

Why Most of Society Completely Misses the Mark About Pentecostalism

A newspaper columnist **recently expressed** alarm at the growing rate of Pentecostalism by saying, “Will much of Christianity be transformed into jerking, howling, swooning congregations who utter incoherent sounds? If so, that’s one more reason for thinking people to renounce irrational supernaturalism.”

While “irrational supernaturalism” may seem an appropriate descriptor for someone with little or no experience with the Pentecostal and charismatic community, this caricaturing totally misses the mark. Pentecostals are not strangers to such attacks. Many trace the modern Pentecostal movement to revival meetings in 1906 on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. At that time, local newspapers cringed at the interracial gatherings. Social segments that normally remained apart came together by the work of the Holy Spirit.

What is this movement and what does it truly represent?

The modern Pentecostal movement took its name from the moment of the Church’s birth on the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. Pentecostals and charismatics believe that the gifts of the Spirit as described in the Bible are active today as the Holy Spirit empowers Christ’s followers. Researchers estimate this movement to now include 669 million people – or one in four Christians globally – making it the fastest-growing movement in the history of Christianity.

Such a sizable group is certainly impossible to describe in broad strokes. Instead, I will talk here about the segment of this Pentecostal movement to which I belong – the Assemblies of God. The Assemblies of God was founded in 1914 and now represents nearly 70 million believers in over 370,000

churches around the world.

When I am asked to describe our Fellowship, a few important things come to mind:

Biblically-centered – From its founding, the Assemblies of God has sought to weigh all things against our ultimate authority: Scripture. The longest-serving Assemblies of God general superintendent, Thomas F. Zimmerman, often said that the work of the Holy Spirit is like a river and the Bible is its banks. Within the banks of Scripture, it is productive. Outside of the banks of Scripture, it is destructive. Excesses or extremes have always been called out and rejected. Practices or beliefs that do not align with Scripture are not tolerated.

In fact, I believe one reason Pentecostalism has seen such global acceptance and growth is because it aligns with Scripture.

Missions driven – Acts 1:8 connects the Spirit's empowerment directly to missions involvement. Correlatively, the Assemblies of God is a missions movement. The approach of AG World Missions was unique and even revolutionary. Instead of the traditional "colonial" approach to missions, Assemblies of God missionaries were tasked to build self-supporting, self-propagating, self-governing churches around the world. The goal was not to export American or Western ideology, but to bring Christ's gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit as He builds His Church. Today, the U.S. Assemblies of God has over 2,600 world missionaries. Beyond that, each church takes personally the call to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Ethnically diverse – Certainly, global Pentecostalism is radically diverse, with much of the movement residing in the Global South. I'll focus here on the U.S. Assemblies of God to be more specific. Some 44% of U.S. Assemblies of God adherents are ethnic minorities, making the Fellowship more diverse than

the U.S. population as a whole. If trends continue, we will be a movement with no ethnic majority in just a few years. We increasingly are seeing our Church represent the American culture in many demographic segments. That diversity is also reflected in our national leadership. Out of 21 elected national executives, half are from underrepresented (ethnic minority and/or women) communities.

Empowered Women – Early Pentecostals saw examples throughout the New Testament of women in pastoral, prophetic, and apostolic leadership. From the very beginning, women were licensed as ministers in the founding convention in 1914 and have continued to serve a vital role in Pentecostal leadership and ministry. Today, 26% of credentialed U.S. Assemblies of God ministers are women. This growing number of women in ministry reflects the missional and theological commitment of the Fellowship to recognize God's calling on all people.

Compassion oriented – Many unfamiliar with Pentecostalism assume that the movement's emphasis on faith, prayer, and expressive worship excludes the boots-on-the-ground work of compassion, feeding the hungry, ministry to the poor, and demonstrating biblical justice to all aspects of society. USC-Berkeley published a study (Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement) that was the culmination of four years of extensive research across the globe by professors Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori. They found that as much as 87% of Christian international social relief is from the Pentecostal/charismatic community. Pentecostals truly believe that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

I continue to be grateful to God for the sustained growth of the Pentecostal movement. Last year, the U.S. Assemblies of God grew at a rate of three times the rate of the U.S. population. Over the last 10 years, the U.S. Assemblies of God has grown by 11% in the 18-35 age group. Now, 53% of the Fellowship is under the age 35.

For Pentecostals, the Gospels and the Book of Acts are not just a biography of Jesus and a historical account of the church—they are our playbook for life and ministry. {eo}

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