

# The Political Rhetoric in Sermons and Select Social Media in Three Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelical Churches leading up to the 2014 South African Election<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Over the last three decades Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelical (PCE) style churches have used cutting-edge media technologies in their ministry. They have also become increasingly politically engaged. This paper shows how three PCE churches in Gauteng used select social media sites, particularly YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp as well as sermons to explain what they believed a Christian's role was in the 2014 elections. By analysing the messages of these churches on some social media sites and in pastor's sermons the ideal of civic society and political engagement of these churches is brought to the fore. All three churches believed that Christians should be politically active, pray for the country's leaders, vote in the elections and obey the rules of government. The churches had different political reasons for supporting democracy which ranged from seeing political engagement as a way to access government and municipal grants, to seeing themselves as the 'chaplains' to those in the highest offices of government and thus able to influence the way in which the country was governed.

**Keywords:** Pentecostalism, politics, South Africa, social media, Christianity, 2014 elections

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During apartheid most Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelical<sup>2</sup>-style churches were politically neutral and uninvolved in politics (Balcomb 2004:7; Kuperus 2011: 297). In the new dispensation after 1994, this changed drastically. On Heritage Day (a bank holiday) on 24 September 2002, for example, Grace Bible Church in Soweto offered a programme in which senior members of the African National Congress (ANC) addressed the congregation. In 2009, as President of the ANC, Jacob Zuma invited Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Bible Church to head the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC) in which the dominant voice is PCE Christianity<sup>3</sup>. Leading up to the 2009 elections McCauley in turn invited Zuma to Rhema, thus expressing his political support for him.

This paper examines the social media platforms of three PCE churches in Gauteng, Grace Bible Church, His People and Acts of Faith Harvesters, to show that – to various degrees – they represented spaces of political debate and involvement during the build-up to the 2014 elections. This paper focuses on three questions. First, what political message was expressed by church leaders leading up to the 2014 election in South Africa? Second, how did these churches use select social media sites to spread their message? Third, how did some members react to the political message of their church leaders? Engagement with social media sites has been taken up enthusiastically by many PCE churches, but little research has been done to determine how this new mode of communication is used in South African PCE churches. Broadly speaking researchers have shown how social media and the internet is transforming religious practice by creating new spaces and shapes of religious worship, learning and leadership (Mayer 2003: 37, 41-43).

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to these churches collectively as Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelical because this best denotes the three strands which have and still influence the theology of these churches. Pentecostal refers to the shared roots that the spiritual is very important in the life of the believer. The Evangelical refers to the influence of Evangelical writers, particularly from the USA, on the South African churches. Lastly, the term ‘Charismatic’ recognises the role that the Charismatic movement played in the establishment of new and independent Charismatic-style churches in South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> In South Africa some of the most popular PCE mega-churches are Rhema, Grace Bible Church, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and His People, all churches which, under apartheid, were politically uninvolved.

In this process ‘people are becoming empowered to become not only consumers of information but also its producers’ (Meyer 2003: 38). This paper looks at the political rhetoric in three PCE churches from the 15 January to the 15 May 2014. It investigates their political message both in sermons and on selected social media sites.

Bayart (1981: 53-82) argues that politics is not only performed in the more traditional Western organised political structures, but is also made by ordinary people from below. Bompani and Frahm-Arp (2010) show that in various African countries religious organisations, while in the process of doing development work, are important spaces in which politics-from-below takes place. I argue that in these PCE communities, religion and politics are not separated but integrated. Church members see the political as part of the religious life of the believer, and as good citizens they believe that they should be politically engaged, thus fulfilling their civic duty. At the same time these churches are spaces in which the political motivations of the leaders have an influence on how members think about politics and even influence their voting behaviour and shape their self-understandings about politics. This paper problematises the idea of religious influence on politics at the level of individual churches. It shows that, particularly through sermons and social media, these churches influence how some of their members think and behave politically, but that there is not one PCE political voice or position. In reality, the various PCE leaders only had limited political influence, although most of them saw their roles as changing the moral behaviour and legislation of government to come in line with conservative Evangelical principles.

In countries that have undergone regime change, civic organisations can either help or hinder the consolidation of democracies (Diamond 1994: 48-50; Gyimah-Boadi 2004: 99-119).

Civil society hinders democratic consolidation when it is co-opted by the state, pursues marginal, narrow interests, serves the needs of elite actors, or promotes intolerance and distrust. On the other hand, civil society contributes to democratic consolidation when it maintains an autonomous relationship with the state, fosters civility, holds governments accountable, provides an empowered space for marginalized groups, and promotes the welfare of the populace at large (Kuperus 2011: 281).

In Africa there is considerable debate amongst scholars on the question of the role that PCE churches can and are playing in regard to democratic consolidation<sup>4</sup>. Three of the recurring themes in these debates are engaged with in this paper: first, the debate that civic organisations like PCE churches can potentially offer positive support and help to stabilize the democratic process (Ranger 2008: 3-35; Haynes 1996: 7, 133, 181). Gifford (1998: 306-48) on the other hand is more sceptical of the positive role that this form of Christianity can play. Tom Lodge (2003: 226) suggests that in South Africa civic organisations can play a meaningful role if they can help to foster a broader 'culture of citizenship'. Bompani (2008: 666) picks up the argument and shows that religion's 'role is crucial in constructing such a culture by creating moral communities and strengthening bonds of civic solidarity'.

