


Safe spaces for marginalised young people: Ambivalent pastoral engagement of Pentecostal churches in the slums of Guatemala

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Many marginalised young people in Guatemala City, one of the poorest and most dangerous cities in the world, face a bleak future. Faced with poor prospects, many turn to the Mara youth gangs, where crime and drug abuse are part of everyday life. The Pentecostal churches offer an alternative to the power of the Mara gangs. They offer safe spaces for young people as they are respected by the Maras. In this way, they open up a path to resocialisation and rehabilitation. However, the rehabilitated young people also criticise the Pentecostal churches, especially the neo-Pentecostal churches, which promote the prosperity gospel. On the one hand, the article reflects on the ambivalent role of Pentecostal churches for marginalised young people and, on the other hand, points to the relevance of a politically motivated liberation theology that is committed to a just society in this world. Marginalised young people need solidarity, social justice and liberation from violence. In view of the 'culture of violence' in Guatemala, the practical liberation theology D. Aguilar Ramírez proposes a peace-building process based on a non-violent God. This approach could contribute to the comprehensive healing of marginalised young people and their culture.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article makes it clear that pastoral practice is a critical corrective for Christian doctrine and ecclesiology. Qualitative empirical research should be strengthened as an analytical instrument of practical theology. This requires stronger interdisciplinary cooperation between theology and sociology.

Keywords: Pentecostal church; Guatemala; neo-Pentecostal church; Mara youth gangs; practical liberation theology, street work in Latin America; violence; peacebuilding-process in Latin America.

Introduction

Guatemala City is one of the poorest and most dangerous cities in the world. There are hardly any future prospects for marginalised young people and so many join the Mara youth gangs. In Guatemala City, Mara youth gangs are known for their involvement in criminal activities such as extortion, drug trafficking and violence (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2012:23–30). They often control certain territories within the city and may engage in activities that intimidate and control local communities. Additionally, the recruitment of young individuals into these gangs, sometimes through coercive methods, is a notable aspect of their operations. The wider context of this fact is that Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and has the lowest social indicators in the Central American region (World Bank 2024). According to Schäfer, the extreme inequality between social classes combined with racism and a state apparatus that is weak in social policy but prevalent and corrupt in police violence creates an ideal breeding ground for Pentecostal churches in Guatemala. More than half of the population is now Protestant, belonging to mainly neo-Pentecostal and evangelical denominations (Schäfer 2021:287–288).

Many of the neo-Pentecostal Christians claim that the conversion of as many individuals as possible to the 'gospel' sanctifies a nation and brings about a transformation for the better in all social and political matters. In that vein, many neo-Pentecostal communities have filled a pastoral vacuum in the poor neighbourhoods, albeit without any official claims about political or social change. For their part, neo-Pentecostal churches nevertheless provide an alternative to the power of the Mara gangs. On their premises, they not only offer safe spaces for children and young people but also enable them to leave the gang lifestyle, seeing as they are respected by the Maras,

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and open up paths of resocialisation and rehabilitation. They give the young generations hope and a future – and also refuge in prayer and a new community. Marginalised young people have, however, likewise found critique with the neo-Pentecostal churches in light of the prosperity gospel, their exclusivist behaviour, their theology and their lack of interest in actually changing social structures of injustice. This article presents the pastoral engagement of neo-Pentecostal churches on the basis of qualitative empirical research in Guatemala City (Román-López Dollinger 2014) and responds to the criticism of young people with a new approach to practical liberation theology that effectively supports the peacebuilding process (Aguilar Ramírez 2024). It is necessary that the complex religious situation in Guatemala should be presented in order to understand the rise of the Pentecostal movement.

Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism and Liberation Theology in Guatemala

The Pentecostal movement in Guatemala can be differentiated between the classical Pentecostal churches and the neo-Pentecostal churches, with the number of adherents to the neo-Pentecostal churches increasing at a constant rate. In 2022, the Interdisciplinary Development Consultants Inc. (CID) executed their CID Gallup survey that clearly identified 43% of the Guatemalan population as evangelical, including those who adhere to neo-Pentecostal churches (Denton 2022). The survey results show that 41% of respondents identified as Catholic. A comparison with the results of surveys conducted in 2016 and 2006 demonstrates a consistent pattern of growth of the Protestant population affiliated with neo-Pentecostal and charismatic churches. According to a 2016 survey by ProDatos, 42% of the population is Protestant and 45% is Catholic (U.S. Department of State: Guatemala). The PewForum's 2006 Pentecostal survey suggests that Guatemala's Protestant population is predominantly Pentecostal, with more than 80% affiliated with Pentecostal or Charismatic churches (Pew Forum 2006:80). Carlos Denton of the CID Gallup provides an explanation for the growth of evangelical churches. These churches are more accessible than the Catholic Church, for example, the pastor spends time on the street visiting homes. They offer a support network for their members, who mainly suffer from economic and other forms of deprivation (Hunt 2010:185) including alcoholism or drug abuse. Many of them are immigrants from rural areas where they had access to a supportive family structure, so these churches serve as a substitute for the family that was left behind (Denton 2022).

