

## Session 3

### Lessons Learned during Thirty Years of Ecumenical Dialogue: What Future Challenges Can Be Expected? (Jean-Daniel Plüss)

#### Abstract

Having been involved in various ecumenical dialogues over the past three decades, I have gained some important insights. Much progress has been made, yet the question remains: How can we, despite our diverse histories and identities, live and function as the church together? Secularising tendencies in our societies have brought about new challenges, especially in large urban centres. For the sake of a credible Christian witness, we need to address common concerns together. Fundamental spiritual desires are not met in a secular context. Christian churches have the opportunity to respond to these human yearnings, to this felt void, and present the good news of Jesus Christ in relevant ways. Furthermore, as we live in increasingly pluralistic societies, we witness a growing polarisation of attitudes. This is evident in one-sided nationalist agendas and a discourse rooted in fear. The ecumenical work done so far can serve as a bridge for a common Christian witness “so that the world may believe.”

**Key Words:** common witness, ecumenism, dialogues, Pentecostalism, pluralist societies, polarisation, secularisation

#### Introduction

Around 1970, the future president of the Swiss Pentecostal Mission wrote the following about Pentecostal churches in Germany and Switzerland:

W. J. Hollenweger sees the Pentecostal movement “moving more and more in the direction of the traditional churches”. Today, “the difference between Pentecostalism and the traditional churches in many places consists in a doctrinal difference—truly a tragic situation for a movement that set out to overcome dogmatic differences through a common spiritual experience.” However, Pentecostalism finds not so much its own situation tragic as the fact that even today there is still an ugly trench between the traditional churches ... and (the Pentecostal movement) ... But despite all ecumenical goodwill, the Pentecostal movement cannot ignore this trench either. It is there.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jakob Zopfi, *Deutschland und die Schweiz in Die Pfingstkirchen*, in *Die Kirchen der Welt*, vol. VII, ed. Walter J. Hollenweger (Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1971), 73.

This was the situation when I was a young Pentecostal, with Pentecostals defining themselves as different from other Christian denominations. On the other side of that gulf, some argued that Pentecostals were sectarian.<sup>2</sup> Was Professor Hollenweger, the early expert on global Pentecostalism, right in claiming that Pentecostals were moving closer to the traditional churches? My aim in this paper is to take you on a journey and present some historical context of ecumenical efforts by Pentecostals. What are lessons learned, and what challenges can we discern ahead of us, especially if we consider the secularising influence in many of our societies?

### **The Ecumenical Roots of Pentecostalism**

Walter Hollenweger has argued that Pentecostalism started in most places as an ecumenical renewal movement in the mainline churches.<sup>3</sup> He makes his point by showing that early European Pentecostal leaders came from a variety of ecclesial backgrounds. Thomas Ball Barratt, the man who brought the Azusa Street revival to Norway during the Christmas Season in 1906, was a Methodist minister. Jonathan Paul, the first leader of the Pentecostal Movement in Germany, was a Lutheran pastor. Alexander Boddy, an Englishman, began to gather the first Pentecostal believers in his Anglican parish in Sunderland. Gerrit Polman, the first Pentecostal pastor in the Netherlands, was an officer in the Salvation Army. Lewi Pethrus, the influential Pentecostal leader in Sweden, was a Baptist. Louis Dallièrè was a leading charismatic pastor within the French Reformed Church. Indeed, the birth of European Pentecostalism happened in a multi-ecclesial context. A strong bond existed among these early leaders as they would meet from 1908 to 1914 at the yearly Sunderland Conventions in the Northeast of England. They all

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<sup>2</sup> This trench was partially created in 1909 by the *Berlin Declaration* in which a branch of conservative Lutherans claimed that the Pentecostal Movement was “from below.” Peter D. Hocken, “Berlin Declaration,” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Ed Van der Maas (Zondervan Pub. House, 2002), 371.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 334.

had their faith in the same Lord Jesus, and they all had experienced an infilling of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, they came from very different traditions. Anglicans and Lutherans were baptising children, whereas Baptists insisted on believer's baptism, and members of the Salvation Army did not baptise at all. Reformed Pentecostals had espoused a congregational understanding of the church whereas Methodists had an episcopal setup. While some would refer to the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, others saw this rite in terms of an ordinance.

So, although a strong sense of unity existed, there was also diversity in terms of particular practices and ecclesial convictions. Would this situation enable the renewal of all Christian churches? Many understood the renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a gift for everyone and lived with a vision of "Christian unity everywhere."<sup>4</sup>

As time passed, Pentecostal gatherings began to assemble as churches, and by the 1930s, most European Pentecostals had solidified as separate denominations.<sup>5</sup> That meant that many Pentecostals in Europe defined their identity in terms of being different. Especially their views on the experience of a baptism in the Holy Spirit set them apart from other renewal movements and evangelical denominations, not to mention the traditional churches.

