



**PART 2**

**MISSION, SPIRITUALITY AND  
DEVELOPMENT**



## Chapter 4

# Pentecostal engagement in peacebuilding and re-imagination of religious leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia has a rich heritage and vast natural and human resources, yet it is torn by ethnic, cultural, and religious conflicts and is in need of sustainable peace. This chapter develops at the intersection of three topics: peacebuilding, Pentecostalism, and perceptions of leadership. Scholars concur that religion is an important factor in relation to peacebuilding in Ethiopia, along with political, social, and ethnic factors (Haustein, 2023; Østebø et al., 2021). They also highlight the potential of religious leaders to foster sustainable peace because of the respect that they enjoy (Haustein, 2023). With Pentecostalism steadily on the rise (Mekonnen, 2013; Fantini, 2013; Haustein & Feyissa, 2022), the understandings, attitudes, and actions of Pentecostal leaders concerning peace are therefore valuable to study - for Pentecostal scholarship, for research on the church in Ethiopia, and for the broader field of religious peacebuilding.

In Ethiopia's culturally and religiously diverse yet tense societal context, Pentecostals occupy an ambiguous position between grassroots movements and political powers (Fantini, 2013). Looking at Ethiopian Pentecostals' involvement in peacebuilding, we ask: *How does the engagement of Pentecostal religious leaders in peacebuilding processes redefine the imagination of what a leader should be, teach, and do?* To address this question, we draw on observations and interviews with Pentecostal peacebuilders in Ethiopia and discuss these findings in relation to Pentecostal theology and the reflections on peacebuilding and leadership by peace theorist and practitioner John Paul Lederach.

## 2. Context and background

### 2.1 Pentecostalism in Ethiopia

The history of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia is complex, encompassing the histories of various evangelical as well as independent indigenous movements. Classical Pentecostalism appeared in Ethiopia in the 1950s and developed through the 1960s, closely connected to Finnish and Swedish Pentecostal missionaries (Haustein, 2011; Engelsviken, 2014; Nyberg

Oskarsson, 2009; Prosen, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The movement was quickly indigenised, primarily through student movements and the initiatives of local evangelists (Haustein, 2011; Engelsviken, 2014; Eshete, 2009; Mekonnen, 2013). In the early years, most Ethiopians viewed Pentecostals with scepticism because of their beliefs, spirituality, and perceived association with Western culture. They faced persecution and imprisonment under the communist Derg regime (1974–1987) (Eshete, 2009; Haustein, 2011). To avoid persecution, many Pentecostals were forced to go underground or join other Protestant denominations (Haustein 2011; Eshete 2009). As a result, several mainline Protestant denominations became ‘pentecostalised’ or ‘charismatised’ by these new members (Haustein, 2011; Eshete, 2009). Today, most Protestant churches in Ethiopia are charismatised, and the label ‘Pente’ is no longer a derogatory term solely applied to Classical Pentecostals. Instead, it has become a generic term for all non-Orthodox and non-Catholic Christians in the country (Eshete, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 *Pentecostalism, politics and social engagement*

Østebø et al. (2021) argue that religion is an important yet often overlooked dimension in Ethiopian politics, attributable to the prevailing emphasis on secularism. Religious tensions have increased in recent years and must be addressed with a view to conflict mitigation and peacebuilding (Østebø, 2021; Haustein, 2023; Haustein et al., 2023). Pentecostal churches have traditionally avoided party politics, for theological reasons and because of past persecution, instead seeking transformation through personal conversions (Fantini, 2013). The lack of broader social engagement within Pentecostalism has been critiqued by Ethiopian evangelical scholars (Deressa, 2017; Knoetze & Wotango, 2023). Freeman (2012; 2013), however, argues that Pentecostalism in Ethiopia can be a positive transformative force for development, at the individual and societal level.

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1 For more on the beginnings and global growth of Pentecostalism, see 2023. *The Pentecostal World*, London: Routledge.

2 In Ethiopia, many of the *Pente* churches are members in the Evangelical Church Fellowship of Ethiopia, an umbrella organisation of born-again, trinitarian Christians. See <https://ecfe.org.et/who-we-are>

In recent years, Pentecostals have shown increasing interest in gaining political influence and holding positions of power (Østebø, 2021; Eshete, 2009; Fantini, 2013). The election of former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn (a Oneness Pentecostal) (Haustein, 2013) and the current Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed (Pentecostal), illustrates the rise of a more politically engaged Pentecostalism. Pentecostal churches reveal a fundamental ambiguity regarding issues such as ethnicity, good governance, and development, resulting in “a plurality of strategies *vis a vis the state*” (Fantini, 2013).

