

**New Wine in Old Wineskins: A Study of Pentecostal Conversion in a German  
Lutheran Immigrant Community**  
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*“The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound  
thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth:  
so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”*  
*-John 3:8 (King James Version)*

Recent scholarship has produced a variety of valuable books on more discrete themes...perhaps most importantly, in light of possible future developments in religious practice, valuable new research is being published on the Pentecostal-Holiness aspects of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction:

Writing as he was in 1991, Henry Bowden’s words could not have been more prescient. Pentecostalism as a field of study for the academy has blossomed during the past two decades and interest has continued through to the present.<sup>2</sup> Much of this new curiosity about the Pentecostal movement as such can be tied to its immense growth over the course of the twentieth century. As it transitioned from isolated outposts in Kansas, Los Angeles, India, and elsewhere to its current status as a movement nipping at the heels of more staid world religious establishments, Pentecostalism has become a force with which to be reckoned.

Much of the growth in Pentecostalism in the past century has occurred in the developing world—most notably Latin America. It is here that sociologist David Martin is a particularly helpful resource, for in both *Tongues of Fire* (1990) and to a large extent *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (2002) he spends a good deal of time discussing the manner in which the Pentecostal faith comes about, is practiced, and functions in the lives of individuals. From this he proceeds to ask larger questions related to sociology, modernity, and secularization.

Explaining both the growth and effects of Pentecostalism—which are in many ways intertwined—

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Bowden, *Church Historiography in an Age of Uncertainty: Historiographical Patterns in the United States, 1906-1990* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 185.

<sup>2</sup> Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) are both examples of this. Wacker’s book provides a fascinating look at the early years of the movement while Jenkins describes what he sees as the growing Christianity in the developing world—which seems very Pentecostal.

Martin pays particular attention to the manner and processes by which Pentecostals become Pentecostals. For instance, especially in South America, conversion to the charismatic faith is at the same time a conversion from Catholicism—whether it be faithfully practiced or formally inherited. As Martin analyzes the phenomenon in his *Tongues of Fire* and develops it on a world scale in *The World Their Parish*, he provides readers with a thought-provoking thesis for conversion related to the processes of modernity and secularization.

With Martin, this paper is concerned with the underlying reasons and systems involved in the appropriation of the Pentecostal faith. But rather than focusing on Latin America Catholics, it seeks to tell the story of a small group of German Lutheran immigrants who settled in southern New Jersey following the Second World War and subsequently converted to Pentecostalism in the 1960s. In dialogue with the conclusions drawn by David Martin vis-à-vis world religion and especially Latin American Pentecostalism, this paper attempts to discover the reasons for their change of faith. Stated simply, the question is a basic one: “Why did they become Pentecostals?” Though in answer we can only begin to offer the most preliminary of responses, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to the body of work discussing world Pentecostalism by analyzing the many complex factors at work that continue to defy reduction to a single formula. Like the essays in Robert Hefner’s *Conversion to Christianity*, we will look at “the reformulation of social relations, cultural meanings, and personal experience in terms of putatively Christian ideals” and “explore Christian conversion in its full complexity—sociological and historical, cultural and psychological.”<sup>3</sup> This said, my analysis will show that **it**

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Hefner, “Introduction: World Building and the Rationality of Conversion,” in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley:

**is not only, or even primarily the larger social forces that were key to conversion but also more immediate religious and personal needs which provide the best means of understanding the individuals who would comprise the nascent Deutsche Volle Evangeliumsgemeinde (German Full Gospel Church) of Bridgeton, NJ.**

## **II. Methodological Matters:**

In the process of my research I drew heavily on a set of interviews recorded for the church’s fortieth anniversary celebration in 2004. Though the issues discussed at that time sometimes went far afield of the type of questions asked in this paper and were often more theological and devotional in nature, important sociological and historical insights can be gained by listening to the stories as narrated. These interviews included the following individuals: the Reverend Alfred and Ernestine Ziefle, the founding minister and his wife; Renate Schmidt<sup>4</sup> & Ella Nurnberg, founding members of the church; and a married couple, Rudi and Helene Kolbe, and single woman, Elfriede Zibulski, all of whom assisted Rev. Ziefle from the earliest days in Bridgeton. Each of the interviews were conducted during the summer of 2004 with the exception of a follow-up discussion with Renate Schmidt in the fall of 2005.

