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Session 6

Pentecostals in Societal Engagement: A Theology of Incarnational Transformation

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Abstract

The Christian faith is formed around Jesus, an obvious fact when reading the Apostles' Creed with the second article significantly longer than the others. In the Pentecostal tradition, faith is even more Christ-centric with formulations around the full gospel as an example. Jesus is the centre of the theological understanding. Pentecostalism gives attention to the Spirit, as doctrine, sign, and experience. When we peel the onion, though, layer by layer, we find Jesus everywhere and in every layer—of course as the foundation of statements but also as a lived example and the core of experience. His transformational presence is unique but can also function as a theological paradigm for Christian life in this world. This paper investigates how one can understand Christian presence and engagement in society as incarnational and transformative. Pentecostalism is, in many ways, a practical and concrete type of religion. Some scholars have described it as entrepreneurial, active, or practical. For Pentecostals, faith is not merely an idea but a lived experience. In this sense, it is faith taking concrete form, or in other words, incarnational. Moreover, Pentecostals feel eager to see radical change. Salvation, for them, means becoming a new creation. Spirit baptism fills believers with new power and possibility; the church is the redeemed alternative community. Their whole spirituality is about change, development, or transformation. The main question, however, remains: How can Pentecostal social engagement be understood as incarnational transformation?

Key Words: incarnational, societal engagement, Swedish Pentecostalism, transformation

Introduction

Why should we care for society when we belong to another Kingdom? I sometimes encounter that kind of question from Pentecostal friends. I respond, "Because God cares." The whole creation belongs to God, and he loves the world. The Spirit is God's dynamic presence breathing life into every creature. Jesus became one of us in the Incarnation, defeated death

through his resurrection, and sustains all things by his powerful word. As his people, our life and actions should, as far as possible, align with God's identity.

For most people, and hopefully especially for Christians, it is instinctual to help people in need. I remember a discussion some years ago in my local church. At that time, many refugees were arriving in Sweden, among them a lot of young boys without parents. The situation was tense. The social authorities did the best they could, but more help was needed. As a church we decided to open our facility to host some of the boys. Though initially this entailed more of a spontaneous reaction to the crisis, along the line our motivations became clearer. We wanted to show love and help the individuals in their vulnerable situations. We also wanted to serve as a constructive partner in building a good society alongside the authorities. During the process, we also realised that in this praxis we became a better version of ourselves. We were not only praying and confessing but also building the kingdom of God, and by that having to think more deeply through our theology. Christinas in general and Pentecostals in particular need to strengthen their theological foundation for the natural praxis of caring. This article attempts to do so.

The Christian faith is formed around Jesus, an obvious fact when reading the Apostoles' Creed with the second article much more expanded than the others. Jesus is the focal point. Faith in the Pentecostal tradition is even more Christ-centric, with formulations around the full gospel as an example where Jesus is the centre of the theological understanding.[1] Distinctive theological expressions for the Pentecostal tradition are pneumatology and eschatology. One can arguably

[1] In relation to the definition of the full gospel, historical divisions exist among Pentecostals in different groups. Still, leading Pentecostal theologians such as Wolfgang Vondey in *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (T&T Clark, 2017), Amos Yong in *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Eerdmans, 2010), and John Christopher Thomas in *Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology* (CPT Press, 2010) use the paradigm of the full gospel.

see the event of Pentecost as the inauguration or the foretaste of the coming Kingdom.[2] When we peel the onion, though, layer by layer, we find Jesus everywhere—of course as the foundation of faith and statements but also as a lived example and the core of experience. Jesus's incarnational presence is unique but can nevertheless have the function as the theological paradigm for Christian life in this world. How can nurturing a thoroughly incarnational understanding of Christian faith and life deepen one's societal engagement?

Jesus's example also shows a radical transgressive presence of the divine amidst this world. He calms storms, turns water into wine, heals the sick, and resurrects the dead. In the end, he defeats death itself and invites humanity through his transformative work into a new and more open reality—the same world and yet another, the same circumstances but with new possibilities. We can describe God's work through Jesus as a transformation of reality, a transformation that he invites humanity to share, a transformation he challenges humanity to live in and contribute to its realization. The Christian life is in this sense transformative, and the Christian presence in society can therefore have a transformative effect. This remains the case even more so in the Pentecostal tradition where the life of Jesus finds continuation through the event of Pentecost in what Nimi Wariboko calls the Pentecostal principle.[3] How can one live the Pentecostal principle in this world and understand and perform the Pentecostal presence as truly transformational?

This paper investigates how one can understand Christian presence and engagement in society as incarnational and transformative. The study focuses on Pentecostalism, mainly the Swedish Pentecostal Movement. Pentecostalism is in many ways a practical and concrete type of

[2] See for example Daniela Augustine and Chris Green, eds., *The Politics of the Spirit: Pentecostal Reflections on Public Responsibility and the Common Good* (Seymour Press, 2023) when they talk about the event of Pentecost as the eschatological *telos* of all creation.
[3] Nimi Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit*, Pentecostal Manifesto Series (Eerdmans, 2011).

religion. Some scholars have described it as entrepreneurial, active, or practical, or as Luke Bretherton says, "embodied experience."[4] Faith for Pentecostals involves not so much an idea but more a lived experience. In that sense it is faith taking concrete form, or, in other words, incarnational. On the other hand, Pentecostals feel eager to see radical change. Salvation, for Pentecostals, means becoming a new creation and Spirit baptism being filled with new power, possibility, and perspective. The church is the redeemed alternative community. Eschatology is the dream of a Kingdom with new heavens and a new earth. The whole spirituality is about change, development, and transformation. In bringing this into Pentecostal life in society, this main question remains: What might a Pentecostal theology of societal engagement look like, and can we describe it as incarnational transformation?