### 2.3 *Perspectives, perceptions and practices of peacebuilding*

In a report based on focus group interviews with Ethiopian Pentecostals, Josefsson and Wenell (2020) explore issues of social engagement and peacebuilding. They found that Ethiopian Pentecostals regarded themselves as important agents of change yet remained hesitant about political involvement. Participants critiqued Western approaches to social engagement for lacking a holistic and spiritually grounded worldview. Instead, they emphasised preaching reconciliation with God and praying to transform the spiritual climate as key contributions to peacebuilding. Josefsson and Wenell (2020) concluded that Pentecostal churches predominantly interpret the causes and consequences of conflict through a spiritual lens, and raised the question of whether spiritual and political structures can be integrated in a holistic pursuit of peace.

Our interviewees were Pentecostals actively involved in a peacebuilding initiative known as the Peaceful and Resilient Communities (PaRC) Programme.<sup>3</sup> They belonged to Classical Pentecostal churches in Ethiopia and represented perspectives ranging from grassroots to national leadership. Most held mid-level leadership positions within the development wings of Pentecostal denominations.<sup>4</sup> While actively involved in various forms

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3 The PaRC programme is implemented by ECFE, PMU (Swedish Pentecostal Development NGO), and NCA (Norwegian Church Aid), together with their Ethiopian partners. See: <https://pmu.se/bistand/pmu-i-stort-partnerskap-med-sida-for-fred-i-etiopien/>

4 In Ethiopia, the religious denominations have separate development wings for humanitarian or development work because of the secular constitutional law. In 2019, the former civil society law was replaced with a more permissive regulatory system

of church ministry, their leadership in development work also required engagement with communities and groups beyond the church.

Although the number of interviews conducted (eight) does not allow for broad generalisations, the findings provide valuable insight into Pentecostal perspectives on peacebuilding and leadership. According to our interviewees, their peacebuilding activities included: organising inter-religious and inter-ethnic self-help groups to address local conflicts and social or economic needs; using their broadcasting networks to promote mutual acceptance and interethnic dialogue alongside evangelistic content; supporting youth training and employment as an alternative to joining rebel groups; facilitating dialogue at local, regional, and national levels; and offering trauma healing training to pastors. In addition, the interviewees referred to their involvement in preaching, praying, and worshipping.

### 3. Theoretical framework

In the all-inclusive peacebuilding project led by PMU<sup>5</sup> practitioners use a manual entitled *Church & Peace: Resource and Toolbox*, developed by the same organisation (Wählin, 2021). One of the peacebuilding scholars referenced in the material is peace practitioner and theorist John Paul Lederach. Several of our interviewees also referred to Lederach. For this reason, Lederach's contribution - particularly his insights on the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding - forms a key element of the theoretical framework which we use to analyse the empirical material. The other major element of our theoretical framework is Pentecostal theology, particularly in relation to leadership and prophetic imagination. We argue that the intersection of these two theoretical perspectives enables us to analyse the interview material in order to address the central question of this study: *in what ways does engagement in peacebuilding lead Pentecostal actors to reimagine Pentecostal leadership?*

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(see, for example, Lupin 2022), but churches and development wings still work rather separately.

5 PMU stands for *Pingstmissionens utvecklingssamarbete*, but the abbreviation is normally used instead of the full name.

### 3.1 Lederach

In his seminal book *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, John Paul Lederach (1997) discusses the role of religious leaders in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. He outlines a pyramid model to describe leadership roles across three levels of society: the top, the middle, and the grassroots. At the top of the pyramid are the political and military leaders - highly visible figures often driven by political ambition. These leaders typically participate in high-level negotiations. In the middle of the pyramid are middle-level leaders, whose positions, Lederach (1997) notes, are not necessarily tied to or controlled by the government or opposition movements. These leaders may belong to religious communities, academic institutions, or humanitarian organisations. Given their visibility and role, they are often known by top-level leadership and the general population. They act as connectors between the top and the grassroots. Although they are in contact with high-level leaders, their positions are not dependent on political or military power, nor are they driven by the pursuit of such power.

Middle-level leaders are familiar with the experiences and context of grassroots communities, but because of their higher social status, they typically live under less precarious conditions. Thus far, Lederach refers to the vertical linkages that middle-level leaders maintain - with the elite and the grassroots. He also highlights their horizontal relationships with counterparts across lines of conflict. At the base of the pyramid is the population at large - the greatest number of individuals affected by conflict. Grassroots leaders may include members of indigenous organisations, healthcare officials, or refugee camp coordinators. These leaders are knowledgeable about local politics and are often familiar with local political and military figures. Importantly, they share in the vulnerabilities experienced by the communities which they serve (Lederach, 1997).

Lederach's goal is to trace an infrastructure for achieving and sustaining peace. At the core of this infrastructure is the nurturing of human relationships and the linking of forces that contribute to peace. He identifies middle-level leaders as key actors in this peace infrastructure. However, he also emphasises that for peace to be sustainable, change must occur at every level of society: the top, the middle, and the grassroots (Lederach, 1997).