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<sup>4</sup> William Seymor, "The Apostolic Faith Movement," *The Apostolic Faith*, September 1906, 1–2. Similarly, Swiss Pentecostal pastors made a declaration of ecumenical intent; P. Richard Ruff and B. Reuss, "Erklärung," *Die Verheissung des Vaters*, no. 41 (November 1913): 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> In Switzerland, the Eglise de Réveil organized itself in 1932. The Gemeinde für Urchristentum organized in 1933, and the Schweizerische Pfingstmission—previously a mission agency—declared itself a denomination in 1935. In the United Kingdom, the process began with the first Elim church in Belfast in 1915, and the British Assemblies of God were established in 1924. In Germany, the Christian Mülheim Fellowship (Christlicher Gemeinschaftsverband Mülheim an der Ruhr) was established as an independent body in 1913. The Italian Assemblies of God (Assemblee di Dio in Italia) officially constituted themselves as a denomination in 1959; for further details see section, "Common Challenges in View of Secularisation, Pluralism, and Polarisation." See also Jean-Daniel Plüss, "European Pentecostal Reactions to Totalitarianism: A Study of Ethical Commitment in the 1930s," *EPTA Bulletin* 4, nos. 2 + 3 (1985), 40-55, 88-100. This two-part article focuses mainly on Germany, and on Italy during the influence of German National Socialism and fascism in Italy. In Sweden, on the other hand, there was no formal Pentecostal body for many decades to come because of a strong congregational setup that gave autonomy to local churches. Eventually, *The Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches* was founded in 2001.

The onset of the charismatic renewal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mostly among Episcopal and Roman Catholic communities in North American and Europe, brought the issue of ecumenical relations back to the table. Suddenly, it was not only Pentecostals who claimed having received the gift of speaking in tongues, uttered prophetic messages, or exercised the charism of prayer for healing. New realities began to emerge.<sup>6</sup>

### **Pentecostals in Dialogue**

The first international religious dialogue involving Pentecostals began in 1972 when the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity<sup>7</sup> of the Roman Catholic Church began conversations with individual Pentecostals and charismatic leaders. Later it became clear that the Pentecostal group should only represent classical Pentecostals as this would make the conversations more focused. This dialogue has continued ever since and recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.<sup>8</sup> Its various documents testify to a rich theological exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, Pentecostals have begun official dialogues with other church families like the Reformed and Lutheran Churches, the Anglican communion, conversations with Orthodox churches and a Joint Consultative Group with the World Council of Churches.<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Daniel Plüss, *Vom Geist bewegt. Die Geschichte der Schweizerischen Pfingstmission* (Asaph Verlag, 2015), 150–51.

<sup>7</sup> Now known as the Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the fiftieth anniversary, see: “Message of Pope for 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue,” July 22, 2022, Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/>; Cecil M. Robeck, “Fifty Years of Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue, 1972-2-22: A Pentecostal Assessment,” *Pneuma* 44, no. 2 (2022): 220–50. [en/news/2022/2022-07-12-dialogo-cattolico-pentecostale.html](https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2022/2022-07-12-dialogo-cattolico-pentecostale.html).

<sup>9</sup> See the reports at “Catholic Pentecostal International Dialogue,” Vatican Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, accessed July 18, 2025, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/pentecostali/dialogo.html>.

<sup>10</sup> The official dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) started in 1996. The World Council of Churches Joint Consultative Group with Pentecostals started in 2000, and a proto dialogue with members of the Lutheran World Federation began in 2004. The international dialogue between Anglican Communion and the Pentecostal World Fellowship had its beginning in 2022. Besides engaging in official dialogues, Pentecostals have also participated in Faith and Order meetings of the WCC at least since 1985 when Cecil Mel Robeck was invited to join that group.

essay focuses on the dialogue between Pentecostals and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). I describe their development and venture into a reflection on the significance of these dialogues for the Pentecostal Movement today.

### **The Beginnings of Dialogue with the Churches of the Reformation**

Why were Reformed and Lutheran churches interested in starting dialogical conversations with Pentecostals? On one hand there was the strong growth of the Pentecostal Movement. Some churches felt threatened by the upsurge of Pentecostal churches.<sup>11</sup> Another reason for engaging with Pentecostals was the pentecostalisation of Protestant churches. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, a Methodist minister and expert on African Pentecostalism, brings the issue into focus: “The impact of neo-Pentecostalism has left the older churches with very little room to manoeuvre. Their very survival has come to depend not on their historic achievements in education and social work, but on how open they are to a Pentecostal or charismatic culture.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, pastoral concerns necessitate dialogue with Pentecostals.

Whether it concerned the growing charismatic presence in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana or the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, partner churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches or the Lutheran World Federation respectively, need to understand these new realities. Páraic Réamoun, a former communications executive of the WARC, argued that in many parts of the world, Pentecostals and Reformed are at loggerheads or compete for religious market share.<sup>13</sup> A concrete expression of this tension was evident in the

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<sup>11</sup> Karen L. Bloomquist ed., *Lutherans Respond to Pentecostalism* (Lutheran University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>12</sup> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Neo-Pentecostalism and the Changing Face of Christianity in Africa,” in Bloomquist, *Lutherans Respond*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Páraic Réamounn, “Introduction,” *Reformed World, Can Two Walk Together?* 50, no. 3 (September 2000), 103.

strained relations between the Presbyterians and Pentecostals in the Republic of Korea.<sup>14</sup>

Entering dialogue with Pentecostals seemed to be a necessary way forward.

In July 1995, an exploratory committee of four Reformed and four Pentecostals met on the grounds of the Assemblies of God Bible college in Mattersey, England, to see whether a dialogue between the two traditions might prove useful.<sup>15</sup> The official dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now World Communion of Reformed Churches) and Pentecostals—now Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF)—began in 1996. In the meantime, three reports have been published reflecting the progress of each round, each lasting about five years.<sup>16</sup> A fourth round of dialogues began in 2025.