The second theme with which this paper engages is that there is a relationship between witchcraft and statecraft. In her work amongst PCE Christians in Ghana, Birgit Meyer has shown how the 'spiritual reality' of evil, bad spirits and witchcraft is kept alive through the rhetoric of the very churches who aim to banish the powers of evil from the lives of their members. By praying against the forces of evil and the powers of the devil and by showing how the Holy Spirit can overcome evil forces in the religious media, Meyer shows how these churches keep the devil alive in the imaginations of their members (1995: 236-9; 1998: 316-49). The Comaroffs (2000) and their students suggest that this engagement with the supernatural is a way for people to come to terms with modernity and the many new desires it awakens in people which often cannot be fulfilled. Ellis and ter Haar do not claim that religion and politics are identical in Africa (2001: 6); they do, however, argue that in Africa 'power is wildly thought to originate in the spirit world' (2001: 8). In the self-understanding of many people illness and misfortune are understood as examples where an individual lacks power or their power has been taken away from them by some external spiritual force. PCE Christianity, which acknowledges the world of good and evil, enables people to make sense of their misfortunes through a rhetoric of good and evil spirits (Anderson 1991: 69; Marshall 1993: 213- 46). Those who are vital and personally, politically or financially successful are understood to have access to spiritual powers than empower or enable them. This often

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of many of these arguments in Africa, Asia and Latin America, see Freston (2001).

means that in the understanding of ordinary people their political leaders are in office because they are able to use spiritual forces to protect and empower them (Ellis & ter Haar 2001: 94-97).

The third theme with which this paper engages is the contested argument that PCE churches can bring political and social change by influencing politicians to adhere to moral principles that will lead to better governance and stability (Marshall 1993: 242; Ellis & ter Haar 2001: 141, 154-157). Mandy de Waal (2012) disagrees and argues that in South Africa, where a growing relationship between Zuma's government and PCE churches is emerging – as for example where PCE Christians like Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng hold key political positions – this will threaten the constitution of the country. Others, like Gifford (2004: 170-71), maintain that influencing the moral behaviour of those in power brings about no tangible change in the structural or material wellbeing of a country. By focusing primarily on social media and to a lesser extent on sermons and interviews with a select group of leaders in each of the chosen churches, these debates are explored in the context of the build-up to the 2014 national elections in South Africa.

Meyer and Moors' (2006) studies shows the powerful way in which PCE churches in Africa use media technologies to present their message. Comparatively little work has been done looking at media technologies in South Africa and how PCE churches there use social media, specifically with reference to the way in which PCE churches use social media in issues of politics, the focus of this paper.

By analysing the messages sent out by three church leaders' political matters on their social media sites and the content of their sermons, a pattern emerging suggesting it possible to conclude that these churches positively helped to promote a stable democratic environment at the level of civic organisations. None of the churches avoided politics, but rather claimed it as an integral part of a believer's life and encouraged their members to take their civic duty of voting seriously. They all helped to inform their members about the political process, encouraged them to vote, stressed the importance of accepting the outcomes of the elections and highlighted that the role of a good Christian citizen is to obey the laws of the country, made by people elected into office. Contrary to expectation from elsewhere in Africa, the churches attributed a minimal role in the political process to evil spiritual forces, ancestors, witchcraft or *muti*. Prayers and sermons focused on

encouraging members to vote Christians leaders into power rather than on spiritual attacks against forces of evil. The leaders of these churches had strong political agendas which usually included influencing the moral behaviour of those in power, but this influence, while growing in the country, was limited in the context of these three churches. Each church community had its own understanding of political engagement which ranged from support for ward members and low level councillors in the ANC in order to access grants, to believing that the role of the church was to influence the thinking and moral behaviour of those in the highest positions of political office. Twenty years into democracy the once uninvolved PCE churches are now spaces of political engagement.

The paper first presents a brief sketch of the relationship between Christianity and politics, with a particular focus on PCE churches. It then examines the case study of three PCE churches in Gauteng and the manner in which they engaged with politics, particularly on selected social media sites during the 2014 national election campaign in South Africa. Subsequent sections analyse these case studies according to the three themes identified above as critical for the relationship between politics and religion in Africa, namely the role of churches in the democratic process, the imaginary of witchcraft in political power, and political morality.

## **The Methodology Used**

The churches in this study are examples of three different types of PCE churches: mega-churches, community churches and new start-up churches. They were chosen because they offer varied expressions of PCE Christianity yet are all located within the larger Gauteng area. In the case of Grace Bible (GB) Church and His People (HP) I had done research in these churches over four different periods from 2002 - 2010<sup>5</sup>. This research focused on the lived religious experience of professional women who attended these churches (Frahm-Arp 2010; Frahm-Arp 2012). Research conducted with Acts of Faith Harvesters (AFH) was my first encounter with this church which was only founded in 2011. Grace Bible Church is a mega-church with many satellite churches in South Africa, His People has a model of creating relatively small

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<sup>5</sup> Research was done with HP and GB over periods from June - August 2002, May - July 2003, September - December 2010.