Many sociologists of religion designate the neo-Pentecostal churches as a new religious movement and as a phenomenon of late modernity, which, however, has not provided a consistently coherent moral system (Hunt 2010:185–186). The first neo-Pentecostal churches appeared in Guatemala in the 1970s. An earthquake in 1976 stimulated Pentecostal growth, which was encouraged in part by U.S. missionaries

distributing earthquake aid. These aid volunteers established worship services that became the Church El Verbo (Pew Historical Overview 2006) who, in turn, gained access to the middle and upper classes of Guatemala. The most important neo-Pentecostal churches in Guatemala include El Verbo (1978), Fraternidad Christiana (1978), El Shaddai (1983), La Familia de Dios (1990) and Casa de Dios (1994). '[A]lmost all neo-Pentecostal churches are located in the capital' of Guatemala (Althoff 2005:2). They preach the *prosperity gospel* or so-called *health and wealth gospel*. This refers to the 'belief that health and wealth come only to those who obey God, and those individuals who suffer do so because they are sinful' (Steigenga 2001:9). This belief goes hand in hand with a negative assessment of poverty, and thus also with a negative image of the majority of followers of the classical Pentecostal movement, which mainly includes the indigenous population. In the 1970s, some Catholics from the upper middle class joined the neo-Pentecostal churches because they did not want to support the option for the poor proclaimed by the Catholic Church. The prosperity gospel also offered them a new opportunity to legitimise their privileged position in society as such. At the same time, the prosperity gospel was also an attractive option for poor people and the lower middle class. In the midst of the economic crisis in Guatemala after 1980, it strengthened their personal discipline and self-esteem. Henri Gooren argues that in this economically difficult situation, the neo-Pentecostal churches with their Protestant individual ethics, strategy for self-improvement and the religiously legitimised gospel of material prosperity struck a chord with poor people better than the Marxist-oriented Liberation Theology of the Catholics that 'proposed a collective ethic, emphasizing the relationship between human societies and God' (Gooren 2002:39–40). Poor people opted for a neo-Pentecostal church because it was not only spiritually interesting but also presented a practical way out of poverty:

This was even more relevant in a situation where uncontrolled capitalism (...) was the inexorable 'order of things' and for many people the only viable out of poverty. (...) God was not so much a companion in the quest for a better society, but rather in the quest for a better self. (p. 40)

Catholic Liberation Theology, on the other hand, has pursued social criticism with its priority option for the poor (Puebla 1979) and called for a just and fair society from a communitarian, socio-ethical perspective.

Another reason why neo-Pentecostal churches are attractive to the poor is the way religion and politics get mixed in Guatemala. Three of Guatemala's presidents have been Protestant, namely Ríos Montt (1982–1983), Serrano Elías (1991–1993) and Morales Cabrera (2016–2019). In 1974, General Efraín Ríos Montt became the president and joined the neo-Pentecostal church of El Verbo some years later. Montt used television to spread his religious views and legitimised his policies in religious terms. In his speeches, he called on Guatemalans to resist communism and uphold morality in family life and politics. His campaigns against crime and government graft openly equated Catholicism

with corruption. The Catholic Church was subjected to a particularly anti-Catholic policy during the Civil War period (1960–1996), as a result of the perception that Catholic Liberation Theology exhibited similarities to Marxism and, for Montt, consequently constituted communism. As the conflict between the government and guerrilla groups intensified, Catholics were subjected to government attacks because of their suspected ties to the guerrillas, and as a result, some considered Pentecostalism a ‘safer’ option (Stoll 1990:193–196).