The oral histories obtained from those directly involved in the religious awakening of 1964 will form the central core of this paper. From them we will gain insight both into the religious and ethnic background of those involved as well as the events that marked their conversions. Other background materials obtained in part through the Seabrook Educational

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University of California Press, 1993), 3-4. Though the dichotomy of traditional vs. world religion is not as clear in this seemingly inter-denominational shift, it would seem that parallels might be drawn between “tribal” Lutheranism and a more far-reaching Pentecostalism.

<sup>4</sup> Name changed.

Cultural Center (Seabrook, NJ), including general information about the social makeup of the community, transcripts of oral histories from other members of the community, and the recorded history of the local Lutheran Church will be utilized in an attempt to gain a clearer picture of the situation. Following and in dialogue with this process I will offer some initial impressions and explanations of what appear to be the forces at work. After this, the sociological thought of David Martin and others will be considered as we attempt to arrive at some answer to the question of conversion that lies at the heart of this examination. Lastly, some tentative conclusions and directions for further research will be offered in this still most preliminary of investigations.

I would be remiss to move forward at point without offering an important admission. The church in question is the one in which I first came to faith and was taught the ways of Pentecost. In many ways the concerns and subject matter of this paper are therefore close to the heart of its author. For not only do many of the questions and issues here raised derive from a deep-seated Pentecostal faith, but I myself remain personally connected to the individuals and congregation in question. The stories related here are in some sense my own story and the subjects described have been fellow worshippers; even their shared ethnicity is my own. To bring matters to the finest point possible, it is not an exaggeration to say that without this congregation and the events of the summer of 1964, I would never have been born or raised in the faith. For it was my grandfather, the Reverend Alfred Ziefle, who first met the German immigrants of Bridgeton and disciplined them the ways of Pentecost. Though two generations removed from the still-revered founding pastor, my relationship to him was neither lost on me

nor those whom I interviewed. While the spectre of bias and agenda-seeking is thus a constant and obvious danger, it is hoped that my status as a favorite son has, rather than polluted my perspective, allowed me unique access to sources, individuals, and stories that I might have never otherwise procured.

### **III. An Early History of the *Deutsche Volle Evangeliumsgemeinde*:**

The story of the Germans of southern New Jersey has a unique history that predates the events of the summer of 1964. Author Charles Harrison is especially helpful here he sets the scene in his book *Growing a Global Village: Making History at Seabrook Farms*. As he writes, “in provincial Cumberland Country, New Jersey, 125 miles south of New York City but closer to Old Dixie’s heart and soul, a seed planted by a father and son grew into the first and only rural global village of its kind in America.”<sup>5</sup> Headed most notably by visionary Charles F. Seabrook and later called the “Biggest Vegetable Factory in the world” by *Life Magazine*<sup>6</sup>, his farm was a major industry in the region, using near its zenith approximately 54,000 acres of farmland in which “during the peak growing months, 7500 employees worked ‘round the clock seven days a week.”<sup>7</sup> An entrepreneur in the farming business, Seabrook in a search for workers brought individuals from diverse regions of the world together on his farms. In addition to workers from the American South and Jamaica, he during the Second World War worked successfully to employ displaced Japanese persons on his farm. As Harrison writes, “when Japanese Americans

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<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Harrison, *Growing a Global Village: Making History at Seabrook Farms* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2003), 1. As a “global community,” one wonders if with the forces of globalization, removal from traditional indigenous cultures, and confrontation with many different others, Seabrook has presaged later developments on the international scene.

<sup>6</sup> “Biggest Vegetable Factory on Earth,” *Life*, 3 January 1955, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, 59.

Joshua R. Ziefle, “New Wine...”

agreed to come to Seabrook Farms, they pledged to work there for at least three months,”<sup>8</sup> in the process forming a community that remains to this day.