community churches (4000 members) and has many churches throughout the world. Acts of Faith is a new small church and is representative of the ever growing numbers of new PCE styles churches. The data for this study was collected from the beginning of February 2014 until June 2014. It was limited to the following: Bishop Mosa Sono's (GB) twitter account, Pastor Roger Pearce's (HP) everynationafrica Facebook page with links to podcasts and blogs which he updates daily<sup>6</sup>, the His People Parktown North Facebook page and Pastor Dladla's (AFH) 'WhatsApp' and Soundclub<sup>7</sup> sermons. These specific sites were chosen because they were the most active as spaces in which the leaders expressed themselves and which followers responded too. The response of members to the content posted by leaders on these different sites was analysed but only features fleetingly in this paper because much of it was just endorsement of the leader's message. I also attended a variety of sermons given by Bishop Sono and Pastor Dladla but not Pastor Pearce because he does not regularly give Sunday sermons. With each church a focus group was held with a group of leading members in the church and interviews were conducted with leaders in all three churches. The content of the above mentioned social media sites was tracked from the beginning of February until the beginning of June 2014. The content was then analysed using discourse analysis. The combination of sermons, social media sites, interviews and focus groups made it possible to triangulate the data and pick out recurring themes or anomalies make it possible to make valid comments about the data.

Grace Bible Church (GB) is typical of a large mega-church with a main church complex in Soweto which includes a vast church building, coffee shop, book store and community centre; it has its own website, Facebook and Twitter accounts, and a weekly television programme called 'Xihlovo'<sup>8</sup>. GB church has an active media team, the Grace Bible News Team (GBN Team), which produces various podcasts of important sermons given. Two examples are the sermon held by Bishop Mosa Sono, the head of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/everynationafrica>, last accessed 28 June 2014.

<sup>7</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/nosinkosi/pastor-dladla-at-acts-of-faith> last accessed 28 June 2014.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuajGpDJyxc> (<http://www.gracebiblechurch.org.za>) accessed last on the 28 June 2014.

the church, at the Mandela memorial service that was held at the GB<sup>9</sup> in which he summed up his central message – all people have a calling from God and therefore their lives have purpose – and the relief work done by GB at Marikana led by Bishop Sono<sup>10</sup>. The most active social media space is Mosa Sono's Twitter account which he personally runs<sup>11</sup> and less so his Facebook page which is updated by his media team and mainly focuses on event updates and inspiring messages<sup>12</sup>. The congregation is 99% black, attracting people from all economic sectors throughout Gauteng. The sermons are held in English and many are streamed from the main Soweto church to the eleven smaller church branches in South Africa. Bishop Sono is able to exert direct influence throughout the larger church through podcasts, the TV programme and live internet streaming of his sermons.

In contrast to Grace Bible Church, His People church sees itself as a community church; each Johannesburg congregation has its own pastors and develops its own identity, catering to the needs of its specific community. The individual congregations form a larger, international group of churches, yet this is only a loose affiliation. The leader of the South African churches is Pastor Roger Pearce and he heads 'Every Nation Africa', an umbrella organisation for His People and other like-minded churches. From the original His People church in the suburb of Rosebank, a variety of churches have been 'planted' all over Gauteng. These vary from churches like the middle-class, multiracial Rosebank congregation with just over 3000 members, to student congregations on university campuses; from a predominantly white, Afrikaans-language church in northern Johannesburg to a mostly black, French-speaking church in the working class suburb of Rosettenville. Each of these churches has its own webpage, Twitter account and Facebook page<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV6tINbE8lo> accessed last 27 June 2014.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg7ziD1n2uQ> accessed last 27 June 2014.

<sup>11</sup> <http://twitter.com/BishopMosaSono> accessed last 28 June 2014.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bishop.Mosa.Sono> accessed last 28 June 2014.

<sup>13</sup> The congregations' webpages can be accessed from <http://hispeoplejoburg.org/> accessed 28 June 2014.

The third church examined here, Acts of Faith Harvesters (AFH), is a small church which was founded in 2011 in Vosloorus, a poor area on the south-eastern margin of Gauteng. With a mixture of houses and shacks, Vosloorus is a working-class community with high unemployment. The AFH congregation has 1200 members and about 1500 people who attend the Sunday services run by its only pastor, Emmanuel Dladla, the founder of the church. The church is not linked to any other Christian body or organisation. Most sermons are in isiZulu, although not all members can speak or understand isiZulu and the pastor highlights important points by repeating them in English. The church claims to have a website but in the three months of research I was not able to access a working site. They do have a fairly active Facebook page<sup>14</sup>. Soundclub<sup>15</sup> makes Pastor Dladla's sermons available and the church posts many YouTube updates about what their Children's Church is doing on Kids@Acts of Faith<sup>16</sup>. Members communicate actively with each other on the social media platform 'WhatsApp'. The content of these social media sites and the sermons preached by these different leaders show how much the political message in South African Christianities has changed.

## **The Role of Christianities in South African Politics**

During the apartheid years churches played a complex and sometimes ambivalent role in the political arena (Chidester 1992). Some churches like the Dutch Reformed Church adamantly supported the apartheid ideology, others saw themselves as 'prophetic' and fought against apartheid, while a third group of mainly African Independent and PCE churches remained neutral or uninvolved (Elphick & Davenport 1997). In 1994 South Africa moved into a democracy with a constitution based on secular principles and ideologies. While several new political figures were former religious leaders and many different views of Christianity came to be represented in

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Acts-of-Faith-Harvesters/140713242720960>, accessed last 26 June 2014.

