



Pentecostal Movement and Charismatization

Approaches – Suggestions – Perspectives



Evangelische Kirche
in Deutschland

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**A Study Document by the
Advisory Commission for Worldwide Ecumenism
of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland
(EKD – Protestant Church in Germany)**

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Preliminary Remarks

On a global level, Christianity is growing. However, this cannot be put down mainly to the traditional, post-Reformation churches, but rather to a new, strong branch on the denominational tree: Pentecostal and charismatic churches are experiencing a strong increase in numbers and already comprise a quarter of Christianity worldwide.

The change is particularly momentous in many countries of the Global South. But charismatically orientated groups are also increasingly attractive in Europe. It is particularly young people who appreciate their lively forms of worship. International congregations with a Pentecostal profile live in our midst and in some places they are using Protestant churches and church halls.

This development challenges us to take a closer look, for most of us hardly know what Pentecostal churches are about. Old prejudices and new headlines distort our perception.

For this reason the Council of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD – Protestant Church in Germany) requested its Advisory Commission for Worldwide Ecumenism to prepare a description of this global movement – a kind of travel guide for an unknown terrain. To this end, the commission got into contact with numerous experts who contributed perspectives on the Pentecostal movement from the inside and the outside. There was much to be explored and understood, so that this guide now offers comprehensive orientation.

First of all, here is the most important insight: Pentecostal Christianity is not a clearly definable new “denomination”, but a broad movement including highly diverse and also contradictory manifestations. That is why this study document contains numerous “case studies” intended to give an impression of the way in which Pentecostal Christianity manifests itself in different contexts, all over the world as well as in our own country. It makes fascinating reading.

In addition to this differentiated perception, the study document also focuses on theological debate. It identifies a variety of topics with which our theology has been concerned in recent years – for example the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit, or the question of a holistic understanding of creation – and which allow us to enter into a new dialogue with Pentecostal theology. Other typically “Pentecostal” topics offer us theological challenges, such as the question of the reality of evil or the concrete experience of salvation. This document reaches the basic conclusion that both sides can learn a great deal from one another.

At the same time, it does not ignore the fact that it is necessary to reject and clearly contradict certain forms of Pentecostal theology. The partner churches of the EKD in the Global South would not be the last to tell us a thing or two about questionable developments in Pentecostal Christianity, and their voices are heard in this document. It is a question of defining criteria for discerning and distinguishing the spirits – in order to find practical consequences for ecumenism and development cooperation, for example.

This study document is deliberately intended to serve as a starting point, an impetus to take a fresh look at the Pente-

costal movement, to take it seriously and to search actively for opportunities to meet it. To this end, it not only provides the necessary background information, but also a host of ideas intended to bring our church into dialogue at various levels.

The Council of the EKD is most grateful to the members of the Advisory Commission for Worldwide Ecumenism, to its chairperson Prof. Dr. Ulrike Link-Wieczorek and the head of the Working Group on Pentecostal Churches, Prof. Dr. Claudia Jahnel, for all they have done. It also thanks the people in many countries with whom the Commission had contact and whose expertise made it possible to present such a comprehensive picture.

The Council hopes that this study document will arouse the curiosity of many people in our church. Those who read it will be well prepared for an ecumenical conversation for which the time is now ripe.

Hanover, September 2021

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heinrich Bedford-Strohm". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Heinrich" on the left, "Bedford" in the middle, and "Strohm" on the right.

Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm

Chair of the EKD-Council

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1. Introduction: Themes, challenges and goals of the study document

1.1 Growing pluralisation of Christianity

Christianity's role and form are currently changing fundamentally. The picture differs according to the place on Earth where people experience the church. From the perspective of the Global South, Christianity is booming and is in fact the fastest spreading religion in the world. Especially in the big cities, for example in Lagos, Rio de Janeiro or Seoul, Christianity is clearly present in the public view, whether in the form of huge new temples built by the megachurches, or of politicians who base their leadership style on Christianity, or just simply in the person of preachers and evangelists who proclaim the gospel in public on the streets. In these contexts, to be a Christian often means that one belongs to a Pentecostal church or an evangelical or charismatic church. Many megachurches are also extremely active in the media, operate their own video channels and are present on all social media channels as globally networked Christianity. However, there are also a host of smaller Pentecostal churches in the favelas and slums of the big cities, where people have a precarious existence and place their hopes on a better future.

