

2020

Bulgarian Pentecostal Leadership in the Crucible of Change

John Paul Thompson
Oral Roberts University, jthompson@oru.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus>



Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, Christianity Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, History of Christianity Commons, History of Religions of Western Origin Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, New Religious Movements Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Thompson, John Paul (2020) "Bulgarian Pentecostal Leadership in the Crucible of Change," *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology*. Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus/vol5/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Theology & Ministry at Digital Showcase. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology by an authorized editor of Digital Showcase. For more information, please contact digitalshowcase@oru.edu.

BULGARIAN PENTECOSTAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CRUCIBLE OF CHANGE

JOHN THOMPSON

Spiritus 5.2 (2020) 253-73

<http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus/>

© The Author(s) 2020

Reprints and Permissions: Spiritus@oru.edu

Keywords *Bulgaria, Pentecostalism, leadership, global Christianity*

Abstract

Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders have navigated the waters of turbulent cultural change over the last thirty years in the wake of the fall of Communism in Bulgaria. From May to July 2020, eighteen Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders were interviewed to explore their leadership characteristics and how their leadership behavior and values changed over time amid a rapidly evolving society. Three generational groups of present-day Pentecostal leaders were identified, and their characteristics described. The study concludes with the leadership development needs of young emerging leaders given the continuously changing cultural environment.

Introduction

This year, A.D. 2020, marks the centennial celebration of Pentecostalism in Bulgaria. The one-hundred-year history of Bulgarian Pentecostalism is a complex story of influence and persecution, perseverance and progress, revival and regression, success and struggle. At the one-hundred-year mark, Pentecostals are the vast majority of the Evangelical population in Bulgaria. Pentecostal leaders estimate they represent ninety percent of Evangelical Christianity in Bulgaria.¹ Bulgaria, itself, is a robust story. This land in southeastern Europe has been a bridge between East and West and exhibits influences of both worlds. Bulgarians survived five centuries under Ottoman Muslim rule and in the last century decades of Communist suppression. The Christian message arrived in the present-day Bulgarian territories eighteen centuries ago and Christianity was adopted as the state religion in A.D. 864. Into this context, Islam entered the region seven

centuries ago. Communist atheism then pressed its hand on Bulgaria in the last century. The last three decades have seen the ushering in of Western democracy and acceptance into the European Union. The Bulgarian soul has been shaped by all of these historical realities. In this milieu, Pentecostalism has both survived and thrived.

Volumes could be written about the one-hundred-year journey of Pentecostals in Bulgaria. The focus of this qualitative research project is on the current state of Pentecostal leadership in the wake of the societal upheaval of the last thirty years with the collapse of Communism and the rise of the democratic state resulting in rapid cultural change. These changes have exacerbated significant generational differences among present-day Pentecostal leaders. The experiences of each generation conferred a unique set of leadership crises and cultural values. This project sought to categorize and identify characteristics of present-day Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders and explore the leadership development needs of young potential and emerging leaders who will initiate the next one hundred years of Pentecostal ministry in Bulgaria.

Research Design

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with Pentecostal leaders in Bulgaria via Zoom between May and July 2020. Interviews averaged two hours in length. All interviews were conducted in English except one that used an interpreter. The initial set of questions was revised throughout the interview process as interviewees provided new insights to be explored by subsequent interviews. This article seeks to synthesize the perspectives of the Pentecostal leaders interviewed, examine cultural changes at work, and provide interpretation and possible application for Pentecostal leaders.

Quotations from the interviews are anonymous as a means of fostering open sharing in the interviews. Selection of the eighteen participants was achieved by snowball sampling beginning with Pentecostal leaders previously known to the researcher with each interviewee recommending other potential participants for the project. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 62 with average age of 44.94 and a median age of 45.5. Ages spread rather evenly across the age range by decade with two in their twenties, four in their thirties, five in their forties, four in their fifties, and three in their sixties. Interviewees included both male (fifteen) and female (three) participants. Twelve of the eighteen participants currently serve in local church leadership (nine as senior pastors and three as associate leaders) and twelve

of the eighteen function in a ministry role outside of the local church context (four in Christian academic leadership and eight in other parachurch ministries). Sixteen of the eighteen interviewees serve in a district, national, or pan-national leadership role (six as regional overseers of multiple churches and four in educational institutions) providing a context beyond the local setting. This diversity of interviewees in ministry role, gender, and age contribute to capturing a qualitative look at Bulgarian Pentecostal leadership.

The qualitative methodology as well as the ethnicity of the participants and the researcher placed certain limitations on the study. Because this was a qualitative study, the sample size was relatively small (though appropriate for a phenomenological study) and consequently limited in its scope of representation of all Bulgarian Pentecostal leadership. Sixteen of the eighteen interviewees were ethnic Bulgarians. Consequently, the study provides particular insight into the ethnic Bulgarian perspective but not for other ethnic minority perspectives present in Pentecostal leadership such as the ethnic Romani (Roma) Pentecostal contingent, nor the ethnic Turkish Pentecostal contingent. The latest census in 2011 reported the ethnicity of Bulgaria to be 76.9% ethnic Bulgarian, 8% Turkish, 4.4% Roma, and 10.5% undeclared. The Roma population is estimated to be underreported and likely closer to 9–11%, making up much of that undeclared category as well.² Further studies are needed to examine the particular leadership challenges and cultural realities of Pentecostal leadership in the Roma and Turkish ethnic minorities.

