

## **The Spirit's Voice from the Margin: Disentangling Australasian Pentecostalism from White Hegemony<sup>1</sup>**

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Within the context of Australasian Pentecostalism, “white hegemony” is a phrase that may be considered controversial, oppositional, and perhaps even deliberately inflammatory. Hegemony itself is a term heavily contested in scholarship but is generally understood using its Gramscian definition as “domination by consent,” usually via the use of “subtle and inclusive power” rather than overt domination.<sup>2</sup> In setting out a call for papers for this special issue, we deliberately chose not to provide a definition for this concept despite its titular inclusion, relying instead on contributors to respond in a manner they felt appropriate. The intention was to draw out the marginal voices in Australasian Pentecostalism and attempt to elicit honest responses from these contributors in relation to their positioning within the movement.

Australian Pentecostalism is undeniably dominated by “whiteness”—one need only look at the distribution of ethnicities on the various boards and executives of the leading Pentecostal churches, organisations, and associations to recognise this as no generalisation. For example, the Australian Christian Churches’ (ACC) National Executive is composed of nine members; of these, all three officers (President, Vice-President, Secretary / Treasurer) are white men.<sup>3</sup> The ACC’s representation is nevertheless slightly better than other major Pentecostal denominations: within the Executives of both C3<sup>4</sup> and the International Network of Churches (INC),<sup>5</sup> there is not a single non-white face to be found.

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Ashcroft et al., *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Third edition., Routledge Key Guides (New York: Routledge, 2013), 134.

<sup>3</sup> “ACC | About Us,” 8 November 2021, <https://www.acc.org.au/about-us/>.

<sup>4</sup> “C3 Australia Executive Team,” *C3 Australia*, 8 November 2021, <https://www.c3australia.com/executive-team>.

<sup>5</sup> “Leaders,” *International Network of Churches Australia*, 8 November 2021, <https://www.inc.org.au/about/leaders/>.

This can be considered both surprising and unsurprising given the broader demographic trends of the Australian population. From the 2016 census data, we find the oft-cited statistic that 49% of all Australians “had either been born overseas or one or both parents had been born overseas.”<sup>6</sup> This same report, however, points out that 88% of Australians were descended from Europeans, and only 11% of all Australians possessed non-European ancestries.<sup>7</sup> On this basis, therefore, one might argue that to have an executive team composed almost entirely of European descent is simply representative of Australian society. At the same time, data from the 2016 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) shows that over a quarter (27%) of all churchgoers in Australia were born in a non-English-speaking country.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, 28.2% of Australian churches were noted to be multicultural, while 70.4% were “monocultural Anglo” churches, with just 1.4% self-identifying as non-Anglo.<sup>9</sup> This should be considered in conjunction with an earlier NCLS report which noted that in 2011, 79.2% of Australian churches did not have any form of relationship with a non-English-speaking church.<sup>10</sup> In other words, in Australia, over a quarter of all churchgoers have non-Anglo heritage, and the overwhelming majority of them attend multicultural churches rather than “ethnic” churches.

In fact, it is likely that many of these Christians attend Pentecostal churches: a 2017 NCLS report on ethnically Chinese church attenders showed that a clear majority of second-generation Chinese immigrants whose primary language was English attended Pentecostal churches (26%), whereas those whose primary language was not English tended to attend other churches (9% and 5% attendance respectively for first- and second-generation).<sup>11</sup> Presumably the data is not too different for other migrant ethnicities and cultures; broadly speaking, this means that Australian Pentecostal churches are potentially home to a full quarter of all second-generation churchgoing immigrants in the country. This certainly fits with the global demographics of the wider church.

Given the broad diversity within the Pentecostal church, it is no surprise that non-white congregants may well perceive some form of “white hegemony”: despite making up a substantial proportion of the congregation, any representation of minorities at the highest levels of decision-making continues to be lacking. Though there are many possible explanations presented for this (often good ones), the outcomes remain the same. The lived

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<sup>6</sup> *2016 Census Data Summary: Cultural Diversity in Australia* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> *2016 Census Data Summary: Cultural Diversity in Australia*.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Powell, *Church Vitality: NCLS Leaders Briefing* (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Powell, *Church Vitality: NCLS Leaders Briefing*.

<sup>10</sup> I. Duncum, N. Hancock, and Ruth Powell, *Local Church Engagement with Non-English Speaking Churches*, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 14009 (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Hoi Lam Lo and Miriam Pepper, *Chinese Church Attenders – a Demographic Profile*, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 17012 (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2017).

(and felt) reality of minorities is that we are often simply left out of decision-making processes and have neither voice nor presence when it matters.

