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Understanding Pentecostal motivations for undertaking community development in South East Asia

Evidence of an expanded understanding of holistic mission

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A shift has been observed in the activities of by Western-based, Pentecostal mission organisations in mainland South East Asia. Where once these mission organisations avoided formal community development programs as a distraction to their understanding of mission, the funding for and implementation of such programs has increased dramatically in recent times. This shift in focus is best understood by considering motivations and changing Pentecostal perceptions of mission. The research is based on new primary data collected through interviews with long-term and senior Pentecostal mission practitioners engaging in development projects in mainland South East Asia. It explores their motivations for engaging in community development, and in particular the extent to which community development programs are seen as a strategy for proselytisation as compared the extent to which they are conducted out of other humanitarian motivations. Analysis of this data challenges preconceived notions of proselytisation being the primary motive of Pentecostal mission agencies, and demonstrates a more holistic idea of mission.

Introduction

The modern Pentecostal movement was founded a century ago as a missionary movement amongst the poor, with an emphasis on evangelism and a reaction against what they saw as liberal Christianity's abandonment of evangelism for social justice. Pentecostals have always been strong in providing practical assistance to people around them in need, yet traditionally this was ad hoc and seen as an aspect of Christian moral responsibility, rather than an aspect of mission.

This research stems from anecdotal evidence that over the last two decades, western-based, Pentecostal mission organisations in mainland South East Asia (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar) have increasingly become involved in community development, social justice and practical assistance programmes alongside their traditional mission emphases of evangelism, Church planting and leadership training. Such a change would be significant, and would likely indicate a change in understanding of the nature of mission.

This research explores any such change in the
understanding of mission by practitioners in the region by examining the motivations of long-term key leaders within Pentecostal mission agencies to personally engage in community development activities. Specifically, this article explores the extent to which community development activities are adopted as a strategy for enhancing conversion and Church growth, and how much they are conducted out of more holistic notions about mission.

This article is divided into five sections. Section One is this introduction. The next section, Section Two, briefly reviews the literature discussing the origins and distinctive of the Pentecostal movement in relation to its understanding of poverty and mission.

Section Three details the methodology for the fieldwork and the research participants. Section Four presents the empirical findings, while Section Five offers a discussion of the implications of these results.

**Literature Review**

**Pentecostalism in relation to poverty**

The Pentecostal movement grew out of the revivalism and Holiness Movement of the late 1800s, beginning largely as a social movement amongst the poorer and more socially-marginalised converts—and remains a largely poor movement in much of the world today.¹

Pentecostalism adopted the Holiness Movement's emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the source of power for evangelism and healing,² and revivalism's emphasis on prayer for the sick and Christ's imminent return.³ This latter belief provided additional impetus for the high priority on evangelism and fuelled millenialist ideas that systemic injustice would be addressed in a 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth.⁴

One distinctive of this is that the Pentecostal Church has long seen the gospel as the power to heal and the means to endure difficult life circumstances, more than as a means to escape or eradicate poverty.⁵ More recently, many middle-class Christians identifying similar experiences and theology have stayed within existing denominations in what became known as the charismatic renewal movement.⁶ The significant impact has been an increasing acceptability of Pentecostals within mainstream Christianity, and thus an increase in communication and the sharing of ideas.

**Pentecostal distinctives**

Originating from evangelicalism, Pentecostalism shares a similar reaction against liberalism, formality and modernism in established Protestant Churches, and thus shares evangelicalism's distrust of social justice.⁷ For example, Pentecostals point to a number of formerly faith-based organisations which are now entirely secular as a result, they believe, of adopting a liberal theological agenda.

