
My Pilgrimage in Mission

Walter J. Hollenweger

I was born in 1927 in Antwerp, Belgium; my father was a steward on a British ocean liner, and the British hired their crews in Belgium. When the Great Depression broke out in 1929, foreigners were the first to lose their jobs. We had to return to Switzerland, and there was great misery in the family.

From Bank Clerk to Evangelist

I decided not to be poor like my father but to become comfortably rich. In 1943 I began an apprenticeship at a private bank in Zurich. I also worked at the Zurich Stock Exchange, which allowed me to read the *Financial Times* and other economic and financial literature. So I began to understand the mechanisms of international finance and trade.

As usual at the time, I was sent to Sunday school in the Swiss Reformed Church. It was utter chaos, with three hundred children shouting and making noise, so I did not understand a thing. I protested to my mother that if I had to go to Sunday school instead of playing football, then I wanted at least to learn something. So my mother transferred me to a Pentecostal Sunday school, where there was discipline. An older woman told Bible stories, which I liked very much. I quickly became their youth leader and conductor of the youth choir.

Although I listened regularly to reports of missionaries on furlough, I never felt a call to overseas mission. God spoke in another way to me. He told me that it was not my calling to work at the stock exchange to make rich people richer, but instead to serve as a Pentecostal pastor. This I did not like at all, because I knew that Pentecostal pastors could not become rich—at least not at that time. So I wrestled with God for two years, until I suddenly experienced what the Pentecostals call “baptism in the Spirit.” It was a kind of fire experience, similar to the one Blaise Pascal describes in his famous memorial that was found after his death, sown into his jacket. The result of this deep and shaking experience was that I stopped resisting God’s call to the ministry. Together with my future wife, Erica Busslinger, I went to the International Bible Training Institute in England (1948–49). Upon our return to Switzerland I was offered a fantastic banking career, which I declined. Shortly thereafter I was ordained pastor of the Swiss Pentecostal Mission and on June 30, 1951, we were married.

From 1955 to 1957 we experienced a considerable revival in Zurich. The congregation doubled in a short time, and many people were healed. I invited new converts to attend Bible courses in private homes so that they could get to know the older members of the congregation. Most of these new participants did not own a Bible, so I had to start from the beginning and explain what the big numbers (chapters) and small numbers (verses) meant. They spoke unashamedly in the office or the factory about their newly acquired Bible knowledge. Such enthusiasm provoked their colleagues to ask if they too could come to the Bible course.

In spite of considerable success, I was not convinced of my

own biblical competence, since I had no access to the biblical languages or scholarly commentaries. In using the official translation of the Reformed Church of Zurich (the so-called Zurich translation, which was extremely influential on the King James Bible),¹ I was struck by the critical notes. For instance, there was a note on Matthew 1:16 stating that, according to Old Syriac manuscripts, Jesus was the son of Joseph. Other notes stated that the story of the adulterous woman in John 8, as well as the end of the Gospel of Mark, were missing in the oldest manuscripts. My teachers from England and my colleagues in the pastorate did not have a clue how to deal with such information. I therefore asked a Presbyterian pastor with a university education what he thought about these notes. He advised me not to believe them, as they were written by unbelieving professors of theology. This answer disappointed me. Even if the notes were written by unbelieving professors, the question was whether the statements were true or false. I decided to find out for myself.

I prayed and fasted several weeks together with my wife, and we came to the conclusion that I would pass the Swiss Matriculation Examination for Greek, Latin, French, German, mathematics, and many other topics. I then would study theology at the University of Zurich, and my wife would take up her former profession as private secretary to an industrialist. My former teacher, Donald Gee, and an American friend, David J. Du Plessis, encouraged me in this direction.² Both warned me not to go to an American Bible college but to do my studies in my own country, or I would never be taken seriously. So, while serving as a part-time Pentecostal pastor, holding meetings on Sundays and teaching Bible courses in the evenings, I studied during the days at the university. As a consequence of my studies, we have no children. This was a conscious decision. At the time, no scholarships were available for married people. My wife was the breadwinner, and when I finished my studies we were both approaching forty.

