


Mega-costalism, socialising, and prosperity gospel in the South African context



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There is a rising phenomenon of mega Pentecostal churches in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent of Africa, which is conceptualised here as mega-costalism. The phenomenon refers to churches with mega-church buildings that can attract large crowds in church attendance. Previous studies have focused on the prosperity gospel and the socialising aspect of membership in mega Pentecostal churches. This literature review on the mega Pentecostal churches has some economic, sociological, and theological implications. Economically, the larger the church is the more income in tithes and offerings can be received. Sociologically, the church creates an opportunity for the sharing of common interests, socialising, and interaction of the church members with one another. However, theologically (particularly in the discipline of missiology), there is a need to research how megachurches can orientate their members on discipleship-making, with some implications for fulfilling the mission of God. To fill this gap, this article uses missional ecclesial imagination as a theoretical framework, to argue that the primary purpose of the church goes beyond the aspect of socialising among members and a prosperity gospel, towards the fulfilment of the mission of God. Therefore, the missional ecclesial imagination is relevant for the orientation of megachurches towards the mission of God. Data were collected by reviewing the literature on the mega Pentecostal churches in Africa, the missional ecclesial imagination, the prosperity gospel, and the socialising among church members.

Contribution: This article makes a unique contribution to the research on mega Pentecostal churches by proposing a missional ecclesial imagination, which is relevant for the church's orientation towards discipleship-making, with some implications on the mission of God.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; socialising; mega-costalism; missional ecclesial imagination; mega-churches.

Introduction

Mega-costalism is a concept referring to the phenomenon of rising mega Pentecostal churches in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. These churches are known for their large size buildings and their ability to attract large crowds in attendance to church services (Resane 2022). Therefore, the mega Pentecostal churches are known for mega-church buildings and mega Pentecostal church members (Knight 2014). In addition, most of the mega Pentecostal churches are found in the suburban areas as opposed to the rural areas. However, the determination of a mega Pentecostal church might differ from one country to another, meaning that what is mega in South Africa, for example, might not be mega in Nigeria, given the existence of many larger churches in the latter. While scholars such as Patte (ed. 2019:783) have used the number 2000 as a determinant for a mega Pentecostal church, this size appears to be too small for many mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the largest mega Pentecostal church, judged by the church building size, is Mountain of Fire and Miracles ministries, whose building, according to Ojo (2020), has a carrying capacity of 100 000 and the church has an average of 200 000 in attendance every week. Mountain of Fire is followed by Dunamis International Gospel Centre, with a carrying capacity of 100 000 people (Ojo 2020). Other mega Pentecostal churches such as Deeper Life Bible Church (65 000), Redeemed Christian Church of God (50 000), Living Faith Church (50 000), the World of Life Bible Church (30 000), and the Christ Embassy (30 000) also have massive buildings and many church members every week (Kuponu & Talabi 2021; Ojo 2020; Ukah 2020). This means an average Nigerian mega Pentecostal church has a membership of 30 000 people. This is different in the South African context where an average mega Pentecostal church has a membership of only 5000 people with almost similar capacity (Kgatle 2024). Nonetheless, the numbers and the building size are major factors in determining who is mega and who is not mega.

The concept of a mega-church has been one of the major factors driving the popularity of Pentecostalism in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu 2019:390). This assertion is based on the ability of these churches to utilise media platforms with great following, the use of popular gospel music, and the ability to reach out and accommodate many people. These are the churches that have been able to change the religious landscape in world Christianity, particularly in African Christianity. Scholars such as Nyoni (2018), Asamoah-Gyadu (2019), and Ukah (2020) also pointed out that the mega Pentecostal churches are the major drivers of the prosperity gospel, in the sense that the larger the church is, the more income they can receive in terms of tithes and offerings. This means that the bigger the building, the more people it can accommodate, and eventually, the bigger the purse. McCauley (2015) explains that a mega Pentecostal church has the potential to build the image of the Pentecostal pastor and connect them with the political figures in a way that a pastor of a smaller church in the city would not be able to. In addition, according to Burgess (2020), the mega Pentecostal churches in Africa have been able to build social and religious networks to support the social needs of their members. This means that the mega Pentecostal churches create an opportunity for the sharing of common interests, socialising, and interaction of the church members with one another. However, theologically (particularly in the discipline of missiology) there is a need to research how mega Pentecostal churches can orientate their members towards discipleship-making, with some implications on fulfilling the mission of God. The first section of the article will describe and discuss the aspects of the missional ecclesial imagination which are important for the discussion on the missional imagination of mega Pentecostal churches. The second section will look at how the mega Pentecostal churches allow their members to socialise with each other. The third section will look at the intersections of mega Pentecostal churches and the prosperity gospel. The last section will look at the relevancy of missional ecclesial imagination in the orientation of mega Pentecostal churches towards the mission of God.

