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### **The Prosperity Gospel in the African Diaspora: Unethical Theology or Gospel in Context?<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract:

The prosperity gospel in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Hosanna Chapel, Helsinki, Finland, builds primarily on African indigenous worldviews rather than serving as a theological justification for capitalism. It is a contextual African interpretation of the gospel in a situation of tension between the expectations of extended families back home, those of the new society in which the immigrants find themselves, and the church. The African experience and heritage come to the fore especially in the strong emphasis placed on interpersonal relations, particularly with family members and God, as an essential part of prosperity. Naïve faith in the bliss of equal opportunities within capitalism is moderated by differentiation between realistic economic expectations and the special blessings that are endowed upon believers. When condemning the prosperity gospel wholesale, there is the risk of misinterpreting non-Western theologies and of morally castigating the weakest for their attempts to survive global capitalism instead of combating its oppressive structures.

Keywords: African Christianity, prosperity gospel, religion and economy, African diaspora churches

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This article explores the nature and effects of the prosperity gospel in the Hosanna Chapel congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)<sup>2</sup> in Helsinki, Finland. In its early years in Nigeria, from the 1950s until the 1980s, the RCCG was suspicious of Mammon, and the prosperity gospel was only introduced to the teaching of the church with the intention of attracting a middle class and international constituency in addition to the poor, predominantly Yoruba members who had previously comprised the bulk of the congregation.<sup>3</sup> Against this background, it is no wonder that in addition to overt, straightforward prosperity preaching, there are further layers to RCCG Helsinki thinking.<sup>4</sup>

The prosperity gospel and its siblings, or possibly just its different dimensions, go under various names and catchwords: faith gospel, gospel of abundance, health and wealth gospel – name it and claim it. All contain slightly different connotations but what all have in common is that God’s blessings in this life are regarded as the outcomes of living faith.<sup>5</sup> Established historical churches originating in the West, however, have generally reacted negatively to the prosperity gospel, considering that while God is the giver of all good things, faith is no guarantee of success in this life,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On RCCG history see Olufunke Adeboye, “‘Arrowhead’ of Nigerian Pentecostalism: The Redeemed Christian Church of God 1952-2005”, *Pneuma* 29 (2007), 24-58 and on theology see Stephan Hunt, “‘A Church for All Nations’: The Redeemed Christian Church of God”, *Pneuma* 24/2 (2002), 185-204., 191-197, on RCCG in general see Asonzeh Ukah, *The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Nigeria: Local Identities and Global Processes in Nigerian Pentecostalism*, PhD diss., University of Bayreuth. Vis-à-vis the debate as to whether African Christian diaspora should be studied against the European or the African context I have chosen a mediating line: the context of the immigrants. Because the vast majority of the members of the congregation studied are African immigrants in Europe, their specific context of immigration and interchange between Europe and Africa provides the most relevant background. On this discussion see Gerrie ter Haar, *African Christians in Europe*, Nairobi: Acton 2001, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Adeboye, 37; Ukah, 183-186. See also Afe Adogame “Contesting the Ambivalences of Modernity in a Global Context: The Redeemed Christian Church of God, North America”, *Studies in World Christianity* 10/1 (2004), 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> See Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, 255 on accusations of shallowness in relation to the prosperity gospel.

<sup>5</sup> On the background and content see e.g. Paul Gifford “The Complex Provenance of Some Elements of African Pentecostal Theology”, in André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (eds.), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001, 62-65; Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2004, 47-48; in the African context see Kalu, 255-263.

<sup>6</sup> On material and spiritual ways of understanding salvation see Miroslav Volf, “Materiality of Salvation: An Investigation in the Soteriologies of Liberation and Pentecostal Theologies”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26/3 (1989), 447-467. According to Volf, mainstream Protestantism belongs to the spiritual line of thought whereas the “health and wealth gospel” is material (p. 457).

rather, a Christian's life is full of temptations and tribulations. Thus, the term 'prosperity gospel' is often used in a derogatory sense, thereby labelling it as bad theology.

The latter, however, is not the intention in this article which, on the contrary, open-mindedly explores one case where the prosperity gospel is preached. The aim here is to nuance the prosperity gospel in African Christianity through the example of Helsinki's Hosanna Chapel, and assess it as contextual theology. The article begins by introducing the church in Helsinki and its teachings about success. This is followed by an exploration of theological dimensions – often not immediately apparent – that do not fit frequently simplistic portrayals of the prosperity gospel, thereby raising and discussing the question of why its surface level theology is so success-oriented. Finally, an ethical analysis of the Hosanna Chapel prosperity gospel closes discussion.

I visited Hosanna Chapel occasionally over the course of about three years and, during April and May 2010, I attended the services more regularly, conducted some group interviews and audio-recorded sermons. I also had a discussion of RCCG theology with its leading pastor along with a group of Finns participating in a missionary training course where both of us were visiting as lecturers. This proved to be valuable because, during the session, the leading pastor elaborated his theological ideas in a lively and multi-faceted debate. In addition to acquainting myself with Hosanna Chapel, I have observed more than half a dozen other African-instituted Christian communities in Helsinki, as well as the RCCG in Copenhagen and Malmö/Rosengård (Sweden), some of them several times. These other churches and congregations serve as points of comparison and assist in situating Hosanna Chapel in its broader context.

#### RCCG Hosanna Chapel in Helsinki

Twenty-five years ago when I left Helsinki for Tanzania, there were no African-instituted churches in Helsinki, and the whole idea seemed distant and improbable. At that time the number of African immigrants was very low, and African activity in setting up new ecclesiastic structures in Europe still went largely unnoticed. Today, there are about a dozen churches and Christian worshipping

communities led by Africans in the city of Helsinki alone. Some of them are completely independent congregations; others belong to multinational denominations led from Africa; while yet others are more or less loosely connected to Finnish free churches. Most of these communities are very small whereas some may gather almost two hundred worshippers every Sunday which, in Helsinki, is considerable in almost any church of any denomination. The language policies of different churches vary. Some use only one language such as Amharic or English whereas many are effectively bilingual. The Kimbanguist church is the most linguistically pluralist with up to six languages used in a single service; there is no translation and virtually no one masters all of them but most of the participants understand most of what is being said. Finnish seldom plays a major role in these churches, and mission efforts directed at Finns are mostly conducted in English.

Founded in 2001 as a small Bible study group led by Mark Etie, who has since become the leading pastor,<sup>7</sup> RCCG<sup>8</sup> Hosanna Chapel is one of the solely English-speaking churches, and also one that is actively willing to become genuinely international rather than only an African diaspora church.<sup>9</sup> In spite of this, the great majority of the churchgoers are of African background<sup>10</sup> and almost all ethnically Finnish congregants are women married to, or dating, an African immigrant. There are also a couple of non-African immigrants.<sup>11</sup> At the time of collecting the data, the number of participants at Sunday services was well over a hundred<sup>12</sup> though the church does not provide an exact number of members, something which fluctuates strongly; there are many newcomers and many leavers, due

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<sup>7</sup> Pekko Kähkönen, *Paikka, jossa toiveista tulee totta? Tutkimus uskonnollisen yhteisön saamista merkityksistä kristityn afrikkalaisen maahanmuuttajan elämässä Suomessa*, MTh thesis, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology 2011, 5.

<sup>8</sup> On the history, organization and faith of RCCG as a denomination see Ukah.

<sup>9</sup> This is visible, for example, in the fact that the church name, Hosanna Chapel, often is followed by words "for all nations". See e.g. flyer *Hosanna Chapel Special Events 2014*.