Pastor and Missionary Executive

As a pastor of the Swiss Pentecostal Mission (1950–58), I was ex officio a member of its mission committee. I realized quickly that in most cases, the indigenous evangelists, who worked under the missionaries, were better equipped for missionary and educational work than the Swiss missionaries, who in general had only an elementary education. This imbalance resulted in well-meaning but uninformed mission policy.

One particularly telling example was that the Pentecostal mission committee assumed that what was good for Switzerland must also be good for Lesotho, in southern Africa. The apprenticeship system has been a blessing for Switzerland and is the backbone of its quality industry. The mission committee collected money to build a school for apprentices in Lesotho and hired a Swissair plane to fly the whole infrastructure down to Lesotho. When it arrived, the African Christians were not amused. They had not even been asked if this was what they wanted. Besides, who were to be the students, and who the teachers? And how were the costs of running the program to be met? Since these questions went unanswered, the Swiss were given one week to pack their rubbish and fly it back home. The committee was angry, feeling that this was yet another example of how stupid

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and ungrateful the Africans were. It did not dawn on them that, in the kingdom of God, money is not enough. We also need understanding.

As a pastor I did not always follow the Pentecostal party line. I did not tell young female converts that a Christian woman had to have long hair (1 Cor. 11:6) or that all jewelry—even wooden necklaces—was an abomination before the Lord.³ I questioned the widespread conviction that the Bible was written “for us.” If it was written for us, why was it not written in German? And why was it addressed to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians,

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to Theophilus, to Timothy, or to the seven churches in Asia Minor? It seemed to me that those who want to take the Word of God seriously have to answer these questions. Furthermore, I challenged some of their interpretations, such as the statement that the Jews are the only rightful heirs to Palestine. According to the biblical legends, not only Jews but also Arabs (the descendants of Ishmael) are heirs to Palestine. The promise of the “Holy Land” was addressed to Abraham, father of Jews and Arabs. All of this created tensions.

My professors, however, liked my critical interventions and encouraged me to criticize their teaching. This freedom was totally new to me. The new converts in my church liked my new approach to the Bible, but the older members did not. They prayed publicly that I should fail my examinations, something that the Lord, in his wisdom, prevented!

These painful experiences and unexpected open doors elsewhere suggested to me that my spiritual home perhaps no longer lay within the small Swiss Pentecostal Mission. As is usual in such situations, there were many harsh words on both sides. It was simply inconceivable to my Pentecostal friends that somebody who had tasted “the highest pinnacle of Christian life” would be prepared to drink from the “troubled fountains” of “unbelieving” and “liberal” theologians (in fact, they had not read a single line of the theologians whom they condemned), and they invented all kinds of confabulations to “explain” the anomaly.

Pioneer Researcher on Pentecostalism

Pentecostals in Switzerland at that time were members of the Swiss Reformed Church as a matter of course, so it was no problem for me to prepare for the ministry in this church. In 1961 I was ordained, and at the same time I was appointed research assistant at the University of Zurich. My doctoral father, Fritz Blanke, a pioneer in Anabaptist history, told me that if I did not write my dissertation on Pentecostalism, he probably never would get a doctoral researcher qualified for this work. I told him this would not be easy; with English, German, and French we had only the opinions of the American, British, German, Swiss, and French missionaries. Much more interesting were the convictions of Third World, Russian, or Romanian Pentecostals them-

selves. Professor Blanke noted that most of the languages of these other groups were taught at the university. So, over the next several years I studied them, learning in all about twenty more languages.

A whole new world opened up before me. What I discovered was not the Pentecostalism I knew from Switzerland or what I was acquainted with at the British Bible school. I discovered a bewildering, pluralistic, worldwide, ecumenical movement. On almost all points of doctrine and ethics, there existed variations differing from what I had learned. In particular it became obvious that the type of Pentecostalism presented to the Western public through the media domination of American Pentecostalism is, within the worldwide Pentecostal community, a very small minority, comparable to the minority of the Vatican within Roman Catholicism.⁴

Unfortunately, historian Philip Jenkins has failed to grasp this fact.⁵ He uses the basic categories “conservative” and “liberal” to describe this worldwide revival. But this revival cannot be described in the terms of a U.S. election. Third-World Pentecostalism has its own dignity. Certainly Pentecostals use evangelical language; they do not know any other. That does not prevent some of them from being ministers in left-wing governments. Third-World Pentecostals trust the Bible in everything, including financial matters, without thereby becoming clones of Western fundamentalism.