Missional ecclesial imagination

Missional ecclesial imagination is a framework that calls for the reorientation of the mega Pentecostal churches to the mission of God for the church. Among the proponents of this theoretical framework, are Roxburgh and Boren (2009:20), who have articulated the missional ecclesial imagination as a framework for any church, including mega Pentecostal churches, to align themselves with the mission of God. In this way, God's mission precedes the mission of the church. Put differently, these churches rather have a platform through which the mission of God should be fulfilled. In the missional ecclesial imagination, the church is not so much concerned about the traction of numbers, but rather the fulfilment of the mission of God here on earth. While the church building and church numbers are major factors defining the mega Pentecostal churches, the missional ecclesial imagination goes beyond these quantitative measures, towards qualitative measures of fulfilling the mission of God. While numbers are

also fruits of the mission strategies for mega Pentecostal churches, it is important to move beyond the traction of numbers. The mission of the trinitarian God, that is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, is a priority to a church that embraces the missional ecclesial imagination. Smith and Niemandt (2022) explain:

In terms of a missional imagination, the habitus of the missional church opens participants to the reality of the *missio Trinitatis*. Congregants imagine that mission is now possible within every day and not just the privilege of the elite. This missional habitus invites participants into the bodily movements and poetics of the Trinitarian God which is radically different from the habitus of a church that is caught in modes of Christendom that distorts the mission by directing it back to the church alone. (p. 6)

Thus, within the framework of the missional ecclesial imagination, the church is in the realisation of the involvement of the trinitarian God in society. According to Beard (2015:191), the trinitarian God is the source of the mission, which the missional church, including the mega Pentecostal churches, should be able to take seriously. By keeping this in mind, the church would be able to align with the mission of God and will be able to train others to be oriented toward the mission of God, where God is working within the church.

When the missional ecclesial imagination is the framework of the church, then everything that the church does would be aligned with the mission of God. This includes all the activities of the church, beyond increasing the member-number of the church, or the church building, but only the mission of God. The church in the missional ecclesial imagination is tasked with the ability to discern which is God's will for the church and the world. This also ensures that the church moves away from its focus on internal ecclesiastical politics, and mainly focuses on its main mission. This means that instead of engaging in fights against each other, the church should refocus its energy on being engaged in the activities of the mission of God. Maponya and Baron (2020) explain:

It is the role of the church to empower its people not to be inward-focused but outward-focused in participating in the mission of God by bringing about reconciliation and healing. (p. 8)

This is possible when the church, in its mission of God, adopts the missional ecclesial imagination to not only focus on what is going on inwardly, but also to reach out to others.

The missional ecclesial imagination is tasked with the orientation of the church, on calling and sending the disciples into the world to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, as opposed to building large church buildings, and crowds following. The mission of the church, in missional ecclesial imagination, is to orientate the disciples towards becoming the witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The individuals who have been trained or oriented towards the mission of God ultimately become the community of believers engaged in witnessing the gospel. This focuses on the missional ecclesial imagination of the community of believers, as opposed to the reliance on the evangelist for the propagation of the gospel (Beard 2015:191).

Therefore, the missional ecclesial imagination is witnessing all believers, as opposed to the individualistic approach, where the leading pastor or evangelist is the main person in evangelism. It is missional ecclesial imagination that the believers do not become spectators in the church but participate in what God is doing in the world. Therefore, the missional ecclesial imagination does away with the notion of believers acting more like football supporters, as happens in some mega Pentecostal churches. Missional ecclesial imagination motivates all believers to find ways in which to reach out to others, for the sake of the gospel. This allows believers to become active in the mission of God and discern how they can participate in the mission of God. According to Roxburgh and Boren (2009:122), when all believers are active in the mission of God, it gives that specific church the means to experience growth. Chung (2013:44) concurs that the missional ecclesial imagination can bring true transformation in the church, where people have their focus away from the quantitative goals of numbers and large buildings, towards the missional activities that aim to fulfil the mission of God. In preaching and teaching the gospel rather aim at transforming people, than on entertaining the audience with motivational talks.