Situating Pentecostalism

Most scholars today see the root and beginnings of Pentecostalism as multifaceted. The events at Azusa Street in 1906 played a crucial role in the image and spread of Pentecostalism.[5] At the same time, it is obvious that Pentecostalism arose among theological ideas and revival-oriented practices, most of which preceded Pentecostalism itself.[6] Many have tried to create a unified definition of the Pentecostal tradition,[7] and in recent years, the multidimensional image of Pentecostalism formulated by Allan Andersson has gained impact in pointing to the differences within Pentecostalism.[8] Sometimes Pentecostalism is either presented as a spirituality

[4] Luke Bretherton, *Christ in the Common Life* (Eerdmans, 2019), 127.
[5] Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival* (Thomas Nelson, 2017).
[6] Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Baker Academic, 1987).
[7] For example, see Walter Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Development Worldwide* (SCM Press, 1980) and *The Pentecostals* (SCM Press, 2012) and Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology.*
[8] Allan Anderson, "Varieties, Taxonomies, Perspectives," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, ed. Allan Anderson et al. (University of California Press, 2010), 13–29. A similar picture can also be found in, for example, Harvey Cox in *Fire from Heaven* (Addison-Wesley, 1995). From a more theological standpoint, Christopher Stephenson shows in *Types of Pentecostal Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2013) a variety of Pentecostal theology.

more than a theological tradition—or as a kind of "evangelical plus." Increasingly, though, Pentecostalism is understood as a family of denominations, churches, and expressions, constituting a unified church family alongside Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.[9] Among Pentecostal scholars today it is more natural to understand Pentecostalism as a Christian tradition in its own right, despite the variations, and from that point engage in a wider theological dialogue.[10] In this article I draw on the wide expressions of Pentecostalism but take the main material and examples from the Swedish Pentecostal Movement.

In *Global Pentecostalism*,[11] authors Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori show that Pentecostalism, or at least a significant proportion of Pentecostal groups, show strong participation in, and a clear impact on, society and its development. This is not a result of development projects or political agitation but through the way the church is operating—through faith in the transformative power of the gospel; through the empowerment of the people involved; and through worship, experiences, and fellowship.[12] We find a similar reflection by Martina Björkander showing that the transformative nature of Pentecostalism includes a holistic understanding of the gospel.[13] The engagement with societal development and common good turns out to be rooted in the way Pentecostals look at faith and the Christian life. The economic

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[9] Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021).
[10] One example of this is Daniel Castelo in *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition* (Eerdmans, 2017). Another example is the Pentecostal Manifesto series edited by Amos Yong and James K. A. Smith in which leading Pentecostal scholars engage in a wider theological conversation: Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination* (Eerdmans, 2011); Frank D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Eerdmans, 2010); James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 2010); Mark J. Cartledge, *The Mediation of the Spirit: Interventions in Practical Theology* (Eerdmans, 2015); Wariboko, *Pentecostal Principle*; Steven M. Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God: A Pentecostal Trinitarian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2012); and Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda* (Eerdmans, 2010).
[11] Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism* (University of California Press, 2007).
[12] Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 129–59.
[13] Martina Björkander, "God's People—A Missionary Community," in *Called to the Nations*, ed. Andreas Svedman and Gunnar Swahn (Libris, 2022).

anthropologist Dena Freeman has shown that Pentecostal groups, in her case in Ethiopia, could demonstrate more far-reaching and lasting social change precisely because the change was rooted in the theological ideas, in the common morality carried by the church, and in the fact that both leaders and participants shared beliefs, experiences, and common life.[14] We can therefore affirm the need to develop a thick ecclesiology and a theology for societal engagement.

The Swedish Pentecostal Movement has from its beginning been characterized by a missionary zeal with strong social pathos. Allan Anderson states that the movement "has made a remarkable contribution […] far beyond its numbers" and that an "important contribution is its holistic approach to missions," which involved both preaching and contributing to the creation of social institutions such as schools and health centres.[15] Agnes Abuom, leader of the World Council of Churches, similarly emphasizes the Swedish Pentecostal Movement's holistic approach to mission; she points to "the importance of such a holistic approach rather than isolating boundaries. The gospel we proclaim needs to touch the whole of life. That is what Swedish Pentecostal Mission is all about."[16] Diakonia, social activities, and integral mission have been highly integrated into the gospel in the Swedish Pentecostal Movement.

