

Book Review: Evangelical and African Pentecostal Unity *Balancing Principles and Practicalities in Britain around the Millennium*¹.

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Hugh Osgood's book, on the historical development and resultant challenges that British evangelicalism and African neo- Pentecostalism have faced in their pursuit of unity, is an important, thoroughly researched contribution to understanding many of the root issues. It particularly caught my attention because of my ongoing involvements in different aspects of intercultural unity and mission from the time period he covers. If you have lived through this era and been involved with cross-cultural unity, Osgood's work will be of particular interest. He explains why he has chosen the twenty- year period from 1985 to 2005 "...it covers the time in which African neo – Pentecostalism was being most vigorously introduced into Britain."² He acknowledges the limitations of choosing this period as he feels he is unable to present some of the more positive developments since then. The first three chapters create the historical context for the challenges of moving towards unity. They cover the development of three important aspects, British evangelical inclusiveness, African neo-Pentecostal distinctiveness and the introduction of African-neo Pentecostalism in Britain. The last two chapters explore the nature of principles and practicalities in the interactions between the different groupings in two time periods, one approaching the millennium (1985-99) and the other at its start (2000-2005). In his conclusion he refers to the need for flexibility especially with reference to theological complications such as differing concepts of revelation, redemption and transformation.

British Evangelical Inclusiveness

His opening chapter starts by referencing the debate on the different views of the origins of British evangelicalism. He states that many have traced it to the Reformation period others more recently "see themselves as the real guardians of authentic first-century Christianity"³. He cites David Bebbington linking it with Wesley and the start of Methodism. Because of the problematic nature of tracing historical roots and for some seeking to own it, Osgood would rather see it as trans-

¹ Hugh Osgood. *Evangelical and African Pentecostal Unity Balancing Principles and Practicalities in Britain around the Millennium*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wifp and Stock, 2024).

² *Ibid* xxvii

³ *Ibid* 3

denominational rather than inter-denominational, through shared beliefs when he refers to the formation of the international Evangelical Alliance (EA) that gathered in 1846 when fifty denominations coming from four continents, although 84% were British. This was short lived and instead became “loosely linked independent international organisations, not accountable for each other’s actions.”⁴ At the start of the twentieth century, the birth of Pentecostalism as a revivalist movement raised fresh issues but Osgood highlights the importance of the Billy Graham crusades and the appointment of Gilbert Kirby’s churches and the one that as General Secretary of the EA. as catalytic in moving towards greater unity with Pentecostal denominations.

The growth of the charismatic movement and the Caribbean churches are also recognized to have brought further challenges to evangelicalism. Within the charismatic movement Osgood identifies two strands that were struggling with unity issues; one that was more focused on release of the gifts of the spirit in various denominational contexts (renewal) and the other on the planting of new churches (restoration). He argues “The charismatic movement was impacting evangelicalism both denominationally and non-denominationally and the encounter was not always comfortable.”⁵ Nonetheless gatherings such as Spring Harvest and the influence of Clive Calver General Secretary of EA) are said to have diffused the debate somewhat.

In the same period the West Indian Evangelical Alliance was established by Philip Mohabir and later Joel Edward’s time as secretary of the WIEA the name was changed to the African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance, reflecting the growth of African Pentecostal churches in the UK. This led to “a form of parallelism which Osgood suggests allowed distinctiveness to be retained, while closer...relationships were pursued”⁶ with the EA.

The development of African neo- Pentecostal distinctiveness and its introduction into Britain

In chapters two and three Osgood traces the change that classical Pentecostalism in Africa underwent towards neo- Pentecostalism which was adaptable in any global context. He sees classical Pentecostalism as beginning from the Welsh (1904) and Azusa Street (1906) revivals and then the formation of the Apostolic Church (1912) had a strong and formative influence particularly in Nigeria.

⁴ Ibid 6

⁵ Ibid 19

⁶ Ibid 30

During the 1960's and 1970's following the evangelical campaigns of Billy Graham and T.L.Osborn (American Pentecostal evangelist) in Nigeria, the differences between the evangelical and Pentecostal groupings became less of an issue. Student movements and the establishing of the Redeemed Christiaan Church of God (RCCG) also added to what was emerging. By the 1980's Neo- Pentecostalism could be identified with American Pentecostal leaders such as Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin and Matthew Ashimolow, a prominent African leader.

