

## **PENTECOSTALS AND THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST IN BULAWAYO**

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### **1. Preliminary Remarks**

This essay builds on two pieces of earlier research carried out with the Brethren in Christ Church in Bulawayo in 1992 and in 1997. It is based on interviews performed in 2003, which were intended to extend the earlier research into a longitudinal study. In fact, the interviews raised a new set of questions that require their own separate further consideration. In this reporting, then, I indicate what I did learn and set the stage for further research into the influence of the Pentecostal movement<sup>1</sup> on the Brethren in Christ Church in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. I begin with a brief review of the Brethren in Christ in Bulawayo and of my earlier research. A report on my recent research follows, with tentative conclusions and suggestions for further study.

The economic and political difficulties of the current situation in Zimbabwe had their effect on the interview process. Whereas informants were readily available in 1992 and 1997, in 2003 they were thoroughly engaged in the struggle to obtain basic necessities. A typical case involved two headmasters of rural secondary schools, who observed that they are no longer able to act as administrators of academic institutions since all of their energy was used in finding food for the students and fuel for the school vehicles. Their experience is the experience of the Zimbabwean people in general. As a result, I conducted fewer interviews than I had planned, which gives the conclusions a sense of caution and incompleteness. Such caution is appropriate; the real story must come from within the church in Zimbabwe.

### **2. The Brethren in Christ in Bulawayo**

The Brethren in Christ Church (BICC) began around 1780 in south-central Pennsylvania as an offshoot of the Mennonite Church in America. The BICC came late to the missionary enterprise, sending missionaries to Africa and India around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wittlinger 1978: 178ff). The first BICC missionary party came through South Africa, entering modern Zimbabwe in 1899 and began their work at Matopo Mission, 30 miles south of Bulawayo (Davidson 1923: 26-40).

Over the next 60 years the Brethren in Christ grew to encompass four main mission

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<sup>1</sup> See Anderson (2000) for an excellent discussion of the Pentecostal and Zionist movements in South Africa. With him I define Pentecostalism inclusively, referring to a movement that takes in Charismatic, Pentecostal, and Zionist sources in the southern African context. The churches that have influenced the Brethren in Christ are primarily what Anderson defines as either Pentecostal or New Pentecostal.

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stations in Matabeleland (Matopo, Mtshabezi, Wanezi, and Phumula) with numerous churches and preaching points surrounding them. A significant institutional work accompanied the growth of the church, with schools, hospitals, a bookstore, and farms. Although the church itself was a rural church organized in four districts surrounding the mission stations, a growing number of the people from the church were moving to the urban areas, especially to Bulawayo.<sup>2</sup>

Bulawayo began its life as the capital of Lobengula's realm in the 1870s. Conflict between the White settlers coming from South Africa and the Ndebele people in south-western Zimbabwe led to two uprisings in the 1890s – the first in 1893 and the second in 1896, just before the coming of the missionaries to Matopo. The conflicts ended with White settler rule that lasted until independence for Zimbabwe in 1980. Under settler rule Bulawayo began a new life in 1894 as a place for the White people to live. The Black inhabitants of the country were believed to have their homes in the rural areas; they would visit the cities to work, but were not expected to live there.<sup>3</sup>

Because the settler government assumed that Black Zimbabweans belonged in the rural areas, a rural church was seen as the natural base for the Brethren in Christ in the colonial period. But of course the Black people of Zimbabwe were not content to live in the country while the Whites developed the cities; some wished to participate in the new opportunities found by working and living in the city. Thus a growing number of Blacks, including some from the Brethren in Christ, moved more or less permanently into such cities as Bulawayo. In 1956 these new urban dwellers coalesced into a congregation in the Mpopoma township.<sup>4</sup> Through the 1950s and 1960s, the Brethren in Christ remained a rural church with two urban congregations, Mpopoma and Nguboyenja. The Liberation War of the 1970s was a primary catalyst bringing about a new situation. As the struggle intensified, many people moved to the cities, seeking greater security. The mission also moved more of its operations into Bulawayo, including the Ekuphileni Bible Institute (a school for training pastors). With increasing resources and people in Bulawayo, the Brethren in Christ expanded rapidly in the city, leading to the situation I experienced in Bulawayo between 1988 and 1992. Lobengula, the largest of the Brethren in Christ churches, had an attendance of about 1,000 each Sunday morning. Nkulumane had a further 600 or so, while Phumula, Mpopoma, and Central all had 300 to 500. This shift from a small marginalized urban church in 1956 to a strong vibrant church in 1990 formed the focus of my research in 1992.