<sup>10</sup> Hosanna Chapel matches ter Haar's (*African Christians*, 12, 15) description of the general tendencies of churches launched by the African Christian diaspora in Europe: international, evangelical/charismatic and starting in African immigrant circles.

<sup>11</sup> The situation thus resembles that of Britain, the Netherlands and Germany according to the article by Richard Burges, Kim Knibbe and Anna Quaas, *Nigerian-Initiated Pentecostal Churches as a Social Force in Europe: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God*, *PentecoStudies* 9/1 (2010), 109-110. There is a lot of soul-searching in the RCCG on how to reach the post-Christian West to attract indigenous Europeans as well. See e.g. Babatunde Adebibu *Storytelling: An Effective Communication Appeal in Preaching: A Guide to Reach the Postmoderns*. S.l.: Wisdom Summit 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded.

mainly to the fluidity of the diaspora.<sup>13</sup> Throughout its history of thirteen years, the RCCG Hosanna Chapel has been led by Rev. Mark Etie who is of Nigerian background. The structure of the church is such that each member has the opportunity of achieving responsibility either in the various task groups or in the very widely understood ministry.<sup>14</sup> The RCCG church in Helsinki has also launched a number of congregations in various smaller Finnish towns following the strongly expansionist principles of the denomination;<sup>15</sup> more broadly, Hosanna Chapel is linked to the international network of the RCCG whose headquarters are located in Nigeria. While a certain degree of independence and variation is allowed, Hosanna Chapel's teaching and programs are relatively tightly bound to the international network through personal communication, various programs and policies, publications and international gatherings.

Hosanna Chapel is the first African-instituted church in Finland that has acquired premises of its own after years of existing in rented locations around Helsinki, leading to more than half a dozen moves.<sup>16</sup> The church hall is large enough to seat about two hundred worshippers, which was double the capacity needed when acquiring it but which, in 2015, leaves very few seats empty.<sup>17</sup> The premises are situated in a semi-industrial block along with a gym and the offices of various commercial companies, near the city centre, with a metro station and good bus connections just next door, and an abundance of parking on Sundays, all the offices being empty. The locality is in the process of a rather swift transformation from industrial zoning into respectable residential area.

As stated above, the churchgoers are overwhelmingly African in origin, with a small number of mostly female Finns who have found their spouses among the congregants. However, the church also

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<sup>13</sup> Group interview with congregants 2010/05/09, recorded.

<sup>14</sup> See Ukah, 126-127.

<sup>15</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded; Kähkönen, 5. On the principles and implementation, see e.g. Adogame, 30-32; Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2008, 354-357.

<sup>16</sup> This is a common experience for these churches in Europe. See ter Haar, *African Christians*, 52. See also Adogame, 35.

<sup>17</sup> See Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. Observations between 2008 and 2014, Kähkönen, 4.

aspires to gaining more members of European and Finnish origin<sup>18</sup> and every Sunday there are a number of newcomers who are made very welcome. The worshipers are overwhelmingly youngish adults, with a good number of small children and very few teenagers or pensioners; men are in a slight majority. This accurately reflects the demographic structure of the greatest field of recruitment: most of the African immigrants, many of them male, arrive in Finland as young adults, and few have been resident long enough to grow old or raise children to their teens. A small number of Muslim Somalis have been resident in Helsinki since the early 1990s but, otherwise, the African population in Helsinki was almost non-existent as late as the end of the '90s.

The social and economic standing of the congregants correlates quite strongly with the number of years lived in the country. Longer-term residents have mostly learned Finnish and are more likely to have a job. Meanwhile, as extension of a residence permit usually depends on employment, those who do not manage to learn the language or find work or a place to study often have to leave Finland.<sup>19</sup> Many members are struggling economically as students while others work extremely long hours in order to earn the money to support their relatives in Africa.<sup>20</sup> Newcomers find themselves in difficulties as they try to settle into a climatically harsh country – both in terms of physical and mental conditions, as Finland exhibits a notable degree of racism and a certain tradition of turning its back on outsiders. Immigration issues are a constant topic in prayers, testimonies, sermons and discussions, partly due to restrictive Finnish immigration policies,<sup>21</sup> thereby demonstrating that these provide one of the greatest sources of insecurity in the lives of the congregants.

The Sunday services have a rather fixed schedule which includes songs of worship accompanied by very loud electric music performed by the resident band and singing group; praying both led by the pastors and conducted independently – often in tongues; the sermon; the offering; blessing the

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<sup>18</sup> See website Hosanna Chapel: About Us. <http://www.rccgfinland.com/site/aboutus.php?linkid=1> Referred to 2010/05/20.

<sup>19</sup> Gifford (*Ghana's New Christianity*, 57) describes how in a Ghanaian charismatic church, there are indications that the less successful do not have the right of belonging, there being no immigration officials to do the dirty work of pruning them out.

<sup>20</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Hosanna Chapel Sunday service 2014-03-02: prayers, testimonies and discussions.

children (which is a Hosanna Chapel specialty); and congregational announcements. Other occasional parts of the services are the Lord's Supper, testimonies, plays or dances, musical performances and so on.<sup>22</sup>

### The RCCG on Success

The slogan of Hosanna Chapel is "where the expectations become manifestations".<sup>23</sup> Even if Pastor Mark emphasizes that success is only one dimension of the church's message along with many additional elements,<sup>24</sup> the subject of success resurfaces in virtually every sermon and also in many other parts of the services. Yet, despite the strong presence of the topic in Helsinki, the impression is that the Copenhagen RCCG is even more oriented to success, exhibiting a clearer reference to its financial aspect than in Helsinki with seminars like "Financial Dominion"<sup>25</sup> or a sermon on "the overcomer's trade secret".<sup>26</sup> Hosanna Chapel, on the other hand, tends to approach success less exclusively in terms of money. In 2014, of the events organized by the congregation, only one, a seminar named "Change for Success" was a directly prosperity-gospel type presentation. The biggest congregational event with the grandiose name "LIFT International Conference 2014" concentrated more on marriage and mental well-being than the acquisition of wealth.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Pastor Mark in Helsinki also tends to emphasize other dimensions of successful life than money, such as a good marriage, an approach which is visible in practical ways in many of the congregation's activities.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The content of the services appear in the Hosanna Chapel weekly bulletins, available at each service. I have a collection of a substantial number of them.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the website Hosanna Chapel: About Us, and the cover of each weekly bulletin. On the RCCG General Overseer's teaching on prosperity see Ukah, 183-194. On how RCCG attitudes to prosperity changed after the succession of the second (and present) General Overseer, Enoch A. Adeboye see Ruth Marshall *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009, 74-75, 180.

<sup>24</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded.

<sup>25</sup> Flyer "Financial Dominion 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> November 2009", RCCG Jesus Centre, Copenhagen.

<sup>26</sup> Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18<sup>th</sup> October 2009, fieldwork diary.

<sup>27</sup> Flyer *Hosanna Chapel Special Events 2014*.

<sup>28</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. On wealth needing to be understood in a Ghanaian context more widely than only finances see Karen Lauterbach, "Wealth and Worth: Pastorship and Neo-Pentecostalism in Kumasi", *Ghana Studies* 9 (2006), 93-94, 107.