My research was published in a ten-volume *Handbuch der Pfingstbewegung*.⁶ It contains the declarations of faith of all Pentecostal denominations worldwide known to me at the time, in the original languages and in German translation, plus other information and analysis.

During this time in my life, one of the most outspoken critics of German Pentecostalism asked me to forswear in public all Pentecostal connections. “How can I?” I asked him. “In spite of all its shortcomings, I became a Christian through Pentecostalism. One does not forswear one’s mother.” I have remained in lifelong contact with Pentecostalism. In Birmingham, England, together with others, I founded an institute at the university in order to train black Pentecostal working pastors, and I trained many Pentecostal educators through my doctoral programs.⁷ Occasionally I taught in their Bible schools and preached in their churches. I even received the Life-Time Achievement Award from the Society of Pentecostal Studies in recognition of my scholarly contributions.⁸

In the year 2003 I gave my library on Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like churches and my vast archive to the Free University of Amsterdam. They founded a Hollenweger Center for the interdisciplinary, intercultural, and ecumenical study of Pentecostal and charismatic movements. It offers a postgraduate program and online resources on Pentecostalism.

Professor of Mission at a Secular University

In 1965 I was called to the World Council of Churches as secretary for evangelism and served there until 1971. During that time I realized that mission in the mainline churches, including many evangelical churches, was not in the first instance evangelistic work. They still used the ideology of “saving souls” in their propaganda, but most of their activity was educational and general development work.

When I was appointed the first and only professor of mission at the University of Birmingham in Britain (1971–89), I was confronted even more with the inherent discrepancies in Western mission. I was often asked where I had been a missionary, the

questioners expecting me to speak about India or China or Africa. I answered truthfully that, in the past, I served in Switzerland and now in Birmingham. Indeed Europe—and perhaps also the United States—is in need of a modern type of missionary.

My educational appointment was simultaneously at the Selly Oak Colleges, also in Birmingham. At these institutions, one of my tasks was to lecture to future missionaries. Most of them were well-meaning young people with rather weak educational backgrounds, especially regarding their language capacities, but with strong convictions about being “called” to missionary work. Many of them wanted to teach theology overseas but did not know much about the diversity of Christian theology, not to speak of the history of Christian theology. They believed with all their hearts that their conversion experience and their British understanding of the New Testament were sufficient preparation for missionary work—a catastrophic misunderstanding when confronted with the situation overseas.

I also taught an increasing number of doctoral students from all over the world.⁹ Those who came from Third World countries typically were better educated than the missionary candidates. Their problem was financial. One day a black student from South Africa told me that he had run out of money and would have to go back home. I told all the students and future missionaries and all my friends to pray for this doctoral student. The result was rather meager. When the time came for him to pay his university fee, I pleaded with the registrar’s office, “Please give us another two weeks. We are praying for him that he will get the necessary money.”

Now the University of Birmingham is not a Christian Bible school; it is a secular university. Most of its staff members—and even some of its theology professors—are agnostics. The registrar smiled and said, “Of course, we grant him the two weeks.” In the meantime I phoned the Methodist missionary office in London and told them about the plight of the student, who was a Methodist pastor. The answer was an absolute and firm No. I insisted that it would be more profitable to train South African blacks to the highest possible level than to send well-meaning but ill-prepared British young people to South Africa. “This student,” I said, “is of exceptional quality and will become an important professor at one of the South African universities or perhaps a cabinet minister in postapartheid South Africa. It is in your interest to give him the best possible education.” My efforts were in vain. The Methodist Missionary Board probably did not believe in a postapartheid South Africa. In any case, they doubted that a Zulu could become a university professor.

I feared I had to give up, but then God intervened. I received a letter from a medical doctor who had attended the Methodist board meeting where my request was discussed and rejected. He wrote that he was ashamed of his church and enclosed a check for the amount needed. I went back to the registrar, paid the money, and said, “Mr. Bongani Mazibuko stays at the university.” Looking at the astonished faces, I added, “I told you we were going to pray for Mazibuko.” Indeed, Bongani Mazibuko finished his dissertation and became dean of the Department of Missiology at the University of Durham, South Africa.¹⁰ This experience confirmed the direction I would take in mission. Dozens of students who came through my courses are now well-trained theologians teaching in their native countries. Sometimes they or their children visit me in Krattigen, my home in retirement in Switzerland.

