Guest Editorial: 
Mobility, Time and Space in Pentecostalism

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The Theme

This special issue of PentecoStudies is one of the results of an international conference held in Amsterdam 12-13 June 2008. Starting in 2004, a team of researchers from the VU University Amsterdam and Utrecht University had worked together in the research programme “Conversion Careers and Culture Politics in Pentecostalism: A Comparative Study in Four Continents.” The programme was funded by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), as one of a set of research programmes with the suggestive and perhaps compromising but also promising umbrella title “The Future of the Religious Past” (see De Vries, 2008). The 2008 conference summarized the results of the “Conversion Careers” programme.

The theme chosen for the conference was “Conversion and Time in Global Pentecostalism: A Lifelong ‘Live’ Experience.” Though Pentecostal conversion can be experienced as a “moment of immediacy,” it can also be perceived as a lifelong and “live” process in which individuals continuously move, within a particular Pentecostal space characterized by a constant and urgent call for personal reform, but also beyond. Two special issues are published on the basis of the conference papers and other contributions. Thus an issue of Ethnos will focus on “Embodied Temporalities in Global Pentecostalism,” whereas the present issue of PentecoStudies is dedicated to ”Mobility, Time and Space in Global Pentecostalism.”

Mobility and time were already part of the central research question with which the “Conversion Career” programme began: In their operating on the religious market, what are the culture politics deployed by
Pentecostal churches and how are these connected to their members’ conversion careers? “Culture politics” was used as referring to the position taken and the strategy adopted with regard to the local social and cultural environment. The term “conversion career” puts the convert in a temporal frame, rather than assuming conversion to be a single point in time. A tentative five-tier typology distinguished between pre-affiliate, visitor, convert, confessing member and disaffiliate. Culture politics and conversion career were considered in relation to each other. The recurrent negotiation of past, present and future is part of people’s culture and identity politics. In the global situation this includes transnational spaces, into which Pentecostals move with great skill and which they themselves help to constitute. In this view the body in space as well as embodiment and corporal sensations must be included. Attention should be given to what Birgit Meyer has called “sensational forms”: “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations” (Meyer, 2008: 707). The role of mediation and media in global space is also to be taken into consideration. All these aspects were integrated into one perspective, providing the point of departure for the “Conversion Careers” programme, operationalized through comparative research in diverse countries like Nicaragua, Mozambique, Japan and The Netherlands (see also Gooren’s article in this issue).

Focusing in this issue on “Mobility, Time and Space in Global Pentecostalism,” the authors enter a relatively new phase in research on Pentecostalism. From the broad and general explanations of the movement’s spectacular growth which dominated the scholarly debate in recent decades, they move on to the study of particular aspects and to an emphasis on the diversity behind the common label. Yet the general explanations will continue to have relevance in that they encourage scholars to keep a global view with regard to what is happening. This justifies a comparative perspective, along with the fact that several of the larger churches mark their presence across the globe. The approach to mobility, time and space works with this double perspective, pointing to both the particular and the general. From that point of view we will now look at each of the three terms in our theme and how they are connected to each other. Attention can be given to types of mobility, to different notions of time, and to the variety of spaces and their boundaries, as created and perceived by Pentecostals and the researchers who study them.

Pentecostal mobility can obviously be understood as a physical and geographical movement of migrating Pentecostals from their original
location to any other place in the world. Whether or not Pentecostals migrate for religious purposes, migration has helped to spread the Pentecostal message across national boundaries. This has happened in a variety of directions, each with its own characteristics: North-South-North, East-East, South-South. Physical mobility may also have taken the form of a transfer to another church, sometimes involving re-conversion.

Mobility can also be used in a metaphorical sense. It may refer to social or cultural mobility, as a chance offered to converts to go beyond given or traditional structures and practices. Their faith can help Pentecostals to move upward in society. In their mode of practising “culture politics” they usually move to new and critical positions. Mobility may also refer to the virtual mobility through the space of the internet, facilitating global contacts. Mobile phones facilitate contacts between the faithful, bridging real distances through virtual space. Without leaving their desk, believers can virtually move from site to site. Media technology helps to experience the global world as one place, allowing believers at one end of the world to see their leader preach at the other end in a “live” transmission by satellite.

With regard to time, the elements of mobility and space are important components for its constitution. Converts and converters move within a Pentecostal space and occupy new spaces, through their conversion career or by adopting a particular position in culture politics, which inspires an ongoing rethinking of ruptures and continuities by both the believers and those who study them. This happens in the continuous reconstruction of time in life trajectories, within a framework of before and after, of pre-conversion, conversion, confession and perhaps de-conversion. This time dimension comes with notions of the spaces through which converts move, going from the sinful world to the safe haven of the church, distinguishing between demonic and sacred territories. Similarly territories are claimed and conquered, suggesting the conversion of nations and societies as a turning-point in time. Generally speaking, the notions of time contain a promise of progress, enhanced by eschatological expectations. The future is open and rich for the saved, just as it is dangerous to the unsaved. The so-called prosperity gospel is an expression of this attitude.

