


# Reconciliation as mission: A classical Pentecostal reading of Isak Burger's leadership in the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa



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**Background:** The Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa, although rooted in early classical Pentecostal revivalism, developed within a context marked by apartheid, segregation and theological polarisation. As a result, the church faced deep structural fragmentation and racial separation that mirrored national socio-political inequality. The presidency of Dr Isak Burger (1988–2016) marked a decisive turning point in which the AFM entered a process of reconciliation, cultural integration and ecclesial restructuring. This study examines how Burger's leadership reflects a classical Pentecostal ecclesiology where spiritual empowerment, relational leadership and cultural plurality are understood as integral to the church's mission.

**Objectives:** The article analyses Burger's 'missiology of life' and its role in transforming the AFM from a racially divided institution into a unified, diverse Pentecostal community shaped by reconciliation and shared identity in Christ.

**Method:** A historical-theological and missiological research design is used. Primary sources – including AFM synod reports and Burger's publications – are analysed alongside secondary scholarship to trace how his ecclesial reforms emerged and were implemented within post-apartheid realities and classical Pentecostal theological commitments.

**Results:** Findings of this study reveal that Burger's leadership facilitated structural unification, intercultural leadership development and participatory worship grounded in Spirit-led relationality and the *missio Dei*.

**Conclusion:** Burger's presidency demonstrates that classical Pentecostal mission is not solely evangelistic but also deeply reconciling, communal and transformational.

**Contribution:** This study offers a framework for leadership and mission in historically divided African Pentecostal churches, contributing to Practical Theology and global Pentecostal scholarship.

**Keywords:** Apostolic Faith Mission; classical Pentecostalism; Isak Burger; reconciliation; missiology of life; ecclesial unity; *missio Dei*.

## Introduction

The Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa, founded in 1908, is among the oldest and most influential Pentecostal movements in Africa. Rooted in the early global Pentecostal revival, particularly the Azusa Street Revival, the AFM emphasised the baptism of the Spirit, the exercise of spiritual gifts and evangelistic fervour (Anderson 2000). However, despite its spiritual vitality, the church was not insulated from the structural and cultural inequalities of South African society. Under apartheid, racialised laws and societal divisions penetrated ecclesial structures, resulting in segregated synods, culturally differentiated worship practices, and unequal access to leadership roles and resources (Burger 2005; Mzondi 2023). These structural inequities often coexisted with vibrant spiritual life, creating tensions between Pentecostal ideals of unity and the realities of racial and administrative segregation.

Dr. Isak Burger's presidency (1988–2016) occurred in a critical historical moment. He inherited a church that was fragmented along racial and cultural lines, yet brimming with spiritual enthusiasm. His leadership represents a case study in classical Pentecostal mission that integrates spiritual vitality with ethical leadership, cultural sensitivity and relational ecclesiology. This study examines how Burger's leadership embodies a Pentecostal understanding of the *missio Dei*

that prioritises reconciliation, inclusivity and participatory leadership, transforming the AFM into a diverse, reconciled and spiritually vibrant community.

This article situates Burger's leadership within the historical realities of apartheid and the emerging post-apartheid Pentecostal landscape, exploring how a classical Pentecostal vision of mission can address structural division, cultural marginalisation and leadership inequality. It addresses critical questions for Pentecostal praxis: How can classical Pentecostal churches authentically participate in God's mission in contexts of historical division? How can leadership embody Spirit-led relationality, humility and inclusivity while fostering ecclesial unity? Burger's presidency provides rich insights into these questions, demonstrating the theological and practical significance of leadership as participation in God's reconciling work.

## Purpose of the study

The primary aim of this study is to examine Dr. Isak Burger's theological and missiological leadership within the AFM of South Africa, focusing on his strategies to transform a racially and culturally divided church into a reconciled and diverse Pentecostal community. The study highlights the intersection of Spirit-led leadership, relational ecclesiology and missional praxis, situating Burger's approach within classical Pentecostal theology and African post-apartheid realities. The investigation contributes to scholarly understanding of Pentecostal leadership, reconciliation and mission praxis in historically divided African churches, offering models for both local and global Pentecostal communities.

## Historical and theological context: Apartheid and Pentecostal fragmentation

The AFM's formation reflected the egalitarian ethos of early Pentecostalism, which emphasised the baptism of the Spirit and the availability of spiritual gifts to all believers, regardless of social or racial status (Anderson 2000). However, socio-political realities in South Africa led to structural segregation within the church. During apartheid, the AFM institutionalised racially distinct synods: white congregants administered one synod, while black, mixed race and Indian members were confined to separate administrative structures (Burger 2005; De Wet 2019). These divisions extended beyond administration into liturgy, pastoral leadership and theological education, limiting the participation of historically marginalised groups.

