

Debunking some Pentecostal stereotypes: Successful in meeting needs of the poor worldwide

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

Pentecostalism and related “Spirit-filled movements” are rightly seen as a hard-driving engine fueling the global spread of Christianity, but their adherents are often wrongly seen as apolitical, otherworldly enthusiasts bent on “speaking in tongues,” according to two separate studies on the century-old phenomena.

A groundbreaking survey of such believers in 10 countries, including the United States, where they account for 23 percent of Americans, was released this month by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Pentecostal and charismatic Christians still hold conservative views on the Bible, end-times prophecies, faith healing and traditional morality. But in six countries at least four of every 10 Pentecostals surveyed say they never speak or pray in tongues—the utterances unintelligible to the believer that were commonly ridiculed in the past by Christian and non-Christian critics.

And researchers said “they were taken aback” by discovering a range of views among Pentecostals on sociopolitical issues—views sometimes similar to outlooks more characteristic of progressive churches.

When U.S. adults in the survey were asked if they agree that Christians have a responsibility “to work for justice for the poor”—a phrase often identified with liberal Christianity—90 percent of Pentecostals and 85 percent of charismatic believers agreed. Between 93 and 72 percent agreed in Brazil, Chile and Guatemala; in Kenya, 97 percent agreed.

“I find that extremely interesting,” said sociologist Donald E. Miller, executive director of the University of Southern California’s Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Miller and colleague Ted Yamamori have completed research on what they

are calling “progressive Pentecostalism” for a book to be published next year.

Miller pointed also to the Pew finding in which most Latin American respondents disagreed with the statement that “AIDS is God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior.” In South Africa 53 percent of Pentecostals and 44 percent of charismatics disagreed.

“The point is,” said Miller in an interview, “that you get split opinions, and that tends to deflate the idea that you can stereotype charismatics and Pentecostals.” Miller is outgoing president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

Miller said his research on global Pentecostalism, done before he knew of the Pew study, was bolstered by the 10-nation survey funded by the John Templeton Foundation. He spoke at an October 4-6 symposium at the USC campus in Los Angeles where the results of the Pew survey were released.

Luis Lugo, director of the Washington-based, nonpartisan Pew Forum, noted that at least a quarter of the world’s 2 billion Christians are estimated to be Pentecostal and charismatic believers. About two-thirds of survey respondents said they speak to others about their faith at least once a week, Lugo said, adding: “No wonder they are growing and retaining their people.”

Lugo said the Pentecostal success stories in Latin America and Africa are understandable. African converts “don’t have to leave behind their world of spirit . . . and Pentecostalism is second to none in providing a sense of community,” especially in countries affected by massive displacement and migration.

“I don’t think it’s too farfetched at this point to seriously consider whether Christianity is well on its way to being Pentecostalized,” Lugo said, “certainly in the developing world.” Like Miller, Lugo said that “contrary to widespread perceptions, Pentecostals are anything but apolitical.”

The Pew study settled on *renewalists* as an umbrella term for Pentecostals and charismatics. Miller objected that the word connotes a fringe movement, which the movement is not. “We had quite an argument on how many categories to use,” said John Green, the Pew Forum’s senior fellow in religion and American politics, in an interview. “I personally prefer *Spirit-filled movement* as an umbrella term.”

In the study, Pentecostals included people in churches like the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ that formed in the wake of the 1906 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, as well as later Pentecostal denominations such as the Brazil-founded Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Charismatics were defined as part of the late 20th-century movement who attend Catholic, mainstream Protestant and independent churches or worship in fellowships such as Calvary Chapels and Vineyard churches.

In the U.S., charismatics outnumber Pentecostals (the former group accounts for 18 percent of the population; the latter, 5 percent). But in Kenya and Nigeria, Pentecostals are more numerous than charismatics. The largest charismatic populations are in Guatemala and the Philippines (both at 40 percent) and Brazil (34 percent).

The theological distinction has traditionally been that Pentecostal churches say that believers receive “the baptism of the Holy Spirit” when they speak in tongues, whereas charismatic groups are not so rigid on that point. The gifts of the Spirit, which include healing and prophecy, are expected to be put to use freely. Some Pentecostal leaders have lamented in recent decades that tongues-speaking has fallen off.

Yet, the study said, spirit-filled believers, especially Pentecostals, “stand out for the intensity of their belief” in traditional doctrines and practices compared to other Christians.

In the U.S., 62 percent of Pentecostals and 46 percent of charismatics said they have experienced or witnessed divine healings; only 28 percent of other Christians said so. Asked if they ever had “direct revelations from God,” 54 percent of Pentecostals and 39 percent of charismatics said they had, whereas 25 percent of other Christians said they had. One-third of U.S. Pentecostals also said they had experienced exorcisms or witnessed them.

“They feel they are very much in the grip of the supernatural,” said Green. The vast majority of Pentecostals (more than 80 percent in each country) believe in “the rapture of the church,” a teaching that in the end times the faithful will be lifted into heaven. As a group, charismatics affirm such beliefs less often, but still more often than other Christians.

On political questions as well, Pentecostals are more conservative. Fifty-two percent of Pentecostals in the U.S. believe that the government should take special steps to make America a Christian country. “In Latin America, however, fewer believers want a Christian nation, and they tend to support church-state separation,” Green said during a news conference.

According to Miller, Spirit-filled believers in the Pew survey often reflect their country’s cultural attitudes. When asked to rate themselves on a political spectrum, 47 percent of American Pentecostals saw themselves in the middle and 14 percent on the right. “It’s not that much different from the U.S. general population with 54 percent in the middle and 17 percent on the right,” he said.

Looking at churches overseas, Miller said they are “not left-leaning, out to change the structures of society.” The sociologist said he agreed with a theologian in Argentina who quipped, “Liberation theology opted for the poor, and the poor opted for Pentecostalism.”

But Miller said Pentecostal churches “have been more successful [than the ‘base communities’ of liberation theology] in dealing with the felt needs of poor people—and especially women.” The warmth of the Pentecostal churches and their opposition to drinking, gambling and womanizing by the husbands has helped to create stable families, Miller said.

Last February, officials of the World Council of Churches, at their General Assembly in Brazil, said they wished to add more Pentecostal churches to their membership ranks, citing their ecumenical outlook and considerable social work. Indeed, Miller said that his study found “really creative programs involved with education, medical care and AIDS,” including programs encouraging economic self-sufficiency.

“Sectarians do tend to withdraw from the world, and in the beginning Pentecostals were sectarians, but they were also part of the poor,” he said. “As they become more educated and sophisticated, they bring that understanding into the job.”