The first classical Pentecostal churches such as *Asambleas de Dios* appeared in Guatemala in the 1930s and differed immediately from the neo-Pentecostal churches. The classical Pentecostal churches in Guatemala are characterised by the fact that indigenous and poor ladinos – an ethnic group in Guatemala with Hispanic origin mixed with indigenous cultural elements – assumed leadership positions and that many conversions were accompanied by healing or deliverance from alcohol addiction. Classical Pentecostalism is both a rural and an urban phenomenon. In the period between 1950 and 1960, evangelisation combined with urbanisation and economic decline facilitated the growth of classical Pentecostal churches. These, however, did not teach the prosperity gospel, which appears to be a consequence of the neoliberal economic order in late modernity. Heinrich Schäfer pointed out (Schäfer 2021:298) that there are classical Pentecostal churches in Guatemala that focus on the practice of Jesus and convey this ethically in their practical commitment and discourse for justice and peace. Accordingly, their social work is oriented towards the communitarian interests of the addressees and against the neoliberal economic and social system. Above all, however, the actors of these church formations are active in the national peace process and call for international human rights standards. Socially engaged Pentecostal churches, which are religiously and politically engaged in this direction, are usually found only in those churches which belong ethnically to the indigenous population of Guatemala (Schäfer 2021:382). The white upper class of Guatemala is a member of the neo-Pentecostal church, while the indigenous groups within the population belong to Pentecostal churches oriented towards Liberation Theology. These classical Pentecostal churches that are oriented to Liberation Theology, especially under indigenous influence, emphasise that they are called by God to cooperate or to serve in the transformation of social structures towards a more just society.

The ‘Mara youth gangs’ section will examine the ways in which the aforementioned churches engage with marginalised young people in Guatemala City, with a particular focus on Mara youth gangs.

Mara youth gangs

Large cities are the central social spaces for the development of youth gangs, whose membership is growing in proportion to the cities. Latin America expert, Manfred Liebel, sees a direct link between the explosive urbanisation caused by

labour migration from the countryside to the cities since the 1960s and the emergence of youth gangs. The poor neighbourhoods saw explosive growth, the number of unemployed increased and with them, the lack of prospects which ultimately led to prostitution, drug use, alcoholism, etc. This situation affected young people severely. Youth gangs, in general, can be seen as a collective response to an intolerable life situation and as a social challenge, as society denies them participation and a future (Liebel 2002:244). The Mara gangs, in particular, emerged in Guatemala in the 1980s, initially in the United States (US) among young migrants from Central America. Many other existing youth gangs or ex-guerrillos and soldiers joined them. They introduced a new level of violence and unscrupulousness so that they eventually became a parallel power to the newly founded state police forces. Mara youth gangs, notably the *Maras Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18*, became a significant social issue in Guatemala City and other parts of Central America (Román-López Dollinger 2013b). These gangs, MS-13 and Mara 18 – whose membership is estimated between 200,000 and 500,000 – often operate through a hierarchical structure, with leaders at the top overseeing various levels of members and associates. The term ‘mara’ is an abbreviation of the Spanish word ‘marabunta’ and means a certain type of ant that lives in large swarms. The MS-13, or *Mara Salvatrucha*, splintered off from the youth gang Mara 18, which was led by Mexicans and is named after its 18th Avenue origins, a Latino neighbourhood in Los Angeles. The name MS-13 also refers to the road and is also an unlucky number (Weltert 2013:118–119).

A study from 2003 shows that 80% of Mara members in Guatemala have a home and do not have to live on the streets (Portillo 2003:485). Nevertheless, the home may well be dysfunctional. Seven out of 10 Mara members have a single mother, as the father has fallen victim to the war, abandoned the woman or fled to the USA for political (or economic) reasons. Moreover, with a single-parent mother, there is not only a lack of emotional affection but frequently also a lack of sufficient living space, so homes often do not allow any room for privacy, which in turn encourages domestic violence. Many Mara members, especially girls, are affected by this (Weltert 2013:121). As a result of these factors, the Mara gang becomes a family and a circle of friends. As most Mara members come from poor backgrounds, they have to help support their families from an early age. Because for many *mareros*, the gang has become a real family or circle of friends, they are characterised by a high degree of identification (tattoos of the gang’s name on the face or upper body) and solidarity with each other. During the day, life takes place on the streets, and the neighbourhood is defended against the hostile Mara gang or a violent police force. This is the main task of membership and replaces employment activity. They pose a threat to children and young people in poorer neighbourhoods of Guatemala City (and other cities). This enables them to exercise control and ward off external influences that they cannot control (Weltert 2013:125). It provides security and a new sense of self-worth in a currently uncertain life situation. A brief examination of

the risk factors associated with joining a Mara youth gang illuminates the significance of Pentecostalism in these impoverished urban neighbourhoods as such.

