

The Role of Church Names in the Spread of Pentecostal Christianity in the Global South

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Introduction

Everything in the physical and metaphysical realms of existence has a designation that accords it a unique identity. Rocks have names that distinguish them from each other. Star differs from star and bird from bird by feather type, beak length or the songs each sings. When children are born, they are distinguished and named individually even if they are identical twins. Forensic scientists meticulously work to identify one human being from another at accident scenes because individual persons are attached to specific families. Handing over victim remains after intensive DNA testing helps to bring closure for family members. It is “terrible to think that a person will go into the ground...without a name” and although forensics can deliver names of victims in tragedies such as 9/11, some families may never actually have any bodies to bury.¹ In the same way, every city has a name given to it because of its unique characteristics; thus Los Angeles was given its name in 1781 because of its immense beauty that seemed to have been the work of angels under the patronage of lady saints,² and Nairobi, which means “the place of cool waters” in the Maasai language, was given its name in 1899.³

In Act 2 Scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare Juliet tells Romeo, “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Romeo responds by saying, “Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized: Henceforth I never will be Romeo.” In this paper, we shall narrow down our interest in naming to religious usage in the Church, specifically focusing on how the Pentecostal type of Christianity employs names as well as their significance.

¹ Gabriele Vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn (eds) *An Anthropology of Names and Naming*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

² <http://www.ci.la.ca.us> , accessed on 29th October, 2019.

³ <http://www.nairobi.go.ke> accessed on 29th October, 2019.

When it comes to establishing and giving names to church fellowships, it is no longer the infatuation of a romantic love affair as between a Romeo and a Juliet. Church names are picked by the fellowship's founder or a group of believers who are deeply guided by the quest for social as well as spiritual identity. Church names are as diverse and creative as the people or groups that give them.

Pentecostal Christianity around the world has grown and continues to expand at an alarming rate especially in the Global South.⁴ One clear distinction the establishment of Pentecostal Churches has from traditional or mainline churches is the names they give to their assemblies and ministries. This phenomenon of naming is so critical in understanding global Christianity that its whirlwind expansion and expression must be given a critical look. In order to obtain a better understanding of the role the naming of churches plays in the expansion of Pentecostal Christianity, we shall set a brief theoretical perspective for the practice of naming and then ask four questions. First, is there any biblical paradigm for the naming of church groups or congregations and does this fit any of the contemporary patterns of giving names to churches? Second, what influences the naming of Pentecostal churches around the world, especially in the Global South? Third, what do these names reveal about the identity of Pentecostal Christianity? Last but not least, what characteristics can we glean from the names given to such congregations?

Theoretical Perspective

Naming is a complex process that is deeply entrenched in God's delegation of the management of the world to mankind. In Genesis 2:19 we read, "Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what

⁴ Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers and Cornelis van der Laan, (eds) *Studying Global Pentecostalism Theories and Methods: The Anthropology of Christianity* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2010) p. 11.

he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” Naming is thus a divine mandate. One could guess that names accord identity, make language possible and, in a sense, function like a hobby because it also evokes man’s creative potential. Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle who gave attention to this discussion under the doctrine of “forms” to Thomas Aquinas who stretched it to the usage of language have contributed much to how we end up naming things and people the way we do. John Locke as well as modern day language experts have continued to clarify the concept. Locke greatly influenced post-modern thinkers like Saussure, Foucault and Derrida who, sadly, employ his concepts with minimal acknowledgement. Most of the philosophers as well as the post-modern language experts relegate naming to social construction, significant for social interaction and designation but also for psychological wellbeing. Of all the thinkers, the person I would recommend for a solid theoretical framework for the naming of Pentecostal fellowships is the philosopher John Locke. In understanding how names of churches become significant points of social and spiritual identity, we shall borrow Locke’s concept known as “signification” although it is important to read it within the context of social reconstruction. Anderson et al agree with this approach in studying Pentecostalism but reads it within essentialism and normative angles. For him, naming a church a particular way involves signification but also a hegemonic application which camouflages as being centered on God. He states:

In looking for conditions that may produce an essentialist and normative image of Pentecostalism, attention should be given to the joint impact of power mechanisms and signification processes. Usually the leadership of an expanding religion like Pentecostalism seeks to gain influence in people’s lives and in society. Influencing people’s behavior is a way to exercise power, even if the leadership prefers not to use that word, reserving it for the power of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.⁵

⁵ Anderson et al, P. 44.

Anderson is of the view that this signification within an essentialist and normative dimension manifests in three ways, i.e. identity, orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In identity, a church may desire more and more visibility. In orthodoxy it seeks to stay pure and in keeping with its identity and may even be viewed as fundamentalist. In orthopraxy, its distinctives are protected in moral codes of conduct and in preservation of certain rudiments of displaying who they are. To see how this works in naming, let us briefly return to John Locke.