Thus far in our discussion, we have framed our enquiry—into how to understand Christian presence and engagement in society as incarnational and transformative—within a focus on Pentecostalism and in particular the Swedish Pentecostal Movement and its international ramifications. I have described the theological identity of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement as experience-based practical Christianity through Jesus-centred missionality. Within

[14] Dena Freeman, *Pentecostalism and Development* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 26–27.
[15] Allan Anderson, "Sweden's Global Footprint," in *Called to the Nations*, ed. Andreas Svedman and Gunnar Swahn (Libris, 2022), 13–15.
[16] Agnes Aboum, "Faithful to the Mission," in *Called to the Nations*, ed. Andreas Svedman and Gunnar Swahn (Libris, 2022), 18.

this articulation, the emphasis on experience and missionality can be characterized by a transformative dimension, while the practically oriented Jesus-centredness has incarnational features. I discuss more deeply below these dimensions of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement's theological basis for societal engagement. To begin that examination, I first briefly set out what lies behind the terminology of "engagement" in this context.

Social Engagement and Political Theology

I remember a conversation among the board of WAPTE (World Alliance for Pentecostal Theological Education) where we were discussing the theme and terminology for the next issue of the journal *Pentecostal Education*. Some of our questions included consideration of what we are actually talking about when the gospel, faith, and the church meet the world, society, and social needs. We asked whether we should use the terms *social*, *societal*, or *community*. The concepts overlap but also have different meanings. Then came the question of whether we should talk about awareness, responsibility, engagement, or transformation. It looked like the theme would be "community transformation," but in the end the discussion led to the formulation of the phrase, "Pentecostal social engagement."[17] In this article, I have selected to use the term *societal engagement*: "societal" because I want to avoid ending up in an overly introverted or individual discussion and "engagement" to make room for passion, based on convictions, while emphasizing personal agency.

The question of whether and how the church should relate to its surroundings and its associated challenges is as old as the church itself. In the second century, Tertullian asked himself what Athens had to do with Jerusalem to show the distance between faith and the

[17] The result of the process was *Pentecostal Education* 6, no. 2 (2021).

world.[18] For long periods in history, however, the church, faith, the State, and power have almost completely merged.

Within classical Pentecostalism during certain periods, an almost sectarian attitude has been cultivated. The first academic work in modern times on Swedish Pentecostalism has the subtitle, *From Sect to Christian Society* [my translation], showing the journey from a sectarian mentality to the ambition to protect what the Pentecostals perceived as a Christian society.[19] Amos Yong discusses the different ways in which Pentecostals have related to the surrounding society, drawing out three types of relationship:

- Pentecostal sectarianism that does not want to be contaminated by the surrounding society and so keeps away.[20]
- Pentecostal conservatism, which according to Yong is more confrontational and argues for theological, moral, and political positions with the aim to try to control.[21]
- Pentecostal progressivism which is more socially activist and, in Yong's terminology, more prophetic in its relationship with society with the aim to transform the society. [22]

In the choice of terminology to discuss the church's role in and relationship to society, the term *political theology* has become increasingly common over the past decade. Many classical Pentecostal groups have striven to be apolitical. As a child of a missionary family in South America, I remember how that position was the prominent stance. We were in Bolivia to build churches and help needy people, and we should not be political. The reason for this was

[18] Tertullian, "Prescription against Heretics," New Advent, accessed July 24, 2025, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm, chap. 7 ("Pagan Philosophy…").
[19] Carl-Erik Sahlberg, *Pingströrelsen och tidningen Dagen: Från sekt till kristet samhälle* (Svenska kyrkohistoriska föreningen, 1977).
[20] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 27–31.
[21] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 31–34.
[22] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 34–38.

twofold: politics were perceived as worldly and corrupting, and, at a strategic level, mission should not offend those in power in order to remain in the country.

The Belgian sociologist, Chantale Mouffe, distinguishes political from politics, observing that politics is about engaging in political parties, elections, and the political system whereas political involves working and acting in the public sphere for the common good.[23] Using this terminology, most Pentecostals have avoided entering politics, but almost all have in different degrees and in different ways been political, some unintentionally others based on a thoughtfully theological position. Since around 2010, several books have been published dealing with public or political Pentecostalism.[24]

To conclude this section, we can state that almost all Pentecostals are political in the sense of action in the public sphere. We also see a growing reflection of what it means to be Pentecostal and political even if this interest has not yet been fully adopted outside more academic circles. I now turn to look more closely at the case of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement.

The Case of Swedish Pentecostalism

I have previously described the Swedish Pentecostal Movement as experience-based practical Christianity through Jesus-centred missionality. In line with several of the cited researchers, not least Freeman, it is my conviction that for the church's practices and commitment to build a sustainable and effective society, the church must anchor those practices

[23] Chantale Mouffe, *On the Political* (Taylor & Francis, 2005), 17–39.
[24] Here are just a small sample: Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*; Mark Cartledge et al., *Mega Churches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice*, vol. 33 of *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* (Brill, 2019); Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*; Kyama Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*, Studies in World Christianity (Baylor University Press, 2020); Josefsson, ed., *Pentecostal Education*, a special issue on Pentecostal social engagement; Daniela C. Augustine and Chris E. W. Green, eds., *The Politics of the Spirit: Pentecostal Reflections on Public Responsibility and the Common Good* (Seymour Press, 2023).

in and integrated them with theological convictions.[25] I therefore want to unpack the condensed description of the theological identity of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement in light of societal engagement. In doing so, I end by reflecting on the two terms *incarnational* and *transformation*.