From a European and especially a German point of view, the picture is completely different. On the one hand, here in Germany, the number of church members in the mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches is falling; on the other hand, within European Christianity as a whole, the forms of spirituality and the

characteristics of the Christian denominations are also changing. In Germany, alongside the main churches cooperating in the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK), a large number of smaller Christian communities has sprung up in the last 20 years or so, gathering for worship and prayer in private homes, rented rooms or church buildings. In some cases these groups can be spiritual awakenings within a denomination, in others they are new congregations without any specific denominational connection. In the Anglican Church in Great Britain (Church of England), such developments in which people try out new forms of church in unusual settings have come to be known since 2004 as "*fresh expressions of church*". Since then, new expressions of Christian faith have also emerged in many Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany, for example as living room churches, skater services or dinner churches.¹

Many new congregations are *charismatic* in their spirituality, i.e. faith is expressed in a free form, trusting in the power of God's Spirit, and is characterised by forms of piety emphasising experience and the body. Such charismatic congregations often have a weak institutional foundation and usually operate on an interdenominational basis. International congregations, which use different cultural references and various languages when celebrating their worship services, complete the picture of a Christianity in Germany which is increasingly differentiated and plural. The diversity of international congregations ranges from local church planting to megachurches that are often anchored in global church networks. Christian churches and communities in Germany often exist side by side without really knowing about each other.

¹ <https://www.freshexpressions.de>.

For many people, the confessional sense of identity has also transformed into a so-called “multiple belonging”: younger people in particular sometimes feel at home both in a historical Protestant church and in a charismatic congregation at the same time; they attend the Pentecostal service, for example, but are also active in the Protestant youth group in their local home church.

This study document focuses attention on these changing contexts within Christianity, the so-called “changing landscapes”, meaning the growing pluralisation of Christianity worldwide and in Germany. The emphasis lies on the theology of Pentecostal churches and charismatic renewal movements and on their how important they are for our living together ecumenically in Germany.

When comparing Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic movement on the one hand with the historic Protestant churches on the other hand, the *terminology* is not always distinct. Among the Pentecostals, it is possible to distinguish between traditional Pentecostal churches, neo-Pentecostal churches and charismatic churches. This study document demonstrates that not all Pentecostal churches are alike; there are all kinds of different types and expressions of this Spirit-emphasising piety, according to historical developments and cultural surroundings. It is equally impossible to find a common description for all the traditional churches that emerged from the Reformation. This study document refers to them all as **historical Protestant churches** or **traditional confessional churches** – over against the Pentecostal churches that emerged in the 20th century. In the broadest sense, this subsumes the traditional Protestant denominations which see themselves directly or indirectly as Reformation churches, such as Lutherans, Reformed, United, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Baptists and Methodists. In Germany, the term “historical Protestant churches” is usually taken to mean the regional churches belonging to the EKD, together with the traditional Reformation free churches (Baptists, Mennonites and Methodists among others). English speakers often refer to historical Protestant churches as “mainline churches”, but this is misleading, because in most English-speaking countries they do not usually represent the majority of Christians.

1.2 Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements

The origins of the Pentecostal movement lie in various parts of the world. The 1906 revival on → “Azusa Street” in Los Angeles was particularly famous and is considered to be the birthplace of the modern Pentecostal movement. The new Christian faith spread rapidly throughout the world and has adopted many different forms in the meantime (see chapter 2 for more details). Pentecostal churches and charismatic congregations tend to differ according to trends rather than in clearly distinct denominations. The historical and theological roots of the Pentecostal movement go back to the North American Holiness movement of the 19th century and went on to be influenced by the revival movements around the turn of the century. In the course of the 20th century, *charismatic renewal movements* took place, producing independent neo-Pentecostal churches on the one hand and charismatic congregations from originally traditional denominations on the other. Thus charismatic awakenings repeatedly occur within the Roman Catholic Church as well as in denominations of the historical Protestant churches. Pentecostal churches and charismatic renewal movements are growing strongly all over the world. At present, about a quarter of the world’s Christianity belongs to a Pentecostal church or a charismatic renewal movement. The geographic focus is undoubtedly in the countries of the Global South. The influx of migrants has also led to an increase in the proportion of Pentecostal churches and charismatic congregations in Germany in recent years, and that will continue. Pentecostal churches are particularly popular in large cities and metropolitan areas, accompanied by a high mobility of their members.

In Germany, numerous Pentecostal churches have joined together in the  Association of Pentecostal Churches in Germany (BFP), which runs its own training institute ( Erzhausen Theological Seminary) and has been recognised as a public corporation since 1974. In addition, a large number of Pentecostal churches and charismatic congregations exist which do not have any institutional or structural ties to the BFP.

1.3 Challenges for EKD member churches and their theological traditions

In recent decades, a process of rapprochement between traditional confessional churches and Pentecostal churches has begun on various levels, accompanied by a change in mutual perception and a reassessment of former stereotypes. This was urgently necessary, since Pentecostal churches had been regarded as “sects” for a long time by the historical Protestant churches. “Pentecostals” were pejoratively labelled “enthusiastic Christians”. From the Pentecostal side, Protestant national churches were described as institutionalised and “dead” Christianity, in which the Holy Spirit was no longer present.

