

PCCNA AND USCCB HISTORIC EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE

FROM MASS TO THE VATICAN THEN “LITTLE ROME”¹

HAROLD D. HUNTER

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Venerated Apostolic Faith Mission South Africa (AFM/SA) ecumenist David DuPlessis was the Pentecostal co-organizer of the oldest and most prestigious Pentecostal dialogue. Talks with the Vatican in Rome have passed fifty years. DuPlessis would be eclipsed by anti-apartheid crusader Frank Chikane and now the AFM is the first church from the Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) to join the World Council of Churches (WCC). Those present with the WCC Central Committee (June 2021) witnessed AFM President Henri Weideman make mention of DuPlessis as part of his acceptance speech.

DuPlessis set in motion a series of Pentecostal “Lone Ranger” ecumenists, although AFM would come to write their own story. These early ecumenists have impacted the academy but what about Pentecostal churches? Of course, it is a fair question about how many churches are listening when the dialogues are often removed from current issues faced by pastors.

Cheryl Bridges Johns published an article that showcased competing models of Pentecostal ecumenism. I was identified as someone who always got endorsements from the head of his/her church for a wide range of engagements involving NCC Faith and Order, WCC, Ecumenical Patriarchate, and various bilaterals.² Fast forward to the second decade of the twenty-first century and now official Pentecostal dialogues are processed through organizations like Pentecostal Churches of North America (PCCNA) and the PWF. When I put together talks with the Ecumenical Patriarchate—2010–2012—it was the first time that the PWF had endorsed any bilateral dialogue.

This monumental sea change along with the rise of ecumenical officers in North America like the late Church of God in Christ scholar Leonard Lovett, Cecil M. Robeck, David Cole, Frank Patrick, David Moore, and Harold D. Hunter, along with

¹ While a student at a Pentecostal college in Cleveland, Tennessee, I first attended Roman Catholic mass at age 19. My first visit to the Vatican was 1989 where I was able to greet Pope John Paul II. The first edition of the PCCNA—USCCB exploratory dialogue was hosted by the USCCB in Washington DC’s “Little Rome.”

² Cheryl Bridges Johns, “Remodeling Our Ecumenical House,” in *Pentecostal Theology and Ecumenical Theology*, eds. Peter Hocken, Tony Richie, and Christopher Stephenson (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 146–47.

the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) ecumenical commission led by David Han, deserve attention due to the evolution of the approval process for conciliar ecumenism, bilaterals, and multilaterals. Parts of that new reality will be reviewed as illustrated in the historic PCCNA-USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) exploratory dialogue so that upcoming Pentecostal ecumenists have a clear path. I will not, however, give details about the work I did together with Prince Guneratnam and others to organize the PWF CUC (Christian Unity Commission) five years earlier at the Pentecostal World Conference in Calgary, Canada.



Dialogue Participants, Oral Roberts University, 2022

In the early 1980s, I was a full-time faculty member at the Church of God seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, now known as the Pentecostal Theological Seminary (PTS). Some months after my 1983 Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) program hosted by PTS, Jerry Sandidge came to Cleveland on behalf of David DuPlessis. Sandidge was looking for church headquarters that would designate official representatives for the ongoing talks with the Vatican. I positioned Church of God of Prophecy (CGP) to endorse this notion. However, I subsequently declined the invitation from the CGP headquarters because at the time I thought teaching at PTS might create unnecessary distractions and also thought sending a CGP bishop at first would be an advantage.

This is not the only time I gave up my seat to make room for minoritized voices. CGP had taught me to take the last seat. While there were unfortunate aspects of that move on my part, one positive thing was opening a relationship with Jack Radano who

represented the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) in talks with Pentecostals led by DuPlessis. Radano made possible a 1989 General Audience with Pope John Paul II where I greeted him in front of St. Peter's Basilica. I have also been with Pope Francis various times including a 2022 General Audience inside the Vatican and more importantly in 2021 with global faith leaders of all religions working toward COP26.