The researcher/author of this present study is not Bulgarian, nor from Bulgaria. As an American, he comes from a different cultural setting. He teaches global leadership in the College of Theology and Ministry at Oral Roberts University, a school immersed in the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition. He met a variety of Pentecostal ministry leaders in his past three visits to Bulgaria. His observations are influenced by his studies in global leadership, his American cultural orientation, and his personal experiences in ministry leadership both in local church and parachurch settings as well as his travels to and work in a number of nations. In short, he is a cultural insider to American Pentecostalism, but a cultural outsider to Bulgarian Pentecostalism. This is both a limitation and potentially an advantage, bringing an external perspective to the Bulgarian Pentecostal setting.

A Shrinking and Growing Church

The ebb and flow of the Pentecostalism in the last thirty years has been dramatic due to tumultuous events transpiring in the nation. For decades, Pentecostals (and other Christians) endured persecution under Communism, a political system that exerted its force on the country for forty-five years. Steadfast faith, holiness, and survival marked the Pentecostal church in that era. With the disintegration of Communism came massive revivals between 1989 and 1992/3 in Bulgaria, mostly led by Pentecostals. One of the distinctives of Pentecostals in Bulgaria, attested to by nearly all of the interviewees in this study, has been the Pentecostal passion for evangelism and soul winning. They were marked by action after the fall of Communism. Pentecostals were passionate to reach lost people. They actively shared Christ publicly in the streets and filled stadiums after the fall of Communism. They were the most evangelistically active Christians in that era and help flooded in from their counterparts in the West. American and Western Pentecostal evangelists along with Bulgarian Pentecostals held massive outdoor and indoor meetings. Thousands gathered in city squares, stadiums, and public halls to hear Pentecostals share the gospel and to experience supernatural healings and miracles. Young people flocked to these events, encountered God, and experienced transformation. New churches sprang up throughout the country and existing churches mushroomed in size. Young people in their twenties were thrust into leadership roles in order to shepherd these burgeoning new and growing churches.

This divine movement of responsiveness to Gospel proclamation, however, subsided in the mid-1990s. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church campaigned against other Christian groups, including Pentecostals, labeling them as sects, branding them as heretical religious groups. During this time churches declined, and many people did not take root in their newfound faith. One interviewee estimated a 500% decline in those years after the revival season. Of course, there had been a net gain overall from the end of Communism, but a psychological toll was deeply felt as churches struggled to keep their new congregants. Another deep disillusionment occurred twenty years later in 2012/13 when the secret files under Communism were opened and the names of well-known church leaders (both Orthodox and Pentecostal) were reported to be working in cooperation with the Communist Party decades earlier. These events from two different decades stymied the growth of ethnic Bulgarian Pentecostal churches. Not only did much of the growth of the

revival fall away in the mid-1990s, today many churches are in decline and struggle to engage the surrounding culture.

There has been significant growth, however, among the Roma (Gypsy) populations in the Pentecostal tradition. In fact, one of the greatest strengths and most significant and perhaps underappreciated stories in Bulgarian Pentecostalism today is the impact Pentecostalism has had in Roma communities. Two of the largest Pentecostal denominations in Bulgaria have large Roma constituencies. The Church of God consists of between fifty to seventy-five percent minority churches (mostly Roma and some Turkish) and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Bulgaria is one-third Roma.³ Roma people are typically very poor and Pentecostal work in Roma communities has brought social peace and change in a number of these communities and ghettos. Most Roma Christians are Pentecostal with estimates around ninety percent. The emotional, vibrant, experiential elements of Pentecostalism seem to connect well with the Roma soul and culture. After the fall of Communism, Bulgarian Pentecostals had new access to resources from the West and distributed food, clothing, and other help to Roma communities while sharing the Gospel with the Roma communities. Interviewees mentioned that Pentecostals “have helped lower the tensions between Bulgarians and Gypsies” and that the impact of Pentecostalism in Roma communities is actually “very advanced and frontier.”

Most Pentecostal churches in Bulgaria are either ethnic Bulgarian or Roma, but usually not both. The socio-cultural differences between ethnic Bulgarians and the Roma are significant, creating a cultural gap. Interestingly, one of the few multi-cultural churches in Bulgaria made up of both Bulgarian and Roma people (sixty percent Bulgarian and forty percent Roma) is one of the fastest growing churches in Sofia and is pastored by an ethnically Roma pastor. This pastor is very young at 27 years old and yet he has a national and international presence. Given his Roma background, he is gregarious and bold in his approach. He is a controversial persona among the larger Pentecostal community in Bulgaria. While there may be several theological and methodological factors for this lack of general embrace by the larger Pentecostal community, divergent cultural style and values should not be discounted as well.

The story of Bulgarian Pentecostalism mirrors what is happening in recent years in many parts of Europe. Churches of the ethnic majority in the nation are shrinking or stagnant in growth, whereas Christianity among minority populations is growing and often significantly. To the south of Bulgaria, Greece (also an Orthodox country) has experienced a doubling of Evangelical/Pentecostal churches in the last ten years in the capital of Athens, consisting of almost

entirely immigrant congregations.⁴ While Greeks remain resistant to Evangelical Christianity, immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere continue to respond to the Gospel (or come from Christian backgrounds in their homeland) and form new Christ-centered communities in Greece. In Bulgaria, it is the minority population of the Roma community that seems to continue to be the most responsive to the Gospel. Sixteen of the eighteen interviewees for this research project were ethnic Bulgarian and consequently the observations and findings of this project primarily address ethnic-Bulgarian Pentecostals. Additional research needs to be done on Roma Pentecostal leadership in Bulgaria.

