

PENTECOSTAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
“THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH”

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The Faith and Order document “The Nature and Mission of the Church” (NMC) has solicited a wide response from the Christian community since its inception in 1998, then entitled “The Nature and Purpose of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> The process of study on this document that has taken place in the ecumenical studies group of the Society for Pentecostal Studies is no exception. The group was formed in 2001 and currently represents the only formally organized, ecumenical think-tank among Pentecostal scholars, theologians and laypersons. NMC is the first major ecumenical consensus statement with the promise of containing significant contributions from the Pentecostal community. It demands and deserves careful scrutiny and feedback. Although no formal response to the document exists from Pentecostal churches, the ecumenical studies group has produced a number of statements on the ecumenical text.<sup>2</sup> These attempts reveal not only the increasing ecumenical commitment among Pentecostals; they also reflect a maturing ecclesiology among the ethnically, culturally and theologically diverse Pentecostal community.

On the following pages, I will address Pentecostal perspectives on NMC with particular emphasis on the fact that the title was changed from “The Nature and *Purpose* of the Church” to “The Nature and *Mission* of the Church.” In the first part, I will outline the four major approaches Pentecostals have taken to the ecumenical document during the study process. The second part of this paper focuses on the implications of the change in terminology from “purpose” to “mission” in light of the four Pentecostal approaches. Rather than offering a selective view of the key themes of the document, I will present Pentecostal perspectives on the Church’s mission and its relationship to the Church’s nature and purpose.

**Pentecostal Approaches to *The Nature and Mission of the Church***

Pentecostals have taken the first steps away from remaining anonymous ecumenists toward full “solicited” participation in the ecumenical movement.<sup>3</sup> Interaction with NMC at this early stage of Pentecostal engagement in ecumenical dialogue reveals that the heart of this ecumenical endeavor is formed largely by a concern for a genuine Pentecostal ecclesiology. Four approaches to the ecumenical document can be identified at this stage:

First, *Pentecostal perspectives on the nature of the text and its function as an ecumenical document*: Pentecostal scholars draw a comparison to the ecumenical interaction with the publication of the

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<sup>1</sup> See World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order Paper 198; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005) and its predecessor *The Nature and Purpose of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order Paper 181; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “‘The Nature and Purpose of the Church.’ Theological and Ecumenical Reflections from Pentecostal/Free Church Perspectives,” *Ecumenical Trends* 33.7 (2004): 1-7; Jeff Gros, “Pentecostal Response to *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*,” *Ecumenical Trends* 33.7 (2004): 1; Thomas P. Rausch, “A Response to Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen on ‘The Nature and Purpose of the Church,’” *Ecumenical Trends* 33.7 (2004): 8-11; Frank D. Macchia, “*The Nature and Purpose of the Church*: A Pentecostal Response,” *Ecumenical Trends* 34.7 (2005): 1-6; Edmund Rybarczyk, “A Response to Dr. Frank Macchia,” *Ecumenical Trends* 34.7 (2004): 7-10; Caleb Oladipo, “A Response to Dr. Frank Macchia,” *Ecumenical Trends* 34.7 (2004): 10-12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Anonymous Ecumenists? Pentecostals and the Struggle for Christian Identity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 37.1 (Winter 2000): 13-27.

convergence text “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” (BEM) of 1982, in which NMC can be situated.<sup>4</sup> Critique of that document, particularly from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox perspectives, went clearly beyond the convergences reported in BEM and pointed to issues of visible separation that require further and deeper attention to the questions of ecclesiology. Similarly, Pentecostal perspectives on NMC point to the further need to resolve some of the remaining problematic differences in contemporary theologies of the Church.

Second, *Pentecostal perspectives on the structure and central themes of the document*: This approach generally situates the Faith and Order text within the formative influence of the official Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue and its documents “Perspectives on Koinonia” (1989) and “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness” (1997). Convergence is found largely on the basis of an ecclesiology that portrays the Church as *koinonia* or trinitarian communion, although the basis for this theology is perceived less as an abstract and speculative concept than an experiential, doxological reality.<sup>5</sup> Concerns among Pentecostals about NMC consequently focus on the historical reality of the Church, the relationship of Church and Trinity, the (minimal) conditions of ecclesiality, as well as the ministry of the Church and its relationship to spiritual gifts, healing and worship.<sup>6</sup>