Similarly, a study group between members of the Lutheran World Federation and Pentecostals began in 2004 at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg; yearly meetings lasted till 2010 when the group met in Tampere, Finland, and published a report.<sup>17</sup> The official dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pentecostal World Fellowship began in 2016. The first round ended with the publication of “The Spirit of the Lord is Upon

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<sup>14</sup> Cecil M. Robeck Jr., *Yoido Full Gospel Church and Ecumenism in The Holy Spirit, Spirituality and Leadership*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P Menzies (Regnum Books International, 2024), 279.

<sup>15</sup> Those present at this meeting were on the Reformed side: Hugh Davidson, Margaret M. McKay, Salvatore Ricciardi and Henry Wilson. The Pentecostal participants were Richard Israel, Frank Macchia, Jean-Daniel Plüss and Cecil M. Robeck Jr.

<sup>16</sup> “Word and Spirit, Church and World: Reformed Pentecostal Dialogue,” European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association (EPCRA), 2000, <http://www.epcra.ch/papers.html>; “Experience in Christian Faith and Life: Reformed Pentecostal Dialogue,” European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association (EPCRA), 2012, <http://www.epcra.ch/papers.html>; “Called to God’s Mission: Reformed Pentecostal Dialogue,” European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association (EPCRA), 2020, <http://www.epcra.ch/papers.html>.

<sup>17</sup> “Lutherans and Pentecostals in Dialogue,” Institute for Ecumenical Research, David Du Plessis Center, and The European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association, June 2022, <https://ecumenical-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Lutherans-and-Pentecostals-in-Dialogue-Text-FINAL.pdf>; See also “2023 Lutheran-Pentecostal Dialogue,” The European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association, 2023, <http://www.epcra.ch/papers.html>.

Me” in 2023.<sup>18</sup> The LWF and the PWF both supported a continuation of this dialogue. The second round began in 2025 in São Leopoldo, Brazil.

These documents communicate how the church traditions met, built trust, and learned to pray and think together.

### **The Language of Early Dialogues**

The introduction of the first report of the Reformed–Pentecostal dialogue describes the struggles they encountered in getting started.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, it was helpful to affirm basic agreement such as “We stand in communion with the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed”<sup>20</sup> or that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ and by means of the Scriptures through the agency of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> The Reformed team stated, “In previous centuries, Reformed theologians usually said that all signs and wonders were confined to the apostolic age. Increasingly, theologians, pastors, and church members see that this opinion finds no ground in the Scriptures.”<sup>22</sup> The document also mentions areas, like the prophetic ministry of the church, where Pentecostal and Reformed Christians differ in emphasis.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the Reformed and Pentecostals tend to identify the faithful church differently. Whereas the Reformed define the faithful church as a place where the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered,<sup>24</sup> Pentecostals would see the faithful church as community where “Jesus Christ is lifted up, the Word of God is preached and obeyed, and where the Spirit’s gifts are manifested in the lives of

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<sup>18</sup> Dirk G. Lange et al., eds., “International Lutheran–Pentecostal 2016–2022 Dialogue Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me,’” 2023, Lutheran World Federation, <https://lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-spirit-lord-upon-me>.

<sup>19</sup> “Word and Spirit, Church and World,” §1-14.

<sup>20</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§15).

<sup>21</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§19).

<sup>22</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§32).

<sup>23</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§35).

<sup>24</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§38).

believers.”<sup>25</sup> Such differences in emphasis were picked up as a positive challenge—for instance, “Deeper dialogue concerning the role of sacraments or ordinances, and the place of the Holy Spirit’s gifts, may lead to mutual enrichment.”<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, a useful gauge of evaluating progress in dialogue is the “we” language being used in documents. Forty-four times, the word “we” is used in this first document of the Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue. Phrases like, “we confess, we share, we agree, and we believe” indicate that there is a commonality that suggests the possibility for a fruitful continuation of that dialogue.

When the second round began, the dialogue partners first had to agree on the overarching topic for the next five years. In a mutual gathering of ideas, the theme chosen was “Experience in the Christian Faith and Life.” Every year, the focus would be on a different aspect—worship, discipleship, discernment, community, and justice. When the second document was written, it turned out to be considerably larger than the previous one.<sup>27</sup> Assuming the same dialogical dynamics, one could expect about eighty “we” references. In fact, there are 167 uses of that word, not counting citations. This illustrates in a simple way that this dialogue represents a journey of fruitful encounter. Paragraph 30 in “Experience in Christian Faith and Life” puts it as follows:

We can explore the depth of God’s covenant of grace, from Abraham through Sinai to the new covenant sealed in Christ’s blood that establishes new relationships among God’s covenant people. We can explore the riches of the Spirit’s gifts, poured out at Pentecost and poured out today that build up the one body of Christ. We can explore the Nicene Creed’s marks of the church—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—in congregations, denominations, and the Church universal. We can explore the reality of the Church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. As

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<sup>25</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§39).

<sup>26</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” (§41).