The missional church in the missional ecclesial imagination, is known as the sending church rather than the one concerned with numbers and the building of large churches. This, however, does not make the missional church anti-numbers and anti-church buildings but it points out that these are not a priority. The main concern of the missional leadership and the missional members of the church is to discover and fulfil the purpose of God for the church here on earth (Chung 2013:179). To fulfil this, the church should not be inward-looking but outward-looking, toward reaching the lost for the gospel of Jesus Christ. This corresponds to the idea of the church engaged in discipleship and the mission of sending out believers into the world to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this way, there would be a renewal in the church, where its missional task is revived, and the believers are called upon to adopt the missional nature orientation. Quine (2023:64) points out:

[T]he missional imagination can only occur once the congregation grapples with its missional identity from the past into its present; as that identity comes with honest reflection, only then can it embrace a future summons to follow Christ as a missional agent in community and culture. (p. 64)

This makes the missional ecclesial imagination a relevant framework for the prophetic voice of the church to be revived in the 21st century. In this current study, this framework is relevant for the orientation of the mega Pentecostal churches towards the mission of God. The aspects of a missional ecclesial imagination can be summarised as follows:

- a) an alignment to the mission of God,
- b) having mission activities that fulfil the mission of God,
- c) being engaged in discipleship-making, and
- d) being a sending church.

These four aspects of a missional ecclesial imagination will be applied to mega Pentecostal churches. Firstly, the relationship between the mega Pentecostal churches and the socialising of the church members will be explored.

Mega Pentecostal churches and socialising of church members

The Pentecostal churches do gather for spiritual empowerment and revival. Another important aspect of gathering when it comes to church services is the socialising of members. Most of the mega Pentecostal churches are family-friendly in the sense that it is not only adult church members but also children who can socialise during the church service (Eagle 2020:53). A family-friendly church that encourages socialising, has some advantages according to Coleman and Chattoo (2020):

[I]t is convenient for busy families, it encourages socialisation among congregation members, and it suggests that religion can be fun as well as challenging. Importantly, it provides a measure of security, especially in contexts where gated communities may be favored by richer residents and thus form part of the imagery of successful middle-class life. Parents of teenagers also gain a degree of surveillance over the activities of their offspring. (p. 91)

Therefore, these churches are attractive when it comes to parents with large families, as their children are well taken care of during the spiritual service. Some families, as pointed out by Coleman and Chattoo (2020), are not necessarily large but would be classified as busy families, wherein both parents are working full-time jobs and would not have time for teaching the children. Hence, a mega Pentecostal church with family-friendly facilities becomes an alternative, not just for the church but also for recreational activities such as swimming, playgrounds, and shopping for children. In the end, the motivation to attend such a church is not necessarily the quest to hear the word of God, but rather to ensure that the children socialise with others in a safe environment. This becomes the culture and practice of the mega Pentecostal churches, as these children would grow to have similar practices for the next generation.

This socialising is encouraged among the children but not necessarily among the adults, who would come to a mega Pentecostal church just to attend the church service, which lasts for about 1 h and 30 min only, to return the following Sunday. However, parents who attend the mega Pentecostal churches with their children remain part of socialising because their children socialise with each other in the children's ministry. Cartledge (2020:174) points out that by providing resources to their children, the parents also become part of the socialising within the broader context of the mega Pentecostal churches. They in a way remain the primary means by which their children can become part of the socialising happening in the mega Pentecostal churches. In the first place, the children would not have reached these mega Pentecostal churches, if it was not because of their parents. Most of the time, the children just find themselves within the family structure, in which the parents are already

part of the mega Pentecostal church. Another way in which parents become part of socialising in the mega Pentecostal churches is that they form part of the common society built by mega Pentecostal churches in the teachings, philosophy, and lifestyles produced by these churches. Cartledge (2020) explains that the common understanding:

is absorbed by the members over time, as part of the overall socialising process, such that new members begin to use the same language, understand the same concepts and practice the same kind of speech themselves. (p. 177)

Therefore, the parents attending the mega Pentecostal churches end up forming a certain society with a common understanding, as informed by the teachings and the philosophies taught in these churches. Burgess (2020:254) explains that some adult members of mega Pentecostal churches can become part of the socialising through the small groups arranged within the mega Pentecostal churches for midweek meetings. But I must point out that not everyone is part of the small groups, as most followers of these churches are middle-class, who are busy with work of business midweek.