At the beginning of Chapter 1 of Book (iii) of Locke's classic work titled *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, there is a good explanation of the process as a gift given to man as a creature "fitted to articulate words" but also distinguishing him from other creatures:

God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind, but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great instrument and common tie of society. Man, therefore, had by nature his organs so fashioned, as to be fit to frame articulate sounds, which we call words. But this was not enough to produce language; for parrots, and several other birds, will be taught to make articulate sounds distinct enough, which yet by no means are capable of language.⁶

Locke adds that words or sounds made by man are "signs" representing ideas that are inside man, what he calls "internal conceptions". When people speak, they use words to "signify" what is included as well as excluded in an idea. This process of signification makes understanding and meaning possible. Thus, when an Indonesian pastor names his Church "Graha Bethany", a Chinese pastor calls his "True Jesus Church of China" and another in Chile calls his "Eglesia Methodist Pentecostal de Chile", such names carry signification. They transfer certain ideas latent in the founder's mind into words people can read on a church billboard or newspaper and identify some people with those ideas.

⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (London: C. and J. Rivington and Partners Publishers, 1690).

Locke says that a name comes from a signified definition or idea and a definition is “nothing but making another understand by words what idea the term defined stands for.”⁷ He adds that a definition “is best made by enumerating those simple ideas that are combined in the signification of the term defined.”⁸ Combining “Methodist” and “Pentecostal” or “Maximum” with “Miracle” conjures the imagination of the one giving the name both for himself and the intended recipients. Writers like Saussure and Roland Barthes delve into how a simple name like any of those given to a church assembly denotes as well as connotes a particular signification in the recipient. It is my argument that Pentecostal founders of churches are fully aware of both the denotations and connotations of the names they give and how they intend people to understand them. Let us bring this theoretical framework into the New Testament portrait of church names as we move to our first of four questions.

Towards a Biblical Paradigm for Church Names

The word “Church” is used 115 times in the New Testament, usually referring to an “assembly of the called out.” In the Old Testament, it appears as “Qahal” and is mainly used of Israel or those in Israel and appears about 112 times.⁹ Although it might be stretching to imagine a biblical standard for church names, several passages in the New Testament provide a good hint for how the Early Church did it. Two distinct patterns of naming churches were the town where an assembly was planted or the house where believers gathered to pray or engage in various expressions of fellowship. We read of “the Church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:1-2) and the “Church in Jerusalem” (Acts 11:22; 15:4) and the Church in Antioch (Acts 13:1). Regarding

⁷ John Locke, *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ <http://www.bibleone.net> – Title” Church in the New Testament, accessed on 29th October 2019.

house Churches, there are mentions of “The Church meeting in the house of Priscilla and Aquilla” in 1 Corinthians 16:19. The same Church is mentioned in Romans 16:3-5. In Colossians 4:15 we read: “Greet the brethren in Laodicea and Nymphas and the Church which is in her house.” In the letter to Philemon 1:2 Paul and Timothy are writing “...to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier and to the Church that meets in your home.” There is also mention of the Church that met at Lydia’s house (Acts 16:40) and the constant mention of meetings in “The Upper Room.” Luke records for us that after Peter was miraculously released from jail, he joined believers “at the house of Mary the mother of John also known as Mark where many people had gathered and were praying.” (Acts 12:12).

In the book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3, John is given specific messages to seven churches in Asia Minor which were named after the cities in which they were including Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

The first hint that personalities and sectarianism began to shape Church identity is found in Acts 6:9 and 1 Corinthians 1:10-9. Luke records in the former passage that the gatherings of the early Jewish Christians in the synagogues began to attain pseudo-political flavors such as “The synagogue of the Freed men.” In the Corinthian case, the Apostle Paul lamented the danger of emerging personality cults. We read:

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ...

This mode of identifying believers with a person is not too removed from the tradition that ended up taking over the naming of congregations in the subsequent years as the Church spread. For

instance, when Roman Catholicism grew, the very distinctives Paul discourages in the above passage became the norm for church names, so that from then to this day we have church names such as St Peter's, St Mark's, St Matthew's, St John's, St Thomas, St Andrew's and, indeed, all of the twelve apostles except Judas who, strangely, is often replaced by St Paul's cathedrals and other shrines, thus violating the wish of the very person who prohibited the trend. The Roman Catholic Church, having adopted the belief that St Peter was the first Pope, ended up naming the main cathedral in Vatican City St. Peter's Basilica. With an increased interest in angelic roles and the part played by beatified saints, names such as St Michael the Archangel, St Mary's and St Joseph the Worker named after the carpentry of the father of Jesus. With this pattern in the medieval period taking center stage in the naming of churches, the norm was carried beyond the Reformation to the decision to name numerous protestant congregations after Martin Luther, hence the Lutheran Church. The same could be said of Wesleyan congregations named after John Wesley.