Leadership Shifts

The political, social, and spiritual upheavals in the last thirty years in Bulgaria have shaped leadership and culture both in the nation and in the Pentecostal church. While cultures do change over time, the forces at work in Bulgaria appear to have sped up the change process and consequently deepened cultural differences among Pentecostal leaders along generational lines. This study began with an assumption of two generational categories of leaders: those born during Communism and those born after the fall of Communism. After a few interviews, it became apparent to the researcher that three categories were more helpful in understanding leadership dynamics. The first category consisted of those who pastored during Communism and are still alive and engaged in ministry today. These are few in number today, but the legacy and influence of their whole generation of leaders are the foundation on which the two subsequent groups stand. The second category is those who became pastors during or after the revivals of the early 1990s. Many of them were in their twenties in the 1990s and came to faith in Christ just before or during the revivals of that period. They were subsequently ushered into leadership roles in the spiritual harvest during those days. They are the bulk of Pentecostal leaders today across Bulgaria and are typically in their fifties and sixties. The third category is young emerging leaders or potential leaders who were born after the fall of Communism. Most of the interviewees affirmed this three-way demarcation of Pentecostal leadership and shared significant observations regarding these three groups that will be synthesized and reflected on in this article. Other valuable ways to categorize Pentecostal leaders could have been used, such as according to the ministry context of being in a large or a small city, according to the level of education (both general and/or theological) a

ministry leader possessed, according to the denomination, or according to the leadership style and philosophy. Additional studies are needed to examine leadership according to these alternative categories

The Veterans

The first group of Pentecostal leaders were those who pastored under the harsh conditions of Communism who are still pastoring today in their old age. Persecution under Communism forged perseverance in their lives and a deep dependence on the Holy Spirit and on prayer. Their families faced pressure by the state, some were sent off to camps and endured forced labor, and they persisted in leading illegal church meetings. These leaders were characterized by Pentecostal leaders in this project with terms and metaphors denoting strength. They were labeled giants, heroes, soldiers, veterans, survivors, and martyrs.

They were a product of their time in leadership style as well. They exhibited an authoritarian leadership style and were suspicious of others (out of necessity). Lewin, Lippitt, and White classified communication styles in the three categories of authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership. Johnson and Hackman summarize the authoritarian leader as one who “maintains strict control over followers by directly regulating policy, procedures, and behavior. Authoritarian leaders create distance between themselves and their followers as a means of emphasizing role distinctions. Many authoritarian leaders believe that followers would not function effectively without direct supervision.”⁵ This authoritarian style fit the broader cultural context of Communism but became more problematic with younger generations as the decades passed under democracy.

Though their style was authoritarian, during Communism these leaders exhibited a deep sense of brotherhood among the faithful and ministry was shared with others in that season as they were not paid leaders. By necessity they had to be replaceable since at any time the pastor could be arrested and sent away. It seems that when they did find themselves in fulltime ministry after the fall of Communism, the authoritarian approach in which they were schooled under Communism and monarchy before that continued to dictate their leadership style. The strong hand approach also was demonstrated in their legalistic perspective on holiness. They held themselves to a high legalistic standard and required the same high standards of others.

Pentecostal leaders in Bulgaria before Communism had been well educated. Many went to seminary in Gdansk, Poland, before the Second World War. After

the rise of Communism, pastors were put on trial, imprisoned, and separated from their congregations. Waves of arrests happened again in 1952 and in the 1960s. New pastors did not have access to theological training. They had to rely on their experiences, and many tended toward anti-intellectualism in the later years of Communism. This may be in part a reaction to the state control of education and being surrounded by Communist propaganda. Furthermore, living behind the Iron Curtain, these leaders were isolated from the new evangelicalism that began to take shape after WWII in the West among Evangelicals and Pentecostals who sought to reengage in scholarship and to find ways to have cultural influence. Evangelists Billy Graham and Oral Roberts led this charge in the 1950s. Schools were founded like Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947 and Oral Roberts University in 1963, demonstrating a revival in the pursuit of scholarship among Evangelicals and Pentecostals in the West. But these were all a world away from the harsh experiences of Bulgarian Pentecostals under Communism.

God rewarded the faithfulness and prayers of these Pentecostal giants in a dramatic way with the fall of Communism. What had been unthinkable had become reality and they were suddenly at the helm of a spiritual revival across the land of Bulgaria. In the years following the fall of Communism, many of them traveled abroad and raised funds for the work back home, including building church buildings and doing outreach across Bulgaria. One metaphor used to describe this group was to call them the “dinosaurs.” They were big and powerful, enduring many things, though today they are dying out. Because the world has so significantly changed from the times they grew up and from the season of revival thirty years ago, their methods today are considered by younger generations to be outdated and inadequate. However, their character and legacy stand strong in the hearts of many Pentecostals. Unfortunately, that legacy was publicly defaced when the Communist files were opened and some of the names of these spiritual giants and heroes were named as Communist informants. Without due process, some leaders in the Pentecostal world called for their immediate dismissal from ministry. These files brought disgrace in society at large and disillusionment among some Pentecostals. Another metaphor given to describe this leadership group was that they were the foundation of the building. In truth they did lay the foundation that has influenced Bulgarian Pentecostalism up to the present day. Some cracks have become visible and in some places the foundation has crumbled. But this generation was strong like concrete in many ways.