Time notions as well as mobility help to construct Pentecostal spaces, real as well as virtual, at the global, transnational, national and local levels. Loci such as networks and conferences constitute a common space, at whatever level, through specific practices. Public space is equally important as a platform for the recruitment of converts and for the practice of “culture politics.” Thus Pentecostals engage in a power struggle about the organization and quality of public space. This is not just a matter of
putting eye-catching church buildings on the major crossroads of city centres or building cities and camps along highways. It is also a matter of giving Pentecostal values a place in society and influencing people’s behaviour, including that of non-Pentecostals. Within these public spaces, Pentecostal converts and converters position themselves and move, whether in market places, prisons, trains, new towns, or TV studios.

With regard to physical space, two seemingly opposite processes take place simultaneously, de-territorialization and territorialization. On the one hand, the missionary vocation uses spatial practices to turn every corner of the world into claimable territory, thus moving people beyond the local and towards the global. As a “travelling culture” (see Catherine Wanner’s contribution in this issue), Pentecostalism eases adherents away from local identities and traditions. Converts become members of a particular church, but also of a worldwide community of fellow believers, a global kinship system of brothers and sisters. The scope of global success raises expectations and enhances faith in the future fulfilment of prophetic promises. Yet global ambitions cannot escape locality since physical bodies can only be in one place at the same time, inevitably giving local form to global trends. Before exporting them, ideal values must first be practised at home. The concept of territory becomes important in new ways, constituted through the transnational administrative structures of Pentecostal churches, delineating various levels on which bridge-heads are established to conquer these territories for Jesus (as Kim Knibbe shows in her article in this issue).

Therefore, as all articles in this issue suggest, the local is a fruitful level to study current Pentecostalism, because it is close to the practice of converts and churches. At this level it becomes clear how notions of mobility, space and time influence social relationships and networks. In these settings converts’ awareness, experiences and responses are fine-tuned and inscribed. However, at the same time it is important to go beyond ‘methodological nationalism’ and be attentive to the ways in which local congregations and believers are part of transnational fields of Pentecostal practice. Interestingly, no less than three of the authors (Paul Freston, Kim Knibbe and Catherine Wanner) discuss the case of pastor Sunday Adelaja in Kyiv, Ukraine, for being an exceptional case.

One caveat must be made. The notions of mobility, time and space appear to suggest that Pentecostalism’s potential is unlimited. The theme of Pentecostal expansion, for a long time the main issue in social science research on Pentecostalism, has reinforced this impression, confirmed by phenomenal growth figures. Nevertheless, the variation in the con-
crete form of mobility, time and space shows that diversity grows with the numbers. Besides success stories, there are also failures, as shown by the tedious campaign to reconvert Western Europe to Christianity. Moreover, citizenship of heaven is in many cases still attained by ethnically exclusive routes. The real does not always obey the ideal. Power games produce winners and losers.

In sum, by raising the banner of “mobility, time and space” over these studies, the meaning and impact of conversion as an analytical concept can be evaluated. These three aspects set the stage for the reorganization of the believers’ life narratives and the trajectories of their membership.

The Articles

The first article, by Paul Freston, summarizes the debate regarding “reverse mission.” Freston deconstructs the concept and offers an overview of reverse missionary practice, including its successes, failures and future. His contribution especially addresses the mobility and space components of this issue’s theme, though time is present in the historical perspective and in his reflections on future developments. Reverse mission is part of a South-North mobility, directly by missionaries, or indirectly by the Pentecostal or Evangelical laity who migrate for economic or political reasons. They all seek to redeem what they consider the secularized Northern space. Freston shows the deficiencies of the concept of reverse mission. In the inversion, conversion and colonization are not clearly distinguished, nor is the target always the former colonizer or converter. Freston emphasizes that the inversion in reverse mission also has a social and cultural component, the downtrodden modernized addressing the wealthy modernizers, thereby sincerely seeking to contribute to the host society, legitimized by the divine call. This posture nourishes a positive self-image.

Yet, relatively few people respond to the call, or the impact is only indirect, galvanizing native churches to develop a new élan. Besides, fellow-migrants demand pastoral time and effort. In some cases, instead of producing a de-secularized space, a diaspora space is the prime result, sometimes organized around ethnic homogeneity. Even as a springboard, the diasporic platform does not serve well and often remains ethnocentric. Cross-cultural outreach proves to be a complex enterprise. A sound perception of the culture of the host society is an important condition for success. Cooperation with established churches is another. In the UK missionaries from emerging nations such as Brazil and South-Korea seem
to have some advantage in establishing reversed and non-diasporic missionary space. Considering relevant factors, the case of Sunday Adalaja is exceptional and therefore instructive.