In the sermons and much of Pastor Mark's speech, RCCG teaching about prosperity and success sounds simplistic and straightforward:

So, I believe that church is about doing good, improving people's life. There is no need for a church if people are going to remain the same, there is no change. So, we believe in prosperity and in blessing because that is the will of God from the Bible.<sup>29</sup>

What is clear is that a born-again Christian lives a life directed towards pleasing God, with the result that God favours the believer and grants her his blessings – a notion that also entails the idea that true faith always results in actions pleasing to God. If good works are missing, faith is also missing; faith is thus not primarily an intellectual attitude but rather the basis of all Christian living.<sup>30</sup>

This issue of blessings, God's favour, success, prosperity, or whatever expressions are used to describe the various dimensions of this phenomenon, is central to the Hosanna Chapel understanding of the Christian message. In his Easter sermon Pastor Mark raises the three dimensions of deliverance: firstly, from the curse of poverty; secondly, from the curse of sickness; and lastly from the curse of death.<sup>31</sup> Raising this message to central position on one of the most important Sundays of the year cannot be a coincidence. Another dimension of success, constantly surfacing in the congregants' testimonies, is success in immigration issues, wherein tropes of

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<sup>29</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. See also Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya*, London: C. Hurst & Co 2009, 112-115.

<sup>30</sup> "[African Christians] take the church issues very, very serious. They pray a lot. They try to practice Christianity seriously - as much as they can. There is serious faith in God... Christian faith here [in Finland] is not as passionate as it is supposed to be. There is a lack of faith in God." Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. See also Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009 for comparison, fieldwork diary. RCCG official teaching emphasizes repentance and holy life (Ukah, 172, 176-178). Hunt (196-197) points out that the idea of prosperity and purity belonging together is an idea based on Igbo and Yoruba traditional cultures. This bringing together of Christian faith and African traditional values and worldviews is a dimension of African Christianity found both on the continent and in the diaspora, according to ter Haar, *African Christians*, 90-92. Cf. Jesse N.K. Mugambi, "Evangelistic and Charismatic Initiatives in Post-Colonial Africa" in Mika Vähäkangas & Andrew A. Kyomo (eds.), *Charismatic Renewal in Africa: Challenge for African Christianity*, Nairobi: Acton 2003, 121-124 who considers that charismatic Christianity in Africa is an importation and Gifford (*Ghana's New Christianity*, 108-109) who did not find the moral element in Ghanaian charismatic teaching (except in Otobil). RCCG, however, stresses its moral code even to the extent of being moralistic. See e.g. Ukah, 176-177.

<sup>31</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's sermon in RCCG Helsinki 4th April 2010, recorded.

miracles, spiritual battle and deliverance regularly appear.<sup>32</sup> This is not something which is downplayed by Pastor Mark, but as he is married to a Finnish citizen, it is also not an issue that is as personally pressing for him as for many of the congregants.

Another aspect of RCCG teachings lies in the dimension of ritual behaviour, adherence to which is thought to result in desired outcomes. The power of the word,<sup>33</sup> especially the word of the heavenly language, or glossolalia, seems to be very important. In some instances, the words appear to gain almost a magical character: the uttering in prayer of what one desires transforms expectations into manifestations.<sup>34</sup> This idea, of course, is not typical only to the RCCG, also being common in churches like the US-based Word of Faith; however, considering the idea of the power of the word in many African cultures, it is not surprising that this view has been adopted in the RCCG,<sup>35</sup> becoming especially potent when the words are uttered in tongues.<sup>36</sup> This is clearly demonstrated in Helsinki, where the collection contains an interesting element: the congregants raise their offering envelopes before they are taken to the basket at the front, and pray – mostly in tongues.<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to avoid the impression of *do ut des* thinking,<sup>38</sup> at least among some congregants. Pastor Mark's wording in the prayer dedicating the offerings to God, when the envelopes are still in everyone's hands, is often open to such a mechanistic interpretation. In this very ritual action, a good work (of giving an offering to the church) is combined with the word (preferably in tongues).<sup>39</sup> What is noteworthy is that there is no explicit, direct connection made between the giving of an offering and God's blessings in the

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<sup>32</sup> This was particularly visible in 2014-03-02 service that contained particularly many and long testimonies by the congregants.

<sup>33</sup> See Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 2003, 68; Kalu, 255.

<sup>34</sup> Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009, fieldwork diary. Thus also Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 52; Gifford, *Christianity, Politics*, 119 through Ghanaian and Kenyan examples.

<sup>35</sup> On Yoruba – RCCG original cultural background – *oriki* praises influencing Christian ideas of worship and power of word see Nimi Wariboko, "Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 38.

<sup>36</sup> On glossolalia's role in RCCG theology see Ukah, 172.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. a similar practice in a Ghanaian church, Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company 1967, 15. In the RCCG General Overseer's teaching this idea is clearly expressed: Ukah 2003, 189-190.

<sup>39</sup> Offering in several RCCG Helsinki services during April-May 2010, fieldwork diary.

sense of seed money or the like, in spite of such tendencies being found in the thought of RCCG leadership.<sup>40</sup> However, in the sermons or other speeches and songs, a mechanistic notion of offering money in order to reap great amounts of it in return does not come up. As the idea of “seed money” is part of RCCG standard teaching at an international level,<sup>41</sup> one can thus conclude that Hosanna Chapel follows the RCCG official prosperity gospel teaching on this point but does not do so with much emphasis, though it has to be said that even the RCCG official prosperity gospel is balanced by an increasing developmental approach to poverty in the African continent.<sup>42</sup>

What is striking in the RCCG manner of praying for (or with/through) the offering is that it is performed before the collection itself, each Christian holding his offering in his hands. This is a departure from the traditional ecclesiastic custom of praying for the offering after it has been collected, and a variation that gives a glimpse of the individualising tendency within the church. It is probably not a coincidence that the individualising dimension relates to money because money can be seen as the grand symbol of individualist consumer society,<sup>43</sup> with its pursuit prompting major individualist competitive ventures. At the same time, however, money serves as a factor reconnecting the immigrants to their communities through the monthly sums they remit to their extended families. A similar oscillation between individuality and community is visible during the offering in that the individual gives and prays yet the offering becomes communal through the very act of collecting it. One may propose that this church not only serves as a place where individual aspirations are catered to through the prosperity gospel but rather that it is a space in which the

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<sup>40</sup> See Ukah, 183 on the RCCG leadership’s teaching. On seed money in Africa, see, for example, Päivi Hasu, “Taivaan pankki antaa tuplakoron”, *Kehitys – Utveckling* 1 (2005), 50-53..

<sup>41</sup> Ukah, 189-190. This conception based on 2 Cor. 9:6 and Lk. 6: 38 sees that God is bound to give back once a Christian offers her funds to the religious community, preferably in a situation of financial trouble (see Mk. 12: 41-44). See e.g. Jonathan L. Walton, “Stop Worrying and Start Sowing! A Phenomenological Account of the Ethics of ‘Divine Investment’”, Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 107-129; Wariboko, 37-39; Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 61-70, 81. Not all prosperity gospel, however, subscribes to this, see Gerardo Marti, “‘I Determine My Harvest’: Risky Careers and Spirit-Guided Prosperity in Los Angeles”, Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 140-143.

<sup>42</sup> Wariboko, 52-53.