<sup>27</sup> “Word and Spirit, Church and World” has a word count of about 11,300, whereas “Experience in Christian Faith and Life” has 20,000 words. The third report, “Called to God’s Mission,” has even more “we” language—166 mentions with a word count of 14,100.

we probe these elements of our common heritage, we will be drawn into realities of *koinōnia* that we have not yet imagined.<sup>28</sup>

It is indeed common exploration, and I would add common worship and witness, that draw us into the reality of greater fellowship (*koinonia*) and unity in Christ.

The third document of the dialogue between representatives of the Word Communion of Reformed Churches and the Pentecostal Word Fellowship was published in 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic started; its title is “Called to God’s Mission.” The first paragraph explains that “This document is a testimony to how Pentecostal and Reformed Christians respond together to God’s mission into which we have been called.”<sup>29</sup> Who would have thought that a dialogue that began with mutual reservations would develop to a confession that would benefit both church traditions?

The dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pentecostal World Fellowship has taken a different journey. Right at the beginning of the conversations that preceded the official dialogue, it was agreed upon that the common format of bipartisan theological reflection was often structured on the non-Pentecostal churches’ terms, and a different methodology was needed that would take into consideration an experiential dimension.<sup>30</sup> A second point soon established the fact that there are no basic doctrinal disagreements to talk about. Although we have different styles of worship and expressing our faith, there is basic doctrinal agreement.

Together we confess God the Holy Trinity. We believe in Jesus Christ, truly human and truly divine, who is our Savior and Lord. We hold that salvation is a purely gracious and free gift of God, and that sinners are justified by faith, which sets us free and sends us out into the world to serve. We interpret our experiences through holy Scripture and with the help of both the local and the global church. It is in the joyful recognition of these

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<sup>28</sup> “Experience in Christian Faith and Life,” (§30).

<sup>29</sup> “Called to God’s Mission,” (§1).

<sup>30</sup> “Lutherans and Pentecostals in Dialogue,” and “2023 Lutheran-Pentecostal Dialogue,” 2.

convergences in our Christian faith and practice that we can proceed to deeper exploration.<sup>31</sup>

It is noteworthy that the deeper exploration suggested in this document emphasises experience and practice. It is not limited to theological exploration.

The report of the first round of the Lutheran-Pentecostal dialogue ends with a section entitled “Looking toward the Future,” which mentions that we both witness in a world characterised by polarisation and pluralism: “We are often confronted by the same challenges ... we discussed the impact of secularism on both of our churches.”<sup>32</sup> To this point we shall return shortly, but let us first look at some fundamental lessons learned.

### **Lessons Learned**

Every initial ecumenical encounter between two or more Christian traditions is loaded with uncertainties and fundamental questions. Why would an ecumenical encounter be desired? What misconceptions could hinder open dialogue? Are there historical wounds between the dialogue partners? Are ecumenical dialogues for the academic elite, or do they have any relevance to the churches in their regional and local contexts? We must raise these and other important questions repeatedly.

Instead of addressing these questions individually, though, which would necessitate a look at various historical contexts and cultural situations, I suggest here four fundamentally significant points.

First, at every beginning there is Christ. Our common allegiance to Christ builds the basis of our encounters. It is not the differences between our religious traditions or church cultures. If

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<sup>31</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” §23.

<sup>32</sup> Lange et al., eds., “Spirit of the Lord,” § 97. Incidentally, this document has a word count of 12,900 and contains 163 “we” references. The question arises if there is so much agreement, why should we not learn to witness together?

there is a common starting point, then it will have to focus on Jesus Christ as our common Lord and Saviour. Jesus Christ being fully human and fully divine, as described in the Scripture and as the Nicene Creed proclaims, must be our foundation.<sup>33</sup> Everything else will follow from that.

Second, we must ask hard questions. Members of certain church traditions have reservations towards others for many reasons. They may have misconceptions, traditional misgivings, false characterisation of past events, and other impediments to open encounter and conversation. Hard questions help to clarify the situation and allow for taking steps toward mutual correction and reconciliation. The tensions between Pentecostals and Roman Catholics in Italy serve as an example that I describe later.

Third, relationships need time to grow. Human factors like building trust and developing friendships play an important role in ecumenical rapprochement. Speaking as a Pentecostal, I would say that it is in relationships that God can work through the Holy Spirit in creative ways.

Fourth, we have more in common than we first assumed. That is a frequently voiced comment by participants and is reflected in various ecumenical documents.<sup>34</sup> It is a foundation to build on. If, as believers in Christ, we acknowledge that we have more in common than what separates us, then there is no reason why we should not attempt to engage in common witness. I would even go so far as to argue that given the increasing influence of secularisation in our time,

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<sup>33</sup> The World Council of Churches affirmed in 1961 that the Lord Jesus Christ is both God and Saviour according to the Scriptures: World Council of Churches, "The Basis of the WCC," accessed July 19, 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/node/6243#:~:text=and%20Holy%20Spirit.%22-,The%20WCC's%201948%20inaugural%20assembly%20declared:%20%22The%20World%20Council%20of,churches%20by%20its%20own%20wisdom.%22>. More recently, the Global Christian Forum communicated that its purpose is to be "an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organisations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges" (Global Christian Forum, "About Us," accessed July 18, 2025, <https://globalchristianforum.org/about-us/>).

<sup>34</sup> "Word and Spirit, Church and World," §9; "Lutherans and Pentecostals in Dialogue," and "2023 Lutheran-Pentecostal Dialogue," 2; "Experience in Christian Faith and Life," §11; "Called to God's Mission," §3, §85; Lange et al., eds., "Spirit of the Lord," §91.

we need common witness to be credible in a world less and less concerned about God. This argument brings us to the last section of this paper.

