

**An Analysis of the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in
Australia**

Submitted by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to describe, analyse and assess the developing ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia (AGA). In chapter one, after reviewing the sparse literature on pentecostal ecclesiology, we turn to a contemplation of ecclesiological method. We note that some of the typical approaches, including biblicist and *communio* ecclesiologies, are idealist in orientation, since they contemplate the church in abstraction from its concrete, socio-historical and cultural identity. In chapter two we develop an alternative method, building particularly on the insights of Joseph Komonchak and Neil Ormerod, who argue that the object of ecclesiology is not ecclesial ideals but, rather, the set (or sets) of experiences, understandings, symbols, words, judgements, statements, decisions, actions, relationships, and institutions which distinguish the group of people called “the Church.” This leads to a concrete methodology that is derived from the explicit and implicit ecclesiology apparent in the history of the church. It also recognises that the church is a social reality as well as a divinely ordained community and, therefore, that the ecclesologist needs to incorporate the insights of both the disciplines of theology and sociology. A large part of our discussion in chapter two is thus concerned with the nature of the interaction between these various disciplines.

The method outlined in these early chapters forms the basis of our exploration of the ecclesiology of the AGA in chapters three to five. In line with our methodological construction, each chapter begins with the narrative of particular periods in the movement’s history, focusing especially on times of ecclesial transition and development. These narrative sections not only tell a story that has, largely, remained untold, but they also seek to draw out the explicit and implicit elements of AGA ecclesiology. In each chapter, narrative is followed by analysis which, firstly, clarifies central aspects of the developing ecclesiology and, secondly, attempts to assess what has been gained and lost in the process of ecclesiological change.

With regard to the content of these chapters, chapter three treats the development of early pentecostalism, and the transition from unstructured and loosely knit faith mission

communities to congregationally structured churches. Chapter four analyses the institutional formation of Australian pentecostalism, focusing particularly on the formalisation of the AGA. Of concern during this period was the relationship between churches and centralised bodies, as well as the roles and responsibilities of church leadership. Chapter five then treats the developments in AGA ecclesiology that accompanied the charismatic revival of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, as well as the institutional changes that occurred due to the rapid growth of the movement. In the concluding chapter six, we summarise our research, and intimate potential trajectories for the AGA as it moves into the twenty first century. In the light of our analysis and assessment, we also make some suggestions for ecclesial self-reflection.

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NOTE:

The full thesis is available in the Australian Catholic University, St. Patrick's Campus Library. For further information, contact the author at shane.clifton@scc.edu.au