Early Pentecostals also had a few characteristics quite distinct from other evangelical and Protestant denominations. Given their poor, largely uneducated origins, it is perhaps not surprising that they rejected many facets of middle-class evangelical practice, including any sense of institutionalised control or establishment.⁸

In response to rejection, they adopted an anti-ecumenical attitude.⁹ They had little time for education, perhaps given the perceived urgency of evangelising the world prior to Christ's imminent return.¹⁰ The earliest bible colleges were set up to facilitate rapid training of pastors and evangelists, and the curriculum focussed on mastery of bible passages for preaching and training new converts.¹¹

Whereas evangelicals derive their theology primarily from didactic passages, Pentecostals have a largely oral tradition and a narrative (storytelling) theological hermeneutic.¹² Pentecostals avoid intellectualising their faith, and are highly pragmatic in their approach to evangelism and assisting those in need.¹³

**Traditional views on meeting physical needs**

To many, Pentecostals have often appeared unconcerned with meeting the needs of those living in abject poverty.¹⁴ However, this reflects a shallow understanding of Pentecostal beliefs and practices, how they have traditionally perceived poverty and injustice, and how their response to it is shaped by theology. In actual fact, Pentecostals have always seen and been highly concerned with poverty and injustice, but have viewed its causes and cures through lenses shaped by their own relative poverty, lenses consisting of three different time-horizons:

1. **Short term**

Belief in Christ's imminent return has meant Pentecostals have traditionally prioritised the urgent task of evangelism, with little time for matters of social concern.¹⁵ The gospel was seen as "the only answer to man's every need, complete for body, soul, spirit, and for eternity."¹⁶

However, this does not mean there was no practical assistance given to those in need. Pentecostal history is full of stories of missionaries and preachers taking in orphans and widows, feeding the hungry and providing for the practical needs of the
The difference is that these efforts tended to be ad hoc, based on immediate need presented by new or potential converts, and with little or no thought given to a broader poverty alleviation strategy.\textsuperscript{16}

This was practised as an aspect of Christian moral responsibility rather than as an aspect of mission. Where Pentecostals had limited physical, social and economic means and could not provide practical assistance themselves, they turned to prayer. Early Pentecostal literature is full of testimonies of divine healings and miraculous provision for immediate practical needs.\textsuperscript{19}

2. Medium term

In the medium term, Pentecostals had an expectation that conversion would lead to greater self-discipline and holiness, that converts would cease bad or sinful habits that robbed them of time, money, and opportunity, allowing greater access to more lucrative employment opportunities and greater economic benefits. Their life circumstances should thereby automatically begin to improve. This phenomenon was first described by the evangelical missiologists Donald McGavran\textsuperscript{20} as "redemption and lift," but has been widely adopted into Pentecostal thought.\textsuperscript{21}

Long term

In the longer term, Christ's imminent return was expected to restore all things to their rightful place for those who believed, so the priority was on conversion so that the maximum number of people could enjoy the restoration and liberation of the poor.\textsuperscript{22}

With an expectation that Christ would return within the current believers' lifetimes, there was little incentive to engage in social or political transformation that would be of most benefit to future generations.\textsuperscript{23}

Early Pentecostal eschatology was apocalyptic in the sense that the kingdom of God was understood as soon to break in and miraculously to transform the entire cosmos. This eschatological fervour may have hindered a vision among Pentecostals for long-term social transformation...\textsuperscript{24}

The Pentecostal Church therefore strongly supported mission activities, both locally and in other cultures and countries,\textsuperscript{25} and such mission usually consisted of preaching for conversion and offering to pray for miracles, particularly divine healing.\textsuperscript{26}

A recent shift

A number of authors have documented a recent shift in Pentecostal thinking and theology, since about the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{27} They note a move away from millennialism and the reliance upon miracles in everyday practice,\textsuperscript{28} together with the emergence of an increasingly middle class membership with greater resources to engage in broad social programs.\textsuperscript{29} Without dismissing belief in salvation and the return of Christ, Pentecostals began to reassess their approach to world evangelisation:

Assemblies of God biblical scholars... and missiologists... began to explore the meaning of the kingdom of God (the rule of God in the hearts and behaviours of believers) as a present reality for the mission of the Church.\textsuperscript{30}

By the early 1990s key Pentecostal missions thinkers, such as Gordon Fee, began to express a more holistic meaning of mission:

Our gospel is not simply that of “saving souls”; it is rather, as with Jesus, the bringing of wholeness to broken people in every kind of distress. Mission simply cannot be divided between “spiritual” and “physical”. To do one is to do the other, and both constitute the global mission of the Church.\textsuperscript{31}

Our empirical evidence suggests that such academic
dialogue became reflected in changed mission theology and praxis by fieldworkers within a decade or so.