Indeed, I am astonished that Third World Christians are eager to learn about Christianity and the Bible from a white European. I have asked many of them why they come to me to study theology, and their answer is the same: “It is because of that

man Jesus of Nazareth.” This Jesus, this historical man, has a tremendous attraction for Christians and non-Christians. Not our Christologies, not our theories about Jesus, but Jesus “according to the flesh” (*pace* Paul, 2 Cor. 5:16). These Christians do not want to be on their own. They want to be part of the church family worldwide, to know the ecumenical tradition of this Jesus.

A New Understanding of Mission

My experiences in the Western Pentecostal church, the WCC, the university, and the classroom have brought me to a new understanding of mission, one that redefines four standard components of mission. First, because mission is about *church growth*, we must invest our resources in indigenous evangelists, pastors, and theologians, who can do the job better and cheaper than Westerners. This fact is slowly but surely dawning on some mission societies. Moreover, in many places of the world the departure of missionaries has given the indigenous churches an important evangelistic impetus.

Second, mission is about *theological education*, but not in the one-directional approach of the past. It has been reasoned that, since many independent Third World churches are theologically rough and underdeveloped, we Westerners have to send them our theological teachers. Certainly Third World churches could learn something from Western theology, if we send them people who have done their homework and know that Western Christianity is a textbook example of a syncretistic Christianity; namely, a blend of Christianity and capitalism, of advertising and the Gospel.¹¹ How is our brand of syncretism any better than that of an Indian guru church or the South African Zionists? If we understand that our task is to teach *and* to learn, that theological education is a mutual learning process, and if our missionaries and theological teachers learn as much from their students as they from them, then this would be a very promising approach to mission. I, for my part, have learned more from my students than from anybody else; especially I have learned to keep quiet on issues where I am not competent.

One important aspect of that learning process would be to integrate into our ministry a therapeutic aspect dealing with the body. It has always astonished me how important the body was

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for Jesus. We misuse such healing texts as sermon texts, instead of taking them as examples for our liturgy. We should take seriously the World Health Organization’s appeal not to reject Korean, African, or Latin American therapeutic traditions, but to combine them with Western analytic medical traditions.¹²

Third, mission that typically comes in the form of *development aid* (e.g., sending food to the starving people in Bangladesh or Sudan) misunderstands the problem. (Aid is a secondary solution, although in some circumstances it might be necessary.) The problem is not in the first instance to be tackled in India or in Africa, but at the places where decisions on life and death for the majority of human beings are made, namely Frankfurt, Zurich,

London, and New York. We need to abolish trade obstacles, in particular, those in the agricultural sector. We speak proudly about globalization when it is to our advantage, but when Third World countries produce cheaper and better steel, food, or cars, we close our frontiers or massively subsidize our products. This system is evil, even if those who manage it are “good Christians.”

What did Christ do when he encountered corruption that led to systemic poverty and misery? He went directly to the exploiter—he invited himself to Zacchaeus’s house! We do not know what Jesus told him, but we know that this chief executive officer of the Roman administration gave away half his fortune, and where he had wronged people, he paid them back fourfold.

I am pleading for a *Zacchaeus* mission, for people to evangelize the Zacchaeuses of our time. The best missionaries to the Bantu are Bantus, to the Dalit are Dalits, and the best missionaries to those who administer our trade system are bankers, leading managers, and CEOs. It is said that the 200 richest people of the world possess as much as the two billion poorest ones. Of these 200 rich people some are born-again Christians. If the Zacchaeus mission can convince the rich people (both the born-again and the others) that the Holy Spirit is interested not only in that which happens in the bedroom but equally in that which happens in the boardroom, then our trade system would change drastically.