In *The Moral Imagination*, Lederach (2005) revisits the pyramid and the role of middle-level leaders, again highlighting their vertical and horizontal linkages - bridging grassroots communities with top leaders and crossing ethnic, linguistic, and cultural divides. However, the primary focus of *The Moral Imagination* is to explore what motivates and sustains engagement in peacebuilding. Lederach defines the 'moral imagination' as "the *capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist*" (Lederach, 2005) (italics in original). Transcending violence, he argues, requires imagination.

The language of the 'already and not yet' evokes the spiritual and theological undertones of the moral imagination. Lederach draws on Walter Brueggemann's (1978) *The Prophetic Imagination* to elaborate on this idea. Imagination and transcendence share a paradoxical character: "Each must have a foot in what is and a foot beyond what exists" (Lederach, 2005:lx). He further references the prophet Isaiah: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (Is. 43:18-19) (Lederach, 2005). Engaging in peacebuilding, for Lederach, is a response to a prophetic vocation. He reflects on his own sense of calling: "Beyond profession, my concern has been to find and follow a calling, a deeper voice" (Lederach, 2005:24).

This vocation, like that of the prophets, entails upholding positive human relationships and living in alignment with the Creator. The reference to the Creator is significant: envisioning peace requires drawing upon a creative force divinely embedded in the human spirit (Lederach, 2005). Such creativity is essential for imagining and realising peace. Lederach's emphasis on the potential of middle-level leaders and on the spiritual and theological foundations of peacebuilding highlights the vital role that religious leaders can play in fostering sustainable peace.

In their article 'The recovery of the prophetic voice of the church: The adoption of a 'missional church' imagination', Eugene Baron and Moses Maponya (2020) explore the relationship between the church's prophetic task and the reimagining of its identity and role in relation to social engagement. They argue that shifts in the social and political context compel the church - its members and leaders - to become a prophetic presence and voice in society. To fulfil this prophetic role, the church must reimagine

itself, meaning that it must examine its identity and, if necessary, undergo transformation to remain an effective presence in its context (Baron & Maponya, 2020).

Imagination and the prophetic role in relation to positive social transformation are central in the work of Lederach and in the article by Baron and Maponya. According to Baron and Maponya (2020), the call to be prophetic - meaning 'the sent one' - is received by the church in its context. Furthermore, the theological and ecclesiological work of reimagination can only occur in that specific context. The church comes to understand (or reimagine) itself as shaped by what is happening around it and by how it responds (Baron & Maponya, 2020; Taylor, 2004). This work of imagination is theological, as it involves discerning God's work in this context and responding accordingly. It is through such engagement in society in response to God's call, that the church develops its prophetic voice.

This transformation or reimagination described by the authors includes listening to strangers and those in need, crossing boundaries, and being open to change (Marais, 2017). It also involves active participation in reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts (Baron & Maponya, 2020). The authors emphasise that prophetic presence and societal engagement is the responsibility of the whole congregation. However, they acknowledge that the task of reimagination is primarily undertaken by religious leaders (Baron & Maponya, 2020).

Lederach refers primarily to the transformation of a context marked by conflict into one of restored relationships and peace. Baron and Maponya (2020) emphasise reimagining the identity of the church as open and responsive to society. Yet, Lederach, Baron and Maponya move in the same direction when Lederach speaks of the peace practitioner's new self-perception in response to a (divine) call, and when Baron and Maponya highlight the contextual nature of imagination and of the prophetic role. Here, imagination is also connected to the transformation of a context marked by injustice into one of healed relationships.

## 3.2 *Pentecostal models of spiritual leadership*

Historically, sociologically, and theologically, Pentecostal theology is most fundamentally a contextual theology - rooted in historical Pentecostal revivals, spirituality, and theological reflection on experience and practice. Except for the rise of Pentecostal scholarship in recent decades, Pentecostal theology has often been oral, grassroots-oriented, and largely retrospective (Vondey, 2020). Despite the significant differences across the global Pentecostal-charismatic landscape - historically and in the present - the plural term 'Pentecostalism' is frequently used to describe what may appear to be irreconcilable diversities within the broader Pentecostal spectrum (Anderson, 2004). At the same time, it is also possible to argue that a common theological logic or 'Pentecostal DNA' emerges - shaped by experience-based epistemologies and pneumatologically-oriented worldviews and spiritualities across Pentecostal traditions (Vondey, 2017; Kalu, 2008).

Pentecostal theology is fundamentally holistic in its understanding of the 'full gospel', proclaiming that God is present and active in human affairs - redeeming not only the sinful condition of humanity but also healing, empowering, and transforming the world (Vondey, 2017; Richie, 2022). In line with the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecostal theology is transformational and missional, aiming to bring change to the individual, the church, and the world.