Experiences and affections have played and still play an important role in forming theology and spirituality among Swedish Pentecostals.[26] This is in line with the wider description of Pentecostalism. It does not necessarily mean, though that thought or theology is diluted. Rather it means that the theological method is different from the classical academic more rationalistic method.[27] A Pentecostal epistemology must include practices, experiences, and affections.[28] Steven Land goes so far as to believe that affections take precedence in the formation of a Pentecostal spirituality.[29] Current research shows a clear connection between the experience-based understanding of faith and life and the societal engagement among Swedish Pentecostals. The encounter with God, the world, and others becomes for Pentecostals a way of integrating faith and life, heaven and earth, spiritual and material. In this integrative process, experiential theology plays a significant role both in the formation of one's own faith and in the encounter with the surrounding society (Josefsson and Wenell 2025).[30]

Action oriented practical Christianity is the second dimension we need to deal with. The experience-based emphasis could lead to looking inward for affections and emotions. This is

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[25] Dena Freeman, "Pentecostalism and Economic Development in Sub-Sahara Africa," in *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development*, ed. Emma Tomalin (Routledge, 2015), 117–23.
[26] Ulrik Josefsson. *Liv och över nog* (Artos, 2005), 365–66; Martin Warnelid, *When Pentecostals Cry: A Phenomenological Study of Encountering God* (Brill, 2025), forthcoming.
[27] See for example Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 48–85; Simo Frestadius, *Pentecostal Rationality: Epistemology and Theological Hermeneutics in the Foursquare Tradition* (T&T Clark, 2020), 215–17.
[28] Jackie David Johns and Cheryl Bridges Johns, "Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study," *Journal for Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992): 109–34, https://www.academia.edu /2954228/Yielding_to_the_Spirit_A_Pentecostal_Approach_to_Bible_Study; see also Ulrik Josefsson and Matthew Novachek, "Practitioners and Pentecostalism: An Epistemological Investigation into Learning as Doing, Experience, and Reflection," *Pentecostal Education* 7, no.1 (2022): 102–103.
[29] Steven Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality* (Shefield Academic Press, 1993), 47–48.
[30] Ulrik Josefsson and Fredrik Wenell, "Är svenska pingstvänner progressiva?" *Scandinavian Journal for Leadership and Theology* 12 (May 2025): 93–111, https://doi.org/10.53311/sjlt.v12.127.

balanced within Pentecostal spirituality with an activist and action-oriented trait.[31] The Swedish Pentecostal pioneer Lewi Pethrus repeatedly spoke about the need for faith to take concrete expression; he used the term *practical Christianity* in this context.[32] An analysis of Swedish Pentecostal preaching from recent decades shows that emphasis on practical Christianity remains strong.[33] Emphasis on action, activity, and practical Christianity was already present during the revival at Azuza Street, with a strong and radical pathos and norm-breaking practices regarding gender, race, and tradition.[34] After a highly emotional service, one of the Azuza Street leaders urged, "Do not go from here and talk about the tongues but go and try to get people saved."[35] The Swedish Pentecostal Movement involved many forms of inherent entrepreneurship, but perhaps the clearest expression is found in the diaconal and social field. Caring for the vulnerable has remained a prominent expression of faith. Pentecostals have not perceived this as political commitment; when the movement's leaders started a political party, the agenda was rather conservative with the ambition to protect Christian values in society. Nevertheless, Swedish Pentecostal emphasis on practical Christianity mostly has been expressed in concern for the vulnerable and a far-reaching social commitment.[36]

The *Christ-centric theology* dimension of Swedish Pentecostalism is not undermined by experience-based practical Christianity. Jesus is the centre of Pentecostal spirituality in a way that interacts with the two preceding traits. The primary experience in this revival-oriented Christianity is conversion. Atonement is usually understood in Pentecostalism as an objective

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[31] Josefsson. *Liv och över nog*, 323–25.
[32] Lewi Pethrus, *Filadelfiaförsamlingens i Stockholm tioårsberättelse* (Förlaget Filadelfia, 1921), 55.
[33] Ulrik Josefsson. "Nutida svensk pingstpredikan: Analys av tre pingstledares predikningar på Nyhemsveckan." In *Gudstjänstens mening*, edited by Stephan Borgehammar et al. Artos, 2019.
[34] Estrelda Alexander, *The Women of Azusa Street* (Seymour Press, 2023), 9–16, 179–84.
[35] Grant McClung, "Try to Get People Saved: Revisiting the Paradigm of an Urgent Pentecostal Missiology," in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism*, ed. Murray Dempster et al. (Regnum, 1999), 35.
[36] Ulrik Josefsson and Magnus Wahlström, eds., *Teologi för hela skapelsen* (Institutet för pentekostala studier, 2017), 7–20.

reality rooted in Jesus's vicarious sacrifice on the Cross. However, the reception of this objective reality in salvation has strong and important subjective dimensions. One of these is the intertwined process of conversion, confession, and surrender in which people are expected to function as active participants not in the conditions or reality of salvation but in its reception and appropriation.