Risk factors for joining a youth gang

It is important to understand that the reasons for the existence of these gangs are complex and intertwined with social, economic and political factors. Marginalisation, poverty, social acceptance of violence and limited educational and economic opportunities contribute to the appeal of gang membership for some young people. Wealth is very unfairly distributed in Guatemala and a high proportion of young people have little access to any kind of social support (World Bank 2024). The most important macrosocial risk factors for joining a youth gang are marginalisation, living on the streets and overall cultural acceptance of violence (Román-López Dollinger 2013b:41–51). There are also microsocial and individual risk factors like family, bullying at school, emotional instability or low self-esteem. The three mentioned macro-social factors are of particular importance for the questions posed in this article, where marginalisation and violence are key factors affecting many young people.

Marginalisation

Young people from poor neighbourhoods in Guatemala City are mainly confronted with two forms of marginalisation, namely direct and psychosocial marginalisation. Direct marginalisation means that young people have no access to social goods or basic social rights, including housing, education, health, work, family or protection. This direct marginalisation goes hand in hand with psychosocial marginalisation, which is understood to mean the othering, discrimination and various forms of social rejection that young people experience in their everyday environment. Such experiences of marginalisation are usually painful and traumatic experiences that often manifest themselves in social anxiety, frustration and aggressive behaviour. Marginalised young people develop coping mechanisms to satisfy their material and psychosocial needs, mostly, however, through deviant behaviour. They then choose youth gangs as an alternative way of life because they become alienated from society's norms of behaviour. Marginalised young people then find a home in the youth gangs with material protection, organisation, for example, a life structure and responsibility, and economic security (Román-López Dollinger 2013b:42).

Social acceptance of violence

In Guatemala, moreover, there is a high level of social acceptance of violence. Guatemala is known as the 'culture of violence' [*cultura de violencia*]. It is very closely linked to the 'culture of impunity'. In concrete terms, this signifies that the prevalence of youth and gang-related criminal activity is exceedingly high (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2012:65–66). In addition to the increasing violence against women and girls, there are contract killers, kidnappings, extortion, drug-

related crime and numerous cases of vigilante policing and lynching. In youth gangs, the use of psychotropic substances, violence and crime are considered 'normal' because they help to achieve goals or status and/or solve problems (Bechle 2021). The high crime rate in Guatemala corresponds to the high level of unemployment among young people and young adults (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2012:76–80). Furthermore, Guatemala was subjected to a considerable degree of politically legitimised violence as a consequence of the Civil War (1960–1996), which, in turn, rendered the country vulnerable to criminal activities (Bechle 2021). The legacy of political violence is evident in the contemporary social landscape. As evidence of this, children and young people demonstrate a general knowledge of war tactics, such as the use of firearms, which are now employed by organised crime and youth gangs. Guatemala is one of the most dangerous countries in the world, as its rates of homicide are among the highest in the world (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2012:69–71). This can be attributed to the ready availability of firearms, particularly among younger demographics (Román-López Dollinger 2013b:32).

The issue of Mara youth gangs in Guatemala City is typically addressed through a multifaceted approach, which incorporates the involvement of law enforcement agencies, the implementation of social programmes, the facilitation of community outreach initiatives and the promotion of violence prevention strategies. The objective of these initiatives is twofold. Firstly, it is to offer viable alternatives to gang involvement, and secondly, to address the underlying social issues that render gang membership, an attractive proposition for some individuals in the first place. Guatemala, for example, also participates in the *peace-building programme* launched by the United Nations (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2012):

To participate in such processes, perpetrators must feel that alternatives to jail, hospital and prison do exist. It is possible to promote peace using both retaliation and incentives. Broad support is usually needed to enable combatants to reintegrate into society, and even then, some will fall back into their old ways. For these, there is still the criminal justice system. (p. 80)

Additionally, Pentecostal churches implement initiatives to facilitate the disengagement of young people from gang-related activities. This will now be subjected to further analysis.

Pastoral engagement of Pentecostal churches for marginalised young people of Mara gangs

A significant number of Pentecostal churches, encompassing both neo-Pentecostal and classical Pentecostal denominations, have emerged as a crucial alternative to gang membership in impoverished communities within Guatemala City. As the Mara youth gangs typically do not permit members to leave the gang alive, joining a Pentecostal church is, however, an acceptable alternative. This is because the churches serve as a

guarantee that former members will not betray the gang or join an opposing gang (Román-López Dollinger 2013a:227). The pastoral engagement of these churches in the slums of Guatemala City has the potential to play a significant role in providing safe spaces for marginalised young people. Such churches frequently function as community hubs, providing support, guidance and a sense of belonging for those in need. They can likewise provide mentorship, counselling and educational programmes that contribute to the well-being of young individuals in these communities. Such engagement can also facilitate personal development, skill acquisition and spiritual guidance. Development is an important keyword for neo-Pentecostal churches because healing is defined in developmental terms like (Matshobane 2024):

Salvation is seen as covering the total well-being of an individual where one is saved not just from sin but also from poverty, disease, and all other misfortunes of life. (p. 3)

A process of healing and salvation entails a transformation in lifestyle, whereby a former lifestyle characterised by sin is replaced by a lifestyle of greater virtue and righteousness.