### 3. Three Phases of Research

The first phase of my research into the Bulawayo churches asked how the church

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<sup>2</sup> In Climenhaga (1998) I survey this history briefly. More recently the Global Mennonite History Project has told the story of the Brethren in Christ in Zimbabwe (see Dube, Dube, and Nkala 2003).

<sup>3</sup> My dissertation (1992: chapter 2) explores the formation of cities in colonial Rhodesia more fully.

<sup>4</sup> See Climenhaga (1992) for this story more fully with greater documentation.

adapted to social and political change in Bulawayo. Between 1956 and 1992 Bulawayo changed from an intentionally White city to a Black city with a decreasing White minority. In the same period the BICC changed from a marginalised position to a central position in society. Both country and church changed: charting and understanding the changes was the task of this first phase of research.

A secondary current within that story concerned the emergence of the youth as a significant force. The influence of Pentecostalism was present in the 1960s and 1970s, but this influence was always subdued, contained within established patterns of Brethren in Christ behaviour. One might argue that the connections were as much a part of the political and social context as of a spiritual or ecclesiastical search; thus they did not lead to particular change in church life among the Brethren in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s this pattern changed. Young people started going to newer Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, such as Victory Fellowship and Bulawayo Christian Centre, from which they returned seeking to lead their own Brethren churches in a Pentecostal direction. The research in 1992 did not pursue this pattern, which I picked up in a second research phase.<sup>6</sup>

In 1997 I returned to Bulawayo to explore the interaction of the youth and Pentecostalism. I arrived in the middle of a struggle for the soul of the Brethren in Christ church. Youth were pressing for change in a Pentecostal direction; elders and leaders were resisting strongly, at times trying to force these youth out of the church. My research observed the broad outline of this influence on the Brethren in Christ church and sought to understand what its attraction was for the people of our church. Paul Hiebert's idea of the excluded middle provided a conceptual framework within which to explain what was happening.

In 1982 Hiebert wrote his seminal essay, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle", which still retains a great deal of explanatory power after 20 years of examination in missionary contexts. Hiebert observed that missionaries from the West (such as the BICC in Zimbabwe) have operated out of an essentially secular world view. Even when firmly committed to a supernatural Christian faith, they acted as though secular explanations are sufficient for most areas of life.<sup>7</sup> Cultures such as the Ndebele of Zimbabwe deal with what Hiebert calls the middle zone (births, deaths, jobs, relationships) with a complex web of spiritual and secular interaction, whereas Western culture treats the same items as primarily secular. As a result, mission Christianity has tended to leave the spiritual aspect out of many

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<sup>5</sup> The interviews containing this information are found in the research notes for Climenhaga 1992.

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph oversimplifies the situation. Of course youth (and others) had always visited other churches, including Pentecostal churches. The real change at this point in time was the increased refusal of the youth to heed their elders' admonitions: "Brethren in Christ don't do these things."

<sup>7</sup> As an example of this unexamined secularism, a Brethren in Christ missionary doctor once informed me that African explanations for sickness could not be true, since Western medicine worked without the need for supernatural explanations.

areas of life that most other cultures in the world assume are also spiritual (cf Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw, 1999).