As a result, expectation also exists regarding a personal experience of assurance of salvation, expressed in the famous song, "Blessed Assurance." Jesus is thus the centre of the crucial Pentecostal experience but also the centre of the tapestry of theological convictions that have come to be called the full gospel. Here Jesus is at the centre as Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer, Spirit baptizer and coming King. In relation to societal engagement, though, Jesus appears more as an example. The early Swedish Pentecostals read the Jesus story through the lens of practical Christianity. Jesus descended, and so should his followers. Jesus went out, met people amidst their everyday lives and often in their vulnerability, and this forms an example that further strengthens the incentives for societal engagement. At the same time, we need to see that Pentecostal Christ-centric societal engagement often ends with the compassion and action for the needy and rarely takes the next step into working for more structural changes.[37]

Pentecostalism in general is a *missionally oriented type of Christianity*. The Swedish Pentecostal Movement is very much so.[38] The introduction to this article quoted Anderson as saying that the movement has made a global imprint far beyond its size.[39] Missiologist David Bundy has made a similar analysis, speaking of disproportionate influence.[40] For Pentecostals, missionality is about an eagerness to spread the gospel, see people come to faith, and form

[37] Josefsson and Wahlström, eds., *Teologi för hela skapelsen*, 7–20.
[38] Sahlberg, *Missionens historia genom 2000 år*, 146–49.
[39] Anderson, "Sweden's Global Footprint," 13–15.
[40] David Bundy, *Visions of Apostolic Mission* (Uppsala University Press, 2009), 1–4.

vibrant and self-sustained local churches. Also, however, it has to do with having a mission and remaining in motion. In the missional identity, the desire to spread the gospel interacts with activism, Christocentrism, and the desire to bear witness to one's own experiences. Missionality in general and missionary work in particular offer an arena and practices that connect several other important theological fields. Mission has a strong intrinsic value, reinforced by and intertwining with the necessity of salvation, the experience of the Spirit to provide power for witness, anticipation of Jesus's return, and dawn of the new age. All in all, this means that the Pentecostal missiology is strengthened as if by multiplication.[41]

Another dimension of missionality is precisely to follow Jesus, the first missionary, and to be led by the Spirit, God's dynamic presence in the world. A clear and holistic soteriology can also be a driving force for societal engagement.[42] Jesus-centred missionality is about following Jesus, led by the Spirit to the world where God is already present. Societal engagement is not about taking God into the world but to discover the God who is there. In the encounter with other religions, it is not about winning theological discussions nor about toning down the message about Jesus, but about discovering where Jesus through the Spirit is already present.[43] In the encounter with suffering and vulnerability, it is, as it was with Jesus, about meeting people where they are and letting the gospel become the good news that meets real needs. In the encounter with unjust structures, it can be about contributing to liberation and redress for individuals and thus seeing a social change from below.[44]

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[41] Ulrik Josefsson, "Rooted in the Bible, Experience and Society," in *Called to the Nations*, ed. Andreas Svedman and Gunnar Swahn (Libris, 2022), 32–47.
[42] Björkander, "God's People," 78–97.
[43] Björkander, "God's People," 97–102.
[44] Ulrik Josefsson and Niclas Lindgren, "State-Church Partnerships: Opportunities and Challenges," in *The Pandemic and the Holy Spirit: Responses of Spirit-Empowered Communities to COVID-19*, ed. Wonsuk Ma et al. (ORU Press, 2023), 137–57.

We have discussed four aspects of the theological identity of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement in light of societal engagement. The overarching question for this article is if and in what way Pentecostal societal engagement can be understood as incarnational transformation. I first address the question of *if* before I end with a reflection on *how*.

Societal Engagement as Incarnational Transformation

Pentecostal identity can, as I have shown, be described as a Christ-centric, practically embodied experience. For most Pentecostals, faith is a personal and inner reality that takes form in real life. When a person is saved, a visible change is expected. The Spirit's moving comes with concrete utterances like tongues, healing, and miracles. When the church is working, it is forward-looking, active, and entrepreneurial. Pentecostal faith must be manifested, concrete, and embodied.

Incarnation means that the divine becomes material, that God himself becomes human but without abolishing or erasing his original identity. The Incarnation blurs the division between God's transcendence and his immanence. The exalted God becomes present, the invisible is made visible, and the involvement of God in human life takes concrete form. In the modern study of religion, we can see a material turn, with increasing emphasis placed on material expressions of faith. One of the major sociological perspectives here is the actor-network theory formulated by Bruno Latour, where the actor is seen as embedded in the context of networking factors. It is an emphasis on actorship in context.[45]

In a Pentecostal context, this fits into the image of faith as manifested practical Christianity, where personal experience is partly shaped in the community of other believers, and

[45] David Morgan, "Materiality," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michel Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford University Press, 2016), 271–89.

partly portrayed in a given social context. Thus, it takes concrete form in the society in which the person and congregation are situated. The incarnational dimension of Pentecostal faith is on the one hand founded in theology and on the other in praxis. The theological dimension is the Christ-centric spirituality and the immanent presence of Christ through the Spirit that forms the motivation to experience, proclaim, and embody that presence. The more practical side of this is the tendency among Pentecostals to measure God's presence in visible and concrete utterances.