<sup>15</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/nosinkosi/pastor-dladla-at-acts-of-faith> last accessed 28 June 2014.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDGT76XJzms>, last accessed 16 June 2014.

parliament, the new government ‘pursued a modern secular liberal agenda’ (Egan 2007: 450), which sought to limit religious voices in the public sphere. From 1994 onwards three options have been open to religious communities: they could withdraw and focus on ‘spiritual healing and social connection’, they could form formal opposition parties, as done, for example, by the African Christian Democratic Party, or they could co-operate with government, voicing their critique when they felt it necessary, as for example the South African Council of Churches (SACC) has tried to do<sup>17</sup>.

In contrast to these three options, Bompani (2008) found, by looking at everyday discussions amongst members and leaders of five African Independent Churches (AICs) in Gauteng, that politics was an ongoing topic of concern, which they discussed regularly both at church and in other social settings. Bompani thus argues for ‘a holistic interpretation of African Christianity that treats politics, like other aspects of the realities of religious communities, as integral to religious discourse’ (Bompani 2008: 665), an approach that underlies this paper.

The Charismatic and Evangelical-Pentecostal movement gained popularity in South Africa amongst primarily white Christians during the 1970s and in the 1980s when a variety of new churches were formed (Thompson 2004: 131). Until 1994 these churches were mostly politically neutral and emphasised personal salvation over political engagement (Verryn 1983; Moran & Schlemmer 1984), although a few groups like the Concerned Evangelicals protested against the apartheid regime (Balcomb 1993; Walker 1993). After 1994 these churches began to grow rapidly amongst the emerging black middle class and those aspiring to join this class. Martin (2002: 132-152), Meyer (1998: 316-49) and Frahm-Arp (2010: 151-180) have, in different ways, shown that the growing popularity of PCE Christianity in Africa lies in its ability to help people make financial, religious and cultural breaks with the past and negotiate a way of being in the modern, individualistic world of the globalised African cities.

Leading up to the 2009 elections Jacob Zuma actively began to align himself with this type of Christianity. In 2007 he was ordained as an honorary pastor by the eThekweni Community Church’s Pastor Vusi Dube in

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<sup>17</sup> Egan (2007: 462) cites the office set up by the SACC in 1998 to monitor parliamentary activity as an example.

KwaZulu-Natal<sup>18</sup>. The ordination was followed by a plethora of PCE pastors and bishops promising to support his election as president of the ANC later that year (de Waal 2012). In 2008 he declared that the ANC was God's chosen party, again using Christianity, the dominant religion in South Africa, to justify and support his party. The ANC government was spoken of as the 'ticket to heaven' when Zuma addressed an ANC rally in Khayelitsha in 2008. Zuma was re-cast as the modern day 'Jesus' by the Free State ANC leader Ace Magashule when he addressed the *Volksblad*<sup>19</sup>. And in February 2011 Zuma told people attending a rally in Mthatha that if they did not vote for the ANC they would go to hell<sup>20</sup>. Yet in December 2011 Zuma was quoted as blaming Christianity for destroying African social structures. The Christianity that he was referring to was the Christianity of early missionaries who struggled to separate their Christian beliefs from the European-based cultural structures they were embedded in, a Christianity far removed from the glamorous PCE pastors with whom Zuma now aligns himself.

In the months leading up to the 2014 election the role of Christianity was engaged with in the media as journalists reported different political figures attending various church services to gain the support of these congregations (Pillay 2014)<sup>21</sup>. Leaders from the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) went to Nigeria to be blessed by T.B. Joshua, one of the most popular PCE pastors/prophets in Africa, before the elections (Pillay 2014). Two weeks before the elections, on the Thursday before Easter, the popular 702 radio station's afternoon drive host Xolani Gwala asked listeners what the role of the churches should be in the led up to the election. Significantly, a large number of responses that he received called for people to pray for the

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/anc-to-rule-until-jesus-comes-back-1.398843?ot=inmsa.ArticlePrintPageLayout.ot>, accessed 28 June 2014. Originally the press indicated that the church that ordained him was the Full Gospel Church in Ntuzuma, but this was shown to have been wrong (see <http://mg.co.za/article/2007-05-08-zumas-no-pastor-of-ours-says-church>, accessed 28 June 2014).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/anc-to-rule-until-jesus-comes-back-1.398843?ot=inmsa.ArticlePrintPageLayout.ot>, accessed 28 June 2014.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/south-african-president-blames-christianity-for-nations-woes-65414/>, accessed 28 June 2014.

<sup>21</sup> See also [www.sabc.co.za/news/20140413](http://www.sabc.co.za/news/20140413). accessed last 27 June 2014.

elections to go smoothly and for a good government that would led the country to realise its potential<sup>22</sup>.

This historical sketch points to a growing engagement between PCE Christianity and politics leading up to the 2014 elections. The following three sections analyse these three churches according to the themes identified above as critical for an understanding of the relationship between politics and religion in Africa. The next section analyses the first theme, namely what the PCE churches did during the 2014 election campaign to foster a civic environment supportive to democracy.

### **‘A good Christian is a good citizen’: Understanding Citizenship in PCE Churches**

The role of the churches in South African politics needs to be viewed in light of the broader political landscape leading up to the 2014 elections in which an ongoing host of challenges had the potential to threaten the stability of the democratic process. These included growing unemployment, poor and underperforming service delivery, education and medical care, labour unrest, particularly with regard to ongoing strikes and wage disputes, an ever widening income gap, one-party political dominance, corruption within the country’s fiscal management and fragile political institutions. In this context, all three churches encouraged their members to vote, to support the democratic process and to voice their critique of government in a peaceful manner similar to Bompani’s (2008) findings, as discussed above.