### 3.2.1 *'Prophetic politics'*

Despite their belief in divine interventions, such as healing, Classical Pentecostals often emphasise God's future reign, thereby de-emphasising, for instance, political engagement. Neo-Pentecostals, on the other hand, tend to highlight God's reign in the present, not only in the life of the believer but also potentially within society and the world at large (Yong, 2019). Today, however, these Pentecostal strands have frequently merged. As a result, tensions exist within Pentecostal thought between the here-and-now and the not-yet, the spiritual and the physical realms of reality.

When applied to the political sphere, Amos Yong (2010) introduces the concept of "prophetic politics" to describe how Pentecostals may engage in the public sphere. First, he notes that Pentecostals may pray for

political matters in ways that perform a political function. Secondly, they may boldly express “antithetical political stances” on issues they perceive as threats to the church or the Christian faith. Thirdly, Yong highlights the role of the Pentecostal church itself, where “prophetic politics of Pentecostalism is manifest in the kinds of counter-cultural and counter-conventional communities shaped by Pentecostal spirituality and piety”. In such contexts, as Yong writes (2010:13), “Pentecostal communities [may] function as alternative ‘cities’” - either ignoring broader political realities or demonstrating solidarity with people in socio-political and economic vulnerability.

### 3.2.2 The pneumatological imagination

The holistic dimension becomes especially noticeable in ‘majority world’ contexts, where Pentecostalism has not only grown exponentially (Anderson, 2004; Lindhardt, 2015), but where - as anthropologists and contextual theologians highlight in relation to various African contexts - Pentecostal spiritualities align with traditional African worldviews and spiritualities (Nel, 2019; Adaeze et al., 2019). In these settings, the (invisible) spirit world encroaches on the realities of the (visible) physical world. Nigerian-born ethicist and theologian Nimi Wariboko (2020:121) frames a Pentecostal rationality (a ‘Pentecostal hypothesis’) that represents “the way by which Pentecostals engage the world, their social realities and the depth of their religious existence”. This rationality involves a ‘dialogical imagination’ (Wariboko, 2020) that reflects a spirit-infused and spirit-augmented logic that insists on engagement and decision-making in the physical world (“it makes sense”) while simultaneously relating to the spirit world (“it makes spirit”).

In simple terms, the Pentecostal worldview presupposes a physical–spiritual (or human–divine) interaction in most aspects of life (Wariboko, 2020). This multilayered theological rationale undergirds and informs Pentecostal theologies - whether on faith (all things are possible for God; we believe), healing (God heals; we pray), or speaking in tongues (the Spirit provides the language; we speak). The concept of ‘spiritual warfare’ exemplifies this duality, emphasising the need to engage in prayer against evil spiritual forces to achieve victories in the physical sphere. This corresponds with

a ‘theo-logical’ approach and with what Amos Yong (2020) calls the ‘pneumatological imagination’ - a “Pentecostal social imaginary” that reflects how Pentecostals relate to God and the world (see also Gungor, 2025; and Kgatle, 2023).<sup>6</sup>

### ***3.2.3 A Pentecostal theology of leadership and peacebuilding***

What has been discussed so far provides a backdrop for delineating a Pentecostal theology of leadership. Theologies of Pentecostal leadership can take many forms, depending on historical contexts, denominational structures, and theological nuances. While some Pentecostal ecclesial bodies are episcopal and hierarchical, others are grassroots oriented. Yet, there is arguably a shared emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in leadership.

On the one hand, Pentecostals generally affirm and emphasise the importance of the Spirit in selecting, empowering, and sustaining leaders for God’s mission in the world). On the other hand, the Spirit’s involvement does not necessarily undermine or negate the value of formal training or human capabilities. The Pentecostal logic emphasises the need for dependence on the Spirit to accomplish spiritual work. Old Testament narratives of anointed prophets and kings, along with Spirit-filled Christologies (Luke 4:18; see Nel, 2020; Peppiatt, 2014), offer theological models for leadership and spiritual empowerment.

However, within the context of African Pentecostalism, Alex R. Mayfield (2018:94) highlights tensions between the rise of independent prophets and prominent “Men of God” on the one hand, and more democratic processes that stress the idea that “anyone can be anointed” on the other (see also Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

Deep within the Pentecostal emphasis on conversion, holiness, and transformation lies a theology of peace and reconciliation - with God and with fellow human beings. Reflecting on the ‘Korean Pentecost’ (1907–2009) and similar revival movements, Allan Anderson (2010:1) highlights how “the various revival movements began with a strong but individualistic peace and reconciliation theology”. In line with this rationale, Martin W.

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6 According to Yong, the term was initially used by the Catholic theologian Lucien Richards, OMI; see p. 152.

