



Evangelicals and Governance in the Global South

■ Stephen Offutt | 10 February 2020

In this paper I ask: how do evangelicals in the Global South engage on issues relating to conflict, security, and basic human rights? I discuss who evangelicals are in the Global South and then present case studies of two evangelical churches: one affluent and one impoverished. I argue that social location matters: affluent churches can participate in democratic discourse; impoverished actors must often navigate the perils wrought by state failure. In spite of the resulting differences in public engagement, shared tendencies emerge. Evangelicalism's (sometimes underutilized) political and policy engagement is guided by an interesting mix of traditional and modern values, and is directed toward a particular vision of a flourishing society.

Executive Summary

How do evangelicals in the Global South engage issues relating to conflict, security, and basic human rights? This paper argues that rich and poor churches interface with this issue differently. Case studies reveal that affluent churches can engage these issues through participating in democratic discourse and implementing relevant programs; poor churches are often forced to navigate spaces characterized by state failure. In spite of the variance created by different environments, shared evangelical tendencies emerge. These include efforts to promote peace, freedom, and the evangelical understanding of a wholesome society.

The two case studies presented here do not represent all of Global South evangelicalism. But they provide useful windows into religious realities in these specific contexts.

The first case, Rhema Church in Johannesburg, South Africa is a nationally influential church that preaches a soft version of the prosperity gospel. Rhema came to prominence in part because of the role it played in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. It is now a valuable government partner in providing social services. Rhema uses its public voice to combat violence against women, support the current ANC leadership, and to argue against abortion and same sex marriage. These are all elements of Rhema's view of a good society.

The second case, Word of Faith church (a pseudonym) is located in a gang controlled, lower class neighborhood in El Salvador. The relationship between the church and the gang, both of which are seen as sources of authority in the community, is complex. The church sometimes provides youths with a pathway out of gangs and the pastor advocates on behalf of community members who have violated gang rules. Gangs seek to participate in church activities: the church runs a child development center (sponsored by a U.S. NGO) and gang members enroll their children in the program. Gang members also sometimes attend services. Such close ties mean that sometimes when police prepare to raid the community, church members warn gang members of their impending danger. The church and the gang in some ways share governance of the community in the absence of the state.

A number of policy recommendations emerge from these findings:

1) **Diplomats and state officials should establish channels of communication between with diverse, carefully selected evangelical leaders in a given country.** There is often little communication between diplomats or other state officials and evangelicals. This opens the door for misunderstanding on both sides. Greater dialogue could uncover unexpected potential for collaboration and overlapping interests.

2) In times of conflict, evangelicals can utilize their social capital and theological tool kit to aid in reconciliation endeavors. **Those churches who have not been co-opted by the state or by political parties should be invited into national dialogues along with other civil society actors.** They should be allowed to be fully religious in these contexts. If oppressive regimes view church participation as a threat, international protection for churches should be extended.

3) Especially in places where evangelicals are a religious minority, **churches can be strong partners in promoting religious freedom.** Caveats provided in the first recommendation also apply here.

4) Evangelicals are increasingly active in poverty alleviation. **They should be viewed as dependable partners in the provision of social services.** In recommendations 2-4, more affluent churches are likely to have greater capacity to contribute than churches in humbler sectors of society.

5) For poorer churches, the main policy recommendation is to **ensure that the rule of law is extended into the communities they inhabit** and that state institutions and local economies function properly.

In lieu of such an ideal, **Western states should play a role in equipping local congregations for the challenges they face.** For example, counseling youths who have experienced psychosomatic trauma while in gangs is complicated; churches could use training for this type of work. Training pastors in community leadership and how to negotiate with community stakeholders, including gangs, could also be very helpful. Such training should be provided outside of communities and through third party vendors (preferably faith-based NGOs or within denominational structures); overt partnerships will create the perception (among gangs and other actors) that churches are acting as agents of the state.