The Pioneers

Upon this foundation, the next generation of Pentecostal leaders stepped up and built the walls of the house of Bulgarian Pentecostalism over the last thirty years. The huge influx of people exploring and responding to the Christian message in the early 1990s required new structures and approaches to ministry. Many of the leaders in this second group were born into Pentecostal families in the Communist era and were young adults when the revivals swept across Bulgaria. Others in this leadership group did not have this Christian upbringing but discovered Christ in the revivals. One interviewee noted that in his fellowship of pastors in Sofia eight were from Pentecostal families and four of them were not. Interestingly, two of the four who did not have Christian upbringings were mentioned by other participants in the study as examples of innovating new ministry wineskins in the last ten years.

All of these new leaders in the 1990s were young and inexperienced but passionate and on fire in their new faith. They were in uncharted waters, which necessitated pioneer work. Everything was new from renting buildings, managing crowds, to changing laws. They needed organizational skills, which were imported quickly from the West. Internationally, the church growth movement was at its climax in the West in the early 1990s championing vision, business marketing tools, and a CEO leadership model in the church. In the new era of political freedom, Pentecostal leaders had access to models outside of Bulgaria and became imitators and implementers of those models. One interviewee lamented that this leadership group, as well as the third group of young leaders, even today too often envision church as a factory and the Sunday morning service as the product. This could also be said of the global church as well, perpetuated by the attractional model of the church growth movement.

With a value on numerical growth forged by the revivals and reinforced by the church growth movement, this generation of leaders lived with much disappointment. Ministry was easy in the early days, but over time some of the fruit of the harvest was lost and the culture hardened its heart toward the Christian faith. They became culturally marginalized as the Orthodox Church flexed its muscle politically and socially. Initially Bulgarian Pentecostalism experienced new prosperity with access to material goods as the country had access to Western resources as a church. But even this did not turn out as hoped, as the broader national economy struggled in this new era and external church resources from the West dwindled over time.

Furthermore, an unfortunate consequence of the spiritual revivals in Bulgaria was that finding ways to be culturally relevant to share the gospel was not necessary in those days. Young leaders found success without needing to try to relate to the culture as historical events naturally created a groundswell of spiritual hunger and interest in the culture. When that hunger subsided in subsequent years, a different approach of contextualization and building cultural bridges was hard to adjust to. The political upheavals of those days had formed a norm of political protest and action for that generation of young people. Demand for change, not diplomatic adaptation to the culture, was the zeitgeist that shaped these young leaders. The culture became resistant, not just neutral, to the gospel in the mid-1990s. It appears to have been a long difficult learning curve for the Bulgarian Pentecostal church to adjust over the last twenty-five years to a relational approach to evangelism and discipleship that is more incarnational and less attractional in methodology.

This generation forged in protest and action prioritized task over relationship. Many of the participants in this study observed that one of the most significant obstacles this middle generation of Pentecostal leaders encountered that shaped their leadership and hinders them even today with the next generation of emerging leaders was their own lack of relational connection to the first generation of Pentecostal leaders, the veterans. Yes, these pioneering leaders knew the veteran leaders and many worked for them. However, this second generation of leaders was not mentored by the older generation and felt they were not fathered by their spiritual predecessors.

Several interviewees used the metaphor of orphan to describe this generation of Pentecostal leaders. The first generation of leaders was focused on fulfilling the dreams they had for many years under Communism. They dreamed of revival. They dreamed of Pentecostal church buildings. When the doors of freedom opened, many traveled overseas to raise the funds to fulfill these dreams. The second generation of young leaders often served as associate pastors in their churches doing the local work while the older leaders of heroic stature traveled overseas and across Bulgaria. But they did not have relationship with these senior leaders. They were not mentored, encouraged, shown love, nor developed. Communism had broken everything including family relationships. Communism bred distrust and secrecy. Pentecostal leaders forged under Communism were predisposed to distrust and be suspicious of others. “We suffered from a lack of spiritual fathers to guide us, help us, and grow us,” observed one participant in this “orphan” leadership generation.

The authoritarian style of leadership in Bulgaria also fostered relational distance with the leader. Bulgaria is a high power distance culture. In high power distance cultures, there is an emotional distance between superiors and subordinates. Matilda Alexandrova called this “distance from authority” and discussed its prevalence in the national cultural environment of Bulgaria. She referenced four studies that “show . . . Bulgaria is a country with large authority distance.”⁶ While this gap exists in practice, the desire for Bulgarians is for that distance to shrink. Mariya Bobina found a significant gap between the practice of power distance and the value of power distance in Bulgaria.⁷ She explained that Bulgarians practice power distance because of their respect for authority conditioned by their “heritage of vertical hierarchies” from their Communist past as well as survival under centuries of foreign occupation.⁸ However, Bulgarians do not value power distance, though they practice it. Bobina attributed lower value score to “the higher levels of individual and economic freedoms and a striving for compliance with pan-European values” in recent decades in Bulgaria.⁹ This tension between higher practice and lower value for power distance was observed in the interviews with Pentecostal leaders. There was both a tremendous respect for one’s leaders as well as a deep longing for emotional connection and personal relationship with one’s superiors and predecessors.