### **Common Challenges in View of Secularisation, Pluralism, and Polarisation**

Many religious people consider the influence of secularism as a threat to their faith. Similarly, we increasingly live in pluralist societies that seem to level distinctions as if any particular value is optional.<sup>35</sup> This can be compared to a supermarket mentality where the consumer can choose from a wide range of breakfast cereals, different types of milk, or a detergent that washes whiter. Opposed to those trends, or perhaps because of them, we can notice strong tendencies toward polarisation of opinions, whether they are political, social, or ideological. These unsettling tendencies call for discernment.<sup>36</sup> We are facing these tendencies regardless of whether we are Pentecostal, Protestant or Catholic; we sit in the same boat, so why not address these challenges together? If we do not, my thesis would claim, we become less credible with our Christian witness in this world because people will be distracted by our differences. We can also put it differently: the ecumenical dialogues have taught us not only to pray and believe together but also to be a prophetic voice in our societies so we can uphold peace, justice, and reconciliation. An image that comes to mind is the prophet Jeremiah's call: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:7, NRSV). So, how can we seek for the

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Marina Ngursangzeli Behera and Jean-Daniel Plüss, eds., *Conviction in an Optional Society: Pentecostal /Charismatic Christianity & Religious Pluralism* (Regnum Books, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Whereas the LWF-PWF report calls for discernment in biblical and spiritual terms ("Spirit of the Lord," §15, §76, §82, §87), the reports of the WCRC – PWF dialogue emphasize communal discernment for the benefit of society at large. In "Experience in Christian Faith and Life," a whole section was dedicated to the theme of discernment (§§73-116).

welfare—also the spiritual welfare—of society in this secular, pluralistic, and divided world? Let me answer by looking at three objections.

The first objection would say that there is nothing good in secularism. I would answer that while it is true that secularism can distract people from paying attention to fundamental spiritual values, secularism is not all bad because it can protect us from extreme positions. The former Anglican Bishop of Durham argues that “A certain degree of secularity—by which we mean preventing theocracy, enabling the free exercise of religion, and permitting liberty of conscience in religion—is far better than Christian nationalism.”<sup>37</sup> In certain countries, especially in the West, some people advocate for some form of Christian nationalism, but let me remind them that Pentecostals suffered persecution from governments that saw themselves as custodians of a Christian nation. German National Socialism comes to mind. More interesting in our context is the fact that Italian Pentecostals suffered in the 1930s until the mid-1940s from the fascist regime that was in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church. They were not allowed to assemble freely, their properties were attacked, and their members were put into insane asylums and prisons until a secular initiative in the 1950s gave them the right to exist as a Pentecostal denomination and practice their faith freely.<sup>38</sup> No wonder Italian Pentecostals had a strained relationship with Catholics. They had every right to demand an apology from the Pope. In 2014, Pope Francis travelled to Naples and attended a Pentecostal worship service led by his Pentecostal friend, Giovanni Traettino. The pope publicly acknowledged wrongdoing by the Catholic Church and asked for forgiveness.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tom Wright and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (SPCK, 2024), 134.

<sup>38</sup> Plüss, “European Pentecostal Reactions to Totalitarianism.”

<sup>39</sup> Josephine McKenna, “Pope Francis Apologizes for Persecution of Pentecostals,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 28, 2014, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-apologizes-persecution-pentecostals#:~:text=During%20the%20visit%2C%20Francis%20apologized,were%20crazy%2C%22%20Francis%20said.>

The second objection focuses on pluralism. It is a common misconception that pluralism necessitates a levelling of opinions. Some people say that if people accept pluralism, then there is no conviction worth fighting for because everything is seen as acceptable. You are OK, and I am OK, as long as nobody is exclusivist. But there is a more constructive approach to pluralism.

Veli Matti Kärkkäinen pleads for a hospitable, dialogical and witness-oriented communication.

Borrowing from missiologist Harold Netland, Kärkkäinen pleads for the following:

1. Bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ among religious others is not optional, but rather obligatory for the Christian Church.
2. Christians are to bear witness to the gospel in accordance with God's love.
3. Christian witness must be respectful of others and be conducted with humility and integrity.
4. Christian witness should include appropriate forms of interreligious dialogue.
5. Christians are to reject violence and the abuse of power in witness.<sup>40</sup>

If the late Walter Hollenweger would hear this, he would probably laugh and say, "I have long argued that the Pentecostal movement is in itself fundamentally pluralistic."<sup>41</sup> Pluralism in our societies is simply the context of our lives.

Finally, there is the perception of polarisation in our societies and churches. Since the rise of social media and partially as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, individual opinions are more pronounced. People are increasingly willing to defend their oftentimes extreme convictions more rigorously. Here again, being in dialogue with other Christian traditions has been a blessing to Pentecostals. Practicing true dialogue means paying attention, being a good

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<sup>40</sup> Harold Netland, *Christianity and Religious Diversity: Clarifying Christian Commitment in a Globalizing Age* (Baker Academic, 2015) 234–42, quoted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Christian Church among Religions: Toward a Hospitable Encounter with the Other," in *Conviction in an Optional Society: Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity & Religious Pluralism*, ed. Marina Ngursangzeli Behera and Jean-Daniel Plüss, Regnum Studies in Mission, ed. Paul Bendor-Samuel and Tony Gray (Regnum Books International, 2020), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Hollenweger, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *Refleks* 4, no. 2 (2005): 93–94, <https://pentecostalarchives.org/?a=d&d=REF2005-Issue4-2.1.1&srpos=2&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN-refleks+My+pilgrimage+in+mission----->.

listener, and trying to find mutual understanding—qualities we desperately need in a fragmented world.