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The global evangelical movement is comprised of diverse groups within Christianity. These have emerged in different parts of the world over the last two millennia. There is no formal leader, hierarchy, or agreed upon geographic center to the movement. Rather, the movement is held together by common beliefs and a mostly organic, unplanned set of transnational networks and organizations.

Evangelicalism maps onto the world's socio-economic realities in the same way that many global entities do. Resources within the movement are concentrated in the more affluent places in the global economy; adherents to the movement are more plentiful in the global economy's lower classes. Evangelicals are thus found in comfortable North American and European suburbs and in the growing pockets of wealth in emerging economies. These evangelicals and the organizations they build have access to finance, well-educated employees, and other goods and services common in the transnational business classes. But higher numbers of evangelicals are found in the shanty towns that encircle cities across the Global South, as well as in remote rural areas. In these places, evangelicals experience social, political, and economic vulnerabilities on a daily basis.

The question that this paper takes up is how evangelicals engage on issues of conflict, security, and basic human rights in the Global South. The bifurcated nature of the evangelical experience requires a two-pronged answer. I argue that transnational evangelicals have a voice in formal, often democratic, political systems. They use their voice to support aspects of the modern human rights agenda, but favor perspectives of traditional societies on other issues. Evangelicals in poorer neighborhoods also have a voice, but it is often exercised in contexts marked by state failure and emergent, oppressive political systems. Although sometimes these evangelicals are simply seeking to survive, they can provide important contributions to a neighborhood's stability. Collectively, evangelicals tend to promote peace, freedom, and their understanding of a wholesome society.

I organize the paper in the following way. I first provide an in-depth look at who fits the 'evangelical' category. I then present two case studies. One looks at an affluent evangelical church in South Africa. The second examines marginalized evangelicals in El Salvador. Although neither case is representative, general insights can be drawn from their experiences. I close the paper with some assertions about how evangelicals in the Global South intersect with issues of conflict, security and human rights.

Who are the Global South Evangelicals?

Defining evangelicalism¹ is difficult. The faith manifests differently in different contexts. Some of its characteristics, such as belief in miracles and the supernatural, are not different from other religions or world views in the Global South. David Bebbington (1989) argues that evangelicalism's defining characteristics include an emphasis on conversion or a need for change in one's life, an active bent toward sharing their faith with others, a high regard for the Bible, and an emphasis on Christ's atoning work on the cross. Although somewhat dated, this definition remains the most useful in the international context.

Knowing which Christian groups fit this description can be equally tricky. Contemporary global evangelicalism is an agglomeration of historical waves of Christianity. It includes remnants of 1st century Christian communities, such as the St Thomas Christians in India. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches became prominent in the following centuries; their contemporary manifestations overlap with evangelical communities in some corners of the world. More typically, evangelicalism includes spiritual descendants of early Protestant outreaches; the 18th century Moravian mission movement, for example, generated churches in the Caribbean, East Africa and elsewhere that remain vibrant today (Tennent 2010).

The advent of missionary societies in the 19th century generated a new wave of evangelical outreach (Wuthnow 2009). William Carey, often referred to as the father of modern missions, helped create this organizational approach. It enabled thousands of missionaries from

Anglican, Reformed, Wesleyan, Baptist and Anabaptist traditions to establish outposts throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America. They planted churches and worked toward human flourishing in a variety of ways. Robert Woodberry argues that they helped to spread “religious liberty, mass education, mass printing, newspapers, voluntary organizations, most major colonial reforms, and the codification of legal protections for nonwhites in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” (2012, 244). Missionaries maintained a complicated relationship with Western powers in the colonial age.

The early 20th century witnessed the rise of the Pentecostal movement. This wave was punctuated by a series of Pentecostal revivals around the world. They occurred in places as far apart as India (1904), Wales (1904), the U.S. (1906), Korea (1907), and Chile (1909).² These events were comprised of public confessions, healings, “speaking in tongues” and other “manifestations of the Spirit.” The most famous revival of this period occurred on Azusa Street in Los Angeles (1906). The “classical” Pentecostal denominations, which include the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, and the Apostolic Faith Mission, were birthed out of the Azusa Street Revival. These denominations began planting churches as far away as Brazil and South Africa within just a few years (Anderson 2004). Their explosive growth has continued; they are among the largest streams of contemporary evangelicalism throughout the Global South.