In 2015, I made a routine visit to the PCPCU at the Vatican in Rome. This was part of a trip that would continue on to Antalya, Turkey, for the WCRC-Pentecostal Dialogue. There are parts of one conversation at the Vatican that kept those exchanges safely lodged in my memory. I came away from that visit convinced that now was the time to work toward a dialogue in the USA between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals even though earlier attempts had failed. I had taken a similar trajectory with the Eastern Orthodox launching direct talks with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. When those talks went on hiatus then I launched an academic version in the USA linked to the annual AAR/SBL meetings.³

Once back in the USA, with the approval of International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) Presiding Bishop A. D. Beacham, Jr., I advocated for the prospect of a PCCNA-USCCB dialogue. As the IPHC Liaison to the Greater Christian Community all my ecumenical activities were subject to the approval of the IPHC Presiding Bishop. I then put the concept before the PCCNA Christian Unity Commission—that is the steering committee then the full commission—which was later taken up by the PCCNA executive committee.⁴

At the same time, Christian Churches Together (CCT) attracted many of those who would make decisions for both PCCNA and USCCB. IPHC is a charter member of CCT (USA) and is the only member of the PWF and PCCNA that is also a member of CCT. Open Bible Churches was a member of CCT when Jeff Farmer was president

³ Harold D. Hunter, "An Emmaus Walk with Ancient Fathers and Mothers: From the Sawdust Trail to the Ecumenical Patriarchate," in *Leadership, Spirituality, and the Holy Spirit*, eds. Wonsuk Ma and Robert Menzies (Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, forthcoming 2024), volume honoring the 70th birthday of Younghoon Lee.

⁴ Some may not realize that PCCNA was created during the so-called "Memphis Miracle" in 1994 when PFNA (Pentecostal Fellowship of North America) was dissolved. More information can be found in the PCCNA *Reconciliation* magazine that I created and co-edited with Mel Robeck. Relevant information can be found in Harold D. Hunter, "Attacking Systemic Racism for the Common Good: Excerpts from the History of the 'Racial Reconciliation Manifesto,'" in *The Politics of the Spirit: Pentecostal Reflections on Public Responsibility and the Common Good*, eds. Chris Green and Daniela Augustine (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2023), 39–50. This article uses the "Racial Reconciliation Manifesto" to judge the racial dimension of that transition by drawing attention to PFNA blocking Pentecostals of color and Oneness Pentecostals from membership or even participation. After Howard Goss, United Pentecostal Church, came to a 1948 meeting toward forming PFNA, the group quickly adopted a National Association of Evangelicals statement in part to exclude Oneness Pentecostals. I then speculate on what might have happened had the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW) been a member of PFNA that would have included the legendary Bishop Brazier in Chicago.

of Open Bible Churches. Other PCCNA churches have declined invitations to join CCT. However, PCCNA approved an official observer for the 2023 CCT meeting in Savannah, GA.

The executive director of CCT for years was Carlos Malave who was faithful to attend annual PCCNA meetings and contribute to discussions with the CUC. The next leader to emerge in 2022 was Monica Schaap Pierce who joined the 2022 PCCNA CUC by Zoom and was present in-person for the 2023 PCCNA CUC in Albuquerque. Schappe Pierce also came to the 2022 IPHC General Conference in Jacksonville, Florida.

Another piece of the puzzle was Bro. Jeff Gross. During the 1983 SPS at the Church of God seminary in Cleveland, I wanted to invite someone from the NCCCUSA. However, the SPS executive committee did not endorse such a move. Further, I was not allowed to invite James Cone to be a keynote speaker. I was president of SPS in 1984 when we were hosted by Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary outside Boston, Massachusetts. Brother Jeff came at the behest of William G. Rusch to invite Pentecostal scholars to participate in the NCCCUSA Faith and Order Commission.

I knew about Rusch because I had used his book on the Holy Spirit in my PTS class on pneumatology. I gave up part of the time allocated to me as SPS President for Bro. Jeff to extend this invitation. My memory is that among those who were first to respond to this invitation were Edith Blumhofer (Assemblies of God), Cheryl Bridges Johns (Church of God, Cleveland), Cecil M. Robeck (Assemblies of God), Jerry Sandidge (Assemblies of God), and Harold D. Hunter (Church of God of Prophecy).

Now called Faith and Order Tables, this body expanded my ecumenical network in the USA and beyond. I also played a minor role in getting Bro. Jeff elected as an SPS president. This echoed my earlier work in 1982 when at the SPS annual meeting, hosted by Fuller Theological Seminary, I helped get through a constitutional change that translated into Reformed scholar J. Rodman Williams and then Roman Catholic Charismatic scholar Peter Hocken following me as presidents of SPS.