To conclude, I would say that the twenty-first century brings several challenges to our social lives and personal convictions. Never was it so obvious that we cannot manage on our own if we want to be faithful to our missional calling in the world. We need one another, especially in the community of faith, if we want to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit and be credible witnesses of Christ. The dialogues between Pentecostals and representatives of other Christian families are a gift by which we can learn to journey together, grow in wisdom, and live lives loving God and our neighbours as ourselves.

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**Response to Jean-Daniel Plüss’ “Lessons Learned during Thirty  
Years of Ecumenical Dialogue: What Future  
Challenges Can Be Expected?”  
(Eva Wong Suk Kyun)**

Thank you, Dr. Plüss, for the splendid presentation. Indeed, church history reveals many divisions and trenches in the universal church. Pentecostals’ ecumenical dialogue has played an important role in bringing unity to the Christian faith in past decades with traditional denominations. Although the trench of doctrinal differences is still there, Christian unity in diversity is possible, and ecumenism has progressed remarkably since the last century. The ecumenical roots of Pentecostalism in Europe have been phenomenal, with early Pentecostal leaders from various ecclesial backgrounds. Indeed, the outpouring of the Spirit and renewals are the universal gift of everyday spiritual experiences for Christians on every continent, particularly with the spread of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement, even to many traditional churches in the past century, with a vast expansion in Asia and the Global South.

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**Pentecostals in Dialogue**

As Plüss mentioned, in ecumenical dialogues, “the Pentecostal group should only represent classical Pentecostals” for more focused conversations; doing so facilitated rich theological exchange. I ponder several questions about the ongoing ecumenical efforts: How are these dialogues bringing impact, awareness, and unity at the grassroots level? What are ecumenical engagements like in the Global South? How are larger Spirit-empowered Christian groups represented at the table? In my response, I highlight the biblical basis for ecumenical work and why it is important. While ecumenism continues, I see the need to bridge the gaps in

global Pentecostalism, broadening Pentecostal representation at ecumenical tables as the way forward in Christian unity.

### **The Biblical Basis for Ecumenism**

I fully agree with Plüss that Pentecostals, charismatics, and various church traditions can and must develop a “strong sense of unity amidst diversity” through common faith in Jesus Christ and the experience of the Holy Spirit, despite their differences in liturgical practices and ecclesial convictions. I affirm that ecumenical work is important because it demonstrates God’s love and the work of the Holy Spirit in uniting and empowering the body of Christ as a Christian witness to the world.

#### *God Commands Love for One Another*

Ecumenical work demonstrates God’s love among Jesus’s followers, heeding God’s command to love and to unite in diversity, rather than perpetuating division and indifference. Jesus commands his disciples to love one another in the New Covenant as a new commandment.<sup>1</sup> Loving one another is a command, an imperative to be obeyed and demonstrated as believers reflect God’s love.<sup>2</sup>

#### *God’s Love Unites the Body of Christ*

God’s love unites the universal church as one body in Jesus Christ. Christians are God’s children and one body of Christ in the bond of love, regardless of historical background, tradition, and place (John 1:12; Rom 8:16–21; Eph 5:1; 1 John 3:1; 5:2). God’s salvation and

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). Jesus repeated this later in John: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you . . . . These things I command you, so that you will love one another” (15:12, 17). All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the ESV.

<sup>2</sup> “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

love transcend barriers, as Jesus has broken down every barrier of humanity in the New Covenant. Ecumenical work is crucial as all believers are one body in Jesus Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12; 2 Cor 5:10; Col 3:14-15).

### *God's Witness to the World*

Ecumenism is an excellent way toward Christian unity, bridging Christ's witness to all peoples globally. Jesus prayed in his high priestly prayer that his disciples may become one "so that the world may believe" (John 17:20–23),<sup>3</sup> particularly in the secular world. Christian unity reflects the triune God or Trinity: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. The heart of unity is love. The unity of Christians worldwide is God's desire, as God's love is demonstrated by Jesus's disciples loving one another, and it is imperative as his witness to the world.

### *The Holy Spirit Breaks Barriers and Empowers God's Mission*

The Holy Spirit breaks barriers and equips believers with spiritual gifts for the Christian life and missions. Since the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been poured out on believers, transcending all boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, and status (Acts 2:17–18).<sup>4</sup> In the unity of the Spirit, believers are to collaborate in synergy, doing God's mission and fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20). The recent Lausanne Fourth Congress on World Evangelisation in Seoul 2024 gathered Christians from a rich diversity of the global church with the theme, "Let

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<sup>3</sup> "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:20-23).