Megachurch initiatives, the Word of Faith or “prosperity gospel” movement,³ church planting networks, and the rise of non-government organizations (NGOs) have added the most recent layer of evangelical expressions. Megachurches have popped up around the world; a recent megachurch conference in Korea attracted representatives from Ghana, Guatemala, Kenya, Malaysia, the U.S., and elsewhere. These independent churches have at least 2,000 members; many have 25,000 members or more. Almost all have been founded since 1970. The Word of Faith movement also often uses megachurches as nodes in their global network. These include Lakewood Church (1959) in the United States, Christ Embassy in Nigeria (1987), Livets Ord in Sweden (1985), and New Creation Church (1984) in Singapore. Some of these are accepted as evangelical; others are not. Not all evangelical churches are large: church planting networks often move quickly to plant small churches. One such group is New Covenant Ministries (1982), a South African church growth movement that reports having a presence in over 100 countries. Finally, the growth of evangelical NGOs has kept pace with

the more general explosion of this organizational form in recent decades. Larger Western NGOs such as World Vision and Compassion International often have local NGO or church partners across the Global South. All of these types of organizations have had a strong impact on contemporary evangelical identity.

None of the historical waves just mentioned would consider itself entirely evangelical. But many members in each wave do, and faith-based networks that crisscross the different groups give connectivity and coherence to this remarkably diverse set of actors. It is a treacherous endeavor to estimate the sum total of evangelicals today. Perhaps a safe and general estimation is around 700-900 million people.

Political Tendencies of Global South Evangelicals

Global South evangelicals are increasingly engaging in politics; they can be found across the political spectrum. In Kenya, where politics has strong tribal or ethnic overtones, one can easily find evangelicals plumping for any of the major parties. In El Salvador, where class, commercial sector and geography help to determine politics, the country’s two largest megachurches often support rival candidates. Such diversity can in part be chalked up to two realities: 1) evangelical religious identity in such places has not been as politicized as it is in the U.S., 2) the underlying social cleavages in other societies do not run along the same cultural terrain.

There is often an erratic nature to evangelical political engagement that goes beyond political diversity. This stems from the still shallow institutional character of the movement. Independent evangelical actors enter the public arena from various social locations, political perspectives, and with particular interests. They are often not trained in how to engage the state; they may not have advanced education of any kind. Missteps are common. Add to this the fact that some politicians don the façade of evangelicalism to gain a platform, but neither they nor their agendas reflect the faith. (Jair Bolsonaro, for example, is and remains a Catholic. He began to cultivate evangelical relationships and sympathies several years before he ran for president, but there are numerous empirical problems with the idea that he is an evangelical political leader.) It is not a surprise that more seasoned political actors become dismissive of evangelicals in politics.

Broader religious context also shapes evangelical political life. In places where evangelicals find themselves in a religious minority, they are particularly concerned with

religious freedom. While they tend not to form strategic alliances with other religious minorities in such contexts, they do work toward policies that make religious persecution less likely for all. In other places religious competition between evangelicals and other religions—including other Christian denominations—extends into the political arena. This dynamic is most noticeably true of Christian/Muslim relations in places where tensions run high, particularly in West Africa and parts of Asia. For example, one aspect of the persistent political tensions in the Ivory Coast has involved a perception on the part of numerically dominant Muslims and traditional Catholic elites of a rising evangelical influence within government. In other political spheres evangelicals usually shy away from ecumenical political initiatives. There are, however, important exceptions, as noted in the case study below.

In spite of irregularities and context dependent behavior, some generalities can be stated about evangelical political tendencies. These are the result of the underlying common religious values and beliefs that, although they manifest in different ways, still influence evangelical public life. These are laid out later in the paper.