<sup>43</sup> See Birgit Meyer, “Commodities and the Power of Prayer: Pentecostal Attitudes towards Consumption in Contemporary Ghana”, *Development and Change* 29, 751-776 (1998), 756.

members are trained to navigate between the individualism needed for success in late capitalist society and the communalism needed for staying on good terms with the vital communities: the extended family back home and the possible nuclear family in Finland.<sup>44</sup>

Yet another dimension on the way to success is an unwavering faith. This was most dramatically expressed in Copenhagen even though the idea is also present in a less marked form in Helsinki. The Copenhagen pastor pointed out in a sermon that if you need a car and yet must walk in biting cold rain, you should not despair but rejoice, because if you have asked God for a car, you already have one in faith even though it is not yet physically present! Consequently, one should not give up when encountering difficulties and obstacles but rather continue to persevere, changing approaches if necessary and working hard. Desperation does not belong in the picture because the victory is already there even if not yet fully and materially realised.<sup>45</sup> While Pastor Mark also emphasizes obedience to God as a prerequisite for blessings, he does so in much more modest tones.<sup>46</sup>

Based on the discussion above, one can conclude that the RCCG Helsinki proclamation contains a straightforward and even simplistic version of the prosperity gospel that could invite accusations of materialism.<sup>47</sup> However, it does not contain many overt elements representing a mechanical interpretation of reaping God's blessings as a result of certain ritual or economic actions.

Furthermore, prosperity is not understood solely in economic terms. Finally, even if the prosperity gospel plays a prominent role in the proclamation, it is not considered the sole message of the

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<sup>44</sup> Meyer (763) points out how, in Ghana, Pentecostalism functions as a legitimizing factor in a person's opting for individualism and thereby facilitates his success in the market economy. In this case, however, the immigrants' issue is not a lack of individuation, because they are away from their families for lengthy periods, but rather how to nurture the relationship to the extended family back home. See also Adogame, 37-38; Hanciles, 300-301 on the immigrant churches as spaces of negotiation between one's background and present context and Kärkkäinen (2010, 5, 7) on Pentecostal balancing between individualism and communitarianism.

<sup>45</sup> Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009, fieldwork diary.

<sup>46</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. See also Gifford, Ghana's New Christianity, 71-72, 78 on similar ideas in Ghanaian charismatic churches. On the tension between already now / not yet in the blessings in Ghana and Kenya see Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 77-78; Gifford, *Christianity, Politics*, 125.

<sup>47</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "The Leaning Tower of Mission in a Postmodern Land": Ecumenical Reflections on Pentecostal Mission in the After-Edinburgh World. Paper read in Societas Oecumenica consultation in Belgrade, 28<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2010, 7 points out that Pentecostal theology has the danger of turning into materialism.

church. Therefore, in spite of the proclamation containing a relatively simplistic prosperity gospel, one should not label this church unwarrantedly under that banner – not, at least, if interpreting the prosperity gospel only in an American key. However, going beyond the surface, let us consider critiques of the prosperity gospel and see how the pastor himself understands his message, how the congregants interpret it, and how it functions in the lives of believers.

### Beyond Simplistic Success

One of criticisms of African charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity, particularly the prosperity gospel, concerns the way success and faith are connected with each other.<sup>48</sup> In highly corrupt countries, success often requires the right connections, the bending of rules and paying of bribes; sometimes embezzlement of public property. This is often locally seen as connected with the use of witchcraft.<sup>49</sup> Financial and political tycoons usually help each other and are also in a give-and-take relationship with religious leaders who are rewarded in the form of material benefits, either to themselves or to their churches; the financial and political big men, on the other hand, use the churches to legitimise their positions and actions. In such a situation, financial success does not often serve as proof of a living faith but rather of a dead conscience.<sup>50</sup> Does such criticism meet the target in the case of RCCG Helsinki?

In the past, Finland boasted one of the best rankings in the Transparency International corruption list. This was until the 2008-2011 scandal involving election financing revealed that money and politics are also intertwined in a very ugly way in the country, and that there is corruption in the upper layers of Finnish society – though whether the judicial system is able to sentence the culprits and whether the legislation is in a form that leaves space for corrupt activities are other questions. However, unlike in many African countries, the financial sector is not very closely controlled by the state, meaning that a successful business can easily be run without being connected and without

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<sup>48</sup> E.g. Mugambi (125-126) criticizes versions of the prosperity gospel that promise immediate returns.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Marshall, 185-190.

<sup>50</sup> Gifford, *Christianity, Politics*, 215-241. See also Robert D. Woodberry, "The Economic Consequences of Pentecostal Belief", *Transaction – Social Science and Modern Society* 44/1 (2006), 32.

getting involved in illegal or immoral actions. Furthermore, when corruption is concentrated in the highest levels of society, one must be extremely well connected to benefit from it. Those doors remain closed to most immigrants and other RCCG churchgoers, just as they do to any average Finnish citizen. Finally, though many of the congregants may nurture ideas of having their own business, those who are in the best financial positions tend to be employed and, in the job market, honesty is a highly appreciated virtue. Thus, making a connection between wealth and faith does not pose an ethical dilemma in this sense.

In Finland, the relationship between prosperity and faith propels a major credibility problem. How is it that ardently believing Africans are usually materially worse off than blatantly secular Finns? One of the explanations, also expressed in public, is that non-born-again rich people are actually miserable because wealth alone does not bring happiness.<sup>51</sup> Pastor Mark notes, for example, that “rich people without God are poor, godly people without money are also poor”,<sup>52</sup> and, obviously, Pastor Mark’s insistence that success should not be counted only in financial terms is related to this issue: success as a father/mother or a husband/wife also plays a central role for him.<sup>53</sup> The influence of societal structures is also taken into account, and the fact that Finnish society functions well further contributes to the success of its citizens. As Pastor Marks observes:

[Big pastors in Africa] also believe that one of the reasons why this part of the world is very rich is that the country is in order. The government governs well and we – personally I see a good thing here that the Finns are more honest than we Africans.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps the point of the prosperity gospel in the RCCG should be interpreted in terms of relative success when considering the context and the background. The goal may not be one of success in absolute financial terms but rather in relation to one’s chances in the society in which one lives. For

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<sup>51</sup> Pastor Abby Olushola’s sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009, fieldwork diary.

<sup>52</sup> Pastor Mark Etie’s discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded.

<sup>53</sup> Anja Nwose “*Elä oikein ja menesty*”, *Kirkko ja kaupunki* 25.01.2010.

<sup>54</sup> Pastor Mark Etie’s discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. This view partly reflects the line of thought dubbed the “excellence model” by Wariboko, 41-44.

instance, RCCG Helsinki congregants point out that for a believer there are also special blessings on top of an ordinary, smooth life, such as getting the monthly salary on time. A believer may expect these special blessings from God, unlike an unbeliever.<sup>55</sup> Thus, one could interpret this as claiming that the amount on the monthly payroll is spiritually less relevant than how God miraculously or surprisingly improves the situation of the believer. Furthermore, a closer observation of the relationship between success and faith in the RCCG demonstrates that it is not quite as straightforward as it first seems. While the interviewed congregants were strongly of the opinion that God's blessings to the believer materialize in this world and not only in the world to come, they emphasized that the effect of faith is not immediate in this regard. Rather, perseverance is required, as economic and other success-related fruits of the faith are available only in the long run.<sup>56</sup>

Still another clarifying dimension of the role of faith in success was the emphasis on the point that hopes of material gain do not create faith. If one decides to believe in God and follow Him only in order to reap financial blessings, those blessings will not be available, because that is not true faith. God blesses with prosperity only those who really believe in Him and love Him.<sup>57</sup> Thus, success is a fruit of true faith but not a legitimate reason for becoming a born-again Christian: by playing a believer, you cannot manipulate God. This view actually makes it questionable whether one should even speak of the prosperity gospel in this context because, with this clarification, the RCCG congregants' position approaches classical Christian ideas of God as the provider of all good things.