In the wake of war, additional international developments helped to transplant other distinct ethnic groups to the sleepy village. With the United States’ passage of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which was enacted “To authorize for a limited period of time the admission into the United States of certain European displaced persons for permanent residence, and for other purposes,”<sup>9</sup> a number of refugees from Europe were able to immigrate to America. Included in this number were 600 Estonians that came to Seabrook for work through the auspices of the Lutheran Church and Charles Seabrook. In a comment that is important for our later discussion, Harrison notes that “a number of the Estonians...were college educated and had had responsible positions in business, the professions, and government in their homeland.”<sup>10</sup> It was these same Estonian Lutherans that came to worship at Northville Lutheran Church in Seabrook. According to a small work entitled “The Estonian Community of Seabrook, New Jersey” published by the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center (SECC):

The national religious tradition is very much a part of the Seabrook Estonians... Estonians found an increasing need to establish their own Estonian congregation...Soon a chapel dating back to 1860 was discovered...[and] the trustees granted permission to use the building and the surrounding graveyard.<sup>11</sup>

After the Estonians settled in the region, one of the last ethnic groups to work at the farms arrived. In the words of Rev. Philip Tammaru, current Estonian pastor of Northville, “The

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>9</sup> Displaced Persons Act of 1948, available from <http://tucnak.fsv.cuni.cz/~calda/Documents/1940s/Displaced%20Persons%20Act%20of%201948.html> (Online).

<sup>10</sup> Harrison, 74.

<sup>11</sup> Milli Poldma, *The Estonian Community of Seabrook, New Jersey: From Displaced Persons Camp to Success in America* (Seabrook, NJ: Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, Inc., 1995), 6-7.

Germans came a bit later. As I mentioned, I think the Estonians started to come in 1949-50. The first Germans came here in 1952.”<sup>12</sup> These German people were eligible to come under the auspices of the Act by nature of their status as *volksdeutsch*. Because they hailed from other eastern European lands yet “held fast to their German heritage and customs”<sup>13</sup> their status was different than that of the *reichsdeutsch* who would have been born and raised in Germany proper and for this reason, in the words of one interview subject, “couldn’t move out to here”<sup>14</sup> by means of the Displaced Persons Act. The Rev. Philip Tammaru helps to put the picture in perspective, commenting that “The Germans here were those Germans who were living in Russia, or parts of Russia and Romania. So, we have some Germans who have lived in Ukraine, Romania, and some in Poland and during the war they were either driven out or they sometimes just escaped toward Germany.”<sup>15</sup> In many ways this constituted a difficult situation for the individuals involved as they faced the prospects being continual outsiders. As Renate Schmidt remarked in an interview:

A policeman saw [her traditional German clothing] and he said I was a Nazi...in Poland. And so they treated us there as German. But when we come to Germany, they said “You are Polish or Ukrainian. You are not German” ...that’s why we moved out to here [America]...<sup>16</sup>

As the *volksdeutsch* began to come to South Jersey in 1952, they often did so along family lines and chose to build their homes in close proximity to one another. As Rev. Tammaru of

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Tammaru, interview by William Brown, *Seabrook Village: Oral Histories of a Community*, vol. 1, (Seabrook, NJ: SECC, 1997), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, 84.

<sup>14</sup> Renate Schmidt, interview by author, 1 December 2005. Whether or not all the Germans who arrived in the region were there because of the Displaced Persons Act is unknown. Because the Kaser family seem to have come after the Act’s provisions ended, further inquiries should be made regarding the auspices under which they and perhaps others arrived. Even so, the disruption they likely experienced in postwar Europe was probably more than enough to affect them as per earlier refugees.

<sup>15</sup> Tammaru, 5.