Case Studies of Evangelical Churches in the Global South

The sketches below provide glimpses of specific evangelical experiences in public life. I begin with the story of an affluent megachurch in South Africa and then move to an impoverished evangelical church in a gang-controlled Salvadoran community.

Rhema Bible Church - Johannesburg, South Africa.

Rhema is a leading evangelical church in South Africa. It was founded in 1979 by Ray McCauley, a white South African. It is part of the transnational Word of Faith, or prosperity gospel, movement. Ray McCauley went to Tulsa, OK in the 1970s, was mentored by Kenneth Hagin Sr., one of the early U.S. prosperity gospel figures, and then returned to start a Rhema church in Johannesburg (Hagin Sr. founded the original Rhema church in Tulsa).

Disagreements soon emerged between the U.S. and South African churches, and the two decided to go their separate ways. Rhema South Africa took the American church's logo out of its own branding. It also repackaged their prosperity message to de-emphasize and nuance (but not completely lose) the message that faith in God brings financial gain. Rhema⁴ is by many

measures the most powerful church in South Africa (Howden 2010), a status it gained independently of Tulsa.

Rhema now has multiple campuses. Its main site is a massive complex in the affluent Johannesburg suburb of Randburg. There is a worship auditorium that seats several thousand people. The property also serves as a Bible college campus. It has a bookshop, a wholesale division, a chapel, and a media department. Rhema's satellite campuses appear in strategic locations throughout the Johannesburg region. Additionally, Rhema partnered with another charismatic megachurch, the Hatfield Christian Church, to start the International Federation of Christian Churches (IFCC) (Anderson & Pillay 1997). The federation (roughly equivalent to a denomination) has more than 400,000 members.

Rhema's influence extends across South Africa's borders. The church remains active in global Word of Faith circles, sending and receiving speakers and other resources across continents. Rhema also utilizes television, radio, the internet, and various social media outlets to connect with followers globally. Its television and radio programming, usually featuring McCauley, is particularly popular throughout Africa and can be viewed in Australia, parts of Asia, and the Middle East (Offutt 2015).

Rhema on Prosperity and Poverty

Rhema encourages financial flourishing and has many wealthy members. The church hopes to help its members "reach the potential God has given them," (Ndabeni 2018). Leading members are not afraid of ostentatious displays of wealth. For those who achieve financial success, Rhema encourages them to continue in their wealth procuring ways.

But an important and consistent element of Rhema's message is that the wealthy should reach out to those who have yet to be materially blessed. Rhema closely ties this message to their understanding of the character of God and how God wants his people to imitate him. As one former member of Rhema articulated, "God is a God who cares, a God who says I'm the provider... He has given us gifts and talents to help others and help ourselves and our families." Such teachings are not particularly controversial. They typify Rhema's approach to the prosperity gospel.

Consistent with this message, Rhema's anti-poverty ministries are extensive. They include job training programs, health care clinics, addiction recovery programs, a children's home, and a community center. The health care clinics, for example, attend to roughly 500 people each day. Like several of Rhema's projects, the health

clinics are run in partnership with the government (Rhema 2019). The church has earned a reputation as a dependable social service provider and willing government partner throughout the Johannesburg area.

Rhema's Political Engagement

Rhema first entered South Africa's political sphere in the 1980s. McCauley took an early stand against apartheid and was a key figure in some of the white churches' declarations of repentance for earlier support of the apartheid regime (Freston 2001). As a result, McCauley's congregation, which started with mostly white congregants, transitioned to being a multicultural but primarily black South African church. Black leaders in national politics and business entered the congregation. An indication of Rhema's strategic position is that the church has been a stop on the presidential election tour for several election cycles, as most major political South African figures have been spotted at Rhema, including the late Nelson Mandela.⁵