The leaders of all three churches saw their role as strengthening the democratic process of the country. They talked on different media site (Pearce on the everynationafrica Facebook page, Sono on his Twitter account and Dladla in his sermons on Soundcloud) about it being their ‘Christian duty’ to support the government; for them this meant developing a broad culture of citizenship in which people learnt to embrace the responsibilities of democracy. The pastors maintained that it is the duty of Christians to pray for their government, to obey and honour those elected into power and to participate in major political events like voting. Pastor Pearce quoted the verse from the Matthew 22:21 and Pastor Dladla referred to Romans 13,

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<sup>22</sup> 24 April 2014, field notes by author on radio programme.

saying that these passages are scriptural guides that exhort members to obey those in power. Thus Pastor Dladla of the AHF church stated that,

We must pray that the person God has chosen is elected through the voting and then we must obey them. God has put Zuma and the ANC into power because he controls everything ... even if these people are not really Christians<sup>23</sup>.

Caroline, a white woman in her early forties who works as an analyst for a bank, has been a member of His People for over 20 years<sup>24</sup>. She explained that, while she was not particularly interested in voting, her church encouraged everyone to vote, explaining that it was their duty as Christians:

because as Christians we are just stewards of the things God has given us. Just like we have to look after our money well and be independent of debt we have to be stewards of our country and do what is right.

On the 30 April 2014 the Pastors Pearce and Simon Lerefolo of His People shot a podcast on Constitution Hill encouraging members to vote and for a government that will honour the South African constitution<sup>25</sup>. On 7 May 2014 Pastors Pearce, Lerefolo and Gillian David were in Cape Town to encourage church members to vote with 'responsibility' and 'maturity'<sup>26</sup>.

Part of being a good steward, according to His People member Caroline, was to be informed; the transmission of the critical information was not done through sermons but rather through social media. Caroline told me that her husband, a leading member of His People, found an online political questionnaire called 'Know your Party' in which one had to respond to

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<sup>23</sup> Pastor Emmanuel Dladla, AFH, interview with author, 13 June 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Caroline, His People, interview with author, 13 June 2014.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIPeJ0MKxCg>, accessed 20 May 2014.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSFO9SDuE-w>, accessed 20 May 2014.

different questions about one's political interests and concerns<sup>27</sup>. Once a participant had completed the questionnaire, he or she was informed which political parties most closely tallied with his or her concerns and interests. Caroline described that,

This questionnaire blitzed through our Facebook site and everyone was filling it in. The questions were based on the actual policies of the different parties and showed how we vote for a party without actually understanding their policies.

Her husband sent out the questionnaire to people because he believed that to be good stewards of the country people needed to be more informed politically.

His People churches in the Gauteng did not invite any political figures to visit or address the congregations and no message about voting was expressed in any of the sermons. Yet the discussion of politics occurred in the social media spaces of the church. What kept many members of the churches 'literally glued' to their phones, as the church members expressed it, was a highly charged political debate on the Facebook page of the Rosebank congregation between two of its members. One was a white woman strongly supporting the DA because of its fight against the corruption in government; the other was a black woman supporting the ANC because of what it had done to win political freedom for all South Africans. The arguments between the two women were not significantly different from arguments on other public social media platforms and in the media more widely. What was interesting was that this debate was held on the church's Facebook page, and that the church did not try to sensor, curtail or end the debate. The women, and the hundreds of members following their exchanges, believed the church space to be exactly the place where such issues should be thrashed out. They maintained that politics, the moral behaviour of those in power, and the role of the Christian community to hold them accountable, were the very issues that Christians should be debating and be actively involved in. Following a workshop held over the weekend 12-14 May 2014, His People communications leader Pastor Belinda Wigley emphasised that the church

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<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.news24.com/elections/knowyourparty>, accessed 28 June 2014.

does not see social media as a platform just to advertise events, but rather as a key space in which members should be engaging, debating, discussing and encouraging each other. This means that social media is the ‘place to start dialogue in community’<sup>28</sup>.

In contrast to the Grace Bible church and His People who left the choice of party to vote for open to their members, the AFH believed that as Christians its members should vote for the ANC. Pastor Dladla invited ANC ward members to preach to the congregation and to attend community events hosted by the church<sup>29</sup>. Tina, one of its members, could not remember who these officials were or what they talked about, but she said that by coming they showed that they cared about her community. In his sermons Pastor Dladla encouraged members to vote, to pray that a godly i.e. Christian government was elected and to support the government which was currently in power. A group of young AFH adults in their twenties said that they were particularly disinterested in politics. Faith, an honours student at the University of Johannesburg, summed up their position:

I just don’t find politics interesting. How does it really affect our lives? We voted because our pastor kept telling us it was what we had to do as Christians<sup>30</sup>.

When asked which party they voted for and why, these young people were all happy to tell me that they had voted for the ANC because it was the ‘only party who came to us and seemed to care’<sup>31</sup>. To them it did not seem problematic that they only engaged with ANC candidates; they believed that their pastor knew what was best for them when he did not invite people from any other parties. On WhatsApp exchanges in the weeks leading up to the elections there were a few reminders to people to vote but no debate or discussion about voting.