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<sup>55</sup> Group interview 2010/05/09, recorded. Thus also Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009, fieldwork diary. Compare to similar ideas in Ghana in Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 49, 154 and Zambia in Naomi Haynes "Pentecostalism and the Morality of Money: Prosperity, Inequality, and Religious Sociality in the Zambian Copperbelt", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012), 128-129. These views invalidate Machiado's criticism that the prosperity gospel is blind to societal inequalities, and views capitalism as a level playing field. Daisy L. Machiado, "Capitalism, Immigration and Prosperity Gospel", *Anglican Theological Review* 92/4 (2010), 729. While some versions of the prosperity gospel may be so, this cannot be proved in the Hosanna Chapel case. On the members developing nuanced interpretations of their situation on the basis of a simplified message see Douglas A. Hicks, "Prosperity, Theology, and Economy", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 243-244.

<sup>56</sup> Group interview 2010/04/29. This is a common view – also voiced by an African diaspora pastor in Holland (ter Haar, *African Christians*, 74) a Kenyan preacher (Gifford, *Christianity, Politics*, 119-120), and Zambian Copperbelt Pentecostals (Haynes, 126-127).

<sup>57</sup> Group interview 2010/05/09, recorded.

The notable difference, however, is that in much traditional Western theologising, this-worldly success was not considered as directly a result of one's faith but rather to belong to the order of Creation. Furthermore, prosperity in this world is very strongly pursued by spiritual means in the Hosanna Chapel congregation, unlike in traditional Western denominations.

Yet material success does not provide unequivocal proof of true faith because there is also a more worldly type of success which depends on ordinary skills and capabilities. Such success can actually turn into a curse if it leads people to forget God, Pastor Mark explains:

The reason [for lack of faith in the West] is that here the government takes good care of the people and so there is a trust in the government, in the job, in the health care, in everything, which is good [as such]. ...Big pastors, African pastors, they see Scandinavia or the Western society as societies that are victim of success, victims of success. And the church, the Bible, and they get it from there that the Western world has been so blessed by God and now because they are scientifically so advanced and technologically so advanced, they have separated themselves from God. So they say that the Western world is the victim of success and economic prosperity and science and technology.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, an important element in this theology of success is not only that of having more – be it wealth, health or good human relations – but also that one needs to be more. The outward growth in success is related to the inward process of becoming more, getting closer to God:

What I preach is, you know, change for a better tomorrow... And that is a message of faith. That is a message telling you that you can be better than who you are today, you can be better than where you are today. And you can get what you want in life by the grace of God if you pray and trust God and obey God. So the simple way to explain it is

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<sup>58</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. See also Josiah A. Bolarinwa, *The Redeemed Christian Church of God: Beliefs and Practices, Historical and Apologetic Analysis*. Lagos: Somerest Ventures.2009, 101-102. Cf. Meyer, 763-771.

that my message is change. I don't believe that I must remain where I am. I believe that I must get better in life... I believe that if I'm sick I can be healed, you know. If I am in need of something, I can get it...<sup>59</sup>

This idea of getting closer to God and thereby being “more”, which also leads to a greater fullness of life, closely resembles many of the so-called ethno-philosophical ideas about the structure of reality. The first of such sketches was Placide Tempels' *La philosophie bantoue*,<sup>60</sup> but it seems that ideas of this kind may have a much wider currency than just within Bantu cultures. According to Bénézet Bujo, African understanding of personality involves an idea of constant progress and growth. In this progress, the individual is thoroughly involved in the community so that it cannot actually be described as that of an individual, and yet it contains a great amount of the person's own striving.<sup>61</sup>

Another detail that hints at the connection between African conceptions of fullness of life and the Hosanna Chapel prosperity gospel is that between fertility and prosperity. This is implicit in the central role of marriage issues in the congregation and the blessing of children, both of which are evident at every service even though (or, perhaps, because) a good number of the congregants are (still) single. A more direct connection is also hinted at: in one service, Pastor Mark described a dream or vision of the previous night where an elderly woman known to him received a golden key from God. The pastor's interpretation was that it was a key to procreative powers which was not meant for the woman herself because she already had children and, in any case, was past

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<sup>59</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. See also General Overseer Adeboye in Adogame, 37 and Ukah, 184-185; website Hosanna Chapel: About us. Church growth is also counted as success in RCCG, but not mentioned in Helsinki interviews even if it was a clearly visible dimension of discourse there. See Nils Malmström, *How Do We Succeed as a Church in Sweden... an African Response*. Paper read in the World Alliance for Pentecostal Theological Education Consultation in Stockholm, 24<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2010, 10. The message of success through faith is very much in line with Woodberry's (35) general remark that Pentecostalism is more likely to produce positive economic results in deprived contexts rather than in affluent ones. Cf. Gifford *Ghana's New Christianity*, 159. Ter Haar (*African Christians*, 89-90) points out that in the African Christian diaspora one often sees the connection between spiritual and material prosperity. On the holistic nature of prosperity and salvation in African Pentecostalism see Kalu, 213, 255-263. This wider perspective is not only limited to Africa, see Walton, 123-124. Compare Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 49, 50-51.

<sup>60</sup> Placide Tempels, *La philosophie bantoue*, Elisabethville, Belgian Congo: Lovania 1945.

<sup>61</sup> Bujo, 80, 114-118. On the multifaceted nature of the concept of prosperity in Zambia see Haynes, 126.

childbearing age. Rather, it was meant for someone in the church. What followed was spirited prayer, both by men and women,<sup>62</sup> aimed at acquiring the key, and one could clearly see an oscillation between praying for fertility and for success in general. The linking of fertility and fullness of life is almost a *commune bonum* of African cultures.<sup>63</sup>

When remembering that the idea of success in RCCG Helsinki also contains the dimension of human relations, one may conclude that the way prosperity and success are interpreted is probably strongly influenced by understandings of good life in the pastor's and the congregants' cultures. Therefore, prosperity and success should be read as shorthand expressions for African yearning for fullness of life.<sup>64</sup> It seems that while the RCCG phraseology is the same, or at least similar, to Western theologies of success, lumping these two together may lead to misinterpretation of the RCCG Helsinki message. Therefore, gleaned the expression from Naomi Haynes, RCCG Helsinki could be considered to represent a "limited prosperity gospel"<sup>65</sup> or perhaps one modified by African thought. Simply reading Hosanna Chapel theology through American lenses would lead to a major misinterpretation of the nature of its theology. Despite its being played out against the backdrop of capitalism, its underlying set of values can rather be found in African indigenous worldviews and it can be seen as a contextual corrective to predominantly transcendently-oriented Western missionary theology.<sup>66</sup>

## On the Success of Success

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<sup>62</sup> Sunday service 2014-03-02.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Vincent Mulago, *Un visage africain du christianisme: L'union vitale bantu face à l'unité vitale ecclesiale*. Paris: Présence Africaine 1965.

<sup>64</sup> Ukah (187) points out that the Yoruba word *olosi* also used in RCCG teaching, means both wealthy and honorable, thus making reference not only to the material possessions of the person. Hunt (195-196) maintains that the RCCG vision of success reflects specifically Igbo and Yoruba worldviews. On the response of the prosperity gospel to traditional African aspirations, see Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 47, 48. On more general discussion of the way African worldviews transform Christianity see Gerrie ter Haar, *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Haynes, 127. Katherine Attanasi points out that "prosperity messages take on a host of forms." Katherine Attanasi, "Introduction", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Machiado, 730. Thus, I see it in an interpretative key dubbed by Amos Yong as "the contextual argument". Amos Yong, "A Typology of Prosperity Theology: A Religious Economy of Global Renewal or a Renewal of Economics", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 23-24.