This middle group of pioneers, currently the dominant group of Pentecostal leaders, was described by one participant as the seam between two pieces of fabric. They served as the stitching between the two worlds of Communism and democracy. It was natural that these pioneers exhibited a chaotic transitional mix of leadership behaviors and values. The tension for this generation can be seen in the Bulgarian scores for the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance compared to other European Union countries as well as their gap in scores between behavior and value. Geert Hofstede defined uncertainty avoidance as “the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. . . . Countries exhibiting strong UAI [Uncertainty Avoidance Index] maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior, and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.”¹⁰ The behavior score in Bulgaria for uncertainty avoidance is lower than all other EU countries at 3.11 (the EU average score is 4.26). However, the value score in Bulgaria for uncertainty avoidance is actually the highest of all EU countries at 5.52 (the EU average is 4.36). The gap between Bulgarian behavior at 3.11 and Bulgarian value at 5.52 is huge especially given that these scores are the lowest as well as the highest of all EU countries. This dimension of uncertainty

avoidance correlates with risk-taking and innovation in a society. Bobino connected the low Bulgarian behavior score to “a search for entrepreneurship and innovation” and the high Bulgarian value score to “a search for a more disciplined socio-economic landscape.”¹¹

Uncertainty avoidance is also illustrative of the rapid cultural changes transpiring in Bulgaria. Uncertainty avoidance has not been a constant cultural dimension but rather has been changing over time in Bulgaria. Surveys conducted in 2001 and 2008 revealed a shift transpiring in just those seven years toward a higher tolerance of uncertainty.¹² The behavior and value data discussed above was collected by Bobina and Sabotina in 2015 and 2017¹³ following the methodology and categories of the GLOBE Studies and this data confirmed the trend toward a growing tolerance of uncertainty with Bulgarians having the lowest behavior score for uncertainty avoidance in the EU.¹⁴ Certainly, the difficult spiritual landscape of the past three decades necessitated the need for entrepreneurial approaches for ministry and yet this has been a very difficult struggle for this pioneer generation of leaders. While they had to pioneer, their approach reflected imitation of the West more than innovation. This cultural movement toward lower uncertainty avoidance in recent years also suggests that the third group of young emerging leaders should be more comfortable with uncertainty and likely better able to innovate.

The quest and struggle to adopt Western leadership practices in the Bulgarian ministry context can also be seen in the use of teams. Teams are seen as “central to organizational success” among Western leaders where work is typically accomplished through teams.¹⁵ While Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders have been implementing teams in their organizational structures, their understanding of team may still hinder the success of teams. An interviewee pointed out that Pentecostal leaders say they are team oriented, but they are not. They have a team of people, but their understanding of team is different than those who work in the West, according to this participant who had lived for an extended period of time abroad in a Western context. “Bulgarian leaders do not listen to others, nor do they see and value the contribution of others for the work.” For this particular research participant, this problem was inherited from the authoritarian style of Bulgarian Communism.

Leading the Pentecostal church in a new democratic society amidst the chaotic cultural changes has been a difficult work for these visionary pioneer leaders. When asked to provide a name or label for this group of leaders, interviewees used a diverse assortment of terms and metaphors: first generation immigrants; the imitators; the pioneers; orphans; the builders; the jackpot winners;

the seam; passionate; diverse; uncertain; and stuck and frustrated. Some of these terms express the discouragement bred by the relational disconnect with their predecessors and the years of struggle to minister in the tumultuous cultural context. This is a very diverse group of leaders. Many burned out and left the ministry. Some of the strongest leaders left Bulgaria to do ministry in other countries, being part of the emigration crisis in Bulgaria. There was a precipitous drop in population of almost two million people between 1988 and 2020 (from 8.9 million to 6.9 million).¹⁶ Those who stayed have often looked for ministry models outside of the country to follow. Many have become tired and worn out from the years of challenge and struggle. Others have found both fruitfulness in ministry and hope for the future. Those interviewed in this study who fall within this age category of leaders exemplify strong caring leaders who have persisted in ministry and have served as faithful shepherds for many years for numerous people.

The Restrained

In the long shadow of Pentecostal leaders who pioneered in the new world of democracy sits the next generation of young leaders. These emerging leaders were born in the new political and cultural era of Bulgaria. The pioneer generation discussed above was like the Hebrews in the Pentateuch who were born in slavery in Egypt and experienced the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea into freedom. They witnessed the great miracles in Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and God's supernatural provision in the wilderness. But the journey was long and tiring. The new generation of Bulgarian Pentecostals is similar to the Israelites born in the wilderness who were not shaped by slavery, but were shaped by the wilderness. While the previous generation crossed the Red Sea, they crossed the Jordan River, entered the promised land, and fought their own battles to settle in a new place. Like their biblical counterparts who did not have the mentality of Egypt, young Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders today were not shaped by Communism. According to one interviewee, they have "more freedom in their mentality." Their upbringing has been very different. These emerging leaders will become the leaders who take the Pentecostal church into the future.

These young people in their twenties and thirties today were described by interviewees as very different from the other two groups of leaders. They are more relationship oriented who naturally prioritize people over programs. They desire ministry that is relational, authentic, and organic. They are more open to unity than their predecessors and have less allegiance to their particular local church with

more connections across denominational lines, enjoying personal relationships with people from other churches and denominations. This interconnectedness has been a natural outcome of multi-church and interdenominational youth gatherings (such as an annual event called New Wave) and the prevalence of social media. This generation of young leaders are digital natives and thrive in the world of technology. They are young professionals who are building their careers and their young families. Born into a period of insecurity, they are more comfortable with risk, more adventurous, more individualistic, and more entrepreneurial than previous generations. They value professionalism and competence and desire something authentic without propaganda. One interviewee remarked, “They are gifted and capable, but they are also disoriented from the example of the second group seeing that some of their methods are not working.” Another observed that they will center their ministry less on being the great preacher in the pulpit and more on relationships, care, and empathy.