Grace Bible Church did not support any one party but rather invited leading members of different political parties to address the congregation.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5W-ZD71AJOE>, accessed 2 June 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Tina, a youth leader at the AFH, interview with author, 2 June 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Focus group interview with author, 11 June 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Youth leaders from AFH, focus group interview with author, 11 June 2014.

Gail, a woman in her late thirties who had been a member of the church for eleven years, explained that this happened ‘so that people are informed’. Thus, for example, on 13 April 2014 Floyd Shivambu, the Chief of Staff of the EFF, addressed the congregation (Mafisa 2014). As Gail stated:

For us it is important that people are informed and we want to see a government made up of Christian people who are born again and can bring God’s principles to the country<sup>32</sup>.

Bishop Sono, Pastor Ray McCauley from Rhema Bible Church and other pastors from GB church addressed the congregation at Orlando Stadium on Good Friday 2014 and in their sermons and prayers encouraged people to vote in the upcoming elections. This was highlighted in the 58 minute podcast clip of the service which was several hours long<sup>33</sup>. On 5 and 6 May, just before the elections on 7 May, Pastor Sono used his Twitter feed to remind church members to vote and pray for the elections. His Facebook page, in the meantime, did not mention the election. After the elections he posted updates, dated to 18 May 2014, of the relief work done and money collected for the victims at Marikana and a call to pray for the girls in Nigeria captured by Boko Haram, dated to 11 May 2014<sup>34</sup>. This illustrates how GB, while engaging with social media, did not see it as a primary space for debate and discussion and that reminders of the elections were just one of many different social issues highlighted in this space.

Though the exact structure of political engagement was different between the three churches, politics was central to the religious discourse of, and the religious behaviour expected from, all of them. Burchardt (2013: 644) noted in her study amongst Pentecostals working with HIV/Aids patients in Cape Town that being Pentecostal meant doing a particular set of things; a set behaviour pattern that identified a believer. Marshall (2009:45) makes a similar argument when she describes Nigerian PCE as a ‘strategic programme’ which determines how individuals and institutions should be organised and behaviour. In the same way each of these churches talked

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<sup>32</sup> Gail from His People, interview with author, 26 April 2014.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRKF0J5qvto>, accessed 2 June 2014.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bishop.Mosa.Sono>, accessed last 28 June 2014.

about political involvement, particularly at the civic level of voting, as being the expected and proper behaviour of PCE Christians.

The next section moves to the second theme identified as critical for an understanding of the relationship between religious and politics in Africa, namely the imaginary of witchcraft for an explanation of political power.

### **Witchcraft and Statecraft**

The role of witchcraft, prayers against evil spirits and the invoking of spirits as a means to hold onto power or to explain why particular people have gained political power has been extensively documented by the work of Ellis and ter Haar (2001: 90-113) and that of Marshall (2009: 166-200) and in media by Meyer and Moors (2006). Yet enquiries in the three churches of whether these could be sources of Zuma's power or the reason for the prevalent corruption in government, none of the church leaders identified the power of evil spirits as part of the political landscape in South Africa. Pastor Gege Sono, Bishop Sono's wife and one of the head pastors at Grace Bible Church, explained:

In Marikana<sup>35</sup> there was clearly involvement of witchcraft but we don't want our people to think like this. It is politics not witchcraft that has Zuma in power. We need to pray for God's will to be done and that must be our focus, not focusing on praying against evil spirits all the time<sup>36</sup>.

Of the three churches, Grace Bible Church gave the most attention to praying against forces of evil in the political process. During the open prayers during church services in the period leading up to the elections, members prayed for the protection of those in power from evil spirits. All three of the churches were adamant that the ANC government and leaders in high political office were not there because of any evil forces at work in the larger

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<sup>35</sup> Pastor Sono is referring to a strike by miners on the platinum belt around Rustenburg in August 2014, which led to the killing 2 policemen by the miners and the subsequent killing by police of 34 miners (see <http://marikana.mg.co.za/>, accessed 28 June 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Pastor Gege Sono, interview with author, 20 June 2014.

political landscape of South Africa. While the church leaders admitted that Zuma had his limitations and the AHF and His People did not think that Zuma was actually a Christian, none of them said that he enjoyed political power because of witchcraft.

Grace Bible church had no discussion and made reference to witchcraft or evil spirits and politics in South Africa on any of their social media, unlike churches, for example, in Nigeria where the social media and films of PCE churches are filled with examples of people having demons exorcised. In a series of interviews during June 2003, Pastor Gege Sono stressed that GB church wanted to create a modern church that was not locked into the old African practices and so it tried to get people to focus on the Holy Spirit rather than on the devil. In interviews done with 30 young women at GB church and by participating at GB church services during 2003, it was clear that witchcraft and evil spirits were part of the imaginings of the members and in their prayer sessions people often prayed against evil forces. The noticeable absence of a rhetoric about evil in the media space highlights the leadership's active move to limit the engagement with 'forces of evil', as it is the leadership which drives the social media content in this church.