One can understand all this as incarnational in the sense that the spiritual and otherworldly experience and presence is taking form in the concrete reality of everyday life of the church and the believer. Regarding societal engagement, this emerges as an offspring of the divine love experienced by the believer. God's love took form in the practical and concrete action of incarnation; in a similar way one can see practical Christianity as the incarnation of love and divine presence. This is both spiritual and material, both divine and human in the enchanted world of Pentecostal reality.

Pentecostal expression is based in radical and personal experience that do not stay as inner feeling of wellbeing but rather set the person in motion in what can be called missionality. God's grace is seen as an active element in the believer forming change and transforming heart, not just covering sin and guilt. The Spirit is for Pentecostals not foremost the life-giver but the power-giver who transforms and gives power for life and witness. In the eschatological vision, Pentecostals see the new world coming towards the existing world from the future to transform it into a new heavens and new earth. Pentecostalism has an embedded transformative vision of life and existence.

We can describe the divine presence in ordinary life as transformational. The Spirit was hovering over chaos and turned it into cosmos (Gen 1). Christ entered into death and darkness

and turned this into resurrection (1 Cor 15). On the Day of Pentecost, ordinary disciples used their normal bodies to speak foreign languages familiar to other people present. The experience of the disciples was transferred by the divine presence into understandable messages to the listeners in Jerusalem (Acts 2). This kind of Christian transformation combines several elements.

A connection occurs between the before and after of transformation in the sense that recognition exists between the two stages; they are both new and the same. In the transfiguration of Jesus, he is completely new but still recognisable. Transformation is both something new and at the same time the same.

Transformation is about divine presence and agency but not without human involvement. Transformation is not built by hard work or human efforts but by God's active and dynamic presence forming something new within and through the existing. Transformation is also something lasting and not just a moment of heavenly light. It brings forth a new dimension, transcending the limitations of ordinary life and shapes the ordinary human life with extraordinary divine possibilities.

Pentecostal understanding of life and faith is in this regard transformational both in the personal life of the believer, the communal life of the community, and in the life and service in society. When we here talk about societal engagement, it is truly political in the sense that it is seen, visible, and concrete. For most Pentecostals, though, the starting point for transformation is from within and from below. Therefore, societal transformation begins with personal transformation of the heart. From that personal transformation, the rings rippling out on the water change society from within.[46]

[46] Another stream exists in Pentecostalism forming a theology where the church though the power of the Spirit is expected to rule and dominate; this is often called Dominion theology. See Mikael Stenhammar, *The Worldview of the Word of Faith movement* (T&T Clark, 2021).

This inward focus is both the strength and the weakness of Pentecostal societal engagement. The strength is shown by scholars like Freeman and others who note that transformation tends to be deeper, more lasting, and broader in reach when founded in personal identity, value systems, and embedded praxis. This leads to an integration of different dimensions of life and possibility to sustainability. The weakness is that unjust structures and political limitations are difficult to change through the life of individuals, even if over time those individuals become the many. In recent years some Pentecostals in countries like Zambia[47] or in the civil movement around Denis Mukwege in Congo[48] taking the lead in political processes and channelling societal engagement into more of structural transformation. On the other hand, we also see Pentecostal groups supporting leaders with dubious agendas in different parts of the world.

Altogether, it is probably fair to say that the Pentecostal way of thinking is promoting a transformational aspect of Christian life, at least in the case of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement. It is also obvious that incarnational and transformative dimensions fit together in this understanding of Christian faith in that both focus on practical presence and radical transformative change in both personal life and societal engagement. Having addressed the question of *if* societal engagement can be described as incarnational and transformational within a Pentecostal understanding, I conclude this article with a short reflection on *how* such incarnational transformation might be expressed in terms of Pentecostal societal engagement

[47] Naar M'fundisi-Holloway, "The Role of the Church as a Political Entity: A Case for Zambia," *Pentecostal Education* 6, no. 2 (2022): 147–60.
[48] Rakel Alegre and Tommy Davidsson, "From Medical Kits to Fighting Rape as a Weapon of War," in *Sisters, Mothers, Daughters: Pentecostal Perspectives on Violence against Women*, ed. Kimberly Alexander et al. (Brill Academic, 2022), 154–84.

As a junior doctoral student, I spent one semester at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland with scholars such as Steven Land and Cheryl Bridges Johns. I followed one course with Dr. Land, and he often asked the students, "Is it this or is it that—and the answer is YES." He helped us to see how many things are meant to be held together and integrated. In his book, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, he uses the terms *fusion* and *fission* in discussing the tensions in Pentecostal spirituality where fusion denotes that polarities are being hold together.[49] Bretherton uses the term *dyatic* for the same tendency in Pentecostal life and thinking.[50] Pentecostals have in many cases tried to separate dimensions from each other into more binary categories such as church as opposed to society, but in forming the theological foundation for societal engagement, I would advocate for a more integrative approach.

In our cosmology, spiritual and material dimensions are intertwined. Soteriologically, holistic salvation is a gospel for both soul and body. In our ecclesiology, we can understand the church as God's presence in this world. The Spirit infuses every part of creation, and our experience of the Spirit can become an integrating centre. In our eschatological understanding, we bring present and future together where the already informs the not yet and vice versa. In a thoroughly holistic theology, we confess, pray, and act for God's Kingdom to come. This comes about through an integrative process where the ongoing work of practical Christianity is interrupted by the inbreaking of the divine presence. In this way, Pentecostal societal engagement can be understood and performed as a truly incarnational transformation.