Research methodology

The fieldwork for this paper seeks to verify such a shift in mission activities undertaken by western-based Pentecostal mission organisations working in mainland South East Asia, and then examine the motives behind any such shift.

Surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 key long-term fieldworkers from nine Pentecostal movements, originating from five western nations (four majority English-speaking), all engaged in a mix of both traditional missionary activities together with development or practical assistance programmes.

Most respondents were field directors of mission organisations, all but three having personally been active in the field for at least 15 to 20 years. Given the small number of qualified informants, purposeful selection was most appropriate and given they are all articulate leaders, semi-structured interviews was the preferred methodology.

For speed and consistency, any change in their mission activities was explored first through a survey contrasting current activities with those undertaken 15 to 20 years ago, followed by semi-structured phenomenological interviews examining their personal understanding of the changes they described.

Leaders within mission organisations comprise a foreign elite, and research with elites is best conducted by those who can occupy “shared positional spaces” by presenting themselves as insiders who understand the concerns of participants.

It is therefore advantageous that most interview participants were personally known to two of the authors, as former colleagues. In interviewing peers, the interview methodology was informed by an understanding that interviews are conversations within a context, and that to generate candid responses interviewers must demonstrate personal rapport and shared meaning.

Interviews were conducted by Skype or phone during March and April 2011 to generate better response rates. While the quality of data obtained through telephone interviews may be slightly lower than that from in-person interviewing due loss of “contextual naturalness,” the additional visual interaction afforded by Skype video-calling overcame much of this disadvantage. All interview responses are treated entirely anonymously, as some of the participants work in sensitive contexts.

Empirical findings

These key informant interviews yielded rich and remarkably consistent data, given the number of different movements and nationalities these fieldworkers represent.

Shift in the nature of activities

The interview responses clearly demonstrate that there has indeed been a major shift in the nature of Pentecostal mission activities undertaken by these agencies within this region over the past two decades. Ten of the 12 respondents indicated their organisations were almost exclusively engaged in traditional spiritual emphases 15 to 20 years ago, and conducted few practical assistance programmes.

One of the two exceptions indicated that he had personally adopted a holistic mission perspective during his theological education, but for a long time found himself at odds with his organisation’s priorities. He notes, however, that there was a shift within the organisation about a decade ago.

The other exception might be described as a charismatic evangelical organisation as much as a Pentecostal one, given its constituency, and this organisation began work in the region over 20 years ago with an emphasis on programmes such as drug rehabilitation, micro-finance, and children’s education alongside preaching, teaching and Church planting.

By contrast, the 10 respondents who described a change noted a significant shift in their mission activities.

Two indicated they had no practical assistance programmes at all 15 to 20 years ago, while the remainder indicated they were engaged in one (or at most, two) of the following activities at that time: an orphanage (two agencies), a preschool, student scholarships, feeding children, healthcare in refugee camps, and a small-scale micro-finance project.

Beyond this, the agencies interviewed were at that time only involved in meeting immediate needs of members as they arose.