Meyer, in her extensive work on Ghanaian Pentecostalism, has argued that by continuing to pray and preach against witchcraft, the devil and evil spirits Pentecostal churches keep these ideas current and even central in the self-understanding of their members. This is not reflected in the three churches under consideration here. His People consciously tried not to invoke prayers against evil spirits in their general prayer meetings and prayer sessions in service. Its member Caroline clarified:

We do believe in evil spirits and that the power of evil needs to be vanquished in Jesus' Name. But we have learnt that people start to focus on Satan and not on God. So we really try to limit our engagement with talking about evil. In one-on-one counselling the spiritual counsellor might discern that evil spirits are at work in someone's life and then this is very specifically handled<sup>37</sup>.

In the social media of His People, in which members are involved and drive a lot of the content, there was no engagement with evil spirits,

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<sup>37</sup> Caroline, His People, interview with author, 13 June 2014.

witchcraft or the devil as explanations of the political landscape in South Africa. Christians were exhorted to pray that God would govern the process of the election (though this leaves the unsaid counter-argument that evil forces might prevail if God does not step in).

Similarly, Pastor Dladla from AFH explained that he was trying to encourage and enable people to take responsibility for their lives, and so limited any talk or prayers against evil spirits:

They must learn to stop blaming the evil spirits for everything and all that goes wrong in their lives. Once a person is saved they are no longer affected by the power of evil. That is why we need to pray for Christians in government so that things will go well for this country<sup>38</sup>.

As the quote from Pastor Dladla shows, he wanted to empower people to take responsibility for their own lives and believed that this could be done through the Holy Spirit. Like GB he tried to limit any rhetoric about witchcraft on social media. But amongst ordinary members of the AFH a belief in witchcraft and the power of the Holy Spirit to protect people from it was very real. Tina<sup>39</sup> explained that her mother was saving money for her and her fiancé to go to Nigeria to visit Pastor T.B. Joshua so that any evil spirits were driven from their lives before they were married.

In the public spaces of sermons, group prayers and social media of these churches, the leadership and the church members did not talk about the work of evil spirit or witchcraft as directly affecting politics. Rather they emphasised that South Africa would only begin to enjoy true political and economic liberation when it became a 'Christian country' in which everyone had been born again and those in power governed according to conservative Evangelical interpretations of the Bible. This echoes Gifford's finding on Pentecostalism in Ghana that the 'biblical approach' based on 2 Chronicles 7:14, which states that when everyone submits to God the nation will prosper, is central to the way in which many pastors in Ghana speak about politics (Gifford 2004: 162).

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<sup>38</sup> Pastor Emmanuel Dladla, AFH, interview with author, 13 June 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Tina, interview with author, 2 June 2014.

All three churches were careful to highlight that the ANC had been voted into power through a democratic process in 2009 and that the government constituted after the 2014 elections would also be the result of a fair and open democratic process. They placed emphasis on Christian obedience to those elected into office and discouraged their members from looking for political explanations in the spirit world.

The last section finally unpacks the political agendas held by the three churches and the impact this had on the manner in which their members engaged with politics during the election campaign.

### **Politically Engaged with a Specific Agenda**

In an article in the *Daily Maverick* analysing the impact of Evangelical Christianity on the South African political landscape, the journalist Mandy de Waal (2012) argues that the growing relationship between Christianity and the South African government is problematic for three reasons: first, it allows ‘this evangelical power group . . . a direct assault on the Constitution’, second, it would lead to more traditional legislation, such as the Traditional Courts Bill, and, last ‘and probably the most effective’, it would allow this group to run ‘a *de facto* Christian national state’. While the churches in this study hoped to influence government so that South Africa would be governed according to a conservative Evangelical agenda, the three churches seemed at best to have a limited influence on political figures in order to make this a reality. Their engagement with politics did not reveal a power-hunger or strong political influence as argued for by de Waal.

While the three churches were all supportive of the democratic process, they had different political agendas or reasons for being involved in politics. His People officially appeared politically neutral and did not want to be seen to take sides with any political party. This can be explained by its history and structure. From its beginnings His People congregations were deliberately inter-racial and developed a logo showing a black and a white hand together in prayer, which is now the Every Nation Africa logo. Pastor Ian Shippey explained that ‘we were not interested in race, we were interested in saving people and reaching out to all the students on university

campuses no matter what their race<sup>40</sup>. Their mission has been to equip the leaders of the future through seminars, workshops and teaching in sermons that give them the social and cultural capital needed to be successful business people, educators, medical professionals and political leaders (Frahm-Arp 2010: 174-79). The leaders are not directly involved in any political party and there is no particular political party which is favoured by the church. Their focus is on creating an environment in which the economy can flourish and people can be liberated from poverty. Much attention is given to the importance of economic liberation by the church. On almost half the Every Nation Africa podcasts there is reference made to how the team doing missionary work in Africa are building businesses and helping to liberate people economically.

Grace Bible Church in turn believed that its role was to influence the moral character of those in power. It has a different mission from His People; it believes that its role is to encourage and strengthen the moral and ethical behaviour of those in power. In 2002 and 2003 the Moral Regeneration of the South African Police Service in Gauteng was spearheaded by Grace Bible Church and led by Pastor Moso Sono who had personally flown to New York to learn from the NYPD how to regenerate and reignite a flagging, ineffective and corrupt police force. The launch of the programme was held at Grace Bible Church and various members of the church became chaplains to the police force<sup>41</sup>. This echoes the findings of Gifford (2004: 172 - 180), Ellis and ter Haar (2001: 90-113), Marshall (2009:165), and Martin (2002: 149-151) who all in different contexts in Africa showed how PCE style churches see their role as influencing the moral behaviour of those in power, but Gifford (2004: 172) argues there is insufficient evidence to show that Africa is thereby tangibly transformed.