Northville Lutheran Church reminisces, “some of the Germans are pretty close here, not in Seabrook, but close to Seabrook. There’s what we call a German village, actually not a German village but it’s a group of people who bought land and built their own houses close by...”<sup>17</sup> Many still live in these houses today. Taken as but one part of the whole community revolving around Seabrook Farms, one can clearly understand what is meant when author Charles Harrison called the area a “global village.”<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point that we must turn our attention to religious matters specifically, for most of the Germans that directly relate to our study were Lutherans and wished, it seems, to continue the cultural and religious traditions of the Old World. While the full extent of these traditions involves what it most likely a much larger story, it is clear their faith became a touchstone in the United States. As such they came to worship at Northville Lutheran Church, finding their place in a church dominated by the Estonian presence. Some indication of the situation may be seen through the words of local German Ida Mueller Hintz: “The Estonian people must have been here like two years before us because they know how to speak already, and we didn’t know nothing.”<sup>19</sup> Of this Rev. Tammaru notes that “The Germans were lucky because all the Estonian pastors also spoke German so they used the same pastors, and used the same building.”<sup>20</sup> The Lutheran church thus began to have two services on Sunday mornings, one for the Estonians in their tongue, and the other for the German people in their language. All during this period and to

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<sup>16</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Tammaru, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Ida Mueller Hintz, interview by William Brown, *Seabrook Village: Oral Histories of a Community*, vol. 1, (Seabrook, NJ: SECC, 1997), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Tammaru, 6.

this day the double congregation has also shared a pastor—always an Estonian—who spoke both German and Estonian.<sup>21</sup>

Though there are rather large gaps in the extent oral histories during the period from the early 1950s to 1964, based on the fact that the great majority of German immigrants remained Lutheran before the time of their Pentecostal conversion indicates a seemingly stable status quo during those years. Three comments gleaned during the interviews remain helpful in characterizing the situation. The first of these is from Ella Nurnberg, who indicated of her and her family that "Our background was Lutheran. And we were strict Lutheran..."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Rev. Ziefle noted that at the time of his arrival in Bridgeton, the level of faith and biblical knowledge was very low: "I don't know if they were very faithful [attendees of the Lutheran Church] but their theology if they had any... the knowledge of the Bible Scriptures was very vague..."<sup>23</sup> A final consideration is that offered by Renate Schmidt, who noted that she felt even before hearing the Pentecostal message that there was something missing in her faith:

[in the Lutheran Church] the message was good...and, but we didn't tell it everything. I knew that I need more. And I told to my husband one time, "You know we sit in church go in church, but we will be lost." And he said, "If everybody be lost, then we will be lost too." And I said, "I no want be lost. I no want to go to Hell."<sup>24</sup>

This perceived lack of salvific faith was apparently what drew her to the first Pentecostal meetings, a desire that upon further questioning was found to have a background in Baptist teachings she had heard while still in Europe: "I knew already from Poland that is Baptist...I

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<sup>21</sup> When asked if the Germans had ever wanted to have their own German pastor, Renate Schmidt replied that she did not think they "could afford like that," Schmidt, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ella Nurnberg, interview by Diane Kuk, Summer 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Alfred Ziefle, interview by Suzanne Nurnberg and author, 8 July 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Renate Schmidt, interview by Suzanne Nurnberg and author, 27 July 2004.

heard something from Baptists, y’know...I was praying that something should happen over here.”<sup>25</sup>

The initial point of contact between these German Lutherans and the man who would begin organizing the local prayer meetings that eventually coalesced into a full-fledged congregation was at an Oral Roberts Crusade meeting in the summer of 1964. Hearing about the event, one local German family traveled to the meetings seeking healing for physical needs:

We heard this from our cousin, Jacob Mohr, he came to our house and he said in Philadelphia is Oral Roberts and he has healing crusade. Maybe we should go there. So we decided, my husband Paul, my mom and dad, and we went there.<sup>26</sup>

There, they met a young *volksdeutsch* minister from Philadelphia named Alfred Ziefle who was able to speak to them in German. Inviting him to come to southern New Jersey to continue the discussions they had at the Crusade, they returned to their homes in Bridgeton. As Rev. Ziefle later remembered, “And they in turn invited us after the meetings, if we would come to Bridgeton, New Jersey to tell them more about the gospel, about Jesus, and so that’s how it started.”<sup>27</sup> When he arrived a few weeks later he found that the few people he had met had invited numerous friends and family. By some estimates, the number of people at this meeting numbered anywhere from 20-35 individuals.<sup>28</sup> Yet while a sizable group, it by no means composed a majority of the over 100 Germans<sup>29</sup> that were attending Northville Lutheran at that time.