<sup>4</sup> "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

the Church Declare and Display Christ Together,” calling for collaborative action to accelerate the global mission as Christian leaders with common calling, vision, and goals to fulfil the Great Commission.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bridging the Gap in Global Pentecostalism**

Regarding focused dialogue conversations having classical Pentecostals representing denominational Pentecostals, global statistics show that classical Pentecostals are the smaller group, estimated at around 124 million within the larger global Pentecostal body, totaling 644 million as of 2020.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the data show an increasing gap between classical Pentecostals and a growing Spirit-empowered Christianity.<sup>7</sup> The diverse wider groups, therefore, may not be sufficiently represented in ecumenical dialogues.

Since the 1980s, newer and different theologies of neo-Pentecostals and Third Wave groups have caused many influences and tensions to arise among classical Pentecostals and traditional denominations. These newer theologies and emphases are an important area for theological dialogues.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, traditional churches are experiencing the impact of renewal

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<sup>5</sup> Lausanne Movement, “Gathering Seoul-Incheon 2024,” September 22–28, 2024, accessed April 7, 2025, <https://lausanne.org/gathering/seoul-2024>. I served on the Lausanne Global Analysis Editorial Advisory Board and participated in the congress.

<sup>6</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *Introducing Spirit-Empowered Christianity: The Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Oral Roberts University Press, 2023), 8-11.

<sup>7</sup> According to Johnson and Zurlo, classical Pentecostals are the denominational Pentecostals (Type 1), estimated to have a total of 124 million in 2020. Among the classical Pentecostal denominations are groups such as the Assemblies of God, Church of God (Cleveland, TN), Church of God in Christ (COGIC), The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and Oneness Pentecostals like the United Pentecostal Church. Type 2 are the charismatics, those who are Spirit baptised but who remain in their mainline Christian denominations, namely Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, and others, with a total of about 268 million. Type 3 are the Independent charismatics, with an estimated total of 252 million. The newer name for the overarching movement is Spirit-empowered Christians, with an estimated total of 644 million in 2020. Previous names used for the movement worldwide are Pentecostalism, Global Pentecostalism, charismatic, Pentecostal and Charismatic, Pentecostal-Charismatic, and Renewal. The newest term is Spirit-empowered Christians, around 26 percent of universal Christians.

<sup>8</sup> Eva Wong Suk Kyun, “Contextual Pentecostalism from a Classical Pentecostal Movement to a Contemporary Pentecostal Church Movement: A Study of the Assemblies of God of Malaysia with Special Reference to Joel 2:28–32” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Middlesex University, 2022). The newer theologies and

groups. Spirit-empowered Christianity is the fastest-growing and second-largest Christian group after Catholics.<sup>9</sup> There is a growing need for theological conversations among the diverse global Pentecostals and charismatics at the table. As classical Pentecostals have been long-established in theological development and Pentecostal education, Wonsuk Ma stresses the importance of “theological formation/education to strengthen the growth of global Christianity so it can serve the wider Pentecostal-Charismatic [M]ovement, actively contribut[ing] to the life of the wider universal [C]hurch, and meaningfully engag[ing] with the world in the public space.”<sup>10</sup> As such, solid Pentecostal theological education and consistent theological conversations among the wider Pentecostal-charismatic Movements can help bridge the gaps within the diverse Spirit-empowered Christianity should church leaders earnestly seek unity in God’s love under the guidance of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Way Forward for Ecumenical Dialogue**

#### *The Nicene Creed as the Theological Foundation for Christian Unity*

The Nicene Creed is a solid theological foundation of the common Christian affirmation of faith, particularly relative to the belief in the trinitarian God. The Nicene Creed is the first ecumenical creed formulated at the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. It unites universal Christianity in a confession of faith and affirms fundamental doctrines of orthodoxy. The Nicene Creed remains an important tool for uniting all churches and denominations in the Christian

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practices of neo-Pentecostals and Third Wave include the Seven Mountains Mandate, Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare, Inner Healing, 24-hour Prayer Movement, and Charismatic Worship, among others.

<sup>9</sup> Wonsuk Ma, “Asian Pentecostalism as a Growth Engine for Global Christianity: Potentials and Challenges,” in *The Holy Spirit, Spirituality and Leadership: Essays in Honour of Younghoon Lee*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies, Regnum Studies of Missions (Regnum Books International, 2024), 259.

<sup>10</sup> Wonsuk Ma, “Pentecostal Theological Formation and Education for Tomorrow (Sec 1), Part III of ‘Global Christianity Today, the Locus of Pentecostal-Charismatic Faith, and Theological Education for Tomorrow,’” *World Alliance for Pentecostal Theological Education (WAPTE), Pentecostal Education* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 264, <https://wapte.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pentecostal-Education-7-2-Fall-2022-v2.pdf>.

faith, even though stark differences remain in culture, traditions, practices, and expressions of worship. In 2025, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical efforts are commemorating the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council, noting its affirmation of faith, its focus on “the mission of God’s triune love, and the implications this has for the common witness and service of the churches.”<sup>11</sup> The Nicene Creed defines and unites the universal church in our belief in who God is and who we are in our relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed helps all believers respond to God and one another in doctrinal truth, whether from orthodox, traditional, or the modern Pentecostal-charismatic church, united as one.