Rhema uses its political leverage to support the freedoms guaranteed by the new South Africa. Two of Rhema's four aspirations are to be socially significant and prophetically relevant (the other two goals are to be spiritually vibrant and evangelistically potent) (Offutt 2015). In April 2019, for example, McCauley posted a blog entitled "25 Years of Liberty" as part of a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the end of apartheid. In the blog, McCauley extols the freedoms that are enshrined in South Africa's constitution and praises the country's freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the independent judiciary, and the efforts of the Human Rights Commission to "investigate the violation of anyone's rights," (McCauley 2019a). In a 2018 blog, McCauley endorsed the moves Cyril Ramaphosa made early in his presidency (McCauley 2018). In 2017, Ramaphosa delivered a speech at Rhema encouraging men to become involved in the struggle to end violence against women (Timeslive 2017). Although Zuma also spoke at Rhema early in his presidency, the classical liberalism Ramaphosa stands for resonates well with the approach to governance that Rhema has consistently supported since the 1980s.

Where Rhema is out of step with South Africa's new constitution is how it approaches issues of family and sexuality. Outside of its overt support for women in leadership in their ministry (a minority position among evangelical groups), Rhema's position is traditional. This includes opposition to abortion and same sex marriage (Howden 2010). Rhema finds allies within the national evangelical community in promoting their position, but also among other

religions in South Africa. McCauley helped to found a roundtable of national religious leaders in the 1990s, including Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, African Traditional Religions, and Christians. This group has gone through different formulations, but McCauley remains a co-chair of what is now called the National Interfaith Council of South Africa. The group has advocated for the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other anti-poverty issues. It has also been a place where Rhema finds allies on its more conservative stances. Ron Steele, former assistant of McCauley's, stated: "We've learned to work with [people of other faiths]. I mean, when the abortion issue was debated ... we had an alliance with the Muslims and the Jews and the Hindus in opposing abortion ... So we've learned to form alliances without compromising our faith. It's not about your faith; it's about common values." Rhema's traditional approach to these issues is a central part of its public identity, and one that it sees as consistent with its other public engagement initiatives.

Rhema tends to engage politics most frequently at the national level, but there are issues which draw them into global and transnational discourses. One of these has to do with religion and female disempowerment. In a September 2019 blog McCauley wrote:

Religions all over the world are known for opposing women's autonomy and any space for change, resulting in direct or indirect controls over gender and the curbing of women's rights. They normalize the inequalities within their institutions and doctrines and give their patriarchal policies divine justification by quoting from their holy texts. As the religious sector, we need our own dialogue about the negative impacts that some of our beliefs have had on women, at times contributing to the violence they suffer in society (McCauley 2019b).⁶

McCauley's primary scope of action remains South Africa even as he intentionally engages a global audience. On this issue, for example, McCauley references the global plight of women, but his action step is to proclaim Rhema to be ready to partner with the national government. During the era of the MDGs, McCauley fully supported the global initiative. But again, the primary way he participated was to help spearhead the advocacy work of various religious networks within South Africa. From a strategic perspective, his national focus allows him to work where he can most effectively create social change.

Word of Life Church, lower class El Salvador

The Word of Life Church is located in San Diego, one of El Salvador's lower class, urban neighborhoods. The church's 200 congregants walk or ride their bikes over the unpaved road to get to the cinder block edifice. Most have tenuous employment situations and have had little formal education. Many who come to Word of Life live in houses with dirt floors and walls made of corrugated steel sheets. The community's water source is compromised and overall physical well-being is low. Word of Life is a church of and for the poor.

Word of Life's pastor, Joel Castellanos, applied to run a child development center out of his church. The sponsoring NGO (a prominent U.S.-based evangelical NGO) agreed, and 350 neighborhood children now benefit from a multi-faceted educational enrichment program. The NGO provides enough money for several locally hired employees, curriculum, supplies, and snacks for the students. The program is coordinated with the public school. Castellanos provides local oversight of the ministry.

The NGO does not (and is not equipped to) help Word of Life navigate the neighborhood's security issues. San Diego experiences chronic state failure. Consecutive mayors have been incarcerated, education and health services are severely inadequate, and the rule of law is neither enforced nor properly adjudicated. Similar to neighborhoods across much of lower class El Salvador, gangs have come into this essentially ungoverned space and now control San Diego through violence.