They possess many positive characteristics, but there are concerns about this upcoming group of leaders and potential leaders. They seem to pray less than previous generations. Many of them are part of worship teams, and yet it is possible to lead people in worship through professionalism and not out of intimacy with God. They value solid teaching and an understanding of the Bible, but not many are pursuing theological degrees. They have a lot of knowledge in their profession, but not a lot of spiritual knowledge. Interviewees across the age spectrum suggested this generation needs to continue to press deeper in their character formation to become Christlike. Humility and not succumbing to the temptation of social media to be image-based are both vital for the next generation. Yet, there was genuine hope articulated among all the Pentecostal leaders interviewed about these young leaders.

A major crisis for Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders is looming on the horizon. Few young leaders are developed and given space to lead. Yet, many churches will undergo leadership transitions in the next ten years as current pastors face retirement age. If a Pentecostal pastor is forty, he is considered very young. The youngest fulltime pastor in one Pentecostal denomination is thirty-five. The irony is that while today’s dominant Pentecostal leadership group stepped into ministry in their twenties during the revival years, today they view the next as too young to lead. Consequently, most young adult Bulgarians are pursuing professional careers, while few are considering a call to ministry. Several personal stories were shared in the interviews regarding senior pastors not releasing young leaders into their own ministry calling. They may resist sending them for theological training or to serve

in other places. Too often the goal seems to be to have subservient volunteers that serve the vision of the senior leader instead of developing lifelong leaders for the body of Christ. Young leaders serving in churches are often overworked, underdeveloped, and denied the freedom to innovate. They are forced to live in the shadow of the old leaders. Unfortunately, they are too often restrained in their leadership. They need freedom and fathers to help them learn to fly.

Developing Emerging Leaders

In all of the interviews, there was a unified voice expressing the desperate need for developing emerging leaders in Bulgarian Pentecostalism. One leader bemoaned, “Most of the second generation of leaders want to develop helpers, not leaders. They are the genius with a thousand helpers. We do not see Jesus having this approach.” This sentiment was reiterated in other interviews. Too few young leaders ever consider a ministry calling or stepping into ministry and leadership. Many of the participants spoke of the need for pastors to champion the call to ministry and invest their lives in developing the next generation for ministry leadership. Interviewees identified problems plaguing leadership development among Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders and suggested important elements for developing healthy leaders.

At the heart of defective leadership development of emerging leaders in Bulgaria appears to be a dearth of healthy spiritual fathering/mothering for these young leaders. The goal of a father/mother should be to help children grow up in maturity and start their own families. A good father/mother has a close relationship with their children, nurturing, encouraging, mentoring, and drawing out the unique callings of each child. The goal in healthy parenting is for children to mature into adulthood and while they are still young to leave home, marry, and start their own families. To parent a twenty-year-old son or daughter like a two-year-old is toxic. The same is true with spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. Healthy spiritual fathering and mothering necessitates a focus on developing that son or daughter and releasing them into their own calling and ministry.

Participants spoke of the need for older leaders to develop close genuine relationships with young leaders. They need to dialogue with and listen to younger leaders, spending time with them to build friendships. Jesus developed his disciples by doing life together with them and allowing teaching moments to happen organically. Young leaders want to share their thoughts openly with their mentors in

a safe space of trust and love. They need to be invited to lead, to innovate, and be allowed to make mistakes.

Prevalent among the specific interviews with Pentecostal leaders in this young emerging age group was a deep and persistent feeling that established older leaders do not trust them, nor believe their methods are good. One young leader interviewed frankly stated, “We need people who believe in us and in our ways of doing ministry.” On the other hand, the established leaders interviewed spoke with words of hope for the future because of the potential they see in this next generation of young leaders. They bragged about the way young leaders are using and leveraging technology for ministry. They mentioned the giftedness, optimism, and entrepreneurialism of the next generation. Here was the disconnect between the generations in the interviews. The younger leaders somehow are not hearing the positive affirmations of older leaders. There appears to be a breakdown in communication. Perhaps a cultural characteristic is at play. One Bulgarian interviewee, whose age falls between these two groups of leaders and has spent time living outside of Bulgaria, mentioned that it is not a Bulgarian cultural norm to speak encouragingly to others. He illustrated this with his preaching experience. When he preaches in Bulgaria, no one says to him, “That was a really good message.” His observation is that Bulgarians “struggle to speak encouragement.” Yet, it was apparent in the interviews with young leaders that they desperately crave encouragement. When asked to describe the Bulgarian soul, one interviewee responded, “The Bulgarian soul is more negative and always complaining.” Geert Hofstede placed Bulgaria very low for his cultural dimension of “indulgence” (16 out of 100) suggesting Bulgaria is a very restrained culture with a tendency toward cynicism and pessimism.¹⁷ Interestingly, when interviewees were asked how this very low indulgence characteristic might be reflected in Pentecostal leadership, respondents typically felt it was often true for older Bulgarians, but it was not true for the younger emerging leadership group.¹⁸