Surveying the scene in West Africa, Joel Kailing (1994) proposed Pentecostalism as a way for African Christianity to eliminate the split-level nature of mission Christianity, thus filling “the excluded middle”. My 1997 findings followed Kailing’s lead for Zimbabwe. I interpreted the interest for Pentecostal styles and practices found among the young people in the Brethren in Christ as a way to bridge the Western divide between secular and sacred, bringing about greater wholeness in the African church (Climenhaga 1998).<sup>8</sup>

But the third phase of research, during my visit in 2003, added a sociological dimension to understanding the influence of Pentecostalism. My earlier analysis had focused on the spiritual, but scholars studying Pentecostalism have suggested that a fusing of sacred and secular is too simple a reading of the dynamics generally observed. *Between Babel and Pentecost* (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001) is a helpful volume bringing together essays that explore the global or transnational dimension of Pentecostalism. One of the points that these essays make is that people coming into the Pentecostal orbit often are looking for greater connection to the rest of the world. The 1997 research sought to test a possible sociological explanation: Were the young people attracted to Pentecostal styles and practices because they saw them as bringing God’s Spirit more fully, or because in the Pentecostal family of churches they found themselves connected to the larger world? In the case of the BICC in Bulawayo, were young people (the primary agents of Pentecostal influence) seeking more of the Spirit, or more of the larger world, or some combination of both?

#### **4. The Picture Today**

The basic research procedure was a series of unstructured interviews in which I identified my desire to know more about the Pentecostal influence within the Brethren in Christ. I did not provide much definition of terms, but allowed the conversation to develop from the initial question, “How has the Pentecostal movement influenced the Brethren in Christ in Bulawayo?” I had intended to do a minimum of 20 interviews with church leaders and with young people sympathetic to Pentecostalism. Because of the difficulty of life in Zimbabwe described earlier, I was able to conduct interviews with five official church leaders, four respected elders (of whom one is too young to really be called an elder), one interested member, two youth leaders, and three Pentecostal leaders. Twelve interviews from members of the Brethren in Christ Church comes to just over half of the desired minimum, along with three interviews from Pentecostal leaders. Two other informal conversations of which I have no written record also played a part in forming my thinking.

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<sup>8</sup> This explanation is similar to Anderson (2000: 18): “This spirituality was in fact a holistic approach to Christianity which appealed more adequately to the African worldview than older Christian traditions had done.”

I began with the following hypotheses with which to explore the interplay between the social and spiritual in the Brethren in Christ response to Pentecostalism. The first hypothesis was that the BICC has become central to the Ndebele identity. I did not gain enough information to illuminate this hypothesis: it remains for further discussion.<sup>9</sup> The connection of the hypothesis to the larger question of spiritual and social influence is that such a linkage between church and ethnic identity supports the strength of a social explanation for Brethren in Christ identity, rather than for Pentecostal influence.

The second hypothesis was that Pentecostalism appears as a threat to the formal leadership both spiritually and socially. Spiritually, it appears as a threat by introducing practices reminiscent of the spirits in traditional culture. Socially, it appears as a threat by defining the church in terms drawn from a broader social identity than Ndebele society. If this hypothesis is correct, then spiritual and social forces are both at work in the way that the youth responded to Pentecostalism. The evidence of the interviews suggests that the spiritual influence, and therefore the spiritual threat to the leadership, is more significant than the social; the evidence also suggests that the conflict is largely in the past, and that the leaders and youth of the BICC have come to an accommodation in the present.

The third hypothesis suggested that the young people embrace Pentecostal influences partly to deal with spiritual needs and partly to deal with social needs. This movement does not necessarily lead to loss of their church or social identity. The evidence here supports this view. Most youth respond to the spiritual influence more intentionally, while the social influence operates at a level less consciously apprehended.

Given the small number of interviews, these findings are tentative. At the same time they support the earlier reading of the evidence – that the primary attraction of Pentecostalism is spiritual, rather than sociological.<sup>10</sup> I now survey each hypothesis more fully, and then draw my observations together to deal with the total question. In a closing section I suggest a direction for further research of special importance in the specific context of Zimbabwe today.