Like other Salvadoran pastors, Castellanos periodically helps youths leave the gang.⁸ But Castellanos explains that the process in San Diego can be complicated. The gang maintains stipulations for the departing youth: he or she has to pay a regular (often monthly) fee. This serves as a reminder that although no longer in the gang, the youth is still under gang control. Gangs also monitor the exiting youth's behavior - if the conversion is not genuine, which the gang measures by whether or not the youth follows evangelicalism's ascetic lifestyle, the gang will kill him or her. Entering the church is also a bit more involved for an ex-gang member. Castellanos explains that "a gang member comes from murdering people, he made a pact with the devil,⁹ he needs a different kind of counseling." The youth must go through this counseling before he or she is eligible for church membership.

Rescuing youths from gangs is just one piece of a larger set of interactions that Castellanos has

with gangs and gang leaders. Just as Castellanos communicates with the gang as a member chooses to leave, he and other pastors also sometimes negotiate punishments that community members face for violating gang rules. Vasquez recounted the example of Hector, the son of a church member, who had stolen over one thousand dollars in cash from the gang. When the gang found out, Hector knew he was in danger. He came to the pastor for assistance. The church put together a delegation to go and speak with the *palabrero*, or leader of that gang clique, who was in prison. The *palabrero* explained that gang regulations stipulated that Hector's punishment was death. The delegation offered to come up with the equivalent amount of money that had been stolen and pay it back if Hector's life was spared. After some discussion, the *palabrero* agreed that the delegation could pay a sum back that exceeded the amount stolen. In return, Hector would be severely beaten, possibly he would suffer bone fractures, but he would not be killed. The delegation accepted these terms: they had achieved their goal of saving Hector's life and knew that a better offer would not be forthcoming.

A third area of gang/church interaction occurs when gang members wish to come to Word of Life church or use the church's ministries. It is not uncommon for gang members to come to a worship service. Most gang members believe in God and, in a study conducted by Cruz et. al (2017), stated that their relationship with God is important to them. Many adolescents currently in gangs attended church as children; many need psychosomatic care because of the violent nature of their lives, and pastors are the most logical people in the communities to provide that care. Such experiences are not universally shared by gang members, but some combination of these do create a draw toward church for many youths in gangs.

Castellanos stated that gang members try to be incognito when they come to services at his church. Still, the church leadership and many members are aware of their presence. When gang members have attended worship services at other churches they have created significant fear in the congregation, but in the case of Word of Life (and some other Salvadoran churches), Castellanos is usually happy to have the opportunity to preach to them. Gang members also enroll their children in the afore-mentioned child development center. The church knows about this and allows it. Castellanos explains it this way: "What we do here is stand our ground... The Christian church is there to help all people. There are several gang children who come. We've never been mugged, and we have

no vigilance, but we have children here who are theirs.”

These examples are evidence of what is widely acknowledged in the community: gangs and evangelicals are the two most important sources of local authority. The Catholic Church seems distant, as it stands in the city center and has no institutional presence in this neighborhood. The police are outsiders. Local residents are wary of police who carry out extrajudicial killings when they do community sweeps (Amnesty International 2018). Children as young as eight and nine years old tell gang members to hide when they notice police preparing to enter. Gangs and churches, on the other hand, are viewed as insiders. Castellanos states that at the local level, “the gang is an organization, and the church is also organized. The gangs, the church, we are recognized as authorities.” All of this points to a larger empirical reality: where the state has failed, evangelicals adapt to their realities in pragmatic ways. Their congregational activities create greater community cohesion; sometimes even for those in gangs or within gangs’ spheres of influence.

Conclusion

Evangelicals are embedded in global security issues at the grassroots level. The security issues are global in the sense that they have transnational causes and consequences. South Africa’s chronic failure to deliver social services, for example, has been impervious to efforts of the international community: South Africa received over \$1 billion/year in Net Official Development Assistance every year from 2008-2016 (World Bank 2019). Still, the country suffers regular energy blackouts, faulty health services, patchy water and sanitation systems, *etc.* The consequences of these shortcomings spill beyond South Africa’s borders in a variety of ways, not least in that they help to foment periodic bursts of xenophobic violence against immigrants from other African countries (Zaheera 2019).