Mittelstadt (2010) shows how, from a Pentecostal perspective, the Luke–Acts narratives present a ‘gospel of peace’, where “Spirit-inspired witnesses consistently call prospective candidates to embrace God’s message of peace”. This calls for prophetic leadership that seeks ‘full gospel’ - not only for individual reconciliation with God but also for society at large, including grassroots communities and the political sphere (Alexander, 2002).

Consequently, Mittelstadt (2010) challenges Pentecostal leadership to adopt a peacemaking vision that reaches beyond one’s own position and power (Afolayan et al., 2018). Historically and contextually, however, Pentecostals have at times supported peace and, at other times, war and conflict (Yacob-Haliso & Iyanda, 2018).<sup>7</sup>

In a similar line of thought, from an African context, Kgatele (2024) connects spiritual and societal transformation and introduces the term ‘pneumatocracy’ to argue for a kind of Pentecostal leadership that is anchored in the rule of the Spirit while seeking to transform society (see also Yong, 2019). In other words, being filled with the Holy Spirit must translate into transforming communities. While acknowledging challenges associated with this model, such as the risk that anyone might claim to be empowered by the Spirit, a responsible and community-oriented pneumatocratic model of leadership can encompass the spiritual embeddedness of Pentecostal faith and the social responsibility to which prophetic Pentecostal leadership is called.

#### **4. Method**

The empirical material<sup>8</sup> on which we reflect in this chapter is based on eight semi-structured interviews and participatory observation conducted during various PaRC trainings<sup>9</sup> and programmes, a Pentecostal leaders’ conference,

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7 A number of contextual studies discuss how Pentecostals and evangelicals have engaged in reconciliation and peacemaking in practice. See, for example, Miti (2024) (South Africa); Tarusarira (2020) (Tanzania); Newberg (2010) (Israel/Palestine); Shannon (2024) (Northern Ireland); and Penner (2024) (Ukraine).

8 The empirical research was approved by SIKT, ref no 431433. Oral consent from the as obtained and recorded prior to conducting the interviews.

9 Occasions when key actors come together to report on project progress, learn from each other, and receive further equipping for peacebuilding efforts.

and visits to Classical Pentecostal churches and Pentecostal development organisations. The first author conducted the interviews - six in English and two with the assistance of interpreters and a transcriber. The interviewees were identified through the PMU network and by using a snowball sampling method.

To reflect the theoretical assumption that peacebuilding efforts must be undertaken at all levels of society (Lederach, 1997; Baron & Maponya, 2020), we aimed to gather a range of voices, from grassroots actors to those in high office. We conducted content analysis, manually coded the material, and identified emerging themes.

The researcher who carried out the interviews and observations is a Swedish Pentecostal - an insider in terms of faith, but an outsider with respect to culture and language. While limited cultural and linguistic knowledge posed a significant challenge in the Ethiopian context, sharing Pentecostal identity proved helpful in building trust and relationships.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Key findings

In this section, we present the findings from the interviews and observations, organised around the following themes: the relation between peacebuilding and politics; what is implied in imagining a different reality; the interplay between the spiritual and the secular; and a call to action.

### 5.1 *Peacebuilding, politics, and leadership*

All interviewees stated that religious leaders are under pressure to submit to political structures and control. As one interviewee put it: “*the government has infiltrated the religious institutions*” (Interviewee B). Several participants indicated that such submission to political authorities stemmed from fear, complacency, or the pursuit of status and positions. Nonetheless, they clearly affirmed that religious leaders must demonstrate boldness and speak out against societal injustices.

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10 The two co-authors of this chapter represent different denominations and cultural backgrounds. In our view, this diversity and their complementary perspectives contributed to a richer analysis of the interview material.

In this one year, what I have noticed is that pastors are afraid of these politicians. They believe the truth, but do not go in bold to challenge politics. But you know, the church MUST play that role (Interviewee C).

When reflecting on their motivation to engage in peacebuilding, all interviewees spoke of a divine, personal calling: “*God put me in a position... and can help me to be a voice in the loudness of confusion*” (Interviewee D), while another shared:

What my internal spirit is telling me is that I need to be qualified towards this. ...I want to craft myself toward that (Interviewee E).

This sense of calling - combined with practical experience and growing knowledge of peacebuilding - appears to motivate these individuals to influence other leaders and shift their focus. As one interviewee, a theologian involved in leadership training and church planting, explained: “*You know, with training and different activities, we change autocratic leadership to servant leadership*” (Interviewee C). According to this interviewee, autocratic leadership tends to overlook the peacebuilding potential found at the grassroots level. In contrast, a servant leader, by engaging directly with the community, is better positioned to recognise and harness this potential for peacebuilding.

