

Windblown: John 3:1-17; Romans 8:12-17

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

*The Spirit of the triune God is and will always be the life force of the world and all that is good and hopeful in it, which includes the hunger for God.* —Joanna Adams

During an attempted coup in Indonesia in 1965, an estimated 500,000 people were killed. What did not make the headlines was the quiet revolution that began to move into a collapsed intellectual and moral vacuum. The wind of the Spirit blew fresh breezes across a wounded land and people. There was no ballyhoo or promotion by the churches. There was simply the response of untold numbers who found in the churches a haven. Forgiveness and love became the “wine and bread” of acceptance and redemption. Slaves of fear no more. Thousands were able to eucharistically sing, “Abba, Father.”

I have seen the wind blowing in other places. In Ghana the statue of President Kwame Nkruma in downtown Accra was smashed. The inscription below his figure read, “Seek ye first the political kingdom.” The wind of the Spirit was dealing with those who usurp power. Slaves of confusion no more. Thousands would know the real “Abba, Father.”

In this country the “Jesus movement” was shaking foundations across denominational lines.

I visited a church in California where those dressed in business suits sat next to barefooted hippies. Latinos, African-Americans and whites focused on transcendent issues. Across America crowds packed stadiums in Jesus rallies. Slaves of prejudice no more. Thousands celebrated the love of “Abba, Father.”

In South America, base communities sprang up. An Argentinian Pentecostal explained that Catholic base communities gather without trained leadership, focus on issues of injustice, then read the Bible to see how God would lead them. Pentecostals, by contrast, start by reading the Bible, isolate the issues that are alienating them, then seek God’s leadership for solutions. Essentially, both groups come out at the same place. Methodology is not the issue when the Spirit is blowing fresh breezes across the lines that separate brother and sisters in Christ. Slaves of denominational pride no more. Thousands could recognize an inclusive “Abba, Father.”

The wind of the Spirit blew open prison doors. Nelson Mandela walked into freedom with responsibility. I was mesmerized when I saw him appear on the balcony of a building in Cape Town, face an awed audience of half a million, and acknowledge the reality of the past. Then he said, “The rest of my life I place in your hands.” It was a commitment of trust and solidarity. Slaves of apartheid no more. Thousands could celebrate a merciful “Abba, Father.”

The wind is blowing. God is at work through the church and beyond the church. Political systems resist anything beyond themselves and the elite class they serve while at the same time the country’s churches may be poor, weak and helpless. But Jesus demonstrated that there is always room for surprises. Mangers, refugee situations, nonchic neighborhoods—these seem to be fertile ground for a new gust of the Spirit. Should it be a surprise then that the dynamic churches of the world are now in the Southern Hemisphere and the East? The ecclesiological tectonic plates have shifted! Is this the first time for such a major turn?

In the first century a shift occurred when gentiles were accepted as equally legitimate members of the body of Christ. Trauma and pain came to Paul and other advocates who pioneered such innovation. But these paradigm tinkerers stood their ground and ultimately became the predominant voice in the church.

Again the wind shifted, moving out of the Mediterranean, and going west. In theological debates hammered out during the fourth and fifth centuries, Berbers and Teutonics shaped doctrines that became the legacy of Western Christendom.

Centuries later the third shift is in full swing. Why did the Spirit wait so long? Wouldn't every 500 years be a decent interval, like the time frame for a super jubilee? Predicting God's ways, however, is a futile effort. Cause and effect, predictability and measurement collapse in the face of the mighty wind of a purposeful Spirit.

There is a downside to a shift. Those who inhabit the landscape of the last shift often do not know that things have changed. It's not that they don't agree with what the Spirit is doing, it's that they don't see it! They don't see the untold millions from areas marked as "mission fields" who are rising up to cry, "Abba, Father" and sharing, as co-heirs with Christ, in his sufferings. In Africa and Asia, they bear ridicule, harassment and even death as a mark of belonging to a community of faith.

Many people are motivated to live out the good news cross-culturally. The category of "missionary" is no longer broad enough to include all of these Christians. Instead, global migration shapes new categories, as one member of a family travels abroad in order to provide income for family back home, or someone transfers into a different country at the request of a business. Students are in flux. If led by the Spirit of God, all of these people bear witness as they go.

No church or movement can claim ownership of the Spirit, which is interactive with the Father and the Son in the overall *missio Dei*. As at Pentecost, the Spirit came as defender of Jesus and a faithful teacher about the things of God. Are we truly on the threshold of a new apostolic era? If so, what church will want to miss it?