Third, *Pentecostal perspectives on the potential ecumenical ramifications of the document*: This approach views the work of the World Council of Churches, at the least, as a summary of ecumenical discussions and a work in progress. From an ecclesiological perspective, the text challenges Pentecostals to consider more carefully the role of baptism, the Eucharist, and social justice as part of Christian initiation, vocation and ministry. On the other hand, Pentecostals lament that the text does not address the unity of the Church more explicitly and extensively as part of an ecumenical ecclesiology.<sup>7</sup> The prominent place the document gives to Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17 reflects the ecumenical convictions of early twentieth century North American Pentecostalism, which saw itself as a movement of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the global fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer.<sup>8</sup> NMC, on the other hand, is based almost exclusively on ecclesiologies of traditional churches in the West and ignores, for example, the changes in faith and praxis in the southern hemisphere, not only among Pentecostals. As a result, the potential ramifications of NMC are seen as strongest in the area of ecclesiology proper (e.g. faith, baptism, Eucharist, ministry, Church government) and as weakest in the actualization of Christian unity in the culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse churches of global Christianity.

Finally, *Pentecostal perspectives on the development of an ecumenical ecclesiology*: This perspective reveals the analytical-critical position of Pentecostals to NMC and the Pentecostal evaluation of the promises and opportunities the document entails with regard to the future development of an ecumenical ecclesiology in general. Pentecostals are critical of the ecclesiological task as it relates to a global ecumenical perspective of faith and praxis as long as this task is carried out within the confines of the hypothesis that there exists a singular, universal ecclesiology. Instead, many Pentecostals suggest that there exists a plurality of ecclesial self-understandings and nuances that are theologically complementary and desirable since they are often born from and determined by a community’s experience and praxis of faith rather than a division of doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the immediate task of ecclesiology is seen as much in the formal “declaration” of convergence as

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<sup>4</sup> See Kärkkäinen, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church,” 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> See Macchia, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church,” 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> See Kärkkäinen, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church,” 6.

<sup>7</sup> See Macchia, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church,” 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Taking Stock of Pentecostalism: The Personal Reflections of a Retiring Editor,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15.3 (Spring 1993): 37.

<sup>9</sup> See Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 121-202; Simon Chan, “Mother Church: Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 22.2 (Fall 2000): 177-208; Miroslav Volf, “The Nature of the Church,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 1.26 (2002): 68-75; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2002), 167-233.

it is found in the “actualization” and “application” of an ecumenical praxis in the Christian ecclesial communities.

The recent initiative to rename the Faith and Order document and to replace the term “purpose” with the term “mission” has not yet been addressed by the Pentecostal community. In the following, I will deal with the implications of this change in light of the four Pentecostal approaches outlined above: the nature of the text and its function as an ecumenical document, the structure and central themes of the document, the potential ecumenical ramifications of the text, and the development of an ecumenical ecclesiology.

### **Pentecostal Perspectives on the Purpose and Mission of the Church**

The change in terms from “purpose” to “mission” in the title of the document is a fortuitous one. It reflects the ecumenical insight that the God-given intention for the Church is realized in history and actualized in the world only when the Church pursues its purpose with a sense of unity, integrity, urgency, and mission. At the same time, the divine “purpose” of the Church is an essential part of the Church *as mystery* and cannot be fully explained in any document, while the focus on “mission” speaks of the divine purpose primarily as it is revealed to the Church *in history*. To this end, NMC speaks with particular frequency about the Church’s mission in terms of “proclamation” and “concrete actions” in the world.

The title of the document implies that the mission *of* the Church is intrinsically connected with its nature *as* the Church. Indeed, the text acknowledges that “mission ... belongs to the very being of the Church” (no. 35) and speaks of this task primarily in terms of worship, service and proclamation (no. 36) in relation “both to the nature of God’s being and the practical demands of authentic mission” (no. 35). “The mission of the Church is to serve the purpose of God” and hence “the Church cannot be true to itself without ... preaching the Word, bearing witness to the great deeds of God and inviting everyone to repentance ..., baptism ... and the fuller life” of Christian discipleship (no. 37). This task is cast primarily in the image of the proclamation of the gospel “in word and deed” (nos. 35; 110) which entails advocacy and care for the poor and marginalized, the exposure and transformation of unjust structures, works of compassion and mercy, and the healing and reconciliation of relationships between creation and humanity (no. 40). The heart and integrity of the Church’s mission is formed by “witness through *proclamation*, and *concrete actions* in union with all people of goodwill” (no. 47). The following image offers a broad synthesis of NMC’s ecclesiology of mission.