Influence and Characteristics of Pentecostal Church Names

There are several factors that influence the naming of Pentecostal Churches around the world. First, there is the founder's opinion. Since most Pentecostal congregations are established by individuals who claim to have received a special calling from god, the ideas, vision and intended concentration of the envisaged church will shape its name. How much education a pastor or founder has including theological training or lack of it strongly informs how church names come about. Those with theological training are likely to employ technical words including drawing names from Hebrew or Greek. For example, a friend of mine is in the process of launching a ministry called "Aurora Bible Centre." In my brief survey of church names around Nairobi I have constantly come across words such as "Logos", "Rhema" and "Shalom." The illiteracy of the founder may result in casual naming such as "Helicopter Church." Second, there are governmental

guidelines and restrictions. These vary from country to country. Registrars of societies in most countries in the Global South vet such registrations right from name searches to whether such groups have political leanings or not. According to an article by East Africa Business Consultants (June 2018) the process in Kenya involves a security vetting by the government, proof of qualification to operate as a church and a statement of any affiliations with international bodies.¹⁰

Third, there is the intended mission of the Church which serves as the functional identity of the group. For instance, if the founder's top priority is the never-ending experience of miracles, he might give a church a name like "Maximum Miracle Centre" or "Signs and Wonders Tabernacle." Some founders, in a bid to emphasize the global nature of their new Church might add the word "International" to their name, e.g. "International Christian Centre," "Universal Church of the Kingdom of God," now "International Church," "International vision Centre," or variations of it e.g. "Global Fields Evangelism Church," "World Harvest International Church," "World Outreach Church," "Life church International" or "Global Outreach Church." This globalization is significant in the growth of Pentecostalism because, unlike many traditional congregations, Pentecostal churches with "international" or "global" in their names actually tend to look beyond their immediate geographical confines to a sense of mission that is broader than their local activities. They tend to be broad-minded and accommodating to other cultures. Writers like Young and Jenkins have argued that this emanates from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to many nations on the Day of Pentecost.

Fourth, there is the distinct factor of names emanating from a desire to experience the power of God through the move of the Holy Spirit. Such experience-based names include "Fire

¹⁰ <https://eastafribusinessconsultants.com/2018/06/14/how-to-register-a-church-in-kenya> Accessed on 31st October, 2019.

Ministries,” “Church of the Holy Spirit,” “Dunamis Church,” and “Holy Ghost Association for the Unification of World Christianity.”

A fifth factor is dissatisfaction with existing congregations or their expressions of Christianity. One example is the “Yoido Full Gospel Church” in Seoul, Korea. When the phrase “Full Gospel” is employed, the yearning for a greater spiritual experience is evident. “Maximum Miracle Centre” seems to suggest a desire not to settle for the common level of miraculous manifestations. The pastor wants more and by extension wishes the same for all who attend his church.

Sixth, there is the factor of wanting the church to be all-inclusive and accommodating to everyone including seekers, e.g. “Church on the Move” in Tulsa, Oklahoma,” Church on the Way” in Va Nuys, California, “Church Unlimited” in Corpus Christi, Texas, “Church without Walls” in Houston Texas, etc. In Kenya, the “Kingdom Seekers Fellowship” sets out to express this very same notion of wanting more. Everyone ends up being a “seeker” that will not settle for the everyday measure of spiritual experience.

Last but not least, there are prosperity-oriented Churches e.g. “Winners Chapel International” established by Dr. Oyedepo in Nigeria but which now has millions of members around the world, “Elevate Life Church” in Riverside, California, etc. Others may emphasize certain gifts of the Spirit. All in all, the name of any church is closely tied to the identity of the founder or members.

Conclusion

Before closing this discussion, we must observe that names given to Pentecostal churches tend to depart from the traditional norm of identifying Christian gatherings. It is no longer names given after the apostles of Christ, cities in which they are found or the houses of congregants

where believers meet, but expressions of faith. This is more dynamic and tends to attract new members more easily. Again, Pentecostal church names are socially more inclusive than traditional names. They foster more participation from members than traditional names. It is safe to infer from the foregoing discussion that the trend of giving names to Pentecostal churches is not likely to change in the future. We are likely to experience the same mixture of learned and unlearned influences in the process of naming. As some countries become more democratic and allow more visibility of Pentecostal Christianity, some, as the case has been in Rwanda, are likely to experience greater control on both registration and operations. In places with more government control of religion e.g. China, these names may not be as significant because open identity implies security risks which may lead to imprisonment and even death for members or pastors. In India, for instance, some states are openly opposed to Christian proselytization and so putting up billboards with church names would be tantamount to inviting trouble.

This is an area of study that requires more research and publishing in view of very limited information and resources. I am in the process of doing a physical survey of church names in Nairobi for a quantitative analysis, but a qualitative study of how and why particular names are given is necessary. There is need for interviews to be carried out to fill this information gap.

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