El Salvador’s violence also has transnational causes and consequences. The problem is acute: in 2017 El Salvador’s murder per capita was more than ten times the global average (*Economist* 2018). But the country’s most prominent gangs were imported from Los Angeles (Ward 2013) and the current violence creates heavy emigration flows. Here, too, the international donor community is involved. The U.S. spent \$140 million to bolster El Salvador’s system in 2017 and “is involved in almost every layer of El Salvador’s efforts to cauterize the near-constant gang violence,” (Watkins & Kohut

2018). There are indications that under El Salvador’s new President, Nayib Bukele, U.S. involvement will continue to grow (Nagovitch 2019). Numerous other countries and multilateral organizations have channeled assistance into the country.

Evangelicals are often among the largest religious groups in such contexts: more than a third of the populations of South Africa and El Salvador, for example, are evangelicals (Offutt 2015). Having spawned a variety of organizational forms, including churches, NGOs, community networks, and media outlets, evangelicals have the (often unrealized) potential of being strategic civil society partners. Simply put, evangelical goals, strategies, and proclivities matter. Although evangelical political and social diversity around the world cannot be understated, the following characteristics hold in most contexts:

The primary purpose of churches, including evangelical ones, is worship (Ammerman 2005). This is an important point and should not be ignored. Beyond this, evangelicals have creedal commitments to attend to the poor, the sick, the widow, and the immigrant. The concept of freedom is also central to evangelical teaching; pastors often preach from biblical texts about Christians’ “freedom in Christ.”

Evangelical congregations in the Global South are at once autonomous and transnationally connected. Evangelical leaders in Johannesburg and San Diego, for example, make their own decisions even as they draw on resources from within their transnational community of faith.

Global South evangelicals endorse the nuclear family (traditionally understood) as the basic unit of society and envision the family and church as anchors of a healthy society. Support for political initiatives against divorce, abortion and same sex marriage are rooted in this basic socio-religious commitment.¹⁰ Affluent evangelicals form political partnerships with other traditional groups that share these values, even groups they view as rivals in the religious sphere. Although impoverished evangelicals have more immediate concerns to address and thus seldom engage in this public debate, their sympathies lean in the same direction.

Global South evangelicals actively engage poverty and other related social issues. Frequent evangelical initiatives include efforts at racial and other forms of reconciliation (evangelicals have historically been more focused on reconciliation than on justice¹¹), prison and addiction related ministries, and market friendly poverty alleviation strategies (Cassidy 2019; Miller & Yamamori 2007).

Impoverished evangelicals often navigate conditions wrought by state failure. They often act pragmatically, meaning that they do not pretend that states exercise authority in neighborhoods where this is not the case.

Impoverished evangelicals often engage in “rescue” activities for individuals in crisis. They do so using nonviolent means and at some danger to themselves. Their presence in communities often acts as a buffer (but not a solution) against violent and oppressive patrimonial systems or other informal methods of local governance.

The image of evangelicals in the Global South that emerges is that of a religious

community with a mix of traditional and modern beliefs, values, and actions. Evangelical engagement with sexual and reproductive rights is, for example, traditional. On other issues evangelicals are guided by classically liberal ideals, especially freedom and equality. Global South evangelicals tend to favor freedom of religion, freer movements of people across borders,¹² and the ideal of racial and ethnic inclusion and equality. There are limits to evangelicals’ ability to live up to these ideals: even within nation-states, Christian subgroups often follow ethnic lines. But the ideal, if not the reality, of being a family centered, multi-ethnic, and connected global community is nearly universal.