#### **4.1. The Brethren and Christ and Ethnic Identity**

This issue arose in just one interview, in which a Pentecostal leader observed that the BICC is too closely tied to its Ndebele identity, restricting the church. Comments from other Brethren in Christ reflected this close tie, but did not speak specifically to this issue. The most that one can say, based on these interviews and on BICC history, is that the church is thoroughly Ndebele, and that church identity and ethnic identity are closely linked. One cannot go further and say, as the hypothesis does, that the church is central to the ethnic

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<sup>9</sup> Wendy Urban-Mead has suggested this idea in personal conversation, based on her own research with the BICC in Zimbabwe. See also her 2004 thesis, "Religion Women, and Gender in the Brethren in Christ Church, Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, 1898-1978."

<sup>10</sup> Born (2002) gives a similar reading of Pentecostalism in Gaborone, Botswana, as does Anderson (2000) in Soshanguve, South Africa.

identity.

This question is worth exploring further. Does the church see its task as revitalizing the Ndebele people in Zimbabwe today? BICC roots in North American Anabaptism are separatist, with no place for such a social-ethnic task. But the church in Africa charts its own path, and creates new meanings with old patterns. I return to this question in the concluding section, noting directions for further research.

#### **4.2. Leadership Challenges**

The hypothesis that the youth appear as a threat to the church leadership appears to be incorrect. Although the evidence is limited, elders and youth alike spoke about the conflict as something in the past. Several elders spoke of the way that the church has controlled the youth. Several youth leaders spoke of the way that their views have become normative for the church. Such conflict as remains is mitigated by both sides feeling that they have made significant gains. In general, then, the conflict over Pentecostal influences appears to be in the past. The influence remains, but the conflict is largely over.

The basic accommodation that the church has come to appears as follows. In various places within the church's life people, especially youth, are able to engage in mass prayer, healing services, casting out spirits, and other Pentecostal-type practices. But when the church comes together in its primary worship service, the Pentecostal is set aside, and the church follows traditional Brethren in Christ patterns. The Lobengula Brethren in Christ Church serves as a somewhat typical example. It was the first urban BICC congregation to welcome Pentecostal leaders to speak to the youth and has been known as a "youth church" open to Pentecostal influences. At 7 a.m. on Sunday people gather for prayer, often appearing thoroughly Pentecostal. On the Sunday I attended Lobengula, the main service began at 10 a.m., with a praise and worship time familiar to Pentecostal-type churches, ending in a time of mass prayer. As a former pastor in the Bulawayo BICC churches, I recognised the kind of practice that had been opposed in earlier years. Then somewhere close to 11 a.m. the senior pastor entered the church, and the style of worship changed markedly. The remainder of the service was conducted in traditional BICC style, so that the pastor was able to observe to me that they practice Pentecostalism, but that everything is done in an orderly manner.

This commitment to orderliness and control appears to be the distinguishing mark of the BICC churches. Worship styles borrowed from Pentecostal-type churches are common, but they are carried out within the framework of older more traditional styles. This compromise allowed informants to tell me that the conflict is over, with church leaders saying that they have controlled the youth, and youth saying that the practices they initiated are now generally accepted.

In the former challenge to the leadership now in the past, I believe that the primary threat was perceived as spiritual. The idea of a social threat relies on the idea that the

Pentecostal influence was connecting the BICC to the larger world against their leaders' will. If that dynamic were significant, the youth would have left the church to join the Pentecostal churches when BICC leaders opposed them. Instead the youth resisted any pressure to leave. As an example of this resistance, one pastor used physical force in the 1990s to prevent youth in his church from adopting any Pentecostal worship styles. The youth refused to leave, and in the end the pastor left instead. It may be that this insistence by the youth is indirect evidence that their identity as Brethren in Christ is integrally linked to their identity as Ndebele youth. If this is so, their refusal to leave the church serves as indirect support for the first hypothesis.