Despite these divisions, Pentecostal spiritual vitality thrived across racial boundaries. Prayer meetings, revival gatherings and worship services flourished, reflecting the experiential and charismatic dimensions of Pentecostalism (Anderson 2000; Bosch 1991). Yet, this vibrancy coexisted with structural inequities, creating a tension between spiritual inclusivity

and organisational exclusivity (Atabongwoung, Lütz & Austin 2023; Mzondi 2023). European-influenced worship and governance models reinforced cultural hierarchies, marginalising indigenous expressions of worship and leadership. African congregants developed parallel worship practices incorporating local musical styles, proverbs and spiritual expressions, often underappreciated or ignored by central leadership (Kgatle 2020; Mzondi 2023).

The AFM's structural and cultural fragmentation exemplifies a missiological challenge. Evangelistic efforts tended to focus on individual salvation over holistic societal transformation, reflecting a narrow engagement with the *missio Dei* (Anderson 2013; Bosch 2011). Mission was hierarchical and paternalistic, with theological guidance and resources flowing predominantly from white-dominated synods to marginalised communities, reproducing systemic inequities (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Walls 2002). Leadership formation in marginalised communities was limited, further entrenching dependency and constraining participatory engagement (Kgatle & Ngubane 2023; Mofokeng 2024). Syncretistic practices, such as integrating indigenous healing rituals, were often viewed as doctrinal deviations rather than legitimate contextual expressions of Pentecostal faith (Mokhoathi 2017; Shingange 2023).

By the late 1980s, the AFM faced a dual crisis: reconciling Pentecostal spiritual vitality with structural unity and integrating diverse cultural expressions while maintaining theological fidelity. This context laid the foundation for Dr. Isak Burger's transformative leadership, which sought not only administrative unification but also the reconciliation of worship, leadership and cultural diversity in alignment with God's mission.

## The uniting church: *Missio Dei* and structural reconciliation

### Contextualising unity under Dr. Isak Burger

Upon assuming the presidency of the AFM in 1988, Dr. Isak Burger inherited a church fragmented along racial and cultural lines. He approached leadership with a vision that integrated a theological commitment to the *missio Dei* with a practical awareness of South Africa's socio-political transformation (Burger 2012; Mzondi 2023). Burger's leadership model emphasised relational and participatory decision-making, reflecting the Trinitarian ideal of mutual love, dialogue and cooperation. He argued that the church must embody God's reconciling work both structurally and relationally, moving beyond apartheid-era paternalism and hierarchical control (Atabongwoung et al. 2023).

### Practical initiatives and structural reform

Burger translated theological principles into concrete ecclesial reforms. Key initiatives included the formal unification of synods in 1996, cross-cultural pastoral exchanges, joint leadership councils and inclusive theological

education programmes (Burger 2005; Mzondi 2023). Efforts to redress historical inequities included scholarships, mentorship programmes and participatory decision-making processes that empowered historically marginalised communities (Shingange 2023).

This approach exemplifies classical Pentecostal mission: the Spirit empowers believers to live reconciled lives, and the church models God's relationality through inclusive leadership and participatory governance. By integrating structural reform with spiritual and missiological imperatives, Burger's leadership facilitated a reconciled and culturally diverse ecclesial community.

### Missiological implications

Burger's leadership illustrates that reconciliation is central to Pentecostal mission. Mission extends beyond proclamation to creating spaces for historical healing, intercultural dialogue and relational accountability (Bosch 2011; Mofokeng 2024). Contextualised worship, leadership development and cultural integration reinforced both theological fidelity and participatory mission (Mokhoathi 2017; Mzondi 2023).

## The diverse church: Missiology of life and Pentecostal identity

### Theological foundations

Burger's 'missiology of life' situates mission within the relational and reconciling work of the Triune God. *Missio Dei* encompasses spiritual, social and cultural dimensions of life, emphasising that Pentecostal mission involves both proclamation and transformation (Bosch 2011; Burger 2012). Central to this vision is Pentecostal pneumatology: the Spirit empowers believers to embody unity, foster reconciliation and participate in God's life-giving work across diverse communities (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Mzondi 2023).

The Trinitarian relational model undergirds this missiology. As the Father, Son and Spirit exist in mutual love and shared mission, so should the church reflect relational equality, mutual respect and participatory engagement in leadership and worship (Bosch 1991; Kärkkäinen 2012). Burger reframed Pentecostal mission as holistic, encompassing worship, communal life and social engagement, moving beyond narrow evangelistic priorities.

### Embracing cultural and racial diversity

In Burger's framework, diversity is a theological opportunity. Historical divisions produced parallel spiritual practices, which were integrated into unified worship and leadership structures. Music, preaching and communal practices from various racial and cultural backgrounds were acknowledged as Spirit-led expressions of faith (Kgatle & Ngubane 2023; Shingange 2023).