Cultural gaps exist between those born during Communism and those born after. Older Pentecostal leaders may need to recognize how this growing gap regarding the cultural dimension of indulgence is creating a fissure in communication between the groups. Gundling, Hogan, and Cvitkovich suggest two ways leaders can close a cultural gap between cultures. The first is by “building strong personal relationships and the second is frameshifting” (shifting communication style, leadership style, and strategies).¹⁹ Both of these cross-cultural leadership behaviors are crucial for leaders who want to mentor and raise up the next generation of leaders. As already mentioned, emerging leaders deeply

desire authentic, organic, close relationships with their models and mentors. Gundling et al. present four elements of being relational. Relational behaviors include “putting relationships before tasks, more interdependence or relying on relationships to get work done, leveraging relationship networks, and seeking cultural guides who can help to trace a path through new territory by providing trustworthy advice.”²⁰ It may be difficult for the pioneer leadership group to put relationships before task because they did not have that relational connection with their predecessors and because of their event orientation in ministry. Gundling’s suggestion for more interdependence in work found expression in one participant’s opinion that this next generation in Bulgaria wants to do ministry together. The interviewee used the metaphor of cooking. Young leaders want to cook together with their mentors and leaders, not just be given the recipe and sent out to do it. Lastly, Gundling’s advice to seek out cultural guides may be very helpful for potential mentors. This could include both experts in sociology within the Bulgarian context as well as a learning approach toward one’s mentees.

The second vital behavior for Gundling et al. to close the cultural gap is what they call “frameshifting,” wherein leaders “must learn to shift their perspectives and leadership methods to better fit different circumstances.”²¹ They identify communication style as the first important component of frameshifting. The focus on negative critique in the Bulgarian expression of Hofstede’s low indulgence dimension does not appear to work for young Bulgarians. The power of leaders encouraging followers is illustrated in the counsel of King Rehoboam’s elders recorded in 1 Kings 12:7. Their counsel to him as the new king may be instructive: “If you will be a servant to this people today, and grant them their petition, *and speak good words to them*, then they will be your servants forever” (emphasis added).²² Rehoboam’s elders affirmed the power of speaking kind and encouraging words. Rehoboam ignored their advice and lost most of the kingdom.

Interviewees were asked to identify best practices for developing young leaders. Most failed to identify existing best practices, but all did suggest elements that should be important for raising up the next generation of leaders. These included having loving spiritual fathers/mothers, discipleship, training, and opportunities to do ministry with constructive supervision. First and foremost, these restrained leaders need spiritual fathers and mothers who have a close personal friendship with them expressing love, trust, and encouragement. Within this context of caring relationships, they need opportunities to do ministry with supervision that provides constructive feedback and encouragement as well as freedom both to innovate and make mistakes. Equipping for ministry should

include some form of Bible training and development in critical thinking skills. Finally, but not last in order of importance, an essential element of the leadership development process should be spiritual formation. Mentees need to be disciplined by someone they trust and respect.

According to interviewees, the spiritual formation process in emerging leaders should include the development of a robust prayer life and Christlike character. Both younger and older participants pointed out that there has been a marked decline in the dependence on prayer since the days of Communism. One of the oldest interviewees remarked that the generation born after Communism is not a people of prayer. “They go to conferences and read books, but they do not have the habit of praying and really waiting on God.” One of the youngest interviewees confirmed this sentiment noting that his generation are not prayer warriors while the previous generations built their ministries in their prayer life. Likewise, another young leader stated, “We need to pray like our fathers and grandfathers.”

Specific attention was also drawn to character formation in the interviews. A young interviewee expressed concerns that in today’s culture “everything is about how you look and what image you have.” Another leader at the median age of the study (45), reflected on the outward activity orientation of the second group, the pioneer leaders. Their hyperactivity eventually resulted in the burnout of many and the fall of some into sin. He encouraged young leaders to work on their internal life and character development so as not to repeat moral failings of some who lacked that development. They “should be very careful with integrity,” the participant observed. Fortunately, the Pentecostal emphasis on seeking and listening to the Holy Spirit should contribute to character formation if young leaders can be humble and practice self-awareness.

Conclusion

Pentecostalism in Bulgaria has a robust one-hundred-year history. The last thirty years of that story have been shaped by the crucible of change in the country as a whole and by the changing dynamics within the Pentecostal church. Pentecostal leaders have had to navigate the radical cultural upheavals and transformations as well as the rise and fall of spiritual interest in the country. Furthermore, the particular sets of experiences for Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders continue to reshape their leadership values and practices. One interviewee summarized, “So you can imagine the kind of dynamics we have in Bulgaria: three types of ministers with three types of dynamics. In Western Europe, this kind of change would have taken

place over a one-hundred-year timespan, but in Bulgaria it happened in just thirty years.”

Yet, Pentecostals in particular should embrace change. The books of Luke and Acts described the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering change and guiding spiritual leaders through the change process. In his two-volume set of writings, Luke pointed out that the Holy Spirit “came upon” and “empowered” Mary to conceive (Luke 1:35), upon Jesus to proclaim and heal (Luke 4:18–20), and upon the disciples to witness (Acts 1:8). In Acts, the Holy Spirit “fell on” the uncircumcised Gentiles, and subsequently guided the council of leaders in Jerusalem to make seismic changes in light of this new manifestation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44–45; 15:28).

It seems that the Holy Spirit is orchestrating change again in Bulgaria. Established Pentecostal leaders should embrace the fresh work of the Holy Spirit in young emerging leaders. The council in Jerusalem sent out letters of support and guidance by the hand of trusted key leaders who believed in and embraced the new work the Holy Spirit was doing among the Gentiles. So, too, established Pentecostal leaders should show their support and offer their guidance, not control, to the next generation of emerging leaders. This may best be communicated by those established Pentecostal leaders who are already working among and embracing emerging leaders.