Fourth, because mission has to do with our *ecumenical calling*, we ought to begin now at our doorsteps. The Lord has sent us hundreds of missionaries from the Third World. They are the direct or indirect product of our mission efforts. Now they come back to us in the form of immigrants, refugees, and foreign students. They belong to our synods, universities, and mission societies. They help us in understanding our ecumenical calling. They might also vitalize our worn-out Christianity.¹³

Evangelist Through Theological Plays

In 1989 my wife and I returned to Switzerland, and I was commissioned to write the Jubilee play for the 700th Anniversary of Switzerland. In Birmingham I had begun to write plays for my students because many of the black students went to sleep

during my lectures.¹⁴ This was understandable because they were working the whole day as bus drivers or railway workers and came to the university in the evening and on weekends.¹⁵ I told them, “If you sleep during my lectures, you will not pass your examination.” “Well,” they answered, “the way you teach us, we cannot understand you.”

“How must I teach you so that you can understand?” I asked. “Only what we have sung, danced, and played have we understood,” was their response. So, together with the drama, music, and dance departments, I began to experiment with using plays, music, and dance for university theological education.

The results were astonishing. My students wrote better examinations, which caused the white students also to want to become part of these innovative educational programs. I continued to explore this approach by writing the *Bonhoeffer Requiem*, which premiered in the Deutschlandhalle in Berlin for 10,000 spectators—at the very place where Goebbels and Hitler had held their inflammatory meetings.¹⁶

My ambition is to involve people who have given up the church in a new way of theological and missionary thinking. Instead of inviting them to an evangelistic meeting, I involve non-Christians in a theological play that lets them relive the life of Pilate or Peter or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer. Through this active evangelism the unchurched evangelize themselves on the basis of biblical or theological texts. They will never forget having played Pilate, Maria von Wedemeyer, or even Jesus. Some of them become Christians.

I am convinced that, at least in Europe, missionary work of the past—in which a pastor or evangelist told an audience that they were sinners and needed conversion—is over. They know that they are sinners. What they do not know is the power of prayer and the beauty of life that is not dominated by money and prestige. People must be immersed in a story that lets them experience in their bones the biblical promise. If some of the players are committed Christians, all the better. They will learn from them that it is worthwhile to give up all in order to follow the man from Galilee. The life testimony of ordinary Christians can turn our churches into convincing missionary congregations.

Notes

1. Walter J. Hollenweger, “Zwingli Einfluss in England,” *Reformiertes Erbe. Festschrift für Gottfried W. Locher*, ed. Heiko A. Obermann et al. (Zurich: TVZ, 1992), 1:171–86.
2. Walter J. Hollenweger, “Two Extraordinary Pentecostal Ecumenists: The Letters of Donald Gee and David J. Du Plessis,” *Ecumenical Review* 52, no. 3 (July 2000): 391–402.
3. This story is told in detail in Walter J. Hollenweger, “The Challenge of Reconciliation,” *Journal of European Pentecostal Theological Association* 19 (1999): 5–16.
4. This is not the only parallel between Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism; see Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origin and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), pp. 143–80.
5. Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002). For the example from Burkina Faso, see Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, p. 267.
6. Walter J. Hollenweger, *Handbuch der Pfingstbewegung*, 10 vols. (Geneva, 1965–67), available from Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn. See also my later work, *The Pentecostals* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988) and, in particular, *Pentecostalism: Origin and Developments Worldwide*. An update is available at www.epcra.ch.
7. “Interaction Between Black and White,” in Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, pp. 106–16.
8. Award presented in 1999 at Evangel University, Springfield, Missouri.
9. An incomplete list of my postgraduate students is in Jan A. B. Jongeneel et al., eds., *Pentecost, Mission, and Ecumenism: Essays in Intercultural Theology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992).
10. Bongani Mazibuko, *Education in Mission—Mission in Education* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987). See also Roswith Gerloff, ed., *Mission Is Crossing Frontiers: Essays in Honour of Bongani A. Mazibuko* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2003).
11. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, pp. 132–40.
12. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals: Religion and Medical Practice Among the Akans of Ghana* (Totowa, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1981). For more on this point, see Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, pp. 237–45.
13. The entire July 2000 issue of the *International Review of Mission* was dedicated to this topic.
14. Walter J. Hollenweger, “Theology and the Future of the Church,” *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1017–35.
15. See Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, pp. 106–16.
16. *Bonhoeffer Requiem* is available in English and German from Verlag Metanoia, P.O. Box 15, CH 8963 Kindhausen, Switzerland. On drama and liturgy in relation to theology, see Walter J. Hollenweger, *Das Kirchenjahr Inszenieren* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002).