#### *Illustration 1. NMC ecclesiology*

Church = nature + mission [proclamation + concrete action]

The meaning of the Church’s mission has been an important part of the Pentecostal dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and a major theme during its fourth phase 1990-1997. Pentecostals in this dialogue bound the meaning of mission not to proclamation and concrete actions but more intimately to the Church’s call to *evangelize* and identified its mission explicitly as a response to Christ’s commission in the Scriptures and as the task to proclaim the same Christ as Lord and Savior in the world today in light of the hope of Christ’s imminent return in judgment and the hope of a new creation.<sup>10</sup> Simply put, for Pentecostals mission *is* evangelization. However, this emphasis should not be perceived as a reduction of the missionary task of the Church to the articulation of the gospel but instead as a preference in theological focus and

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<sup>10</sup> See “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness: The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue (1990-1997) between the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders,” *Pneuma. Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 21.1 (Spring 1999): 11-51; see also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness: Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue on Mission, 1990-1997,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25.1 (January 2001): 16-18, 20-22; idem, *Ad Ultimum Terrae: Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness in the Roman Catholic Pentecostal Dialogue, 1990-1997* (Studies in the intercultural history of Christianity 117; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999).

positioning of the ecclesial self-understanding of Pentecostals in the ecumenical landscape. NMC highlights that “evangelization is ... the foremost task of the church” (no. 110) but the absence of any further definition of this task reveals the underlying assumption that evangelization is largely synonymous with the ministry of service and proclamation advocated throughout NMC.<sup>11</sup> Put differently, no distinction is made between evangelization and service, on a missiological level, and between evangelization and mission, on the ecclesiological level. This neglect is particularly surprising in light of the recent emphasis on new evangelization in many churches.<sup>12</sup> In light of the four Pentecostal approaches outlined above, this aspect points to a number of critical issues:

1. The nature of the text and its function as an ecumenical document: Understandably, NMC reflects very little Pentecostal language. As a consensus statement that combines the views of many ecclesial communities this cannot be expected. Nonetheless, the language of the document in general should reflect and invite the participation of all churches in casting a common understanding of the nature and mission of the Church. The question is, therefore, can Pentecostal observers find their theological position reflected in the document? This question is accentuated when one considers the ethnic, economic and socio-cultural diversity among Pentecostals that geographically and ecclesiological shifts away from the West and toward the southern hemisphere to include greater theological emphasis on liberation, exorcism, healing, the transformation of cultures, dialogue among religions, and the reconciliation of nations. In order to function as an ecumenical consensus text in the twenty-first century, Pentecostals call for a more consistent integration of non-Western Christians who experience the nature and mission of the Church in ways often radically different from the established European and North American mindset.<sup>13</sup>

2. The structure and central themes of the document: Any successful revision of the nature and function of the document will depend largely on the structure of the text and its themes. At this time, many Pentecostals would be hard-pressed to find their emphasis on mission as evangelization reflected in the text of the ecumenical document. The Pentecostal perspectives may be summarized as follows:

Mission as evangelization places emphasis on “proclamation” only insofar as the act of proclamation encompasses not only the content of the message of salvation but also the whole life of the Christian and the community. Proclamation is therefore always witness in worship and holiness, a task that Pentecostals find accomplished primarily through the work of God’s Spirit.<sup>14</sup> NMC speaks of proclamation primarily as a verbal process and situates it in the communication of the gospel through words and a fleeting comment on “the love of its members for one

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<sup>11</sup> See also Neville Callam, “The Mission of the Church in the World Council of Churches’ Text on the Nature and Purpose of the Church,” *International Review of Mission* 90.358 (2001): 239.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Wolfgang Vondey, “New Evangelization and Liturgical Praxis in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Studia Liturgica. An International Ecumenical Review for Liturgical Research and Renewal* 36.2 (2006): forthcoming. “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation,” *International Review of Missions* 71 (1982): 427-51.