Neo-Pentecostals in these poor neighbourhoods are often deeply rooted in the community and have a firsthand understanding of the challenges faced by marginalised youth. The everyday issues of parishioners are addressed during the preachers' sermons: unemployment, the high cost of living, hopelessness, drug addiction and the risks young people youth face when living in a neighbourhood permeated by gang activity and drug trafficking (Dary 2019:90). It is crucial to acknowledge that the specific character of pastoral engagement and its impact on the safety of marginalised young people is contingent upon the individual Pentecostal church, its leadership and the particular needs of the community. In a lecture, Dennis Smith, a pastor of a classical Pentecostal church and member of the ecumenical organisation 'cedepca' (Centro Evangélico para Estudios Pastorales en Centroamérica), which is working for justice and peace (Schäfer 2021:297), presented the case of a pastor of a classical Pentecostal church who resides in an urban area facing threats of Mara violence. He opted to provide a safe haven for marginalised children, offering them a safe space within the premises of his church. This initiative was initially utilised by 50 children, later increasing to a total of 90 children ultimately participating (Smith 2010:6).

In a qualitative empirical study, Guatemalan theologian Angel-Eduardo Román-López Dollinger examined the pastoral work of various Pentecostal churches in Guatemala City for young people with deviant behaviour, focussing, in particular, on their work with *Mara* members. Based on his field research, he was able to distinguish between three forms of youth ministry in the Pentecostal movement. These are: (1) conversion pastoral care, (2) institutional pastoral care and (3) pastoral street outreach. The theologian himself had previously spent 16 years in pastoral work with marginalised young people, six of which were spent with neo-Pentecostal groups. In his urban pastoral street outreach work, he had significant contact with young people from the *Mara* gangs.

The categorisation into these three categories is based on his observations accordingly.

In the context of *conversion pastoral work*, the only avenue for rehabilitation is to 'accept Christ as personal Lord' and become a member of the neo-Pentecostal movement (Román-López Dollinger 2014:110). There is no evidence that this approach yields positive outcomes. Rather, its efficacy is contingent upon the individual's belief system. The absence of specialised therapies, such as drug withdrawal programmes, rests on the belief that the Holy Spirit can facilitate spontaneous healing during baptism. It is believed that the Holy Spirit can act as an agent of deliverance, exorcising the demons that have led the young person to become involved in gang activity. The deviant behaviour is regarded as being centred on the individual and situated within the context of a spiritual conflict. However, it is not conceptualised as a social or psycho-social issue (Román-López Dollinger 2014:124).

The objective of *institutional pastoral care* is to facilitate the rehabilitation of young people who have engaged in deviant behaviour by offering them the necessary institutional support. Such rehabilitation facilities are established by neo-Pentecostal churches. Such programmes include detoxification initiatives which are supported by volunteer professionals from the Pentecostal community, including doctors and psychologists. The therapeutic method employed is the reading of the Bible, which is intended to facilitate spiritual and physical healing in the young people in question. It is also imperative that the healing process extends to the family of the young person in question. The theological foundations of this pastoral care are rooted in the Pauline doctrine of charisms, which posits that spirit-given gifts are bestowed upon the church for its benefit. This doctrine also encompasses the spiritual war against demons and the prosperity gospel, which entails providing material and spiritual support to the institutions of the neo-Pentecostal church. Once the rehabilitation process is complete, the next stage is social integration. It is now anticipated that the rehabilitated young people will engage in street outreach work and serve as exemplars of recovery for other young people. Concurrently, the young person is integrated into the neo-Pentecostal church, where they are introduced to the tenets of catechesis and Pentecostal morals (Román-López Dollinger 2014:125). The neo-Pentecostal interpretation of discipleship and family ministry (Matshobane 2024), moreover, constitutes an essential element of the rehabilitation programme, and may also be regarded as a preventive measure.

