible reading. And they have to let the congregation know that they do so. I say that because I see there a great potential for conflicts: Within themselves – how are they able to handle the gap between their position in the congregation, their spiritual power, and their often- marginalized and unacknowledged position in the German society? Where can they be feeble? How can they depend on God's grace? In the congregations, where can they get council without loosing their authority? And also in the ecumenical context; I have had the experience that it can be difficult to interact with a person who always has to be right. I exaggerate, but this is a feeling I had, and often heard from German colleagues.

On the other hand I learned that in our churches we sometimes fear authority. Often we are too cautious. We refrain from giving advice, or telling people what we see in their lives. I was encouraged to trust my feeling, or the guidance of the Holy Spirit, while counselling people. But I still only say that what I feel and see is one possibility of what can be seen – not the only possible solution. And I was encouraged to extend and live my spiritual life.

Let me finish with some tasks:

We have to discuss and reflect in our various churches how we can help people to experience God's presence without giving them the feeling to be manipulated.

We have to encourage each other to live a good Christian life, to strive for holiness without putting each other down and looking down on each other.

We have to find ways and go them, how we are able to evangelize and tell people about God's love without the necessity of being sure that we have the complete truth.

We also have to show God's love in our actions.

We have to develop our community, and represent the Body of Christ together, with our different ways of faith and our various backgrounds and cultures.

Questions and comments from the participants of the conference after the presentation of my paper:

Talking about power: Did you reflect that mostly women tend to fall while men pastors pray for them?

You have to notice that not all African rooted churches are the same.

Are you reborn?