<sup>13</sup> See Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 167-202; Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187-286; David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Manuel Quintero, *Jubileo, La Fiesta del Espíritu: Identidad y Misión del Pentecostalismo Latinoamericano* (Maracaibo, Venezuela: Comisión Evangélica Pentecostal Latinoamericana, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Carmelo E. Alvarez, “Mission as Liberating Spirit: Disciples and Pentecostals in Venezuela,” *Disciplina* 62.4 (2002): 116-128; J. A. B. Jongeneel, “Ecumenical, Evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic Views on Mission as a Movement of the Holy Spirit,” in *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism: Essays on Intellectual Theology: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Walter J. Hollenweger*, edited by J. A. B. Jongeneel (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 231-246; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Mission, Spirit and Eschatology: An Outline of a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Mission,” *Mission Studies* 16.1 (1999): 73-94; Andrew M. Lord, “Mission Eschatology: A Framework for Mission in the Spirit,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (December 1997): 111-123; John Christopher Thomas, “The Spirit, Healing of Mission: An Overview of the Biblical Canon,” *International Review of Mission* 93.370-371 (2004): 421-442.

another, the quality of its service to those in need, a just and disciplined life and a fair exercise of power and authority” (no. 88).<sup>15</sup>

Mission *as* evangelization places emphasis on “concrete actions” only insofar as these actualize the content and manner of what is proclaimed in a person’s witness to the world. NMC neglects to point out not only what kind of concrete actions belong to the nature and mission of the Church and thus form “the practical demands of authentic mission” but also how these actions are made possible and these demands can be met in the Church. The Pentecostal community views the “baptism in the Holy Spirit” as essential for every believer to receive empowerment for Christian witness. NMC acknowledges the gifts of the Holy Spirit as necessary for the fulfillment of the Church’s mission (no. 83) yet speaks of them primarily in terms of obligations, responsibility and accountability without first referring to the Spirit’s empowerment for evangelization through words of wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, discernment of spirits, healing, or the working of miracles.

In seeing mission *as* evangelization, Pentecostals place emphasis on the doxological, eschatological and charismatic aspects of the life of the Church that form the heart of the Church’s mission. NMC says surprisingly little about the role of worship, praise or spiritual warfare in mission. No sense of urgency can be detected in the Church’s proclamation and concrete actions. The Church is “open to the free activity of the Holy Spirit” while being exposed to change, individual, cultural and historical conditioning and the power of sin (no. 50), yet nothing is said about the concrete individual, cultural and historical forms this work of God’s Spirit takes in the Church and in the world. Put differently, NMC runs the risk of disconnecting pneumatology and eschatology from ecclesiology in a way that portrays the Church as a heavenly city in a constant stage of missionary pilgrimage without any lasting impact on the world here and now as it presents the possibility of opening to the full realization of the kingdom of God at any time and any place.

3. The potential ecumenical ramifications of the text: NMC proposes to be a work in progress.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the text holds a number of promises for the Pentecostal community as a genuine Pentecostal theology begins to emerge. The chief benefit is the mere exposure of ecumenical consensus on the Church, a reality still unknown to many Pentecostals. The importance Pentecostals place on pneumatology, eschatology, and doxology for an understanding of the Church could be complemented by the emphasis NMC places on trinitarian theology, history, and service in the world. Pentecostals could learn about the unity already existing among the visibly divided churches and the significance of preserving and nourishing that unity for the fulfillment of the Church’s mission. In praxis, this means that Pentecostals, among others, are called to consider the implications of an emerging theological convergence on the nature and mission of the Church and the concrete steps that can be taken toward mutual recognition in the faith and praxis of the churches. All this depends not only on what is being said in the document but also on how it is being said and whether it ever reaches those who should listen.

The ecumenical movement has produced a number of consensus statements in recent decades. The ecumenical ramifications of this process depend only secondarily on the challenge to *accept* the implications of these common affirmations into the life of the churches. The primary challenge remains to this day to *introduce* the agreed statements first of all to the various communities that participated in its production. This is a particular challenge among the worldwide phenomenon of Pentecostalism which lacks the structures, institutional support, public recognition, and promotion of the ecumenical agenda. The task of incorporating an

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Callam, “The Mission of the Church in the World Council of Churches,” 239.

<sup>16</sup> The subtitle of NMC calls it “a stage on the way to a common statement.” On the process see also Alan D. Falconer, “The Church: God’s Gift to the World – On the Nature and Purpose of the Church,” *International Review of Mission* 90.359 (2001): 396-397.