¹ Even knowing whether ‘evangelical’ is the best term is cause for extended debate. Other possible references include conservative Christians, Pentecostals, orthodox Christians, and spirit-filled Christians. Although imperfect, I believe the term ‘evangelical’ has certain advantages. These include the fact that not all evangelicals are politically conservative, ‘Pentecostal’ is often viewed as a set of religious practices which are used outside of the Christian circles of interest in this paper, Christian orthodoxy can be legitimately debated by different camps within the faith, and evangelicalism covers an important set of faith actors that the term ‘spirit-filled Christian’ does not intend to cover. The Pew Research Center, however, takes a different approach. It is best explained in their 2006 study of Pentecostals.

[\(https://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power-a-10-country-survey-of-pentecostals3/\)](https://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power-a-10-country-survey-of-pentecostals3/)

² If and how these events across the globe were linked is a point of academic debate.

³ Kate Bowler (2013) outlines the prosperity gospel’s long and complicated history in the U.S. The current constellation of prosperity preachers includes Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, and Kenneth Hagin. The prosperity message states that faith can bring health, wealth and victory over life’s problems.

⁴ From this point on, Rhema will be used to reference the Johannesburg-based church.

⁵ Rhema’s prominence has created some envy among competing churches. One affluent, black South African who does not attend Rhema stated that Rhema “is one church that’s got celebrities and non-celebrities ... if you are an unknown, the pastor will not come to you, he will send other people. But if you are a celebrity, he will [pay attention] to you.”

⁶ It should be acknowledged that while McCauley is helping to raise the profile of women’s rights, he is multiply divorced, which is a source of consternation for the church.

⁷ Pseudonyms are used for names of all places and people in this section. This includes the town, the church, and the pastor.

⁸ Multiple studies (Wolseth 2011; Brenneman 2012; O’Neill 2015; Johnson 2017) show that Central American evangelical churches uniquely provide people with a pathway out of gangs. This is possible in part, Brenneman (2012) argues, because gang leaders can observe the life changes that evangelical conversion requires. The new lifestyle includes submission to God through active church attendance, an ascetic lifestyle and a cessation from violence. Gang leaders monitor but also respect these behavior changes.

⁹ The religious practices of gang members are heterogeneous and complicated. One window into gangs’ cosmology are the frequent references to “the beast”, a term which has multiple meanings. Sometimes it is another name for Satan; sometimes it is a personification or spiritualization of acts of violence, particularly homicide. Raul, an inmate and former gang member, said that “... Many [gang members] worry, ‘how will God will take care of me if I’m killing [other people]?’ And they say “No, the beast, the beast is with me,” and they cling to some relationship with the beast, which is the Devil, as protection... they cling to the [idea] that “no, the beast is with us,” “the beast has taken care of us,” “the beast, we must entrust things to the beast.” This psychological and spiritual dependence on the beast is often worked out through formal rituals, including, in some cases, human sacrifices.

Lower class churches that accept converted gang members for membership do not have uniform procedures for dealing with these issues. Some will seek to cast out any evil spirits that may afflict the individual, but pastors will more frequently seek to use corporate and individual prayer, Bible study, and pastoral counseling in these cases.

¹⁰ Ava, a black South African lawyer with an ivy league education, is a case in point. In an interview, Ava expressed dismay about a prominent strip club near her Johannesburg home. She argued that South Africa’s new freedoms should not have the effect of making sex a highly visible public commodity. This, to Ava’s way of thinking, exploits women and debases communities. She applied a quote by a favorite British scribe of evangelicals, CS Lewis, to her current context: “we make men without chests and

expect of them virtue and enterprise.” Evangelicals devise various strategies to promote what they believe is a more wholesome vision of public life.

¹¹ In areas of conflict across the Global South more progressive theological groups often argue that peace requires changes in the way societies are structured (a more just society). Evangelicals tend to emphasize the

restoration of relationships between individuals and groups without dwelling on underlying social structures.

¹² Evangelicals in San Diego have no ethical qualms whatsoever about undocumented migration. It is part of their pragmatic response to broken state systems. Some congregations even have annual events celebrating their friends and family who have gone to the U.S. and who send remittances back in support of the church.

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