Elsewhere, Jason Goroncy has shown that both “whiteness” and “Christian” are historically closely linked within Australian identity formation, and comments that Australia is in increasing danger of allowing a white-dominated “One Australia” vision to overwhelm its current multiculturalism.<sup>12</sup> He suggests that this can be resolved by a refocusing upon God, here using a remarkably Pentecostal turn of phrase:

While the barriers erected by socio-cultural identities can both occasion and be occasioned by various forms of idolatry, in and of themselves the diversity of identities represents nothing less than the gift of the liveliness of God as life-affirming and creative Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

This issue therefore seeks to *postcolonise* Australasian Pentecostalism by “talk[ing] back” and situating non-white voices within the overall narrative, asserting our importance to the story of Australasian Pentecostalism, past, present, and emerging. Here we apply Jione Havea’s assertion that “to postcolonise is to place” into a slightly different context.<sup>14</sup> By doing so, we hope to demonstrate that Australasian Pentecostalism should not be monolithic or dominated by a single identity but is able to draw together a broad range of cultural and ethnic identities as different expressions of the same life-affirming and creative Spirit. The hope is in untethering from a monocultural iteration we can then affirm a more inclusive ethos. Non-white voices have long been an important part of Australasian Pentecostalism and should remain so.

The call for papers highlighted two key areas of consideration amongst non-white Pentecostals. First and most obvious was the growing global awareness of structural racial issues, heralded in large part by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and compounded by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. For minorities, these are not new issues—they have simply become more visible. This increased awareness has allowed minorities the opportunity to speak from our liminal positions in society, and occasionally to be heard by those in power. This is reflected in Amos Yong’s preface to his 2021 *Revelation* commentary, in which he reflects on the growing pertinence of an “Asian American interpretive optic” in a post-2020 world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jason Goroncy, “Race and Christianity in Australia,” *PCS* 4 (2019): 51.

<sup>13</sup> Goroncy, “Race and Christianity in Australia,” 57.

<sup>14</sup> Jione Havea, “Postcolonize Now,” in *Postcolonial Voices from Downunder: Indigenous Matters, Confronting Readings*, ed. Jione Havea (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Amos Yong, *Revelation, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), xx.

The second area is closely linked: the espoused expectation of either hybridity or “Westernisation” in order for non-white congregation members to fully participate in Australasian Pentecostalism. In other words, because of the distinct “whiteness” of Christianity in Australian thought,<sup>16</sup> minority Christians understand that we forever occupy a liminal position between whiteness and our own cultural identities. To paraphrase Fanon, we wear white masks over our coloured skins to be acceptable to white-dominated society (including church leadership), and in doing so forfeit an essential part of our own identities. Thus, we arrive at the six contributions within this special issue; though at first glance they are only loosely connected, a close reading of each reveals a deep coherence. Together they provide an insight into some of the tensions faced by non-white congregants as we negotiate our identities as members of the Australasian Pentecostal world. Rather than being combative, these articles are deeply introspective and grapple with the challenges faced by almost every one of us—of identity, hybridity, language, and belonging. Other themes included inter-generational differences as well as the lasting effects of the White Australia Policy.

Andrew Huang’s historical piece explores the life of Jessie Wong Goot Hong, an Australian-born Chinese Pentecostal missionary whose life and ministry was shaped by two world wars and the challenges of the White Australia Policy.

Hyeong-Kyoon Kim discusses the construction of Pentecostal Korean immigrant identity in New Zealand, centring around the way different generations of immigrants outwork the concept of U-Ri, as Korean communal identity.

Kenelm Ka Lun Chan investigates the way English worship songs are chosen, translated, and subsequently used by three different Chinese Australian Pentecostal churches. Using Swee Hong Lim’s categories of adopted, adapted, and actualised songs he shows the importance of contextualisation for diaspora communities—and the notable differences between such communities.

Qianwen Deng challenges the dominance of monolingual critical thinking in Australian Pentecostal higher education, suggesting that postmonolingual critical thinking is more appropriate for Pentecostals given both the Pentecostal ethos as well as the increasingly diverse nature of students in Pentecostal higher education institutions.

Siufung Wu draws on Craig Keener’s Spirit hermeneutics to argue that Australian Christians should adopt a Pauline conception of a cruciform community which actively works to include

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<sup>16</sup> Goroncy, “Race and Christianity in Australia.”

and embrace the poor, marginalised, and dispossessed, concluding that those who “live on the margins” provide a blessing in their reflection of the image of God.

Dorothy Mendez and Samir Eljagh discuss the experiences of ten *mujeres Latinas* in a predominantly white Pentecostal setting, noting the challenges they faced given their hybridity, as well as the sense of belonging they felt through their participation in the community.

This special issue represents a first of its kind for Australasian Pentecostalism and is an important contribution to the field: it highlights the wide variety of challenges regularly faced by non-white Pentecostals and proposes contextually grounded solutions. Our hope is that this issue will create room for other voices—diaspora, immigrant, Indigenous—to be raised more intentionally in scholarly circles and within wider Pentecostal discourse, not just as participants or the recipients of benevolent mission work, but as stakeholders and partners who share an equal desire to see God’s Spirit move in our congregations.

By doing so, may we emulate the many faithful witnesses who have gone before us. We strive toward an Acts 2 church where a multitude of different languages are raised in the Spirit to worship God in unity. At the same time, we look back to the subversive resistance posed by the earliest Pentecostals to the societies around them, which reached beyond differences in age, gender, and ethnicity to present a vision of God’s kingdom enacted on earth.<sup>17</sup> May it be so in our own lifetimes.

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<sup>17</sup> U-Wen Low, “Towards a Pentecostal, Postcolonial Reading of the New Testament,” *JPT* 29.2 (2020): 233.