## 5.2 *Imagining another future*

According to some interviewees, certain identity markers - such as ethnicity, geography, or religion - carry greater potential for peacebuilding.

And, you know, it is my birthplace, so I know the leadership and the families of those fighters who are fighting against the government... I know two languages so, I can influence Amharic speaking people, and Oromo speaking people also (Interviewee E).

Several interviewees emphasised faith and the Bible as key resources for peacebuilding, while also recognising that, given the complexity of peacebuilding, secular and academic knowledge holds significant value. As one interviewee notes: “*I learned from various scholars on conflict, like John Paul Lederach... They can give you perspective*” (Interviewee D). A number of interviewees stressed the importance of adopting a broad and comprehensive

approach to peace. For example, they noted that focusing solely on conflict resolution may have limited impact:

In addition, one thing that we missed during the implementation process is that we didn't incorporate any kind of humanitarian activities. (Interviewee B).

Despite numerous ethnic, religious, historical, and political obstacles to peace, the interviewees remain committed to their peacebuilding efforts - within and beyond the church. Such engagement requires a resilient and imaginative mindset:

In peace building, we shouldn't stop speaking, teaching and acting on it... this is a very, very important principle ... there is a saying in Amharic: A drop of water can really penetrate a big rock (Interviewee C).

### 5.3 *The spiritual and the secular*

Our interviewees described what they referred to as a biblical worldview, within which conflict is primarily attributed to the influence of the devil or evil spirits. According to one participant, the limitation of 'secular' peacebuilding lies in its lack of spiritual discernment:

You cannot solve spiritual problems with material things, with carnal things. There are principalities, there are powers, and one must really understand that and seek for the wisdom of God, the humility of God. (Interviewee D).

The interviewee does not advocate for a purely spiritual perspective but emphasises the complementarity of secular and academic knowledge in the pursuit of peace.

The Pentecostal spirituality of the interviewees includes experiences of worship, speaking in tongues, and prophetic utterances. God is seen as someone who guides them in different ways, including through dreams:

I think it's God's grace, the gift that God gave me. I see a dream before something happens... And I pray a lot about that dream and after some time I tell another person...It needs prayer. And mostly, it happens (Interviewee A).

The interviews reveal a perceived tension between the spiritual and secular realms, resulting in a dualism that some interviewees reject. As one interviewee explained:

...you will be considered as a good and devoted Christian if you spend all night and the day in the church compound. And if you are running your own business or if you are a politician, you are not born-again Christian (Interviewee E).

While criticising the church for creating a false dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular, the interviewee also highlights the limitations of knowledge that lacks spiritual insight and contextual sensitivity:

Having biblical knowledge and secular knowledge is so important. Sometimes, I invite PhD-holders from the nearby universities...they preach *von oben* [from above] and it will be challenging for them to localise. And it is difficult for them to bring in the spiritual aspect of life (Interviewee E).

#### 5.4 *A call to action*

In reflecting on ideal leadership, some interviewees pointed to the example of Christ, emphasising that Christlike leadership must be taught and embodied in practice. As one interviewee explained:

We often forget the methodology that he did. Visiting the poor, crying with those people who hurt, crossing the boundaries, reaching out. These are methodologies (Interviewee D).

Moreover, the interviewees expressed the view that leaders should adopt a more holistic understanding of the church's identity and mission - one in which peacebuilding is not an added responsibility, but a natural outworking of the church's mission:

...my dream is for my leaders to engage and to be a voice for the voiceless, to call for justice, because that's the mandate of the pastor, the church, the evangelist. Of course we are responsible to spread the Gospel, plant a church and ... parallelly the church leaders should ask for justice and mobilize the community for peaceful co-existence and living together. I want to see the pastors standing on the pulpit and teach the church members about peacebuilding (Interviewee F).

These interviewees prioritise a model of servant leadership that fosters peace and reconciliation. At a peace conference attended by the lead author, pastors from a conflict-ridden area expressed feelings of abandonment by the rest of the denomination. The situation was perceived by the observer as volatile. A turning point occurred when a highly respected, older leader embodied reconciliation by kneeling before his younger colleagues, asking for forgiveness, and demonstrating his willingness to attend to their needs.

The interviewees were observed mediating between conflicting parties - within and outside the church; visiting leaders of other denominations and religions, such as Orthodox fathers, Muslim imams, and traditional leaders, to establish relationships; seeking out rebel youth in the forests in an attempt to reunite them with their families; and offering trauma healing in conflict zones. They further explained that, in undertaking these activities, they aimed to embody the very qualities that they wished to see in church leaders.

Active engagement in peacebuilding has made these interviewees acutely aware of the church's shortcomings and those of its leadership. They conveyed the view that, in order to address tensions in society, the church requires leaders who are trusted, well-connected, and who possess an understanding of the current political landscape and the complexities of peacebuilding.