This approach reflects classical Pentecostal principles: the Spirit cultivates unity amid diversity, empowering believers to express authentic faith within their cultural contexts while maintaining theological integrity (Mofokeng 2024; Mokhoathi 2017). By embracing diversity, Burger fostered a participatory and relational church that mirrors God's reconciled community.

### Participatory and relational mission

Burger emphasised participatory mission, challenging hierarchical structures inherited from apartheid-era administration. Leadership was distributed, mentorship encouraged and historically marginalised voices amplified (Anderson 2013; Mzondi 2023). Initiatives included cross-cultural leadership workshops, shared worship experiences and community engagement projects, embodying holistic mission through reconciliation, justice and Spirit-led communal life (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Burger 2012).

### Implications for contemporary Pentecostal mission

Burger's model redefines mission as relational, culturally sensitive and ethically engaged. Spirit-led Pentecostalism can transcend racial, social and cultural barriers without compromising doctrine. His leadership provides a paradigm for African Pentecostal churches navigating post-conflict, post-colonial and post-apartheid realities, contributing to global mission discourse (Kgatle 2020; Mzondi 2023).

### Scriptural and theological interpretation

Dr. Isak Burger's leadership finds deep resonance in several key biblical texts, which illuminate the theological underpinnings of his approach to reconciliation, diversity and participatory leadership. Acts 10, Ephesians 2:14–19 and Philippians 2:5–11 provide crucial lenses through which to understand his praxis.

### Acts 10: Crossing cultural boundaries

Acts 10 narrates Peter's encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile, where the Spirit compels Peter to embrace a radical inclusivity. Peter's hesitation and eventual obedience illustrate the Spirit-led call to transcend cultural, ethnic and social barriers, expanding the community of God beyond familiar boundaries (Anderson 2000; Kärkkäinen 2012). For Burger, this narrative embodies a missiological imperative: leadership must actively facilitate reconciliation among historically divided communities. The Spirit empowers leaders to recognise and validate the gifts, traditions and contributions of all members, regardless of their background. Burger's implementation of cross-cultural pastoral exchanges, synod unification and inclusive theological education reflects this scriptural principle in a practical ecclesial context (Burger 2012; Mzondi 2023).

### Ephesians 2: Structural and relational unity

Ephesians 2:14–19 presents Christ as the reconciling centre, breaking down walls of hostility and creating 'one new

humanity'. This text profoundly resonates with the AFM's apartheid-era divisions. Burger's vision of leadership aligns with the biblical mandate for unity, emphasising both structural and relational reconciliation. Leadership becomes a ministry of peace, modelling hospitality, equity and communal belonging. Through synod unification and participatory governance, Burger enabled historically marginalised communities to exercise agency and contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Bosch 2011). Pentecostal pneumatology reinforces this dynamic, affirming that reconciliation is not only doctrinal but experiential, manifesting in worship, communal life and relational accountability.

### Philippians 2: Humility and kenotic leadership

Philippians 2:5–11 underscores the kenotic nature of Christ's leadership, characterised by humility, self-emptying and service. For Burger, this text informs a model of leadership that challenges hierarchical domination and fosters empowerment. Leadership is not a pursuit of status or authority but a ministry of enabling others to participate fully in God's mission. Through mentoring programmes, cross-cultural workshops and inclusive governance, Burger operationalised kenotic leadership, ensuring that leadership reflected servanthood, relational equity and communal flourishing (Anderson 2013; Burger 2012). Pentecostal charismata and Spirit empowerment underpin these processes, providing both the spiritual vitality and relational capacity necessary to sustain structural and cultural reconciliation.

### Normative reflection: Leadership as participation in God's mission

Leadership in the AFM under Burger exemplifies a normative Pentecostal understanding of leadership as participation in God's *missio Dei*. It is neither managerial nor bureaucratic but inherently theological, relational and participatory (Anderson 2000; Bosch 1991). Leaders serve as conduits of God's reconciling work, modelling inclusivity, cross-cultural respect and ethical accountability.

### Participatory ecclesiology

Burger's leadership highlights the necessity of participatory ecclesiology. Decision-making is distributed; emerging leaders are mentored and empowered; historical inequities are addressed through structural reforms and community engagement (Mzondi 2023). Participation is both spiritual and practical: congregants exercise gifts, contribute to worship and mission and engage in communal discernment. This approach reflects the Trinitarian relational model, where equality, mutual respect and shared mission are foundational to ecclesial life (Bosch 1991; Kärkkäinen 2012).