Current mission activities of these same agencies are a stark contrast. Today, agencies are engaged in formal activities across almost all community development sectors, in conjunction with (not replacing) traditional spiritual mission emphases. Almost all respondents reported that they or their agency are directly involved in each of these major areas of development (numbers in brackets
represent number of respondents indicating current work in this area):

*Health* (11)—water/health/sanitation (9), primary/preventative healthcare (9), disability (4), drug rehabilitation (4), AIDS training and/or care (3), surgical operations (2), hospital (1);

*Education* (11)—student scholarships (8), construction and/or running of preschools (7) and primary/secondary schools (3), children's clubs and tutoring programmes (5), young adult job-skill training (7), and language schools (2);

*Livelihood* (11)—training and assistance to start small businesses (7), micro-finance (5), agriculture (7), animal husbandry (4), and other food security (2);

*Advocacy* (7)—human trafficking (4), equitable access to state services (2), ethnic, religious or political discrimination (2), peacemaking (2), and corruption (1);

*Other* (10)—orphanage (7), crisis food distribution (6), crisis housing (4), sex industry rescue (5).

Respondents were sometimes hesitant to describe their work using development terminology. It is not clear whether that was a fear of being too closely associated with secular non-government development, or because most programmes were less well funded and thus much smaller than those of major international development organisations.

Several respondents did repeatedly clarify the small scale and limited funding of their programmes. It was also clear respondents had rarely done any formal training in development studies, just theological training, and were imitating or experimenting.

Advocacy stands out within the above list. Given the historical legacy of Pentecostals being from marginalised groups, and their aversion to political involvement, Pentecostals might be expected to avoid engagement in advocacy.

It is interesting to note that the fieldworker directly engaged in an anti-corruption campaign brings a holistic spiritual-plus-physical view of corruption, combining a programme of direct engagement and advocacy with regular prayer meetings seeking divine intervention on this issue.

Those advocating on other issues also indicated prayer for miraculous intervention was an equal component in pursuing structural power change, emphasising their recognised relative powerlessness.

Of the seven respondents who self-identified as engaging in advocacy, all did so through privately engaging with officials or key leaders on behalf of people rather than promoting an active citizenship in which people educated about their rights make a public stand or hold officials accountable.

Human trafficking was the greatest area of advocacy, and the direct link to their work rescuing victims from the sex trade is clear. Two respondents reported occasional advocacy with local authorities on behalf of communities they work with, to ensure equitable access to services. Likewise two of the 12 agencies reported direct work in peacemaking and promoting ethnic, religious or political equity. Such changed action appears related to a changed understanding of mission, as well as of socio-economic power.

**Motivations for engaging in development**

Respondents were asked to describe their motivation for engaging in development activities, rather than maintaining strict focus on traditional mission activities. Their responses were informative, speaking of holistic mission:

> You cannot eat prayer and the word of God. **Practical assistance is one aspect of holistic mission.**

> I want to see the whole community transformed. It is holistic. I want to see total health in the community, physically, socially, emotionally, physically, spiritually and environmentally.

> Jesus ministered to people in body, soul and spirit. We have to treat people as wholes. It comes out of God's demonstration in Jesus' ministry.

> I am just following Jesus' example.

> The gospels show that God's heart is to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Salvation is not just limited to people’s souls.

> Jesus told us to give water to the thirsty, to feed the poor, and to preach the gospel. These are two sides of our calling.

A couple of respondents noted they had long been engaged in these activities, in a different form:

> We have been doing this for years, but have only recently labelled it as development.

> Pentecostals have always been involved in helping people in tangible ways, but have been rhetorically opposed. We got around it by saying, "The Holy Spirit led me."

One of the most interesting observations from the
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interview data was that nine of the 10 respondents who noted a significant shift in their mission activities date that change to sometime between 1998 and 2001. The 10th pointed to the impact of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami.

To clarify their responses, respondents were asked what led to their shift in thinking. They pointed to three key factors: observing the ideas and practice of other organisations, seeing human need in a new way, and re-evaluating "what Jesus did."

This latter point correlates closely with the Pentecostal hermeneutic that emphasises narrative scriptural passages over didactic ones, and therefore is indicative of a shift in the theology of mission.

Responses regarding what prompted the shift included:

Visiting some very isolated and needy people, and discovering that a few months earlier a third of the village had died of dysentery for a lack of clean water. For me, that was a paradigm shift, recognising that ministry was not just teaching and words but has got to be practical.