Kim Knibbe makes a plea for being attentive to the spatial practices through which Pentecostal churches reach for spiritual and social power. The Nigerian-initiated Pentecostal churches that she has studied for the past three years are often classified as “migrant churches” in the context of the African Diaspora in Europe. This label is very influential in framing research questions, directing attention towards the role of these churches in empowering and “integrating” migrants in the host society. By focusing on spatial practices instead of migration, it becomes clear that these local congregations are situated at the periphery of transnational religious empires that have their centres in Nigeria. From there, effort is expended towards evangelizing the rest of the world through mapping this world, mobilizing money, people and time to produce a geography of churches covering the globe. Focusing on spatial practices can show how the worlds of Pentecostalism are built, representing various levels. It then becomes clear how the spaces that Pentecostals create are dependent on the rupture of continuous conversion, as a lifelong “live” experience, transforming individual lives. By constituting new spaces these individual experiences ultimately create new dynamics on the local level, transforming cityscapes. Moreover, transnationally the spatial practices of Pentecostals add new input to globalization, thereby enabling like-minded believers in diverse parts of the globe to feel connected. A potential for the politicization of religious agendas then emerges.

In her contribution, Catherine Wanner discusses the consequences of Pentecostal mobility in the Eurasian context, with mobility taking a variety of forms, as suggested above. Pentecostals represent a “travelling culture” and thereby de-territorialize religious identity, making it “portable.” They move, in both the physical and reflective way, beyond established cultural and ethnic boundaries. From a minority position they challenge the usual Eurasian symbiosis of Orthodox religion, Slavic culture and the state. As a consequence of their “culture politics,” believers change religious and cultural spaces. The experience of belonging changes accordingly, in contrast to the majority, but also depending on the level to which the believers connect: local, regional, national, or global. Their notion of time and history changes as well. Thus, the end of the communist regime facilitated the introduction of a Pentecostal perspective on events. In describing what she calls “the ecology of conversion,” Wanner shows the pattern behind these changes, taking the beginning of the twenti-
eth century as a starting-point for her analysis of religious change in Eurasia. Religion, in all its manifestations, is currently rehabilitated as a moral bulwark, even though it can be used for the defence of contrasting values. People position themselves in this context, conversion being – as Wanner puts it – an ongoing way of rewriting the auto-biography of the “mobile self.” It expresses one’s conversion career in a setting of changing “culture politics” that often involves forced migration. The membership of a Pentecostal church softens migration’s negative consequences. At the same time migration for the sake of missionary activity has become possible, either to or from Eurasia. Just as secularized Western Europe became a target for evangelization, the former Soviet Union is to be freed from the atheism that is supposed to have predominated for so long. Like Freston, Wanner discusses Adelaja’s church, depicting it as a global player, yet rooted in Ukraine. She pays special attention to the role of Leonid Chernovet’skyi, a member of that church and twice elected as Kyiv’s mayor. Concluding, Wanner suggests that mobility is as important a factor as the much discussed concept of deprivation in explaining Pentecostal success as well as the radical changes that massive conversion causes.

Regien Smit, who is presently conducting a comparative study of two Pentecostal migrant churches in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, addresses the different ways in which Pentecostal migrant churches reconstruct “time” in their strategies for taking pastoral care of their converts. Igreja Maná, a Portuguese-led Angolan church tells its adherents that they should not look back, nor should they talk about it, because that will make the past haunt the present. Calvary Christian Center, a Brazilian Assembléia de Deus church, considers reconciliation of the past indispensable for the conversion process of its members. Smit explores how these differences are reflected in the way adherents respond to their churches’ strategies in their own conversion narratives. Moreover, she points to social and political issues in the migrants’ lives, which might enforce or diminish the applicability of either speech or silence about the past. While taking memory as a lens for analysis of these conversion processes, Smit shows how forceful and at the same time ambiguous social processes of remembrance and forgetting can be, thus opening up a space in which Pentecostal discourse frameworks of rupture are softened. In her article Smit coins the term “inter-temporal space,” by which she means “a space in which present and past flow together into simultaneity, even if the past seems to be removed from the discursive domain” (Smit, p. 226 in this volume).
The last article in this issue, authored by Henri Gooren, summarizes the findings of the five researchers involved in the “Conversion Career” programme with regard to the theme of “Mobility, Time and Space in Global Pentecostalism.” Though bringing together very diverse case studies, some common trends can be discerned. Gooren makes an effort to situate the three elements of the issue’s theme in a wider context, pointing to the dynamic connections with other sets of factors: mass media, “culture politics,” organization, leadership and growth. He thereby not only offers a sample of the individual projects that made up the “Conversion Career” programme, but also provides a check-list of the factors involved in all projects, thus facilitating the comparison that from the start was part of the programme.

References