As Bulgarian Pentecostals cross the centennial mark in their land, a fresh look at the first Pentecost may be instructive. Peter reminded his audience of the prophecy in Joel: “‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams’” (Acts 2:17). The Holy Spirit is empowering emerging young leaders to speak the words of God and to see the things of God through the Holy Spirit to their nation and beyond. And the Holy Spirit is giving new dreams to older leaders, not just in nostalgic remembrance of the past, but for a new and different work of the Spirit of God in the future.

John Thompson (jthompson@oru.edu) is Associate Professor of Global Leadership in the College of Theology and Ministry at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.



Notes

¹ This estimate does not conform to the latest edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, which reports 146,000 Pentecostals/Charismatics and 118,000 Evangelicals. That would mean only fifty-five percent of Evangelicals are Pentecostals/Charismatics. However, the statistics listed in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* are unclearly reported. Referring to these two groups, an asterisk indicates, “These movements are found within Christian traditions listed above.” One of the categories listed above is “Protestants,” but the total number of Protestants listed was only 133,000. Confusingly this is less than either group. See Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 148.

² “The World Factbook: Bulgaria,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, n.d., n.p., <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook//geos/bu.html> (29 July 2020).

³ These estimates were provided by research participants.

⁴ André Rocha counted 160 Protestant churches and 104 of them were immigrant churches started in the last ten years. Rocha is a researcher and developer of www.prayforgreece.net. Information was obtained in an interview with Rocha by John Thompson, Athens, Greece, May 2017. For further discussion of this trend in Greece see John P. Thompson, “Witness to Following Jesus in Athens, Greece,” *Witness: The Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 32 (2018), 10.

⁵ Craig E. Johnson and Michael Z. Hackman, *Leadership: A Communication Perspective*, 7th ed. (Long Grove: Waveland, 2018), 40.

⁶ Matilda Alexandrova, “Dimensions of the National Cultural Environment: Bulgarian Evidence,” *KSI Transactions on KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY* 8:2 (2015), 42.

⁷ A practice score of 5.52 and a value score of 2.60 according to Mariya Bobina, “Bulgaria and the European Union: Cultural Differences and Similarities,” *Bulgarian Studies Journal* 2 (2018), 10.

⁸ Bobina, “Bulgaria and the European Union,” 10.

⁹ Bobina, “Bulgaria and the European Union,” 10.

¹⁰ Geert Hofstede, “National Culture,” *Hofstede Insights*, n.d., n.p., <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture> (28 July 2020).

¹¹ Bobina, “Bulgaria and the European Union,” 9, 15.

¹² Bobina, “Bulgaria and the European Union,” 6.

¹³ Bobina, “Bulgaria and the European Union,” 7.

¹⁴ In contrast, Hofstede reported a high uncertainty avoidance score of 85 on his 100-point scale for Bulgaria. Geert Hofstede, “Country Comparison—Bulgaria,” *Hofstede Insights*, n.d., n.p., <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country->

comparison/bulgaria/ (28 July 2020). Yet, these recent GLOBE studies point to this changing reality toward lower uncertainty avoidance behavior.

¹⁵ Frederick P. Morgeson, D. Scott DeRue, and Elizabeth P. Karam, “Leadership in Teams: A Functional Approach to Understanding Leadership Structures and Processes,” *Journal of Management* 36:1 (January 2010), 6.

¹⁶ “World Population Review—Bulgaria,” n.d., n.p., <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bulgaria-population> (7 August 2020).

¹⁷ Hofstede, “Country Comparison—Bulgaria,” n.p. (2 August 2020).

¹⁸ Two additional features of very low indulgence that in particular respondents felt were not true of young leaders in Bulgaria today were 1) not putting much emphasis on leisure time, and 2) feeling that to indulge themselves is somewhat wrong.

¹⁹ Earnest Gundling, Terry Hogan, and Karen Cvitkovich, *What Is Global Leadership?: 10 Behaviors That Define Great Global Leaders* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2011), 54.

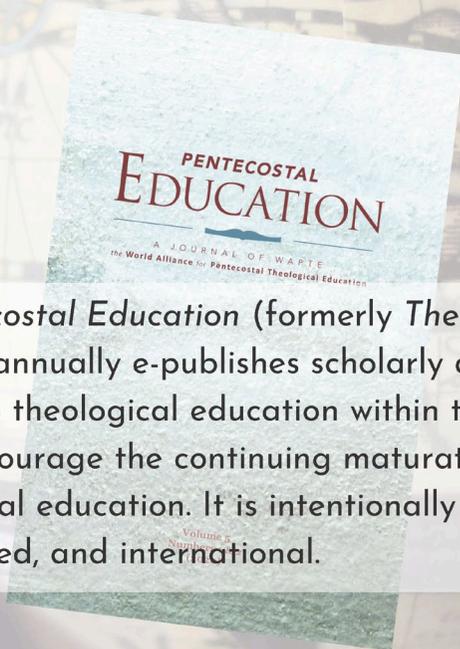
²⁰ Gundling, Hogan, and Cvitkovich, *What Is Global Leadership?*, 54.

²¹ Gundling, Hogan, and Cvitkovich, *What Is Global Leadership?*, 62.

²² Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

PENTECOSTAL EDUCATION

A JOURNAL OF WAPTE
the World Alliance for Pentecostal Theological Education



WAPTE's journal, *Pentecostal Education* (formerly *The Pentecostal Educator*) semiannually e-publishes scholarly and practical articles related to theological education within the Pentecostal tradition to encourage the continuing maturation of Pentecostal theological education. It is intentionally practical, applied, and international.

View the current volume of *Pentecostal Education* at
<https://wapte.org>



the World Alliance for
Pentecostal Theological Education
<https://wapte.org>