[49] Steven Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 92.
[50] Bretherton, *Christ in the Common Life*, 130.

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A Response to Ulrik Josefsson's "Pentecostals in Societal Engagement: A Theology of Incarnational Transformation"
(Joel Agpalo Tejedo)

By way of introduction, I begin with an interesting story about three religious leaders who were talking about the severity of graft and corruption in their respective countries:

The Indonesian Imam said, "Bribery in Indonesia is bad; government agencies always receive money under the table."

The Buddhist monk claimed, "It is much worse in Thailand; government officials do it over the table."

Then the two asked the Filipino bishop, "How about in the Philippines?"

"In the Philippines," he said, "We take even the table."

I happened to ask my Pentecostal students when I was teaching in American Samoa years ago about how they do corruption in Samoa, and they told me, "Here in Samoa, we eat even the table."

I congratulate Dr. Josefsson for his excellent paper here at the Europe-Asia Pentecostal Global Summit. I take this as an honor to have the opportunity to respond to his ideas and concepts he has communicated to global Pentecostals, especially Asian Pentecostals. Reading his paper not only shows us the complex problems in our society, but it also shows us who we are as people of the Spirit, why societal engagement matters, and what potential contributions we can make in our society. In contrast to the religious leaders I mentioned earlier who were only talking about the *problems* in our society, Dr. Josefsson also proposes "incarnational transformation" as the challenging pathway to effect genuine social change in our society.

Rationalizations of Societal Engagement of Pentecostals

Josefsson's paper centres on the theological foundation and rationalization of Pentecostal theology for societal engagement, which he calls "incarnational transformation." His paper is rooted in the idea that God, after creating the whole creation, was involved in the affairs of the whole created order—breathing, identifying, and sustaining everything so all of life would flourish and be protected. Josefsson asserts at the outset of his paper that Pentecostals should care about the whole of creation because God cares. His Spirit overshadowed and breathed all of life, and at Jesus's incarnation, our Lord did not remain distant but identified himself among us.

Josefsson is right that Pentecostals are confronted with societal issues that require them to be responsible, incarnational, and transformative in their action. His church realized that responding to the vulnerable refugees coming to Sweden was not only a collaborative effort of government and civil society organizations such as the church but that such a response indeed reflected the very heart of the mission of Jesus. Josefsson argues that the Christian faith to be believed and lived out by Pentecostals was formed and shaped by their understanding of Jesus's incarnation and transformative action on earth. In the New Testament, we see Jesus, according to Josefsson, as radical, aggressive, and transformative when it comes to confronting social reality. However, Jesus's way of transforming social reality cannot only be mediated by his sole power and presence. Rather, this takes place by inviting human beings—especially his children—to partner with God in this incarnational and transformative action in our broken world. For Josefsson, the Pentecostal Movement is the most concrete, entrepreneurial, and practical type of religion that can effect genuine transformation in society due to its Christo-centric theology, pneumatological experiences, and eschatological expectations. Pentecostals believe in a radical change demonstrated in their salvation experience and in the power of the Holy Spirit who creates a new community.

Who We Are as People of the Spirit

Building his arguments from the work of Pentecostal scholars and theologians, Josefsson situates Pentecostalism as a multifaceted "family of denominations, churches, and expressions, constituting a unified church family alongside Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism."[1] He then cites Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori as showing that these Spirit-filled people "show strong participation in, and clear impact on, society and its development. ... operating—through faith in the transformative power of the gospel."[2] This far-reaching and lasting social change, Josefsson notes, was rooted in Pentecostals' theological ideas, a common belief in morality shared in the community of believers. Therefore, with these characteristics of Pentecostals as a Spiri-filled religion, "societal engagement" is the appropriate concept when it comes to dealing with the issues and challenges that surround the church. Josefsson criticizes Pentecostals for being sectarian and apolitical in the past but encourages them to appropriate their relationship to society. He suggests that Pentecostals should develop a political theology that guides their action in the public square.

Using Swedish Pentecostals as a case in his paper, Josefsson underscores four aspects of the theological identity of Swedish Pentecostals as people. In contrast to the academic and rationalistic method of spiritual formation, he points out that Pentecostals must increase practices, experiences, and affections, translating those emotive practices into social activism and action-oriented activities fueled and shaped by their Christo-centric theology and empowered

[1] Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), quoted in Ulrick Josefsson, "Pentecostals in Societal Engagement: A Theology of Incarnational Transformation," in *Pentecostal Voices Across the Continents*, ed. Kong Hee et al., Regnum Studies in Mission (Regnum, 2026), 141.
[2] Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism* (University of California Press, 2007), page, quoted in Josefsson, "Pentecostals in Societal Engagement,", 144.

missionally oriented type of Christianity. For Josefsson, these aspects frame our Pentecostal theology of societal engagement.

Pathways of Translating Societal Engagement: Incarnational and Transformative

The last section of Josefsson's study proposes that Pentecostal societal engagement be expressed as incarnational transformation. This recommendation is rooted in the idea that Pentecostal people are Christo-centric, experiential, and practical segments of Christianity, therefore faith need not be privately practiced but lived out in public. By incarnation, he means that the "divine" becomes material, the invisible becomes visible, and the concrete expression between the transcendence and the immanence of God, the interplay of theology and praxis, all are expressed in divine love by Spirit-filled believers.