The objective of *pastoral street outreach work* is carried out by former gang members. They facilitate the formation of self-help groups and endeavour to integrate young people into a Christian community, which may or may not be Pentecostal in nature. However, they themselves originate from Pentecostal churches. The pastoral work of these organisations comprises visits to youth in prisons, hospitals and rehabilitation centres, as well as discussions with affected

youth on the street. Additionally, they facilitate the formation of self-help groups that incorporate therapeutic sessions analogous to those employed by Alcoholics Anonymous. Nevertheless, within the context of Pentecostal self-help groups, the Bible is utilised, select Pentecostal church rituals are employed and the family of the affected young person is also invited to participate in healing processes. Theologically, this Pentecostal street outreach work presupposes that the Holy Spirit works towards baptism, in favour of the baptised person recognising the gift of ministry for building up the church, for a concept of God working in everyday life, to which the rehabilitation of former gang members bears witness, and for a concept of life engaging in a spiritual war with Satan which manifests itself in the crime and violence on the streets of poor neighbourhoods (Román-López Dollinger 2014:126).

Because *pastoral street outreach* and *institutionalised pastoral care* are the most effective means for the young people concerned, Román-López compared these two forms in his qualitative-empirical work, which cannot be presented in more detail in this article.

Positive significance of Pentecostal churches

Pentecostal churches provide a multifaceted form of protection, encompassing both spiritual and social support as well as safeguarding their members from life-threatening violence. The qualitative empirical study conducted by Román-López reasonably argued that the only viable option for those wishing to leave gang life behind is to become involved in a church. The churches serve as a secure environment – a safe space, as Pedro elucidates (Román-López Dollinger 2014):

There I felt protected and useful, because there I felt that I myself was the Church of Christ. (...) And then a gang member has the mentality that one of the answers to the question of how to get out of a gang, or where to see a future, is in the things of God (in the Church). It's the only option for a gang member. (pp. 187–188)

The study revealed that marginalised young people who were affiliated with a Mara gang perceived Pentecostal churches to be the most appealing, alluring and efficacious option among the religious, state and therapeutic alternatives present in their immediate surroundings (Román-López Dollinger 2014:179). This is because of the fact that Pentecostal churches regard these marginalised young people as equals. Pentecostal churches facilitate a direct encounter with the divine through the Holy Spirit, which does not necessitate the intercession of a priest or pastor, as is the case in the Catholic Church. This engenders the perception that all individuals are equal before God and within the community. The absence of hierarchical structures within Pentecostal churches fosters a sense of belonging and identification among their members: 'The church has helped me to think that I am the church', says Pedro, a former gang member (p. 179).

The presence of numerous impoverished individuals within Pentecostal congregations fosters a sense of belonging and

acceptance, allowing them to embrace their authentic selves. The marginalised young people express gratitude for the fact that Pentecostal churches do not segregate themselves from impoverished communities but rather endeavour to implement the teachings of Jesus in this context. Furthermore, the Pentecostal churches' practice of integrating young people with their specific skill sets and abilities for tasks is perceived as highly efficacious. This is particularly advantageous for young people exhibiting deviant behaviour, as they are now able to perceive themselves not merely as a problematic entity, but as a contributor to the resolution of the issue. Pentecostal churches proactively promote behavioural change and facilitate improvements in living conditions for young people by providing them with the solidarity and support they need to become active members of the congregation and remain loyal to the Pentecostal movement. It is of particular importance that the Pentecostal movement not only proclaims an 'option for the poor' but also demonstrates tangible solidarity with those who are impoverished. In contrast to the Catholic Church and the Lutheran or Anglican Church in Guatemala, the Pentecostal movement does not require a formal declaration of support for the option for the poor, as it is a movement that is inherently aligned with the interests of the poor. In light of the aforementioned factors, it becomes evident why the impoverished populace tends to gravitate towards Pentecostal churches – they are indeed the most proximate to their lived experiences. In accordance to Román-López, this is the primary reason behind the rapid growth of the neo-Pentecostal movement in impoverished communities (Román-López Dollinger 2014). Pedro says in the interview with Román-López:

The Pentecostal church is the church that stands up for people from poor backgrounds and for people who are a little more in the middle of society. But above all for people from below. (...) That's what I liked about the Pentecostal church. (p. 181)

They accept marginalised young people as they are, without them having to adapt or disguise themselves, and they provide a safe space. Pedro says (Román-López Dollinger 2014):

Pentecostalism is like what I told you about the gangs. You're comfortable there. You feel like you can be crazy, you can be yourself there, you can be crazy there. That's right, because that's the way the Pentecostal church doesn't hold you back! (p. 186)

As a result, the Pentecostal movement in Guatemala City's impoverished neighbourhoods has flourished, becoming a dynamic and nurturing community. The Pentecostal movement is a social phenomenon that originated among the economically disadvantaged and has been characterised as a 'people's church'.

