

Claudia Währisch-Oblau. *The Missionary Self-Perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing Back the Gospel*. Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies Series 2, Andrew Davies and William K. Kay, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2012. 428 pp. ISBN: 9789004228306.

Reviewed by John Koeshall*

This book is the edited version of the author's doctoral dissertation, 'Migrants with a Mission,' Heidelberg University, 2007. Währisch-Oblau heads the evangelism department of the United Evangelical Mission-German Region (UEM), a part of the German Protestant Church (*Landeskirchen*). In 1998 the UEM decided "to become more instrumental in starting one or more international congregations in its German region which would serve as symbolic representations of the international character of the body of Christ" (1).

Währisch-Oblau has chosen an important topic, considering that the World Council of Churches Commission for Migrants (2008) estimates 24 million migrants find their home in Europe. Half of these sojourners belong to Christian churches ranging from Oriental, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, to Protestant, Pentecostal and Charismatic. (5) The questions this book addresses include: how can the European churches respond to this growing presence of migrant churches? How do the migrants view their role in Europe and form their vision or mission?

This study extended over a nine-year period and analyzed a portion of the 291 Pentecostal/charismatic migrant churches found in the UEM database. More than 100 pastors, elders, and founders of these churches participated in the study. In Germany, Währisch-Oblau interviewed in-depth 24 pastors of which 13 of the interviews are transcribed in the appendix of the book, entitled "Expatriation Narratives." The interview scripts were analyzed to determine the leaders' self-interpretation, their understanding of ministerial "call" and how their "call narrative" was integral to the legitimization of their

* John Koeshall serves as an Assemblies of God World Missionary (USA) to University students. He has been active in Europe and in other parts of the world since 1980, and was instrumental in founding Students for Christ Europe.

role as a pastor.

In an effort to gain a better understanding of migrant church leaders as well as build trust, Währisch-Oblau took a month long study trip in 2001 to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Ghana and Nigeria. As a participant observer she primarily visited churches that had daughter churches or related churches in Germany, and has made subsequent trips to Ghana.

Währisch-Oblau was particularly interested in the role of the pastor and their relationship to their congregation and their “call”, which serves as the main source of legitimization of “ministerial authority” in the ecclesiology of the African church leaders. In the process of the study, Währisch-Oblau discovered formidable cultural and ecclesial contrasts between the German *Landeskirchen*, whom she represents, and the migrant churches. As an example, a “calling” does not appear to play a significant role in the German pastor’s life; rather his/her educational and professional skills qualify them for their position. The migrant pastor on the other hand, defends his call as his qualification, to the exclusion of any particular theological training. Chapters 3 and 4, which cover these topics, span 160 pages of the 364 page text, indicating the emphasis Währisch-Oblau places on these themes. Chapter 5 explores modes of evangelism, spiritual warfare, self-definition, and mission in dialogue with the *Landeskirche*, the Lutheran church of Germany.

Chapter 6, entitled “Consequences”, contain the author’s conclusions or outcomes. The author opens by revisiting her problem statement or her goals for this study; “an attempt better to understand Pentecostal/charismatic migrant churches and their agenda, with the aim to help deepen the cooperation between indigenous Protestant churches in Europe and the Pentecostal/Charismatic migrant churches” (305).

Währisch-Oblau optimistically presses for both sides to learn from each other and bring about change that results from what she describes as the ‘urgently needed’ dialogue. Thus the thread that runs throughout this chapter is a plea for dialogue in order to promote cooperation and partnership. However she maintains that theological and missiological dialogue “has hardly begun, not least because both sides do not really know each other” (305).

In a nutshell the author concludes, cooperation is not simple and is not easy.

“Clearly, the current situation is not conducive to theological dialogue between indigenous and migrant churches” (310). In her usual thorough and well written fashion, Währisch-Oblau supports that statement with what she calls ‘conflict layers’, or arenas of misunderstanding, and they include “ministerial authority, the understanding of (im)migration, and evangelism” (310). The interviewees “displayed conceptions, ideas, worldviews and theological theses which are deeply ‘foreign’ to a European mainline Protestant outlook” (310). The UEM saw the migrant churches as a kind of *diaspora*, a “home away from home.” The migrant churches saw themselves as having a missionary call to the “dead” churches of Europe! The *Landeskirchen* and its UEM mission wish to form international congregations that adopt German leadership styles and church structure. This is probably the farthest idea in the minds of Ghanaian and Nigerian pastors who have brought with them “the power!”

As the author approaches the conclusion of the chapter, she unveils a fundamental ecclesiological understanding among the German churches that will ultimately affect the possibility of respect and cooperation: “In general, the Pentecostal and charismatic movement is not defined as part of Protestantism in Europe, but rather as a movement *against which Protestantism needs to draw a clear dividing line*. Consequently, a double exclusion-mechanism works against Pentecostal/charismatic migrant churches. They are neither European nor Protestant: therefore again, they cannot claim a right to co-define what “protestant in Europe” means” (328) (*italics mine*).

Very fairly and honestly throughout the book the author gives both sides of divisive and problematic issues, for example, Währisch-Oblau states, “... migrant pastors look at what they describe as the lack of spiritual praxis of European Protestant pastors and feel validated: European Protestant pastors may have superior academic training, but spiritually, they have little to show” (312). Although the author’s intention was to discover and build a better understanding of migrant churches in Germany, some of the most enlightening parts of the study were revealing of her own *Landeskirchen*.

The author has limited her studies to the German *Landeskirchen*, or the state Lutheran churches, and only briefly mentions the indigenous German Pentecostal Church (BfP or Federation of Free Pentecostal Churches), which would seem to have a closer affinity with these Pentecostal migrant churches. Währisch-Oblau states that the BfP are

“cautiously” welcoming migrant “reverse mission churches” (319). According to the BfP website, since 2002 the BfP has experienced a membership growth of 32%, to 600 churches, (Source: www.bfp.de), much of which is attributed to their policy of including 150 *Internationale Gemeinden* (AIG). Although Währisch-Oblau restricted her studies to her own organization, a further study of the relationship of the immigrant churches with the BfP would be natural, since they are more closely aligned in theology, history and shared experiences. Would the German led Pentecostal churches also be found to be lacking in “power” by the migrant pastors?

This book should be recommended to any cross-cultural worker who desires to build synergistic partnerships between immigrating churches and an existing but perhaps weakening local church. Many of the problems and prejudices that the author presents could serve as a valuable basis for dialogue to bring greater understanding to both the parties.

I admire the author’s candor and honesty. She clearly respects and appreciates the migrant churches even as she works to understand another people, a differing theology and praxis, and has tried to balance contrasting viewpoints with careful, well-documented research. She urges the European Protestant churches to embrace a “real opening-up towards migrant Christians” which would begin “a process of radical re-definition of their own heritages and identities” (326). Her closing comments remind the European Protestant Churches that they too “are strangers in this world and citizens first and foremost of the Kingdom of God” (336). If they will remember this in “their encounters with migrant Pentecostals and charismatics... a real dialogue and learning process may ensue” (336). As members of Christ from different cultures consider deeply Währisch-Oblau’s findings, they will move together toward the badly needed unity in the Christian Church of Europe as we prepare for every tongue, tribe and nation to gather around the Throne on “that day.”