During the February 2018 PCCNA conference in New Orleans, members of the PCCNA CUC steering committee met with a subcommittee of the PCCNA executive committee. According to then PCCNA president Jeff Farmer in an email to the PCCNA CUC steering committee, a motion was made and passed to advance this dialogue I had proposed. When discussing my proposal with the PCCNA CUC while in New Orleans, we were fortunate to include Monsignor Juan Usma Gomez from the Vatican in our deliberations.

It is also the case that all the USCCB ecumenical officers I have engaged acknowledged the impact Bro. Jeff Gros had on them. Brother Jeff had advocated for a USA dialogue with Pentecostals. By 2020, it would be announced that this exploratory

dialogue was endorsed by both the PCCNA and USCCB.⁵ The USCCB team is led by Rev. Dr. Walter F. Kedjierski, an ecumenical expert who has led with wisdom, compassion, and insight. We are most fortunate to have engaged the excellent USCCB team, a charisma to the church universal. The agreed themes were initiation, healing, and vocation/mission, which echoes Roman Catholic sacraments. Details about the three years may be found in press releases easily found by the web links in this footnote.⁶ Our host each year has gone above and beyond to enable our ministry.

This historic dialogue provides an opportunity to review the emerging model of Pentecostal ecumenism linked to both PCCNA and PWF. The core member churches of PCCNA were identified as candidates for members of the Pentecostal team. I steadfastly campaigned for racial, gender, and faith tradition diversity. Note that each member of the Pentecostal team was endorsed by his or her church and received financial support.

Rev. Dr. Harold D. Hunter, International Pentecostal Holiness Church, chair.

Rev. Dr. Frederic Ware, Church of God in Christ, 2021–2023, paper read 2021.

Rev. Dr. David Han, Church of God (Cleveland, TN) 2021–2023, paper read 2022.

Rev. Dr. Martin Mittelstadt, Assemblies of God, 2021–2023, paper read 2023.

Rev. Dr. Tammy Dunahoo, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 2021–2022.

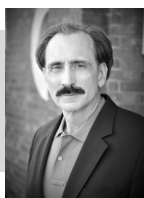
Rev. Jennifer Thigpen, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 2023.

⁵ Some will point to the lack of Oneness Pentecostals. I share that concern as the SPS executive committee member that took in Manuel Gaxiola-Gaxiola in 1982. Gaxiola was the first Oneness Pentecostal to join SPS and I was heavily criticized for receiving him at the time. However, beyond the Goss PFNA story mentioned earlier, one of the dramas at the 1994 launch of PCCNA was a request to include Oneness Pentecostals. A PAW minister came to the platform, where I and others were seated, to ask for such consideration, but that has never been realized. Since this dialogue is endorsed by the PCCNA then only member churches can be members of the team. However, during our September 2022 meeting at ORU, I accepted a Oneness Pentecostal as an observer who is a PhD student at ORU.

⁶ Rev. Dr. Walter K. Kedjierski is executive director of the USCCB Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Here is his personal reflection on how we started: <https://www.usccb.org/news/2021/celebrating-new-relationship-pccna-and-usccb>. Press release for 2021: <https://www.usccb.org/news/2021/pentecostalcharismatic-christians-and-roman-catholics-engage-exploratory-ecumenical>. Press release for 2022: <https://www.usccb.org/news/2022/representatives-catholic-and-pentecostal-churches-meet-ecumenical-dialogue>. Press release for 2023: <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/representatives-catholic-and-pentecostal-churches-meet-ecumenical-dialogue>. PCCNA released identical reports under their own name like 2022 at https://pccna.org/documents/2022.09.23_USCCB.pdf. and 2023 at https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Representatives-from-Catholic-and-Pentecostal-Churches-Meet-for-Ecumenical-Dialogue.html?soid=1109615552491&aid=XBKb_B_X5fl.



Dialogue Participants, University of Notre Dame, 2023



Harold D. Hunter (hdhptii@gmail.com) is the International Pentecostal Holiness Church Ecumenical Officer and an Adjunct Professor at ORU Graduate School of Theology, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.