

BOOK REVIEW

ANDERSON, Allan, *Spreading Fires: The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism*. London: SCM Press, 2007. 312pp. Pbk. ISBN: 978-0-334-04032-3. £22.99.

Reviewed by: Claudia Währisch-Oblau, Vereinte Evangelische Mission, Rudolfstraße 137, 42285 Wuppertal, Germany. E-mail: Waehrisch-Oblau-C@vemission.org

Allan Anderson has written a stupendous book. Halfway through, one is reminded of the poster for the 1998 movie “The Truman Story”: A huge and bewildering array of small photographs, once seen from a certain distance, morphs into a single portrait. Similarly, Anderson sometimes overwhelms the reader with a cornucopia of information as he is trying nothing less than a global overview of the early Pentecostal movement. But as in the poster, a larger and coherent picture slowly emerges.

Anderson’s study has three parts: three opening chapters sketch the context by giving an introduction both into the state of research into the Pentecostal movement and an overview of its beginnings in the United States. The major middle part then traces the movement of missionaries from the beginning of the Mukti Mission through the Azusa Street Revival to China and East Asia, Africa and Latin America. The third part, “Theology and Praxis,” attempts a more systematic reading of these early missionaries’ understanding of their evangelistic message, their attitude towards religions, culture and politics, and their understanding of and training for ministry. A short conclusion summarizes the main assumptions of the book: (1) the Azusa Street Revival and the Mukti Revival had equal significance in the early promotion of Pentecostal beliefs throughout the world; (2) (Western) missionary networks were fundamental in spreading Pentecostalism internationally; (3) Pentecostal periodicals were the foundation of a Pentecostal meta-culture; and (4) Pentecostalism was, from the beginning, a new missionary movement.

The overall picture that emerges through this study is one of a truly global network in which women and men cooperated beyond cultures and denominations and in which “natives” also influenced and changed the missionaries. In a typical example, Alice Luce, one of the first North American Assemblies of God missionaries to Mexico, is introduced as follows: “Luce was English and a former CMS [Church Missionary Society] missionary in India who had received Spirit baptism through

the ministry of Shorat Chuckerbutty in Allahabad” (pp. 194–95). Anderson shows how the early Pentecostal missionaries, many of them single women, simply and quickly went all over the world without much money, training or preparation, sometimes enduring unimaginable hardships.

Anderson keeps stressing that: “information on western missionaries... is disproportionate to their role and contribution,” pointing time and again to the role of the often unnamed “native workers” whose commitment probably contributed far more to the fast global spread of the movement than can be ascertained through missionary archives. Despite often being unable to name these workers, it is Anderson’s great merit to have pulled at least some of them from obscurity, for example the Chinese Mok Lai Chi who began to edit a Pentecostal newspaper in Chinese as early as 1909, the South African Edward Lion (Motaung) who headed the work of the Apostolic Faith Mission in what is today Lesotho, or Francisco Olazábal who at his time led the biggest network of Latino Pentecostals in the USA. But despite his intentions, Anderson’s history centres very much on the movements of Western missionaries.

The theological analysis Anderson attempts in the third part of his book is somewhat uneven. The chapter on the evangelistic message of the early missionaries well characterizes its holistic character (bodily healing was always understood as part of evangelism) and puts it into the context of their strong (pre-millennial) eschatological expectations. Anderson points out that most of the early Pentecostals were pacifists and that many of them refused to serve in the military during World War I, preferring to go to jail rather than to kill. When looking at the missionaries’ attitudes toward “heathen” religions and foreign cultures, Anderson does not try to decorate a rather ugly picture. Most Pentecostal missionaries saw the cultures and religions surrounding them as nothing more than devilish and demonic, and many were not immune to racist and colonialist ideas. Unfortunately, this chapter remains mostly descriptive. It would have been interesting to delve somewhat deeper in trying to understand whether there was a connection between a missionary urge that enabled many to undergo terrible hardships, and the need to paint one’s surroundings in the darkest possible colour. The last chapter which looks at ministry is a treasure trove of interesting observations, from training and preparation of missionaries and “native” workers through the role of women to questions of organization and sectarianism.

This book is not an easy read, particularly in the middle part, but it is definitely worth the effort. Extensive indices are helpful to find one’s way through the wealth of information provided. It can only be hoped that other researchers will now tell us the stories of the indigenous evangelists.