The challenge is that in mega Pentecostal churches, the believers attend these churches with the main aim of socialising, particularly for their children, rather than to hear the word of God, or to be trained as a disciple, or the one sent for the propagation of the gospel. In the end, the members of these churches can end up not being involved in mission activities, but rather in family-friendly activities, more like a restaurant, a sports field, or even worse, a social club. While there can be some good signs of effectiveness on the socialising part, the challenge is that there would still be a gap in terms of discipleship. This is very unfortunate in the sense that the heart of the mission is making disciples of all nations as per the great commission, not necessarily the idea of socialising. Thus, the church can be growing in terms of the size of the building and the number of church members but qualitatively be modelling socialising, rather than discipleship as expressed in the great commission. In terms of the size and quantity, this might illustrate some form of growth; however, concerning the mission of God, this might present some form of a challenge. In the end, the members of some of the mega Pentecostal churches are more concerned with meeting for the sake of socialising with one another, as opposed to meeting for the sake of fulfilling the mission of God. In a way, the church would flourish in terms of gathering the numbers but on the other hand, there would still be gaps in the mission and its activities such as winning souls and so forth. In the next section, I explore the intersections between the mega Pentecostal churches and the concept of the prosperity gospel.

Mega Pentecostal churches and the prosperity gospel

The prosperity gospel, also known as prosperity theology, is the teaching about the accumulation of wealth and the attainment of health in the life of the believer

(Jones & Woodbridge 2011). The prosperity gospel teaches that the theology of the cross does not only bring the salvation of the soul but also brings the salvation of the body, which to some certain extent includes both health and wealth. The prosperity gospel teaches that salvation must result in material blessings such as mansions, luxurious cars, and private jets (Bowler 2013). Moreover, the proponents of the prosperity gospel teach that poverty is a curse and therefore when one is saved, poverty should be reversed, and wealth should manifest in the life of the believer. The cross therefore represents the removal of the curse. In the prosperity gospel, Jesus has not only taken away the curse of sin but of poverty as well. However, for those who still live in poverty, particularly in the African context, they would be under the guilt of being cursed. Or they can live with the guilt of having a small faith because it is faith that is expected to produce prosperity. The prosperity gospel emerged out of the faith movement, or the word of faith movement of Kenneth Hagin, and this has lately been embraced by preachers such as Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and others. In Africa, the prosperity message is embraced by preachers such as David Oyedepo, Duncan Williams, Ray Macauley, and others. These preachers, like their American counterparts, have embraced and modelled the prosperity gospel. The difference is that in the African context where many live in poverty, the lifestyle of the prosperity gospel preachers creates an economic gap between the preacher and the members of these mega Pentecostal churches.

The literature review demonstrates that there is a relationship between the mega Pentecostal churches and the propagation of the prosperity gospel (Asamoah-Gyadu 2019; Bowler & Regan 2014; Melton 2020; Nyoni 2018). Bowler and Reagan (2014) explain that the prosperity gospel has been made popular in the mega Pentecostal churches and the concept of televangelism. Melton (2020:79) calls the prosperity gospel one of the main tenets of the theology preached in the mega Pentecostal churches. Therefore, mega Pentecostal churches represent a platform in which prosperity can be paraded from the parking lot to the pews and the pulpit. Most of the pastors in mega Pentecostal churches, whether in Africa or the American context, are known for preaching the gospel of prosperity. Some small churches would also emphasise prosperity in the life of the believers but not at the same length as the prosperity gospel ministers in the mega Pentecostal churches. The mega Pentecostal churches have been the major enablers of the prosperity gospel. As highlighted in the introduction, some pastors have a mentality of building mega Pentecostal churches with a large following, to accumulate wealth. In this case, *mega* does not only represent a big church building and many members but also living large. The mega Pentecostal churches can give more, and the pastor earns more. Another factor is that these mega Pentecostal churches do not only rely on tithes and offerings but also have different shops within their facilities, wherein the members attending the church service, also buy. Therefore, it can be reiterated that in one way or the other, these churches have become the centrality of the theology and practice of the prosperity gospel.

While the prosperity message might appear to be attractive to the members of the mega Pentecostal churches, the challenge is, that most of the time it is only the leading pastors who prosper, as evidenced by their ownership of mansions, private jets, and other luxurious assets (Bowler 2013; Brogdon 2015; Nel 2020). In the ownership of these luxurious material things, the pastors in the mega Pentecostal churches do model the prosperity lifestyle but the challenge is that most of the members will not attain such a lifestyle. The majority of the followers would not be prospering, as claimed in the sermons and the theology of many pastors in these mega Pentecostal churches. Therefore, this name and claim of its gospel presents some challenges, in the sense that the believers will continue to name it, but the pastors are the only ones who claim the blessings (Mashau & Kgatle 2019). Therefore, the prosperity gospel presents some form of inequality, that already exists in a society where the pastor is extremely rich, and the congregants are extremely poor (Kgatle & Kaunda 2023). Another challenge is that overemphasising the prosperity gospel, can shift the focus away from the training of disciples and the sending of the trained. Jones and Woodbridge (2017) explain that because of the specific teachings on the message of prosperity, some of the pastors in mega Pentecostal churches do not devote time to teachings on evangelism and discipleship. In other words, it is a great challenge in the mega Pentecostal churches, when the prosperity message overshadows the real gospel of Christ, which is supposed to lead people to the salvation of their souls. Small groups have the potential to bridge this gap, but in many mega Pentecostal churches, the teachings of their pastors dominate the discussions in small groups; consequently, the prosperity gospel continues to dominate the theology and practice of these churches.