Josefsson further explains that when these experiences of Pentecostal faith are expressed internationally, it sets believers into motion to become missional—creating change and transformation in individuals and societies. Having the example of Jesus and the ordinary disciples at Pentecost, Pentecostal believers have the potential, Josefsson holds, to transform chaotic situations into the creation of a just, loving, and transformed society. This can take place when Pentecostals translate their incarnational theology into praxis.

Josefsson concludes by calling like-minded Pentecostals to advocate for the integration and intertwining of spiritual and material dimensions—a wholistic salvation that addresses the issue of soul and body, the theology of Spirit that permeates everything, and the eschatology that brings together the present and future together. For Josefsson, this is the whole idea of being a Pentecostal in societal engagement—a theology of incarnational transformation.

Evaluation and Recommendation

This paper invites us to understand more deeply what we should think as Pentecostals about our theology of societal engagement. It acquaints us with the growing Pentecostal scholarly literature dealing with Pentecostal social/societal engagement. It can serve as a good theological resource for a new breed of Pentecostal scholars and researchers to frame a grounding theology of societal engagement. Surely, it will add to the library of knowledge created by Pentecostal scholars of the past and present.

The concept of societal engagement is not just a new grammar of faith being used by the church in general or the Pentecostal Movement in particular but a new sociological theory popularized by prominent social scientists like Perrie Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam of Harvard University. According to these scholars, both religious and non-religious organizations socially engaged have greater political voices in society; they can convert their social capital into economic-well-being and will become happier and healthier people in the community.

No doubt the doctrine of incarnation provides a theological template that should challenge Pentecostals to become incarnational in their praxis of ministry and mission. To further establish the conceptual and theological link that the church is the continuing incarnation of Jesus in society today should be emphasized more, however—not only to understand the rich conceptual framework of the theology of incarnation by New Testament writers, but for Pentecostals to appreciate deeper its implications in the context of church societal engagement.

For instance, the concepts of likeness (*katartizo*) (Luke 6:40; Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:2); the word written in the flesh (John 1:14; 2 Cor 3:3); reflecting Christ (Matt 5:14; John 8:12; Acts

11:26); and *missio Dei* (John 20:21)[3] are all vital examples that the body of Christ is the continuing incarnation of Jesus on earth today.

I suggest that a foundational theology of Pentecostals—that the Spirit at work in the Old Testament and given to Jesus in fullness, was the same Spirit who empowered the church to continue the incarnation of Jesus in our society—should be included as an important theological theme in establishing our Pentecostal theology of societal engagement. This foundational Pentecostal theology once overlooked should be explored more. We must communicate a substantive Pentecostal theology of incarnational and transformative societal engagement.

Additionally, I recommend that if Josefsson is pleased to communicate that Swedish Pentecostalism is an important case study with the capacity to interplay theology into praxis, then he must provide hard evidence to demonstrate that within Swedish Pentecostal churches and organizations incarnational and transformative societal engagement exists as functional among Swedish Pentecostals. As we Asian Pentecostals say, "To see is to believe." Where is the hard evidence, and how do Swedish Pentecostals do societal engagement that is both incarnational and transformative? How do Swedish Pentecostals address the issues of increasing migration, homelessness, poverty, etc? What are the expressions of wholistic, integral mission practiced by Swedish Pentecostals? For Asian Pentecostals, is an important element to flesh out in the paper so that we have something to emulate and perhaps adopt. I recognize that he limited his study on the conceptual nature of Pentecostal theology of societal engagement; therefore, the task remains for our new breed of Pentecostal scholars to provide evidence for this excellent theology.

Finally, I wonder whether Pentecostal societal engagement can be more pronounced, incarnational, and transformative when Pentecostal thinkers in Sweden or Europe can become

[3] All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NIV.

prophetic by increasingly making themselves visible in public dialogues, discourses, and debates in the public square? I observe an acute need for Pentecostal apologetics trained to be dialogic in public sphere. I rarely find Pentecostals confronting secular philosophies invading Europe today. For millennia, the Bible served as a game changer for the shaping, forming, and creation of Western civilization. For the West, it is not the Greeks or the Romans who shaped Western civilization but rather the Christian religion. Christianity was and is the most satisfying, revolutionary, and transformative religion to shape Western civilization.[4] With all the current religious and secular ideologies swimming in the seas of Western civilization, Christianity cannot afford to be neutral. It must defend its most cherished beliefs and values that it built or else religious militants and secular ideologies will replace the very foundation and core values of its existence.

How I wish that Pentecostals in Sweden would join other Christian thinkers in Europe to return the God hypothesis to their universities soon? It is my humble prayer that Pentecostals in Sweden and across other parts of Europe will welcome and open their churches to migrants from the Global South contributing immensely to the refueling of faith in the religious landscape of Europe. Will we see the rebirth of belief in God soon? Will there be a coming revival for Europe? I earnestly pray that Pentecostals in Sweden and the whole of Europe will increasingly engage their faith and spirituality in the public square.

[4] Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Little, Brown, 2019).

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