Criticising neo-Pentecostal churches: Lack of socio-political engagement, racism and exclusivism

Nevertheless, the younger generation has also voiced criticism of the neo-Pentecostal churches. At the neo-Pentecostal

churches espousing the prosperity gospel, criticism has been levied against the assertion that these churches cater to individuals from more affluent economic backgrounds. The prosperity gospel is a subject of intense scrutiny, as it is perceived to perpetuate a demeaning attitude towards impoverished individuals as if their circumstances were a consequence of a lack of faith. What's more, the prosperity gospel preached by neo-Pentecostal churches is perceived as a means of enriching the leaders of the church, as it promises a doubling of donations. Furthermore, these neo-Pentecostal churches fail to embody Jesus' message of solidarity with the poor. Rather, the focus within these churches is on attending seminars on prosperity and pursuing intellectual development. This prevents marginalised youth from resocialising through practical action or developing a sense of self-worth through a connection with the church. Such institutions are regarded as exhibiting hypocrisy (Román-López Dollinger 2014:189–190).

The strict Pentecostal doctrine posits that the Bible is the verbal inspiration of God and therefore true in literal terms that the divinity of Jesus Christ is a fundamental tenet of the faith and that the return of Christ will require the conversion of others. These beliefs are also seen as obstacles to full integration. One significant challenge faced by neo-Pentecostal churches is the potential for their strict moral standards to result in the marginalisation and discrimination of vulnerable youth. This can lead to a reintegration into gang-related activities, with individuals facing further marginalisation and exploitation. To illustrate, an individual who had been incarcerated for 172 years and had subsequently undergone rehabilitation was subjected to racial discrimination by members of the Pentecostal church on the grounds of his mother's Mayan ethnicity. He has reverted to his former gang and has assumed a leadership position within one of the most dangerous cliques. However, he adhered to the Christian faith all the while.

A further pertinent criticism of the subject matter of this article is that neo-Pentecostal churches fail to exhibit social commitment. It is frequently observed that those in positions of authority within the Church are lacking in awareness of the issues facing the nation. Furthermore, there is an overall lack of social initiatives, including the establishment of health centres, crisis relief projects and public libraries. The interviews indicate that church leaders frequently demonstrate a lack of genuine interest in the circumstances of marginalised young people. Such individuals are instead excessively preoccupied with themselves, their celebrity status and their wealth (Román-López Dollinger 2014:193–195).

In summary, it can be said that the criticism relates to a lack of social commitment in the poor districts, which would also bring about structural change. Marginalised youth and young people in general need inclusive, welcoming churches. It's crucial to ensure that such engagement should be culturally sensitive and respect the autonomy and beliefs of the individuals and communities involved.

In order to comprehend the ambivalent outcome of Román-López's study with respect to the social commitment of the Pentecostal movement in Guatemala, it is notable that some neo-Pentecostal churches have retained their original ethos and mission of serving the economically disadvantaged, while demonstrating social commitment across ethnic boundaries. This is exemplified by the CAREVAD project, which was referred to by Román-López. Conversely, some neo-Pentecostal churches espousing the prosperity gospel, particularly those situated in upper-class contexts, evince minimal interest in sociopolitical engagement with impoverished and indigenous communities. Instead, they engage in discriminatory practices against indigenous people. The question is whether there is a third pastoral path in this complex religious, sociopolitical and economic situation that connects the joyful and healing message of Jesus with a social and political dimension that is non-discriminatory and does not only associate the responsibility of healing with the individual.

Against this background, the practical theological approach of Protestant theologian Joel D. Aguilar Ramírez appears promising (Aguilar Ramírez 2024), as he develops a practical theology of peacebuilding in the context of Guatemalan society's collective woundedness. Methodologically, this is a new approach to liberation theology that is explicitly contextualised hermeneutically in Guatemala.