Seeing people die! I could see the difference giving people hope for tomorrow made, and this might touch on the joy of the Lord and so on—but that does not put food on the table or stop people dying of disease.

We were frustrated that what we were doing was not working, and someone suggested [a particular] training. We were not interested, but we finally went and our eyes were opened.

The bible is clear. We need to be concerned with the whole of life. The trigger was re-reading the bible, and seeing the example of other people embracing a more holistic approach.

Became aware that the bible shows that we need to be concerned with the whole of life.

To further clarify motives and priorities, respondents were asked to first rank on a scale of one to 10 how important they consider traditional Pentecostal mission activities, then to similarly rank how important they consider practical assistance and development activities.

Respondents almost all resisted this question, articulating concern at expressing a view about one aspect of mission in isolation to the other. Most attempted to avoid the answer altogether. When they did finally answer, they quickly add qualifiers to their responses, such as:

... as part of... but not in isolation, the two must be integrated.

... but I do both, all the time.

You can't separate them. I can't box them like I used to.

It needs a holistic approach—don't separate them.

Ultimately, with prodding, respondents gave a cumulative score of 113/120 to the importance of traditional activities and 110/120 to the importance of development/practical assistance. This is not a statistically significant difference. Where some respondents gave slightly greater importance to traditional spiritual activities, the reason was consistently, Eternity is longer than here.

Respondents were then asked to explain the difference between their motivation for traditional spiritual activities and for practical assistance.

Directly asking them for a difference was a deliberate ploy, to see how consistent their expression of holism was or whether at a more fundamental level they really did perceive a distinction. Their responses expressed a strong concept of holism:

They are one and the same. It is like a marriage. These are two arms that need to work together.

They are part of the one, whole package. The transformation process includes inner, social, family, psychological and physical change. They are connected; the same. We can't separate them. We have to do both.

We are strongly motivated for both, but the motivation behind relief and development is still spiritual.

Corroborating these responses, several respondents expanded (without prompting) to discuss arranging prayer for the effectiveness of their practical community development work.

At this point respondents were asked the most direct question of the interview, probing at their core motivation.

Respondents were directly asked whether practical assistance and development work was a strategy for evangelism, or came from other motives.

While the responses showed some variation in understanding, these responses do demonstrate a significant level of change in motivation from traditional Pentecostal priorities. For a few, development activities are clearly part of a strategy:
We do our humanitarian work to build relationships and trust on behalf of the church.

Practical help creates goodwill and opens lots of doors. It creates a platform and receptivity for spiritual help, and brings relationships we would not have developed any other way.

We earn the right to speak into people’s lives by reaching them at their point of need.

Yet the motivations behind this need to be recognised:

Bringing people into the kingdom encompasses every area of society and all of life. So evangelism is extremely important, but it is not always the first thing people are ready to tackle. Once God is in your life, you are going to receive benefits of salvation in spirit, but also improvements in other aspects of life. It is a doorway into the rest of the kingdom of God.

If it was family you were helping, you would never distinguish between practical help and evangelism. Evangelism would flow from a natural relationship. We have a natural concern for sharing Jesus and for practical help.

For others, development and evangelism are both priorities, but one is not the strategy for the other:

Compassion for humanitarian needs is not just a strategy.

Meeting needs... is NOT a strategy for Church planting, although I used to think that way. It is true that if people do not have enough food or water, they are not interested. That is why Jesus fed the 5,000. Now I see that you do the whole lot simply because they need it.

If we do social service as a tool to entice people to change their religion, they know it. That is not the way Jesus operated.

Our motivation is not to convert people, but it is to allow them to see the difference in our lives. Before, we were using programmes as bait, to reel people in. Now we don’t want something to be bait, we want to bless and love others out of obedience to Christ rather than pressure them to convert. We have had a big shift in our thinking.