The popularity of success as a theme is hardly surprising. Success and prosperity are, after all, the elements drawing the majority of the Hosanna Chapel congregants to Finland, most of whom seem to be hard working and upward mobile people determined to struggle for success in life. Pastor Mark is very open and analytical when considering the role of prosperity or success in his preaching; as noted above, for him the point of the Gospel is its transformational capacity<sup>67</sup> in believers' lives, so the issue is not one of politicking but rather of taking people's life situations and context seriously and adjusting his preaching accordingly: "So you have to find a way to balance a message so that both sides [i.e. the rich and the poor] can benefit from what you are speaking."<sup>68</sup>

In the lives of these mostly immigrant people, a similar recipe seems to be functioning as in indigenous Finnish revival movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries though the latter tended rather to emphasize tribulations and cross-carrying than success. In spite of this theological difference, success seems to follow both groups of believers. That is not surprising: when stress is laid upon personal holiness in terms of temperance, honesty and diligence, not committing adultery (thereby preventing money being spent on women outside the family), as well as valuing the entrepreneurial spirit, it is almost impossible not to succeed in the long run in a country where financial possibilities are present. In addition to all this, believers also help each other in times of trouble, which provides a form of insurance and helps when taking reasonable risks in business.<sup>69</sup> Revivalist Nordic Christians were often referred to as "the readers". Likewise, contemporary African charismatic Christians are people of the book, and therefore equipped to cope in societies based on literacy.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> On the constant call for transformation see David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement*, Oxford: James Currey 2006, 195-197.

<sup>68</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded.

<sup>69</sup> On the possible continuity between the Protestant ethos and Pentecostalism see Eloy H. Nolivos, "Capitalism and Pentecostalism in Latin America: Trajectories of Prosperity and Development", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 93-95.

<sup>70</sup> See David Maxwell, "Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty? Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28/3 (1998), 353-355; Maxwell, *African Gifts*, 201-202, 209;

In the case of old Finnish revival movements such success does not necessarily become a factor in increasing their attraction because the movements do not promise it but, in line with the general Finnish attitude, rather castigate the exhibition of wealth. Through the transformation of ideas concerning work, faith and success in the prosperity gospel the case of the RCCG in Finland is somewhat different: success awaits the believer for the grabbing. Yet, probably because of the moderating influence of local society, the hype surrounding financial success is toned down in comparison to Copenhagen or RCCG official teaching.

Nonetheless, the arrival of the more established congregants at the church, with their handsome cars and nicely clad families, serves as a compelling example of the functioning of the scheme of success.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, the church contributes to the integration of its members into Finnish society which further increases possibilities for all,<sup>72</sup> an effect that is amplified by the fact that less successful immigrants find it difficult to extend their visas and may therefore be pruned out of the community as a result of Finnish immigration policies; the emphasis on success may also lead to the resignation of congregants who no longer believe in the possibility. Through these various mechanisms, the scheme gains even more credibility. Making the community attractive through the success and positive outlooks of its members seems to be both conscious and theologically argued:

The [Finnish Lutheran majority church] perception is that church is for poor people, is like a funeral, like being afraid. But church is life and action and, you know, and activity and power and joy and all those kind of things. That's one thing that I feel bad that is missing in Finland... It is difficult for a Christian to go and preach out there because the people are worried that they become like Christians because they think that Christians are poor people. That also is not good. We have to take everything and go with

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Woodberry; David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*, Oxford: Blackwell 1995. Cf. Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 141-160, 196. Meyer (763) highlights the preachers' success as an attracting factor.

<sup>71</sup> "In Africa, especially like in my church, when Mika, you see everybody nicely dressed [MV: except me. Laughter.] Everybody nicely dressed because we believe that is how God is, you know." Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. On the importance of displaying material success see Haynes, 133-134.

<sup>72</sup> Kähkönen.

everything... I believe that God is a good God and we need to show the people of the society that we are OK people, that we are happy people, we are blessed people, we are wonderful people and everything so that they can come and see that it is a good thing to belong to these people...<sup>73</sup>

As noted above, one central aspect of materializing expectations into manifestations is that of asking for things from God in prayer. Following the example of the story of Jesus and the persistent Canaanite woman, one should pray for the same things over and again<sup>74</sup> in what can be interpreted as a technique of self-suggestion based on the power of the repeated word. In comparison to many self-suggestive techniques, however, here the point is not so much one of assuring oneself of the possibility of success but rather of acknowledging that success is already there in faith whereas its material fulfilment may take time. This combines both the advantages of self-suggestion and of increasing perseverance.<sup>75</sup>

Yet another dimension of continual praying combined with hard work is that the prayers also function as planning for future strategies.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, they might involve a dimension of self-inspection which would help the believer in readjusting the approach in cases when spiritually granted success is slow to materialise.<sup>77</sup> This is linked to the constant funnelling of discontent, as evinced in Pastor Mark's prayer: "I am tired with this level... lead me forward... in the name of Jesus,

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<sup>73</sup> Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded. Cf. Adeboye, 30, 38-39. Pastor Mark's approach definitely represents the new dispensation described by Adeboye and is in line with the recent RCCG line of thought. See also Hunt, 194; Bernice Martin "New Mutations of the Protestant Ethic", *Religion* 25 (1995), 108; ter Haar, *African Christians*, 90.

<sup>74</sup> Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009, fieldwork diary.

<sup>75</sup> On the psychological and cognitive dimensions of the prosperity gospel's propelling believers towards success see e.g. Haynes, 125; R. Andrew Chestnut, "Prosperous Prosperity: Why the Health and Wealth Gospel is Booming Across the Globe", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 219.

<sup>76</sup> Pastor Abby Olushola's sermon in RCCG Copenhagen 18th October 2009, fieldwork diary. See also Gifford Ghana's *New Christianity*, 55. According to Gifford, in prosperity teaching the listeners can even be taught management skills. This was the case in Copenhagen but has not occurred in Helsinki in any of the dozens of Sunday services I have attended.

<sup>77</sup> Gifford in *Christianity, Politics*, 145-150 also points out similarities between North American success techniques and some Neo-Pentecostal teaching and action. See also Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 140.

lead me forward.”<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the constant emphasis on the believer’s superior spiritual status with regards unbelievers is likely to boost the self-confidence of the congregants.<sup>79</sup> This is an important dimension in the lives of immigrants, struggling to make their way in a strange cultural setting in a foreign language. One does not need much prejudice and racism in that kind of a situation to lose trust in oneself, and faith in the metaphysical necessity of eventual success can be of a great assistance in coping.

Finally, the congregation serves as a security network for congregants who have left family and friends in Africa, providing moral, mental and spiritual support in the absence of the social control of the family. It helps the member to lead a virtuous life that (as described above) is also financially beneficial and adds to her/his well-being by providing a social network. Last but not least, the church also provides a material security network. It is significant that in addition to a myriad of religiously-oriented issues and contact phone numbers, there is also a “house and job information” phone number in the congregation’s weekly bulletin.<sup>80</sup>

Nevertheless, even if the born-again moral lifestyle produces financial gains in the long run, it does not necessarily mean that the prosperity gospel is a theologically sound interpretation of the gospel and the context. In the following section, the Hosanna Chapel prosperity gospel is approached from a contextual theological point of view by projecting some of the general criticisms of the prosperity gospel onto Hosanna Chapel theology.

The prosperity gospel – opiate of the masses or option of the poor?