### Spirit-led relationality

Spirit-led relationality forms the core of Burger's leadership philosophy. Leaders are guided by the Spirit to cultivate unity, foster reconciliation and nurture cultural diversity.

The Spirit's empowerment ensures that relational engagement is not merely symbolic but transformative, enabling diverse communities to cohere into a unified Pentecostal body while maintaining theological fidelity (Burger 2012; Mzondi 2023).

### Ethical and missiological accountability

Leadership, in this framework, entails ethical responsibility and missiological discernment. Leaders must navigate historical injustices, cultural tensions and social disparities, ensuring that ecclesial structures reflect God's justice and mercy. This entails active mentorship, conflict resolution and the creation of participatory structures that empower marginalised voices. Burger's approach demonstrates that normative Pentecostal leadership integrates spirituality, ethics and practical governance (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Bosch 2011).

## Pragmatic implications: Pastoral strategies, conflict transformation and church formation

Burger's leadership offers tangible strategies for pastoral praxis, particularly relevant in multicultural, immigrant and historically divided church contexts.

### Relational pastoral strategies

Pastoral strategies under Burger prioritise relational engagement over administrative control. Leaders mentor emerging pastors, facilitate intercultural dialogue and foster participatory leadership structures (Kgatlé & Ngubane 2023; Shingange 2023). Congregants are empowered to contribute meaningfully to worship, decision-making and mission initiatives, fostering communal resilience and spiritual vitality.

### Conflict transformation

Conflict in multicultural churches often stems from historical, cultural and structural tensions. Burger reframed conflict as an opportunity for reconciliation rather than dysfunction. Practical interventions include structured dialogue, collaborative decision-making, joint worship experiences and intentional integration of diverse spiritual expressions. These initiatives operationalise the principles of Acts 10, Ephesians 2 and Philippians 2, transforming conflict into spaces for healing, dialogue and mutual recognition (Anderson 2013; Mzondi 2023).

### Church formation and cultural integration

Church formation under Burger emphasises proactive engagement with contextual realities. Churches provide spiritual, social and material support to marginalised members, acknowledge cultural identities and integrate indigenous worship expressions. Cross-cultural leadership workshops, shared liturgical practices and participatory governance

embody this integrative approach. Through these initiatives, congregants actively participate in God's mission, reinforcing relational cohesion, spiritual growth and communal flourishing (Atabongwoung et al. 2023; Burger 2012).

### Implications for immigrant and multicultural churches

Burger's leadership model is particularly instructive for African Pentecostal churches in diasporic or multicultural contexts. Spirit-led, relational and participatory leadership enables churches to navigate diversity, historical division and social complexity without compromising theological integrity. His framework offers a paradigm for contemporary African Pentecostalism, illustrating how mission can be holistic, contextually sensitive and ethically engaged.

### Comparative analysis: African and global Pentecostal contexts

Burger's leadership offers insights beyond the South African context. Across Africa, Pentecostal churches grapple with historical divisions, cultural diversity and leadership inequality. Burger's model demonstrates that classical Pentecostal principles – Spirit empowerment, relational ecclesiology and participatory governance – can effectively address these challenges. Moreover, his approach contributes to global Pentecostal discourse by providing a framework for understanding leadership, reconciliation and mission in culturally complex contexts (Kgatle 2020; Mzondi 2023). The AFM's experience under Burger illustrates that Pentecostal mission extends beyond evangelistic growth to embrace social transformation, cultural integration and ecclesial reconciliation.

### Conclusion

Dr. Isak Burger's leadership of the AFM of South Africa provides a compelling classical Pentecostal model of leadership as participation in God's reconciling mission. Through a 'missiology of life to diversity', Burger transformed a historically divided, racially segregated church into a reconciled, diverse and Spirit-empowered community. Leadership, interpreted through Acts 10, Ephesians 2 and Philippians 2, emphasises inclusivity, kenotic service and relational empowerment.

Theologically, Burger's leadership affirms that leadership is not merely administrative but a space of divine participation, where reconciliation, cultural integration and spiritual vitality intersect. Practically, his vision informs pastoral strategies, conflict transformation and church formation that are participatory, Spirit-led and contextually sensitive. Burger's missiology exemplifies how Pentecostal spirituality can faithfully engage African cultural realities, embody justice and reconciliation and provide a model for national and global mission praxis.

Ultimately, classical Pentecostal leadership, as demonstrated by Burger, invites contemporary churches to embrace

Spirit-led humility, relational inclusivity and holistic participation in God's *missio Dei*, transforming communities into reconciled, vibrant and culturally diverse ecclesial bodies. His legacy underscores the profound potential of Pentecostalism to contribute meaningfully to ecclesial unity, social justice and cross-cultural mission.

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#### CRedit authorship contribution

Zephania Mundhluri: Writing – original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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