Grace Bible Church leaders believe in a politics of influence and see themselves as ‘chaplains’ to those in power. They are able to invite key political leaders both from the ANC and EFF because of the size and influence of the church in the cultural landscape of Gauteng, the Northern Province and Mpumalunga where it has congregations. Like mega-churches in other African countries it believes its role is to influence those in power. Pastor Gege Sono explained that some ANC politicians were members of the

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<sup>40</sup> Pastor Ian Shippey His People Church, interview with author, June 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Field notes by author.

church and that the leadership prayed with and for those in political office. To what extent Grace Bible Church is able to tangibly affect the moral behaviour of those in power is not within the scope of this paper to determine.

Acts of Faith Harvesters, lastly, wanted to be seen as a good supporter of those in power in order to access political grants and help for its members to become more economically empowered. In a much smaller and poor church like the AFH, the political agenda was quite different to that of the two other, much larger churches. For Pastor Dladla politics is the route to economic liberation and helping his congregation out of poverty is his central mission.

I didn't used to think politics is important but now I understand that if we want to start business and embrace God's riches then we need to link in with government, so that we can access their grants and help our people<sup>42</sup>.

He believes that through his church he can link people with the municipal and government officials that can take up their issues and help them to transform their lives economically. As individuals he believes people have no political power but as a church they have the power to access the resources of government and because this is a godly thing to do, God will give them the spiritual power they need to be successful. In his sermons Pastor Dladla never once spoke against the ANC, but rather encouraged people to support the ruling party. His focus was on how to access grant money:

We can't just go to government asking for grants. We have to start things that people need, like computer literacy training, and then they [the government] will see what we are doing and will want to partner with us and give us grants.

Being model citizens and supporting the ANC was his political strategy to access the resources his people needed to flourish. In a study of PCE churches in the Western Cape Burchardt noted that 'more than belief and ritual, it is Pentecostal belonging that links organisation, people, opportunities and resources' (Burchardt 2013:627). Grace Bible church and

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<sup>42</sup> Pastor Emmanuel Dladla, AFH, interview with author, 13 June 2014.

the AFH both had political strategies of belonging: if members were part of their church they would have access – either at a low or high level – to political leaders and government resources.

## **Conclusion**

His People, Grace Bible Church and Acts of Faith Harvesters all believed that it was the duty of a good Christian to participate in the political process of voting. His People leadership supported active social media discussions and debates about politics but did not speak directly about political parties from any official platform. Grace Bible Church believed that its members should be informed about who the Christians were in the different political parties and what they stood for; this meant that they invited ANC and EFF delegates to address its congregations, not just in the lead-up to the elections but at other important festivals as well<sup>43</sup>. They gave information about upcoming political events like voting and social care which for those in distress because of political events like Marikana and the capture of young girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, but neither they or their members engaged in debates about these events on the social media sites investigated in this research. Acts of Faith Harvesters tried to encourage everyone to vote for the ANC because it thought its members would have more of a chance of accessing government grants and small business loans by supporting the ruling party. Like GB there were no political debates on their social media sites only information about political events coming up and an encouragement for members to participate.

This study supports Kuperus' (2011: 280) findings that the relationship between Christianity and politics is not uniform; even within PCE churches in Gauteng there are differences in why and how they engage with politics. Much like the AIC churches (Bompani 2008: 265-7), these church spaces - either in their physical form or on social media platforms – are places of political debate and engagement; politics and faith are not separated in the daily lived experiences of believers.

During the period leading up to the 2014 national elections, HP and GB churches created a civic space that supported democracy and fostered an environment in which a stable democratic process could take place. They

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<sup>43</sup> When the soccer world cup was announced, at Heritage Day services, at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela.

encouraged their members to be informed and vote as they felt led by God. Acts of Faith Harvesters encouraged all their members to vote for one party, the ruling party, because they were already in power. This shows influence could undermine the democratic process. In their public discourse they maintained that South African politicians are in power through democracy and not because of evil forces or witchcraft. They differed amongst each other most on the basis of the reasons for which they were involved in politics. His People maintained a politically neutral official voice and said it was down to the individual to vote according to their conscious. It impressed on members the importance of developing a stable economic climate and encouraged 'good stewardship' in politics, thus indirectly inferring that good Christians voted for those who would best promote economic growth. Grace Bible Church believed that it could and was influencing political leaders and that once these were 'born again', they would govern the country with responsibility and according to conservative Evangelic principles. As a strong Christian nation the country would then begin to flourish economically. Lastly, Acts of Faith Harvesters tried to encourage everyone to vote for the ruling party because they believed that by being seen as supporters of those in power its members would be able to access financial aid and the resources needed to help their community.

This study shows how PCE are using social media as a way to inform and minister to their members. In all three churches the majority of posts on social media were to inspire, teach and inform members and many people used it as a site to express their need for prayer or thanks for people's support. All three churches used social media as an important space to highlight the important of political participation on the part of their members. For GB and AFH has not become a space of discussion or debate. His People on the other hand are consciously trying to create community through social media and use it as a key space for pastors to engage with their congregation. More research needs to be done to examine how social media as a platform these sites may begin to re-shape the way in which these churches spread their message, minister to people, create communities and discuss social, political and spiritual issues.

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