Re-imagining socialising and the prosperity gospel: A missional ecclesial imagination

The socialising of church members in the mega Pentecostal churches is good, but the research question remains: is this the main aspect of the mission of God? Do churches exist for the socialising of members in the same way restaurants, sports centres, social clubs and shopping centres do? In line with the aspects of the missional imagination, it can be deduced that the church is more than a social site, it exists for the fulfilment of the mission of God on earth. The socialising of members might in some mega Pentecostal churches demonstrate the koinonia of missions, but the church should be able to go beyond socialising at a face-value level. Churches are different from other social gatherings in the sense that the centre of the meeting, is the mission of God. While there are some similarities between the church and other social sites, the main difference is the purpose of the meeting, whereby in the context of the church, the purpose is to orientate the people to God's mission. Similarly, the accumulation of wealth in mega Pentecostal churches with a large following may benefit the pastor financially. However, the research question remains: is this the main aspect of the

mission of God? Do mega Pentecostal churches exist for the primary purpose of making the presiding pastor rich? Or should the finances of the church be channelled towards the mission of God, in sending the witnesses for the propagation of the gospel? This calls for a reimagination of the socialising of members and an overemphasis on the prosperity gospel, in most mega Pentecostal churches. This article suggests a missional ecclesial imagination to call the mega Pentecostal churches to a reorientation of the mission of God.

In the first instance, it is a call for alignment with the mission of God. Missional ecclesial imagination is a relevant theoretical framework for the mega Pentecostal churches, to align with the mission of God rather than to focus on the socialising of the members and the prosperity gospel. This means that the meetings in these churches should be dominated by the teachings on the mission of God, rather than an emphasis on the prosperity teachings. Secondly, this is a call for the church not to compete with restaurants and other public spaces in trying to be family-friendly, but to rather focus on the mission of God in its activities during a spiritual service, as opposed to the socialising of members where the church becomes more like a social club. Missional ecclesial imagination is the relevant theoretical framework for the pastors and the members of these churches, to engage in mission activities where they will engage in the mission of God. Thirdly, the mega Pentecostal churches are called upon to turn members into disciples. Missional ecclesial imagination is a relevant framework, whereby the members will not attend a church service from one week to another without a broader understanding of the mission of God. This is a relevant framework, whereby members are turned into disciples, in the same way that Jesus turned his followers into disciples. Lastly, the missional ecclesial imagination is a call for the mega Pentecostal churches to be sending churches, rather than receiving churches. This means that the wealth accumulated in these churches is not meant to enrich the pastors but rather to be reinvested back into the churches, for the propagation of the gospel. The missional church is the sending church but cannot be so without proper emphasis on discipleship and the training of members.

Conclusion

The mega Pentecostal churches in Africa have been instrumental in changing the social and religious landscape on the continent. This article reviewed literature on the study of mega Pentecostal churches and found that these churches are strong on meeting the social needs of the members, in building various social networks within and outside their churches. In addition, the study found that some of the mega Pentecostal churches have used the size of their churches in terms of church building and membership, to accumulate wealth, particularly for the church leaders within the broader context of the prosperity gospel. These findings have some implications, sociologically, economically and theologically. Sociologically, the church creates an opportunity for the sharing of common interests, socialising, and interaction of the church members with one another. Economically, the

lead pastor or bishop can amass wealth, while their congregants continue to suffer amid economic depression and other challenges. Missiologically, some of the mega Pentecostal churches have not been able to orientate their members towards discipleship-making for the fulfilment of the mission of God. This article addressed this challenge, by using missional ecclesial imagination as a theoretical framework. This framework is relevant for assisting mega Pentecostal churches to go beyond the socialising of membership, toward the fulfilment of the mission of God. This means that the mega Pentecostal churches would not only be engaged in the activities of socialising, and the collection of tithes and offerings, but would be able to move towards the missional activities. The missional activities proposed here, through missional ecclesial imagination, are the training of mega Pentecostal church members to become disciples of all nations. In addition, this means that the missional members would also be sent out to reach out to the people of God, by preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, rather than only relying on motivational talks of their pastors on prosperity and the accumulation of wealth.

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M.S.K. is the sole author of this research article.

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