It is good that these mutual negative attributions belong to the past. However, the painful experiences endured by Pentecostal Christians in particular in a range of different contexts have often not yet healed and need to be acknowledged.

The path of rapprochement is strenuous, and at the same time it reveals the widespread *stereotypes and fears* about one another which have developed in both Pentecostal and historical Protestant churches: in historical Protestant churches it is

usual to sing traditional hymns with organ accompaniment, in the Pentecostal churches the congregation and their band worship with contemporary Christian praise and worship songs. Protestant churches use formulated prayers written in advance, but Pentecostal churches emphasise free prayer and speaking in tongues (→ glossolalia). The accusation often raised by Pentecostal churches is that the members of traditional churches are not real believers and do not adequately and visibly incorporate fellowship with Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit into their own lives. In the other direction, traditional confessional churches criticise the Pentecostal churches for instrumentalising the power of the Spirit of God for certain purposes. There are also disputes about the Bible as the centre of faith: the traditional churches are criticised for reading the Bible too much as a historical book (criticism of historical-critical exegesis), while the Pentecostal churches are criticised for understanding the Bible too literally (biblicism). Further grounds for fears and uncertainties in dealing with Pentecostal churches are to be found in historical Protestant churches when it comes to spiritual or faith healing, to practices of casting out demons (→ exorcism) or to the suspicion that neo-Pentecostal churches are only interested in marketing the Christian faith financially. Conversely, believers from Pentecostal congregations sometimes question whether regional church or free church congregations still celebrate their belief in a lively way in their worship services, and how the Holy Spirit is effective in their theology.

Currently, we are in a process in which the diversity of Christianities is clearly emerging worldwide. This makes it necessary for the historical Protestant churches and the Pentecostal churches to be more aware of each other and to come together

more strongly than before. It is obvious that they are aware of their common Protestant roots, but find differing forms of expression for their faith. In Germany, there is an official dialogue between the Pentecostal churches and the Protestant Church in Germany, which mainly takes place within the framework of the annual talks between the EKD and the Association of Protestant Free Churches (VEF), to which representatives from Pentecostal churches also belong. At the international level, Pentecostal churches have been members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) since 1961. However, it was only after a decision by the Harare Assembly in 1998 that a Joint Consultative Group was established between the WCC and Pentecostal churches; the first meeting took place in 2000. This WCC consultative group also deals explicitly with controversial theological issues.

Pentecostal churches present challenges to the historical Protestant churches and their theology in ethical, theological, and in some cases political fields. These arise primarily in the co-operation between EKD member churches and their partner churches in the Global South, but also in Germany in connection with contacts to international congregations with a Pentecostal or charismatic profile. The main points of controversy concern lifestyle and sexual orientation, but they can also flare up around the question of the extent to which the Christian faith is instrumentalised for political goals. A major challenge for historical Protestant Christians is the commercialisation of religion in some parts of Pentecostal Christianity. According to the understanding of the so-called prosperity gospel, a person's standing with God is dependent on their personal and economic success. Further critical questions arise with regard to the attitude towards spiritual authority and the danger of spiritual abuse of power (cf. below chap. 3.10).

The dialogue between Pentecostal and historical Protestant churches is therefore crucial for the perception of the respective faith practice, for mutual theological understanding, but also for the distinction and dissociation from each other that is necessary in some areas.

1.4 Aims, approaches and structure of the study document

The present text serves as an orientation within the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD – Protestant Church in Germany). In this way, it follows the guiding principle of the Charta Oecumenica (2001), in which the churches committed themselves to “overcome the feeling of self-sufficiency within each church, and to eliminate prejudices; to seek mutual encounters and to be available to help one another”.²

The study document is addressed to those responsible at the various levels of the EKD, its member churches and agencies, in partner churches and institutions worldwide, including especially those who are active in theological education and in ecumenical institutions.

It aims to encourage member churches of the EKD to encounter Pentecostal churches and charismatic congregations as part of the one Church of Jesus Christ. The guiding criterion of the study document is to promote the ability to speak about the Pentecostal movement and charismatic currents in the diversity of Christianity. Following this ecumenical hermeneutic, the

² Charta Oecumenica. Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe (2001), Chapter II.3: “Moving towards one another”.

study document does not confront Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements in a phenomenologically descriptive, distanced, judgmental or apologetic way, but forms an ecumenically open, but also positioned contribution to dialogue. The aim of the study document is to counteract uncertainties on the basis of information and to break down existing stereotypes on the basis of theological orientation. The encounter with the theology and spirituality of Pentecostalism can be helpful in rethinking one's own theological positions in order to gain new insights into one's own theology and faith practice.