The direct evidence of the interviews suggests this spiritual challenge. One young person said that the leaders could not compete with the Pentecostal youth spiritually, therefore they opposed them in the church. In 1992 elders told me that Pentecostal practices would act as a bridge to traditional connections with the spirit world, and youth accused their elders of following traditional spirits because they did not have the Holy Spirit. In 2003 a respected elder told me, this attitude on the part of the young people was the source of much conflict, as it not only challenged the elders' spirituality, but also offended their sense of decency in a hierarchical elder-oriented culture. The second hypothesis, then, stands as amended: that the primary source of conflict was spiritual, but also that the conflict has been largely dealt with.

#### **4.3. The Youth and Pentecostalism**

The third hypothesis builds on the second: the youth embraced Pentecostalism to deal with spiritual and with social needs. The discussion above also applies here. The evidence suggests that both spiritual and social factors are at work, but that the primary attraction among youth was the spiritual. The strongest support for the importance of Pentecostalism's contact with social networks came from the Pentecostals whom I interviewed. Brethren in Christ did not refer to this dynamic at all. One may suggest that the social dynamic applies most fully within the Pentecostal churches themselves, and that non-Pentecostal churches (such as the BICC) who draw on Pentecostalism, have less need of such networks. The BICC already have their own international network on which people in Zimbabwe can draw. I began my sabbatical in Zimbabwe by attending the Mennonite World Conference, hosted by the Zimbabwe BICC – a convincing demonstration of the network the BICC already inhabits.

The spiritual attraction, bringing the Christian faith into every area of life, is clearly the stronger attraction. Several BICC youth expressed their conviction that the best type of Pentecostal was one who combines the BICC commitment to order and biblical knowledge with the Pentecostal search for the immediacy of God's Holy Spirit. In a similar vein one elder observed that the best Christians are those who combine the biblical grounding of Evangelical churches (such as the BICC) with the spiritual vitality of the Pentecostal

churches.

### **5. Where the Research Needs To Go**

Although the above conclusions are of interest and significance in themselves, the context which they describe calls for attention to a different set of questions. This closing section considers what the primary direction might be. This direction relates to the life situation in which Zimbabweans find themselves today. One leader spoke movingly of the need for the church to help Zimbabweans acknowledge their anger at what has been done to them in the political arena. Only then can their sickness begin to be healed. Given the current context of Zimbabwe as a country in crisis, the hypotheses of this study do not sufficiently address that crisis.

A different set of questions is required to understand the BICC and the Pentecostal movement and their contribution to Zimbabwe today. Both the BICC and the Pentecostal churches affirm the confession: “Jesus is Lord!” “UJesu uyinkosi; inkosi yamaKhosi!” What are the political and social implications of that confession, and how does the church work out these implications in the context of Zimbabwe? Both the BICC and the Pentecostal churches have been primarily apolitical, at least formally. In practice many BICC leaders have political connections, which were evident in the interviews I performed in 1992. But at the formal level the BICC insists that it is not political, and Pentecostal churches do the same.

But when the social context becomes as critical as it is today in Zimbabwe, the church cannot attend to spiritual realities as though these are somehow divorced from social realities. Indeed, all three phases of research indicated that people in Zimbabwe do see life as whole: political, social, and spiritual all together. One Sunday we attended a Baptist church – normally as apolitical as the BICC, and close friends historically of the BICC. The preacher read from Exodus 14, and then described the plight of the Israelites trapped between the Egyptian Army, the strongest of their day, and the sea before them, with the words: “They must have felt like Zimbabweans!” The political implications were clear, calling for hope for Zimbabweans trapped between a collapsing economy and the current government.

Another Sunday we attended a BICC congregation. Reflecting on Jesus’ words, “By their fruit you will know them,” the preacher observed that politicians from ZANU-PF (the ruling party) and from the MDC (the opposition party) all make many promises, but that people judge them based on results, not on promises. Then he added, “Some people are afraid of change, but God teaches us that we do not need to be afraid of change!” Since “Change” is the motto of the opposition party in Zimbabwe, one hears the political application beneath the words.