It is not infrequently claimed that African charismatic churches function de facto as their leader-founders’ personal businesses.<sup>81</sup> According to Paul Gifford or Kwesi A. Dickson, for example, these

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<sup>78</sup> Sunday service 2014-03-02. Thus also a student’s testimony ending in “I expect even greater things from God.”

<sup>79</sup> Gifford (*Ghana’s New Christianity*, 55) situates the increase of self-esteem in the repeated slogans claiming future success as a result of being God’s chosen.

<sup>80</sup> E.g. *Hosanna Chapel weekly bulletin 2<sup>nd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> of March 2014*, back page.

<sup>81</sup> Wariboko, 40; Yong, 20.

unscrupulous preachers exploit the resources of the poorest segments of the population in the name of God and seed money. Their luxurious lifestyles are supposed to prove to their impoverished followers the veracity of their message of success.<sup>82</sup> Yet, while Gifford's and Dickson's criticisms may be justified in a number of cases, one can wonder whether they are simplifying the issue. While there are many examples of people who have established churches as means of personal financial gain, it may be useful to distinguish between the mode of organization and the goal. In the case of the church being run with business as a goal, the point is to accrue financial profit to the leader. On the other hand, if it were just a matter of organizing the church in a business-like manner, this would merely imply benchmarking the seemingly most effective mode of organization available – not unlike the course followed by the Salvation Army (and other Christian organizations consisting of army-type structures), founded at a time when the British army was conquering new colonies with apparently unlimited success. Today, colonial armies have been stumbling in places like Afghanistan and Iraq while businesses seem to flourish without limits, so it is not surprising that some Christian organizations want to make use of that mode of organization. To label all churches which are structured in this way would be like accusing the Salvation Army and other similar Christian organizations of militarism, without further analysis. Undeniably, however, a business goal and business organization may go hand in hand.

In Hosanna Chapel, the pastor dresses well and, before the offering, the congregants are reminded of giving one tenth to the church.<sup>83</sup> Superficial observation might suggest that the situation is one that combines both business goal and business organization. However, closer analysis reveals that, despite there being between one and two hundred participants, quite a few are students or unemployed, while some are just visiting; the offering, therefore, is not likely to be huge. Considering

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<sup>82</sup> Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 50; Gifford, *Christianity, Politics*, 150-159, see also Anderson "Pentecostals in Africa: The Shape of Future Christianity?", in *The Charismatic Movement and the Churches*, Occasional Papers 2, Aarhus: Center for Multireligious Studies 2001, 40-41; Marshall, 181-182; Kärkkäinen, 7. Prof. Kwesi A. Dickson is quoted as having an even harsher criticism against this kind of preacher, see Lauterbach, 102-103 quoting Ghanaian paper *The Daily Dispatch* of Sept. 7 2005. See also Maxwell, "Delivered?", 366-367.

<sup>83</sup> Mal. 3: 7-18 is given as the Biblical justification of this demand; it is found in each Hosanna Chapel weekly bulletin and is also usually pointed out in the introduction to the offering.

the cost structure of the congregation, one may estimate that the lion's share is spent on interest and payments on the church premises' loans, and running expenses. The pastor notes that none of the congregation leadership is paid, though the congregation covers some of the expenses of pastoral work, like fuel for the car. This situation of a full-time pastor working as a volunteer is most likely dictated by the circumstances, and facilitated, in this case, by the income of the spouse. Only in the long run, when the bank loan for buying the premises has been repaid, can one imagine that the institution might turn into a profitable business. Therefore, the criticism of churches which are run for the sake of profit does not seem to be applicable to Hosanna Chapel, at least for the time being. Even if the pastor were receiving more from the congregation than he is revealing, it seems highly improbable that it would be able to provide substantial salaries. Therefore, there is no reason to suspect that the church is being run for personal financial gain – also the case of most of the churches initiated in the African diaspora in Europe, with some notable exceptions.<sup>84</sup>

Criticism of the prosperity gospel also stems from the claim that by concentrating on individuals and their success, the poor's "conscientization"<sup>85</sup> and their will to change oppressive structures is suffocated.<sup>86</sup> Here we have two alternatives provided for the marginalised: either to play according to the rules of the status quo as well as possible, in order to climb the ladders of capitalist society – or at least mount a couple of rungs; or to work for the total overhaul of capitalist society. For

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<sup>84</sup> See ter Haar, *African Christians*, 72-73. The most notable example of this kind of accusation is Sunday Adelaja, church leader of the Embassy of God in Kiev, Ukraine. The serious accusations against him of fraud and embezzlement from former church members and the former Ukrainian government, even at the ministerial level, did not lead to a proper court case or conviction. See Julia Barton, Ukraine's Embassy of God Evangelical Church Struggles with Founder's Controversy, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-02-13/ukraines-embassy-god-evangelical-church-struggles-founders-controversy> Accessed 2014/02/26. However, the social reward of being the leading pastor of a prospering church can be notable because pastors are much appreciated in many African communities. See, for example, Lauterbach 2006, 93-94. Thus, instead of financial capital the pastor can be seen to accumulate symbolic capital. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1991.

<sup>85</sup> For discussion of this term see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1972.

<sup>86</sup> E.g. Machado, 728-729. See also Otabil in Gifford *Ghana's New Christianity*, 122. Paul Gifford is personally also one of the critics. Paul Gifford, *Christianity: To Save or Enslave?* Harare: EDICESA 1990; Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 160-169. See also Chestnut, 216. David Martin points out that the Pentecostals generally refuse the victim's role offered by liberal social observers and Kalu considers individual transformation a political reality that is an alternative to submissive apathy. David Martin, *Pentecostals: The World Their Parish*, Oxford: Blackwell 2002, 10-11; Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, 213-217.

someone from a petit bourgeois background like me, it is easy to hail social activism by the poor and in the name of the poor,<sup>87</sup> but one may question whether they have the moral right to do so, and, more importantly, whether it would be their best course of action in terms of tangible results. While the majority of the poor might not be able to provide sociological or economical explanations for societal power structures, they often prefer to speak in terms of spiritual realities in any case. Sometimes, of course, such talk can be used by religious leaders as a smoke screen in their games of cooperation with the political elite.<sup>88</sup> However, grassroots analysis of asymmetries in social, political and economic spheres, no matter if expressed in spiritual terms, usually boils down to the hard realities of life. One dimension of such a grassroots analysis is that a marginalised person could spend the whole of her life struggling to change society, and even in the unlikely event that change was achieved, the benefits would not accrue to her or her offspring but rather to those who had been playing according to the rules of the status quo, gaining education and/or capital.<sup>89</sup> It is true, however, that playing according to capitalist rules and promoting them as the solution to poverty naturally means reinforcing and promoting the capitalist world order.<sup>90</sup>

Do the poor have the moral obligation not only to fight for their own rights but also for those of their fellows? If yes, is the obligation somehow stronger than among the well-to-do? It is difficult to argue that the most politically and culturally marginalised should be the ones to fight for change in local social structures especially in the context of the African diaspora in Finland. Rather, one could maintain that those who have the vote, who master the language of political communication, and who have secure positions in local society are morally more obliged to work for the change.

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<sup>87</sup> On the Pentecostal choice see Maxwell, *African Gifts*, 209-210. See discussion between Maxwell and Gifford in Maxwell *Delivered?*, 369-370. See also Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome "African Immigrant Churches and the New Christian Right", in Jacob K. Olupona and Regina Gemignani (eds.), *African Immigrant Religions in America*, New York: New York University Press 2007, 283-285 and Anderson 2001, 41-42 on similar discussions.