Safe spaces from the perspective of a practical theology of liberation

The previous explanations have shown that particularly marginalised young people in Guatemala City perpetuate the 'culture of violence' of Guatemala by finding no other perspective for themselves than to join a Mara gang that practices violence. The individual problems of these marginalised youth are a reflection of Guatemala's structural problems. Yet marginalised young people are not only victims of intergenerational violence but also perpetrators, as is evident in the Mara gangs. Aguilar Ramírez now focusses precisely on these violent entanglements in Guatemala and says that healing can only take place through a peacebuilding process. The theologian aims to create an integrative approach for combining practical theology and René Girard's mimetic theory, aiming at an explanation of the nature of men's violence and liberation theology. This integrative approach is a means of addressing social issues and violence through a lens that humanises both the oppressed and the oppressors, that makes clear, furthermore, that Christians are presented with an ethical challenge in recognising others in their otherness (Aguilar Ramírez & De Beer 2020):

These three paradigms fused together are a powerful cross-contextual tool that allows the practical theologian of liberation to reimagine the humanity not only of the oppressed and marginalised, but also the humanity of the oppressors and perpetrators of violence. The fusion of this paradigms builds a theology of resistance that always struggles to rehumanise those who are about to be sacrificed. (p. 6)

The theologians point out that religion also plays an equally eminent role in the discrimination and perpetuation of violence if the theology of sacrifice – according to which God sacrificed his Son on the cross to redeem the world – is perpetuated, thereby providing divine legitimacy for the violence of the social actors. This theology that glorifies violence must be rejected as neither redemptive nor salutary, especially in light of the traumatising experiences of violence in the Guatemalan context. In contrast, liberation theology is preferred because it is a theology that ‘is a non-sacrificial theology that seeks to call forth the stories of the innocent victims of contemporary society and its institutions’ (Aguilar Ramírez & De Beer 2020). They define Liberation Theology as a theology that:

[I]s a subversive way of doing theology. However, it is not a ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ idea. It is a way of doing theology that is concerned with the marginalised voices of society, whatever that marginalisation may look like, depending on the context. (p. 2)

The image of God that the theologian relies on as healing and liberating is nonviolent, featuring love and vivacity. Christians can live from this unconditional love of and vivacity before God (Aguilar Ramírez & De Beer 2020:7). Liberation theology in this sense means being liberated from exclusions in the name of purity. Rather, Christians are liberated to a radical hospitality ‘thus creating a space for ourselves and the boundary breaking other’.

Aguilar Ramírez’s research is not only theoretical in nature but also carried out through the Centre for Transforming Mission (CTM), which represents a network of grassroots leaders and communities in Guatemala City, like Street Psalms or unRival. With this practical link to (church) street outreach work, his research explored what a practical theology of peacebuilding in response to the Guatemalan societal wounds could look like, incorporating the elements of living, laughing and loving as parts of theological exploration – and resisting violence: ‘These communities have different resources and spaces that can help you embark in your own journey to find and believe in a God in whom there is no violence’ (Aguilar Ramírez 2024:141). Based on the healing transformation of the individual, this social engagement and reworking of practical liberation theology, moreover, can provide a secure environment for young people as they work towards a cultural transition in pursuit of reconciliation, healing and peace at both the individual and collective levels.

Conclusion

The qualitative empirical study conducted by Román-López on the social work of new Pentecostal churches in Guatemala City with marginalised adolescents from Mara youth gangs presents an overall ambivalent picture. For many young people of the Mara youth gangs, joining a Pentecostal church represents a crucial step in leaving behind the life of a gang member and the associated lifestyle. Pentecostal churches provide former gang members with the opportunity to

embark on a new life. These individuals are also supported medically, psychologically and spiritually by the respective Pentecostal churches, and undergo a process of Christian resocialisation in line with the programmes of the Pentecostal churches in question. However, young adults also perceive negative aspects associated with neo-Pentecostal churches that espouse a prosperity gospel. They notice the racist exclusivism towards indigenous people, and they also perceive the double standards of the prosperity gospel, which results in leaders enriching themselves with donations from church members or blaming the lack of wealth on a believer’s lack of faith. On the other hand, they recognise the socioeconomic context that creates social and economic injustice and would like to see greater sociopolitical engagement.

Meanwhile, liberation theology, whose followers were politically defamed and persecuted in Guatemala during the civil war, focussed on social injustice from the very beginning. The Guatemalan theologian, Aguilar Ramírez, now proposes a revision of liberation theology by taking into account the aspect of the pronounced culture of violence in Guatemala claiming that these histories of violence must undergo a process of healing – spiritually and personally. God is not violent and there is a way out of violence, which is supported personally by a network of grassroots communities in Guatemala City – the Centre of Transforming Mission. This third way might be able to build a new, peaceful society. This seems to be a good way to enable safe spaces without double standards and make a lasting difference in the lives of marginalised youth in the poor neighbourhoods of Guatemala City by building up a new community, one that benefits the generations to come.

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