Osgood traces how neo- Pentecostalism in Africa soon transferred to the UK as African immigration increased during this period. He identifies five clear phases which happened independently, during which there was some level of interaction with the EA. The first is described as *Constrained to plant*⁷ in order for neo-Pentecostal churches in order to preserve their own cultural identity, whilst having to adjust to British culture. The second, *Sent to Plant*,⁸ from Africa, in the 1980's included *Deeper Life* and *RCCG* as its forerunners. Thirdly, *Transferred to Plant*⁹ involved leaving original churches and planting independently. The fourth and fifth phases are described as *Trained to plant*¹⁰ and *Called to Plant*¹¹.

Principalities and Practicalities in interactions 1985-99

After providing the historical context to Evangelicalism and African Pentecostalism Osgood focuses on what had been learnt through subsequent interactions. Some of the first principles and practicalities for Evangelicals and African Pentecostals working together in mission and unity arose from stadium evangelism stemming from Luis Palau and Billy Graham missions in London. It was decided that African and Caribbean church leaders together with their congregations should be involved at every level. Even though there was a limited response from African Pentecostals, in post mission consultation, invitations were sent out with suggestions to 'develop new relationships'.

Morris Cerullo's Mission to London (MTL) in 1992 and his subsequent Morris Cerullo World Evangelism organization (MCWE) brought to the fore other challenges for the EA. Issues such as his emphasis on miracles and money raising together with 'prosperity teaching'. This resulted in requesting the resignation of the MCWE from the EA. Since MTL was the main interchurch initiative supported by

⁷ Ibid 60

⁸ Ibid 65

⁹ Ibid 81

¹⁰ Ibid 90

¹¹ Ibid 103

African neo – Pentecostals and the one that EA rejected because of their theology, this had consequences for evangelical and African- Pentecostal relationships.

Osgood describes how spiritual warfare and identificational repentance became key issues in working out how African neo Pentecostals and British Charismatics with the EA related. Although there was some agreement on the two subjects, neo- Pentecostals could not agree about identificational repentance and wounded history. Eventually the EA were able to position themselves in a non-adversarial way. The appointment of Joel Edwards as General Director of the EA was an attempt to bring African and Caribbean churches closer together with evangelicals but this was not seen as a turning point.

Osgood identifies other challenges such as the ‘word’ and ‘spirit’ debate, the lack of charismatic theology, Toronto Blessing, Alpha and Christian broadcasting. On some of these issues there were those who took a strong stand on hermeneutic principles. During this period African neo Pentecostal churches and Caribbean Pentecostal churches could not find a practical basis of working together or able to embrace charismatic or conservative evangelical praxis. Although they were keen to see racial harmony the main pursuit was to see numerical growth.

Principles and Practicalities in the interactions of 2000-2005

Referring to the start of the millennium, Osgood quotes Edwards (Director of EA) comment “ On the whole, evangelicalism, with all its shortfalls, continues to be an area of growth-not just in-numbers but in its contribution within local and regional ecumenical settings”.¹² Both the EA and ACEA were becoming recognized by the government as making a vital contribution to the health of local communities and a new relationship was established. Osgood however highlights some issues where it was difficult to establish clear agreement, for example, deliverance and abuse, financial mismanagement and church governance. Rather than reaching agreement between the two parties, he suggests evangelical principles were more influenced by the press rather than through honest discussion between the two groupings.

In conclusion Osgood refers to British evangelicalism’s continuing commitment to inclusiveness during 1985 to 2005 and although there was good interaction alongside “some kind of parallelism” with the Caribbean denominations, there were greater challenges with the distinctiveness of African neo-

¹²Ibid 174 - Edwards’ speech to EA Council, September 2002, abridged as “All Change,”

Pentecostalism. These are summarized as: the challenge of momentum which occurred particularly during large scale mission activity: of finding enough flexibility in the oscillation between enthusiasm and caution; of theological complexity, e.g. different concepts of revelation in the Bible, different views of redemption and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Although it is difficult to see what Osgood's vision of unity should look like, this book gives a fully comprehensive picture of some of the more nuanced aspects of pursuing unity between evangelical and African Pentecostals. Understanding the historical context, which is well worth spending time considering, helps clarify the challenges in establishing particular principles and practical applications. It should equip leaders, in various contexts, to develop honest ongoing relationships in working towards the future.