Interviewees also spoke of the need for resilient hope and the capacity to imagine a different future. When navigating various worldviews, they emphasise the importance of spiritual discernment and belief in divine encounters, where God is seen as directly involved. Some expressed a desire to move beyond a dualistic understanding of spiritual and secular realms towards a more holistic perspective that embraces both dimensions.

Others warned against political alignment that might compromise the prophetic witness of the church and its leaders. They described themselves as motivated by a prophetic calling, prompting them to reimagine what a leader should be and do. Christlike character and action were cited, along with the call for a fuller, more holistic theology - one in which peacebuilding becomes a central theme, to be taught in Bible colleges, preached from the pulpit, and enacted in practice.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 *Tension between prophetic role and subjection to politics*

Lederach (1997:42) asserts that the position of middle-level leaders does not depend on political or military power, nor are such leaders typically interested in acquiring it. This independence contributes to the trust that they enjoy from grassroots communities as well as from top-level leadership. In contrast, our interviewees express concern about religious leaders who are constrained by, and submit to, political authorities. According to these interviewees, when religious leaders align themselves with party politics, they compromise their integrity and undermine public trust. By highlighting the dangers of political submission and affirming the importance of maintaining integrity, serving the people, and giving voice to the voiceless, the interviewees offer a critique and a call for religious leaders to reclaim their prophetic role.

A critical stance towards political engagement is not unfamiliar within Pentecostalism. Given that many of our interviewees belong to Classical Pentecostal churches, one might ask whether their critique stems from an eschatological worldview that de-emphasises political involvement. However, our empirical material suggests otherwise.

There are numerous global examples of Pentecostal politicians, and Amos Yong (2010) helpfully describes the complex “apolitical-political characterization of pentecostalism”, whereby Pentecostals engage politically, albeit often in indirect ways. Yong argues that through “prophetic politics”, Pentecostal apolitical rhetoric may actually function as a prophetic critique of the existing political order - expressed through prayer, counter-political stances, or counter-cultural church communities. Drawing on examples from Malawi, he notes that “young Malawian Pentecostal preachers are not political in any conventional sense. However, their actions are not simply apolitical or non-political, but are also an indirect yet prophetic challenge to the political status quo” (Yong, 2010).

Returning to the Ethiopian context, some interviewees report experiencing tensions between loyalty and opportunity, even to the point where “pastors are afraid of these politicians” when, in fact, they should boldly challenge

the political establishment “to bring change in the society” (Interviewee C). In other words, religious leaders occupy a unique position: they have the potential to act as prophetic voices, to lead with courage, and to drive social transformation - but only if they are willing to accept the cost of such leadership.

Using Kgatle’s (2024) concept of ‘pneumatocracy’, Pentecostal leaders can be understood as bearing a dual responsibility: to engage actively in the world while being led by the Spirit.

## *6.2 Tension between social reality and prophetic imagination*

Lederach argues that peacebuilding must be sustained by a moral imagination - the capacity to envision and bring into existence that which does not yet exist, but is grounded in the challenges of the real world (Lederach, 2005:LX). Peacebuilding unfolds within the tension between a reality marked by conflict and division, and a vision of restored and healed relationships. Our interviewees reflect on this same tension, while also voicing frustration at the church’s perceived failure to catalyse meaningful change. Lederach (2005) and Baron and Maponya (2020) highlight the need not only to reimagine the context - from one shaped by conflict to one characterised by reconciliation - but also to re-envision the role of peace actors, including churches and their leaders, as those responding to a (divine) call to transform their context.

This ‘prophetic imagination’ aligns with a Pentecostal epistemology, spirituality, and theology - one that embraces the possibility of the impossible and challenges leaders to perceive, by faith and through the eyes of the Spirit, a reality beyond present conditions. It calls for vision, innovation, and the courage to pursue peace. Such believing and imagining do not negate human initiative; rather, faith and action work in tandem, trusting that God, by the Spirit, acts through God’s people and the church.

## *6.3 Tension between the spiritual and the secular*

As noted above with reference to Yong (2010), the church may be tempted to form ‘prophetic’ counter-cultural communities to such an extent that they risk societal withdrawal. Several interviewees described the difficulty of

navigating a worldview that is simultaneously physical and spiritual, which often appears to demand a unilateral stance. On one hand, the church may attribute all societal ills to spiritual forces, prescribing prayer, worship, preaching, and conversion as the sole remedies. On the other, a purely human or secular response to social issues is also perceived as one-sided and inadequate.