#### *Involvement at the Grassroots Level*

Involvement at the grassroots level will benefit the universal church in cultivating Christian unity. It would be more impactful for the dialogues and issues to be shared with the public and with grassroots believers, especially now in the digital age that transcends geographical borders. The conversations will help unite different denominations and churches, not just at the leadership level, but also at the level of congregations at large. An Asian example is the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Pentecostal Dialogue in May 1999 among the Presbyterian and Pentecostal communities in Seoul, Korea, open to the public through Korean television news reports and newspapers. Such ecumenical efforts get down to the grassroots level. This dialogue facilitated extended conversations among the churches throughout South

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<sup>11</sup> World Council of Churches, “Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order Set for October: ‘Where Now for Visible Unity?’” accessed July 1, 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/sixth-world-conference-on-faith-and-order-set-for-october-where-now-for-visible-unity>.

Korea toward mutual understanding and unity. Stronger ecumenical ties were formed over the years, and then Korean churches hosted the WCC 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Busan in 2013.<sup>12</sup>

### *Inclusion of the Wider Circle of Spirit-Empowered Christianity*

“Who is missing at the table?” is the mantra of the Global Christian Forum (GCF), which aims to engage those outside their circle and has initiated important theological dialogues.<sup>13</sup>

Universal Christianity has diverse histories and identities, with an increasing number of post-denominational independent Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches worldwide. Similarly, Pentecostals can ask the same question, “Who is missing at the table?” and broaden the existing theological dialogues.<sup>14</sup>

### *A New Form of Ecumenism through Global Pentecostal Scholarship*

Global Pentecostalism is quite diverse, and there is an emerging new trending ecumenical approach and uniting effort in the fastest-growing Christian movement through Pentecostal scholarship. The uniting contributions through scholarships, consultations, and dialogues worth noting are the European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association,<sup>15</sup> the Global Network of

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<sup>12</sup> Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Yoido Full Gospel Church and Ecumenism,” in *The Holy Spirit, Spirituality and Leadership: Essays in Honour of Younghoon Lee*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies, Regnum Studies of Missions (Regnum Books International, 2024), 283–6. The WCC 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Busan was hosted by the Korean Host Committee, comprised of Rev. Dr Younghoon Lee, senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, who is also the General Superintendent of the Korean Assemblies of God; the Rev. Samhwan Kim, founder and pastor of Myung Sung Presbyterian Church; and the Rev. Jong-wha Park.

<sup>13</sup> Casely B. Essamuah and Jean-Daniel Plüss, “Christianity Moving South—Walter Hollenweger’s Propositions Revisited: A Conversation,” in *The Holy Spirit, Spirituality and Leadership: Essays in Honour of Younghoon Lee*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies, Regnum Studies of Missions (Regnum Books International, 2024), 227–8.

<sup>14</sup> I was privileged to be involved in the Global Christian Forum Asia Regional Meeting as part of the Message Drafting Committee in Seoul, Korea, in 2022. I also participated in the GCF Fourth Global Gathering in Accra, Ghana, in 2024, themed “That the World May Know” (John 17:23) and experienced the unique sharing of faith stories and fellowships at the tables. See Global Christian Forum, “GCF Asia Regional Meeting: ‘Faithfulness in a Multi-Faith Context,’” accessed April 7, 2025, <https://globalchristianforum.org/gcf-asia-regional-consultation-2022/>; see also Global Christian Forum, “Message of Fourth Global Gathering ‘That the World May Know,’” accessed April 7, 2025, <https://globalchristianforum.org/june-2024-newsletter/>.

<sup>15</sup> See the European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association (EPCRA), accessed May 3, 2025, <http://www.epcra.ch/home.html>. EPCRA started in 1981 and is presently chaired by Dr. Jean-Daniel Plüss.

Spirit Empowered Scholars (GNSES),<sup>16</sup> and the *Global Pentecostal Voices Initiative*.<sup>17</sup> These initiatives are scholarly ecumenical dialogues among global Pentecostals and/or Spirit-empowered movements from every continent to learn and share their unique theological insights and gifts with the larger body of Christ. As these resources are widely available, this scholarly approach of global Pentecostal conversations—in theology, doctrines, Spirit-empowered living, church and ministry, missions and evangelism, and cultural engagements—effectively connects, shares knowledge, and bridges the gaps among global Pentecostals and the global church with long-lasting impact.

### **Conclusion**

The Holy Spirit unites the body of Christ, the diverse universal church, on every continent, through the outpouring of the Spirit, in revivals and renewals. Ecumenism plays a significant role in bringing the body of Christ from dialogue to collaboration in God's mission amidst the contemporary challenges of secularisation, pluralism, and polarisation.

Christian unity is a foretaste of heaven on earth, as described in Revelation 7:9-10,

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The church, though diverse, is the beautiful Bride of Christ (Rev 19:7).

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<sup>16</sup> See Global Network of Spirit Empowered Scholars (GNSES), "Who Are We?" accessed May 3, 2025, <https://empowered21.com/about/gnses/>. GNSES is co-chaired by Dr. Wonsuk Ma and Dr. Opoku Onyinah, providing a common platform for meaningful consultations among scholars in the larger global Pentecostalism. It was launched in 2023 as part of Empowered21's annual Scholars Consultations.

<sup>17</sup> See Global Pentecostal Voices, "Home Page," accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.gpvoices.org>. The GPV Initiative is co-chaired by Dr. Byron Klaus, Dr. Douglas Petersen, and Dr. Kong Hee, organising the Global Pentecostal Summit November 3–6, 2023, the Europe-Asia Pentecostal Summit May 13–18, 2025, and the Asia Pentecostal Summit October 29–November 2, 2025.

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