

Hearts on fire: Pentecostal spirituality

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

Pentecostal styles of worship and spirituality have come to pervade mainstream Christianity, as [Larry Eskridge points out](#). And as [Edith Blumhofer reminds us](#), Pentecostals are the second-largest Christian group in the world, trailing only Roman Catholics. Still, many of us in the mainline churches would have to admit we don't know that much about the movement.

My own introduction came when I was a pastor in Indiana and got to know Charlie Hackett, the pastor of the large and rapidly growing Pentecostal church in town. We became friends, and I was surprised at how frequently we agreed on issues. On many topics, I learned, Pentecostals are not stereotypical fundamentalists or conservatives. For example, while Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians and Lutherans talked a lot about race, Charlie's congregation was by far the most racially mixed in town.

Harvey Cox's 1995 book *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* tells the Pentecostal story critically but respectfully. The movement succeeds in the postmodern era, he says, "because it has spoken to the spiritual emptiness of our time by reaching beyond the levels of creed and ceremony to the core of human religiousness, into what might be called 'primal spirituality.'"

I experienced that spirituality during a trip to South America. In Buenos Aires I received an invitation to meet with the board of a Pentecostal seminary. When I arrived, I discovered I was at an automotive repair shop. I was guided to a large room with table, folding chairs, bare light bulbs and a large bank of tape-recording equipment. I asked where the seminary was. "This is it," my host, the board president, proudly told me; "this room and that taping equipment. We make tapes of sermons and lectures and send them to our students weekly."

“How many students do you have?” I asked. The answer stunned me: “Thousands. We sent out 3,500 tapes this week.” The board president explained that the students were pastors scattered throughout the entire region. “Many of them can’t read. They have the Spirit. They want to learn to be pastors and we try to help them.” That experience helped me understand what Cox meant by referring in his subtitle to “the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century.”