Chapter 2 introduces the global phenomenon of Pentecostalism. Beginning with a brief historical overview of Pentecostalism, the chapter provides an overview of the typology of Pentecostal churches and outlines existing ecumenical relationships.

Chapter 3 then unfolds fundamental theological questions that arise in the dialogue with the Pentecostal churches and identifies commonalities, differences and current theological incompatibilities from a systematic-theological perspective.

Chapter 4 looks at the social and political practices of Pentecostal churches and the charismatic movement in social engagement, whereby dissonance and criticism are named and justified.

Chapter 5 formulates practical recommendations for the ecumenical journey with the Pentecostal churches and the charismatic movement, which can be used to shape dialogue and ecumenical cooperation at the various levels of church activity.

Some central terms of the document are explained in a separate *glossary*, which is referred to in the text by an arrow, thus →.

The study document is supplemented by a series of *case studies*, which are referred to in the text by this symbol ☉. On the one hand, these summarise essential contents that are important for the theology, spirituality and practice of Pentecostal churches and the charismatic movement. On the other hand, they present examples of the diversity of Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements. Case studies from the Global South represent the challenges faced by international partner churches of the EKD, its member churches and agencies. They are also exemplary – other, even contrasting examples could be found.

A decisive factor in writing this study document was that it already expresses the dialogue between Pentecostal churches and the EKD. In order to counteract “talking about Pentecostal churches”, the study document was developed in cooperation with and with the participation of Pentecostal theologians, as well as in discussion with representatives of various institutes for research on religious and ideological issues.

The authors of this study document come from different backgrounds, and their intensive controversial discussions have accompanied and enriched its drafting. The present text endeavours to take account of the diversity of Christianity and to consciously make room for it. The study pleads for an ecumenically open learning attitude in which differences and commonalities between the EKD and Pentecostal churches or charismatic trends can be identified and churches and congregations mutually encouraged to engage in dialogue.

2. The global phenomenon of Pentecostalism

“Pentecostalism has experienced amazing growth. [...] It is fundamentally an ‘ends of the earth’, missionary, polycentric, trans-national religion. The experience of the Spirit and belief in the world evangelization are hallmarks of Pentecostalism.”³

The Pentecostal movement is characterised by a unique pace of growth, derived from its strong sense of mission, the direct relation to the Apostolic Age and an eschatological expectation of the coming Kingdom and the redemption of the world. This is how Allan H. Anderson, who can be considered one of the most important researchers of Pentecostalism, characterises the Pentecostal movement. In his book “To the Ends of the Earth” he describes how the Pentecostal movement has decisively changed world Christianity. Following on from this statement of the importance of the Pentecostal movement, this chapter will first trace the way in which the Pentecostal movement emerged and went on to spread throughout the world as well as in the Pentecostal churches and congregations in Germany. This has been a highly differentiated phenomenon from the outset to the present day.

2.1 The beginnings of the Pentecostal movement worldwide and in Germany

At the beginning of the 20th century, Christians in various parts of the world reported that they had had special transcen-

³ Anderson 2013, 1 (see bibliography).

tal experiences or had observed them in others, interpreted as the workings of the Holy Spirit. Events in Los Angeles are particularly famous, where on 9 April 1906 believers who were followers of the Afro-American preacher William Seymour experienced special manifestations of the Holy Spirit for the first time. Shortly afterwards, the group, which was joined by growing crowds of men and women of different ethnic backgrounds and social affiliations, moved to a building in 312 Azusa Street. This much-vaunted beginning contains the classic characteristics of Pentecostal identity: a conversion and baptism with the Holy Spirit takes place, at a precise place and time. This experience transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, class and gender. This → “Azusa Street Revival” is considered by many to be the cradle of the Pentecostal movement. But it must be noted that the entire first decade of the new century was permeated by revivals and similar experiences of being blessed with the Holy Spirit, all across the globe. Apart from the spread of Pentecostal testimony in the USA, the most prominent reports came from India, Chile, Norway and Wales. In 1907, a great outpouring of the Spirit (→ “Mukti Revival”) occurred in Mukti/India in the state of Maharashtra in the home for widows and orphans founded by Pandita Ramabai. The Methodist Church in Chile was gripped by a spirit of prayer. The descriptions of the outpourings of the Spirit in Valparaiso and Santiago read over long passages like the accounts of the Acts of the Apostles: prophecies, dreams, mocking, healings and speaking in tongues are just some of the phenomena that took place. The revival came to Norway through the Methodist pastor Thomas Ball Barrett. After returning from a trip to the USA, where Barrett himself experienced the outpouring of the Spirit and began to speak in tongues, his sermons triggered a broad revival and spread to neighbouring European countries. Barrett is also designated as the father of the Eu-