Although I observed these comments in sermons, I did not hear counsel on how to act in Zimbabwe today from either the BICC or the Pentecostal leaders with whom I spoke.

Officially the BICC remains apolitical. But to the extent that the situation in Zimbabwe has a moral element – seen in the prevalence of violence and of corruption – it is necessary for the Church to speak and act in response. Writing from the safe confines of an office in Canada I cannot state what the church should do. The specifics must be forged within the heat of the fire that burns in Zimbabwe today. But violence and corruption always have a moral and ethical component, which the church must address. This truth applied in Rhodesia of old and in South Africa in the days of apartheid; it remains today.

In Zimbabwe, the Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo has spoken openly and courageously about the situation in Zimbabwe. The question this paper suggests for further research is: What do the Pentecostal churches and the BICC say and do in the current situation? I have asked about the Pentecostal influence in general, which usually turns back to the specific practices of mass prayer, speaking in tongues, and healing. What contribution does Pentecostalism bring to social and political issues?

Within the BICC the church can draw also on its Anabaptist heritage. The writings of John Howard Yoder, for example, are one source of insight. Yoder (1984) observes that the radical reformation (the term he uses consistently for the Anabaptist movement and its heirs) is radical precisely at the point of its locus of authority. The commitment to non-violence, for example, rooted as it is in radical obedience to the teaching and example of Jesus, rejects the accommodation that the main part of the Reformation churches made with the State. The BICC in Zimbabwe is in a unique position to synthesize the Pentecostal “UJesu uyiNkosi” with the Anabaptist radical commitment to obedience. Obedience to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit suggests possibilities beyond the ordinary.

Although outside researchers may not prescribe what the church should do; we may contribute to the conversation by observing what the church is doing. We ask questions, but the answers must be forged within Zimbabwe. In my estimation the essential question involves the spiritual dimension of political life. Whatever answer is given must bring together the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church with the current political and economic context of life in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwe National Pastors Conference (ZNPC) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) are two such organizations that involve evangelical churches such as the BICC. Heads of Denominations (HOD), the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Christian Care, Crisis Coalition, and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace are other organizations that have responded to the present crisis. It would be misleading to suggest that the church as a whole has not spoken out. The Catholic Commission, especially, has spoken to such issues as Zimbabwe faces today for many years (Auret 1992). What is needed is for the church to speak and act jointly with sister churches in the rest of Africa and throughout the world. Events since 2003 have only emphasized the need for such speech and action.

## 6. Conclusion

Forty-five years ago a writer described the struggle to build the Kariba dam. He closed his book-length story with the following words.

Around you slumbers Nyaminyami . . . . But although his power has been tamed it has not been destroyed, and those who have seen his anger do not laugh as readily at the forebodings of the primitive tribesmen who recognize the white man's victory, but who feel there will be a price to pay for it.

A price indeed there must be, differ though it may from the superstitious fears of the Batonka who believe that the lake will take its revenge. For the more securely western man establishes himself in the empty wastes of Africa, the more urgent it is that he should come to terms spiritually with his environment; and with the Africans whose home it is . . . (Clements 1959: 219)

In many respects, Clements reflects the thought of his age. He assumed that the White settlers were permanent in a place many were only visiting, and that the indigenous people were secondary to the impact of Settler life. But in his conclusion he remains accurate. If the people of any country live with constant violence and corruption, the land itself becomes polluted, and the cure for the situation requires the power of God.

Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on spiritual power, seems well suited for such a task. Daneel (2001) describes a movement in southern Zimbabwe in which African indigenous churches, whom we may count among the larger Pentecostal movement, have apprehended the spiritual task of healing the land. It is not yet clear, however, that the church as a whole – either Pentecostal or the BICC – has grasped this task clearly.

The challenge for the church in Zimbabwe is to bring the power of God's Holy Spirit to the healing of their land – to help people “to come to terms spiritually with [their] environment.” The challenge for research, and for the church around the world who walk alongside our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe, is to lift up the words and deeds of the church, critiquing and supporting at every step.

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