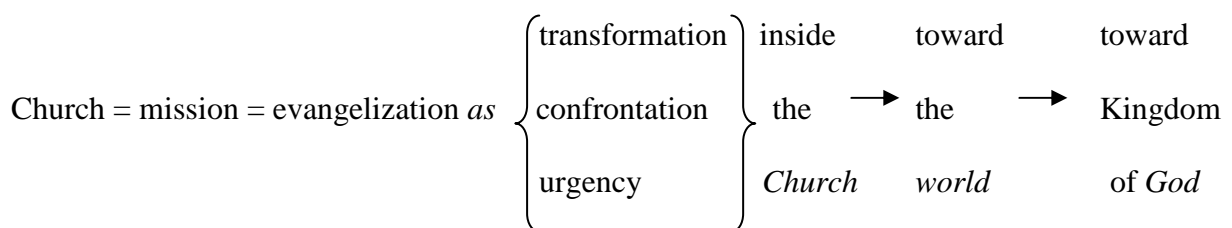
ecumenical sensitivity in the life of its communities rest only partly on the shoulders of Pentecostals; it is fundamentally a task that the ecumenical community has not yet addressed.<sup>17</sup>

4. The development of an ecumenical ecclesiology: The successful distribution of the final document in the churches and communities of the Pentecostal traditions could speak to the importance of the ecclesial life in communion and call Pentecostals to consider the significance of baptism, Eucharist and ministry in a way that has not been achieved by previous ecumenical documents. Despite well-known concerns about the predominance of sacramental categories in the ecclesiology of NMC, the development of an ecumenical ecclesiology is likely not hindered by distinctions of ecclesial praxis but challenged more immediately by ecumenical prejudices, assumptions and generalizations.<sup>18</sup> The most important among those is the presumed antithesis of Pentecostalism and ecumenism.

In essence, there is no contradistinction between an ecumenical ecclesiology and a Pentecostal ecclesiology. Pentecostal theology is ecumenical by virtue of the origin in and emergence of Pentecostals from virtually all forms and branches of the visibly divided churches. Rather than perceiving Pentecostals as distinct from the established theological and religious traditions from which they emerged, the ecclesiality of worldwide Pentecostalism can be perceived only in continuing awareness of other confessions not as an alternative to but as a root and source of Pentecostal life and praxis. A more ecumenical way of expressing the Pentecostal contribution to an ecumenical ecclesiology would be to say that Pentecostals are no longer pursuing the ecclesial life from which they emerged although they remain ecclesologically bound to their experience of that life.<sup>19</sup> As a result, there exists a variety of “experiences” among Pentecostals depending on the negative or positive influence of particular forms and elements of ecclesial faith and praxis on a person’s life. For example, some may have found the celebration of the Eucharist life-transforming while others lost all sense for its significance in the daily ritual of the ecclesial life in which they were raised.

Pentecostals would reserve room for such experiences and migrations within and among ecclesial communities as part of the nature and mission of the Church which, not only for Pentecostals, is always being renewed. In many ways, therefore, the ecclesial experience of Pentecostals finds the mission of the Church starting not outside of its boundaries but within.<sup>20</sup> From there the Church’s mission extends into the world only to return again to itself. Worship, service, and proclamation are acts of the churches that originate *within* the churches and are directed *toward* the churches in order to affirm the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the one Church *beyond* the churches and into the world. This continuous dynamism is what moves the whole Church along the way and confronts it with the kingdom of God (see Illustration 2).

*Illustration 2. Pentecostal ecclesiology*



<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Vondey, “Presuppositions for Pentecostal Engagement in Ecumenical Dialogue.” *Exchange: Journal for Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 30.4 (2001): 344-358, idem, “Appeal for a Pentecostal Council for Ecumenical Dialogue.” *Mid-Stream* 40.3 (July 2001): 45-56.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Rybarczyk, “A Response to Dr. Frank Macchia’s Paper,” 9.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Vondey, “Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology. Implications of the Theology of Amos Yong,” *Pneuma. Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 28.1 (2006): forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> See the emphasis on change and conversion within the Church in Groupes des Dombes, *Pour la conversion des églises. Identité et changement dans la dynamique de la communion* (Paris: Centurion, 1991).

Such an ecclesiological concept stands in sharp contrast to the theology of NMC, which speaks of the Church as a combination of its nature and mission and defines the latter in terms of proclamation and concrete action (see Illustration 1). For Pentecostals, Church is a reflective, discerning reality that finds consensus about its nature and mission not only in formal statements but in an often painful process of repentance, forgiveness, conversion and renewal in and among the churches *while* the Church proclaims the gospel to the world. I suggest that this form of evangelistic, contextual, critical, non-triumphant, and pragmatic Pentecostal ecclesiology has much to say to what often appears as an idealistic, romantic, and authoritarian ecclesiology in the text of NMC. In light of these insights, the next stages in the development of an ecumenical consensus on the nature and mission of the Church will likely prove to become a catalyst in the development of a genuine ecclesiology in the Pentecostal traditions which, surprisingly, still have not produced a comprehensive theology of mission.