These responses clearly show community development activities are no longer merely a strategy for evangelism, but are an important concern of their own. Part of the difficulty expressing this appears to stem from a strong view that holistic mission requires both, but that ultimate assistance must still include spiritual salvation since, “Eternity is longer than here.” Nonetheless these responses do show a real change in motivation, embracing a genuinely humanitarian concern for the proximal needs and the priorities of the people they work alongside, and a genuine respect for freedom of choice.

We have to help the poor, even when they are not interested and do not accept Christ.

There is also a growing appreciation of the power imbalance in a development relationship, which can imply coercive pressure, hence proselytisation.

This issue was not raised directly in the interviews, nonetheless several respondents felt the need to explain their position. The most clearly articulated comment was:

As we relate to people, we do so because of God’s love for all people. It is not conditional on them buying into our worldview. God said to love our neighbours. I have a deep commitment to not acting with a carrot and stick. Therefore I am very upfront about who I am, and I don’t attach incentives to any activities. I always ensure the ‘classical spiritual stuff’ happens outside these events.

Respondents suggest a significant disconnect between leaders of their donor church and many of the individual donors within these Churches. Church leaders were perceived as being motivated more by evangelism and church planting, with development being perceived primarily as a strategy.

The motivation of our movement to engage in development is as a strategy for souls to be saved.

The majority of Churches, particularly the Church leaders and big Church congregations... For them it is a strategy to see people saved, as opposed to being for their benefit, full stop. And it is a marketing technique to their home Churches.

The leaders of our movement are keen to publish the number of new Churches started and the number of salvations, so we have a problem with them still seeing conversion as the priority. But they are now also giving airplay to the dollars raised for orphanages, child support, etc.

Individual Christian donors in those Churches, however, are increasingly motivated by holistic humanitarian concerns:

Today there is a shift in motivation. People respond to compassion and humanitarian need.
and Churches are particularly generous in giving to crisis situations. They give out of a humanitarian spirit, not to see people saved but because they see people suffering in the media and have compassion for those suffering.

Christian donors in general like to hear stories of the underdog who does not have the resources or education to break the poverty cycle, but with the assistance of an outside donor they can break that cycle. The motivation is both humanitarian and for salvation, but the emphasis is now more on meeting humanitarian need.

There is a full spectrum of views. Some, still a minority, want to do development simply for the benefit of the poor. But there are many more now; it is a gradual shift.

Conclusions

Pentecostalism is known as a missionary movement, fast growing and driven by an emphasis for evangelism and conversion. Practical assistance has always been a part of the movement's activities, but has been ad hoc, out of a concern for helping people as needs arise, but has theoretically been subjugated to the imperative of evangelism, because of the reality and proximity of eternity.

What this research shows is a clearly significant, quantifiable shift in Pentecostal mission practice and theology over the past two decades, at least amongst the missions interviewed. This shift appears to reflect a clear change in the theological understanding of the nature of mission, to now recognise holistic development as an integral aspect of Christian mission.

This is a clear shift in Pentecostal theological interpretation, and it would be interesting to see how widespread this is beyond our small sample and region. Practical assistance and development are now being expressed as equally being components of Christian mission, alongside traditional Pentecostal spiritual ministries of evangelism, Church planting and leadership development. The motivation for each is not separable.

Pentecostal practical assistance for people outside the Church has often been perceived as being primarily a strategy to entice conversion. This research challenges such preconceived notions, demonstrating that the motivation of fieldworkers (as opposed to some donors) is not to use development as a strategy to enhance evangelism, but to offer either-or-both practical and spiritual assistance unconditionally, out of genuine holistic concern.

Both are seen as aspects of what Jesus did, and of the salvation people need. This shift in theological thinking has resulted in a far more deliberate organisation and planning for development activity within mission by Pentecostal agencies.

As a final conclusion, it is significant that these Pentecostal fieldworkers would not be motivated to engage in development without a spiritual dimension, since they are motivated by holistic Christian mission, an integration of the practical and spiritual.

This speaks to secular agendas asking mission workers to separate development from evangelism, suggesting this imposes a false division which violates the core motivation driving these fieldworkers.
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