<sup>88</sup> Gifford, *Christianity, Politics*, 229-232.

<sup>89</sup> On the prosperity gospel as an adaptation to the financial system see e.g. Walton, 134-135 and as a legitimization of one's success in the situation of increasing economic inequality see Nanlai Cao, "Urban Property as Spiritual Resource: The Prosperity Gospel Phenomenon in Coastal China", Katherine Attanasi & Amos Yong (eds.), *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012, 152-154.

<sup>90</sup> Chestnut, 215-216.

Furthermore, from a global perspective, statistical evidence indicates that the global upper-middle classes and the very destitute (the lowest 5% income segment of the world) are the losers in terms of the global economy, whereas the rest – most of the poor, the global middle class and the super-rich are the winners. The upwardly mobile poor, namely those most often subscribing to the prosperity gospel, have good reason not to join the crusade against global capitalism.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, the choice made by immigrant Christians to Finland to concentrate on their family, clan and faith community is both rational and culturally understandable: given the unlikelihood that they would be able to change Finnish capitalist society, it is more prudent to play according to its rules. One may also question whether many of the congregants would actually be willing to work towards changing the political and economic system.<sup>92</sup> After all, despite offering a fairly meagre entry position, Finland also offers the possibilities of progress, and is, ultimately, the society in which they have decided to settle – at least for the time being. The choice not to opt into local socio-political constructions but rather to work hard to support relatives back home and to gain an education or a steady job is also, culturally and socially, a predictable choice. The immigrant Christian is, after all, subject to the tension between three communities, all expecting loyalty: the home community in the country of origin, Finnish society and the church.<sup>93</sup> By choosing to become a hard-working and potentially successful player in the existing system, the immigrant can satisfy all three: by sending money to the family back home, adding to the work force in Finnish society, and providing both

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<sup>91</sup> See Branko Milanovic, *Global Income Inequality by the Numbers: in History and Now, an Overview*, The World Bank Development Research Group, Poverty and Inequality Team, 12-15.

<http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-6259> Consulted 2015-02-09. Piketty's results seem to clash with this analysis at first glance as his data deals mostly with the affluent countries whose population mostly represents the global upper-middle class. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press 2014, 20-21. However, the fact that the biosphere cannot bear the consequences of global capitalism is an argument to which everyone should listen, not least the poor who have the most to lose through climate change and environmental disasters.

<sup>92</sup> The pastor considers Finnish society quite ideal (Pastor Mark Etie's discussion with the missionary training course 2010/04/08, recorded) and many of the congregants are business-minded (e.g. Group interview 2010/04/25, recorded).

<sup>93</sup> NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*. New York: Reagan Arthur Books 2013 describes well the tension between the home community and the local culture and community in prose.

financial offerings to the church, as well as the model of a good and successful Christian. The pressure to prove loyalty, diligence and success in all directions is considerable, however. In spite of its attraction for the up-and-coming, the prosperity gospel is not an easy ideology to follow: it expects a lot in terms of faith, hard work and reiterated hope.

Given that it is so hard, one may wonder what might be the ethical justification of the prosperity gospel when applied to the weakest members of society. John Rawls, in his *Theory of Justice*,<sup>94</sup> points out that the ethical quality of a society can be assessed by estimating the position of its weakest, and the impact of an action assessed by how this position is affected. A similar question may be posed of the prosperity gospel in the Hosanna Chapel context. As already noted, the message provides congregants with hope for a better future as well as offering coping and success techniques, thereby seeming to equip them for the tough competition of a Western capitalist system. In addition to this, the prosperity gospel also helps to create meaning and unity in a culturally and socially confused and confusing situation: the message of change for the better is not only Pastor Mark's central thesis but also the backbone of African understandings of personality and its growth. Thus the way in which personal growth and wealth acquisition are interwoven functions to bring together the Western experience of competition and its results for the community back home. The task of the immigrant is to grow in all ways, thereby making life meaningful: making money is not only about the cash itself but also about contributing to the community of origin, and through the prosperity gospel, it also acquires a spiritual dimension. The prosperity gospel is tied to financial achievement, but also to social and communal success, which presupposes monetary support of the community of origin. This interrelation is concisely spelled out in the quoted highlight of Pastor Adewale's sermon in Lahti (Finland) which resonates with Pastor Mark's ideas:

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<sup>94</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford paperbacks 301, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973.

All that you'll ever get from God, & all that you'll ever be, revolves around spiritual growth... No prosperity without growth, no growth without God's Word, & the Word won't work unless we trust in God.<sup>95</sup>

So, if African immigrants are to be situated as one of the most marginalised groups in Finnish society, it can be concluded that the prosperity gospel seems to play a positive function in their lives. This, however, may not be a sufficiently detailed assessment as there are great differences between immigrants. The newcomer, who has not yet settled in, has potentially the most to gain from the prosperity gospel: hope, visions and techniques for success; those who have already achieved relative success might, at some point, begin to feel the need for a less pressing theological approach.

On the other hand, what has the prosperity gospel to offer to those who have already lost the game, those who have been deported back to their countries of origin? As a general rule, they will have expended a considerable amount of money, or gone into debt, in their attempts to emigrate to Finland and establish themselves there, meaning that they are now much worse off than when they began the process: they are back in the situation they sought to escape, without the funds they gathered to assist their passage. These people are, of course, no longer members of the Helsinki congregation and out of sight, but surely the church's message should also offer some meaning for the congregants who continue to find themselves in the same desperate situation? That does not seem to be the case.

Ultimately, however, moral rejection of African forms of the prosperity gospel also has an ethnocentric bias in which Western influences are seen as the baseline against which Africans need to react. An alternative vision would be to see African versions of the prosperity gospel as transformed expressions of traditional and long extant African worldviews, belief systems and goals. In that vision the focus shifts from the political and ideological categories of the West to those of African forms of the prosperity gospel. In so doing, the relationship between this theology and

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<sup>95</sup> Hosanna Chapel weekly bulletin 25th-30th April, 2010 referring to the previous Sunday's sermon by Pastor Adewale from RCCG Lahti (Finland) 18<sup>th</sup> April 2010. Note that Hosanna Chapel is the mother church for Lahti.

capitalism is not essentialized but can rather be seen as a present variable within long-term African approaches.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

A simplistic and straightforward prosperity gospel is one of the most audible dimensions of the RCCG Helsinki congregation message. Nonetheless, the success that this message promises is not only one of material wealth, but contains such a wide range of elements that it seems to reflect the African yearning for the fullness of life, reported and analysed in so many cultures on the African continent: this is an ethos that is not just about having more but also becoming more through getting closer to God in spiritual growth. It is a scheme that appears credible in the eyes of the congregants of Hosanna Chapel because the signs of material success are visible in the lives of many of its members. On average, the longer one has stayed in Finland, the better life becomes, both as a result of learned coping skills in the new society and also improved financial circumstances which are partly enabled by the moral code of a church that curbs spending on vanities.

The general criticism levelled against the prosperity gospel, which claims that it contributes to political passivity, is not reasonably applicable here even though the congregation is not overtly politically active. It is not fair to criticise African immigrants for what they are not doing towards reforming a country where they have settled when they have very few means of influencing society and many hardships to overcome in their private lives. As long as they are fulfilling the expectations of the society in which they live, and the communities from which they originate, one should rather appreciate that the church is supporting them in that. However, the unanswered question that we are left with is whether a church whose message is aimed almost exclusively at the successful and socially attractive (and those en route) can really be a church for all.

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<sup>96</sup> For a similar discussion, see Marshall, 17-19.