This tension, as expressed in the interviews, echoes what Nimi Wariboko (2020) calls a 'dialogical imagination': a theological framework that embraces a dualistic worldview and requires decision-making that engages the spiritual and physical realm. This tension reflects a wide Pentecostal theological spectrum. As our material illustrates, some Pentecostals are inclined to address political and societal challenges solely through spiritual means, while others prefer to operate within 'secular' development paradigms. Taking Pentecostal spirituality seriously, one must ask to what extent Ethiopian Pentecostals can integrate these perspectives - remaining faithful to their spiritual identity and drawing on spiritual resources, while also embracing effective and proven approaches to peacebuilding.

#### *6.4 Re-imagining the social and the spiritual*

Compared to the Pentecostal focus groups interviewed by Josefsson and Wenell (2020), the group of interviewees whom we encountered were more directly engaged in peacebuilding, within and beyond the church. In order to carry out their programmes and activities, they needed to familiarise themselves with laws and regulations related to peacebuilding and development. They also had to cross ethnic and religious divides, interacting with Orthodox, Muslim, and traditional believers, and engage in mutual learning around the theme of peace. These interviewees have experience in building relationships across all levels of society, reflecting Lederach's description of middle-level leaders who are able to traverse horizontal divides.

The interviewees viewed peacebuilding as a vocation and as an endeavour that requires secular knowledge. In this regard, they spoke of efforts to deepen their understanding by reading academic literature or sourcing material online. The integration of what is perceived as secular knowledge

with their spiritual resources appears to enrich their understanding of how the church should engage in peacebuilding and clarify its mission - as a body divinely called to engage in context - and, in turn, reimagine what leadership should look like, what should be preached, and how one should act.

This reimagination carries a distinctly prophetic tone, especially when the interviewees call on leaders to speak for justice, promote reconciliation across ethnic divisions, and resist the temptation to align with those who misuse power. As argued earlier, imagination is theological in nature: it involves discerning God's work in context and responding to divine initiative. Through their engagement in peacebuilding as a response to God's call, the interviewees appear to find their prophetic voice - a voice that is also critical of the blind spots within their own communities.

Their prophetic reimagination of Pentecostal communities and leadership includes a more holistic understanding of mission and a vision of servant leadership. This reimagination of the church's role and of prophetic, servant leadership represents a contribution to peacebuilding and an expansion of Pentecostal theology itself.

The interviewees articulated a reimagined understanding of the role of the church and its leaders. It is therefore pertinent to ask whether their theology remains recognisably Pentecostal. As previously noted, although Pentecostalism encompasses a wide range of expressions, it may be argued that it retains a common theological logic - or a shared Pentecostal DNA. The model of peacebuilding that emerges from our empirical material is fundamentally holistic in a Pentecostal sense. While the interviewees express faith in God's transformative power, there seems to be a shift in their focus from the individual to the larger society (cf. Anderson, 2010; Kgatle, 2024). Their view of social engagement is not a typical Classical Pentecostal one, as they encourage social involvement, nor does it emphasise God's reign in the form of dominion theologies, which is often the case in neo-Pentecostal circles. Instead, they refer to an "already but not yet" (Brueggemann, 1978). What is distinctly Pentecostal is the way that they navigate their engagement, presupposing a physical-spiritual interaction. They still believe in spiritual warfare and that prayer, worship, and personal encounters

are important, but they emphasise the significance of complementary perspectives in order to be truly holistic.

In terms of approaches to leadership and perceptions of leadership roles, our interviewees appeared to favour servant leadership over the “strong man” type of leaders. For example, they mentioned democratic leadership. Consequently, the leaders whom we engaged with did not conform to the neo-Pentecostal stereotype of ‘big Men of God’ (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013). At the same time, they expressed scepticism towards politically elected leaders and referred to Christlike leaders as an ideal. A way to summarise their ideal view of leadership could perhaps be the anointed, Christlike, servant leader.

Anderson (2010) argues that at the heart of Pentecostal conviction lies a theology of peace. When our interviewees articulate their understanding of peace and their engagement in peacebuilding, they call for prophetic leadership that seeks a ‘full gospel’ peace – one that encompasses societal and political transformation as well as personal reconciliation with God (Mittlestad, 2010, Alexander, 2002). We contend that the peacebuilders we interviewed diverge from stereotypical portrayals of Classical Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals, yet they unmistakably embody Pentecostal DNA. Their perspectives affirm and expand the diversity of positions within global Pentecostalism, offering valuable insights into the ways Pentecostal theology, leadership, and peacebuilding intersect in the Ethiopian context.

## **7. Conclusion**

In light of the discussion above, our central thesis affirms that engagement in peacebuilding within the Ethiopian Pentecostal context is sustained by Pentecostal theologies that give rise to a particular, contextual reimagination of the role of religious leaders. This synthesis of Pentecostal theology and peacebuilding practice is distinctly contextual, drawing upon secular theories and a holistic worldview. Consequently, our analysis contributes a nuanced understanding of contemporary Pentecostalism in Ethiopia, particularly in relation to its active involvement in peacebuilding.

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