

Global and local: Pentecostals' independent spirit

by [Cecil M. Robeck Jr.](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

As the message of Pentecost spread, it adapted to fit existing cultures. Korean Pentecostals, for instance, frequently climb “prayer mountains” for pre-sunrise prayer services, a reflection of a pre-Christian past. At Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, reputedly the world’s largest church, parishioners recite the Apostles’ Creed, pray or sing the Lord’s Prayer, and pray for the reunification of Korea every Sunday, reflecting something of the old Presbyterian majority. Preachers are expected to take off their shoes and don special slippers when they preach, for they stand on “holy ground.” More pragmatically, during the service people are encouraged to pray aloud en masse in “concerts of prayer,” but prayer stops the second a bell is rung. American Pentecostals would find such things almost unthinkable.

In much of Central and Eastern Europe, mirroring the practice of Orthodox Christians in the region, the men at Pentecostal services sit or stand on one side of the congregation while women sit or stand on the other, often with their heads covered. Some of them make the sign of the cross, and they share a common communion cup. While ample room is given for manifestations of tongues, interpretation and prophecy, frequently the congregation also sits through two or even three sermons in a single service.

In Scandinavia, the vast majority of Pentecostals are members of what amounts to a national Pentecostal church (of Norway, Sweden, Finland, etc.), in which each congregation is viewed as autonomous, though in recent years these churches’ monopoly has been slightly altered as newer groups have emerged. The situation becomes more complex, however, when one realizes that Pentecostals often hold dual membership in a state church (the state Lutheran Church, for example) in order to avoid marginalization in society. In Italy, many Pentecostals have aligned with the Communist Party because it is one of the few places where their influence can be measured over against that of the Catholic Church.

In Latin America, Pentecostals share a common culture with Roman Catholicism, out of which many members have come. The parallels at the level of personal piety and popular religion are abundant. One Pentecostal scholar has noted that in Latin America there are Catholics who honor the pope and Catholics (read: Pentecostals) without a pope, though many local pastors exercise more power among their people than any pope. While many Pentecostals in Latin America distance themselves from Catholicism, most of them remain close to the concepts of suffering and sacrifice seen in the Jesus figures on display in caskets, such as are found in Catholic churches in Mexico, or in the crucified Christ who appears on crucifixes. Some Pentecostals pray to Mary and the saints, avail themselves of “holy water,” and leave the equivalent of *milagros* in crutches, braces, and wheelchairs as testimonies to God’s healing interventions. On a visit to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, I watched as women prayed while brushing their babies against fully dressed statues of the Virgin, bringing to mind the use of “healing handkerchiefs” among Pentecostals (see Acts 19:11-12). Some of the newer, indigenous Pentecostal denominations have embraced the “prosperity” gospel proclaimed by independent North American televangelists, but link their emphasis on prosperity to the “blood of Jesus,” thereby aligning it with the more traditional Catholic theme of suffering.

In Africa, Pentecostal manifestations are even more diverse. Healing crusades, which have gone on for half a century, continue unabated. Independent megachurches led by gifted African pastors are common. Even among the poorer churches meeting in fields and forests, self-help programs, educational programs, computing classes and feeding programs are common. In postapartheid South Africa, churches that had been separated along racial lines have made progress toward integration, though any time spent with these people suggests that incredible pain remains for people of color and that racial tensions remain. Investment in the poor by those with more remains a begrudged priority. Still, there are a number of large, independent churches in and around Soweto that could teach American Pentecostals a thing or two about social concern. For them, this aspect of mission has been a matter of survival.

As Pentecostals celebrate their centennial, they are still far from realizing the potential of the movement as a truly global power. While many Pentecostals in Latin America and in Africa are becoming politically active, they continue to remain committed to historic understandings of the Christian faith. Issues such as abortion and the ordination of homosexuals that have become church-dividing for so many historic churches will not emerge as issues among Pentecostals in the foreseeable

future. Their independent, entrepreneurial spirit will continue to be both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness as they seek new ways to connect with one another.