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<sup>25</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Nurnberg.

<sup>27</sup> Ziefle.

<sup>28</sup> Ziefle remembers around thirty-five, but Rudi Kolbe, interview by Suzanne Nurnberg and author, 9 August 2004 seemed to remember the numbers being around twenty or twenty-five.

<sup>29</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

It was during these meetings that Rev. Ziefle began to teach them of the evangelical gospel message together with the particularly Pentecostal faith of which he himself was a part. As one of Ziefle’s assistants from Philadelphia remembers from the first house meeting, “Brother Ziefle explained to them the way of salvation and at the same time in that same evening, the Lord moved in a wonderful way.”<sup>30</sup> Weekly meetings, held on Sunday nights so as not to be in direct competition with the Lutheran Church, were formed immediately.<sup>31</sup> It was during this time that a number of individuals embraced the Pentecostal faith. Ella Nurnberg’s own conversion experience provides insight into some of what was taking place:

My own testimony, yes. It’s Brother Ziefle was preaching from that lady she was sinner and they caught her in adultery and brought her before Jesus...and this message was speaking so hard to my heart I had to scream to God to God forgive me for my sins. And this was my salvation message.<sup>32</sup>

The group’s weekly basement meetings attracted many interested German locals and before long drew the ire and anger of some in the Lutheran congregation—including its pastor. While often compressed or chronologically suspect, the stories they told from this time forward help to speak to their feelings concerning the matter and relate real tensions that grew between the groups. First among these was an alternate prayer meeting formed by a competing group at Northville: “The Lutheran’s started meeting by themselves meeting...at the Hintz’s. My husband was there too, I guess, twice. And he said, “Is this right that your wife go there and you

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<sup>30</sup> Rudi Kolbe.

<sup>31</sup> Ziefle remembers this, though was unsure how many were attending the Lutheran Church in the morning. When they eventually starting meeting at the house on Sunday mornings, he noted with gravitas that “That was a decision.”

<sup>32</sup> Nurnberg. It is unclear exactly why this particular biblical story held such meaning for Frau Nurnberg. Clearly, a deeper look needs to be taken concerning the understanding of sin at work in her life and that of the community. As has been suggested, experiences in the Old Word, immigration, or the Second World War may all be at work here.

here? Shouldn't she be here the way you are? But later on my husband recognized...”<sup>33</sup> When asked why they started these second meetings, Schmidt replied it was simply because “They want that we should go back to the Lutheran church.”<sup>34</sup>

A second wrinkle that speaks to the growing tensions between Lutheran and Pentecostal has to do with the Estonian pastor at the time, the Rev. Karl Kiisk. As Ella Nurnberg related, “My mom went to pastor and invited him he should come and listen because we wanted to know to what he thinks.”<sup>35</sup> By all reports, Kiisk was not impressed by the “Holy Rollers’ with which his congregants were consorting and apparently was astounded by their use of the language of being “born again.” In a scene so surreal that it strains credulity—or possibly just bizarre enough to be indicative of truth—more than one of the people interviewed stated that he asked the rather peculiar question of how a person could once again enter their mother’s womb (*Mutterleib*):<sup>36</sup>

And he came and he listened to that message and Pastor Ziefle preached on the message from...Zaccheus who said must be born again. And then the preacher [Kiisk] asked the same question—“Do you think I have to go in my mother’s womb and be born again?” That was really not a right answer what that pastor said.”<sup>37</sup>

Both as remembered and experienced by the Pentecostals, this story serves as an indication of the spiritual dryness of their Lutheran pastor and by extension, the Lutheran congregation. Thus it was with some relish that more than one of those interviewed told us that not long after this Nicodemus-like moment before the Pentecostals, the Lutheran minister scandalously absconded

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<sup>33</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Nurnberg.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to Rev. Ziefle, the story is also told by Renate Schmidt and Ella Nurnberg.

<sup>37</sup> Nurnberg.

with a woman from his congregation.<sup>38</sup>

At one point tensions between the established congregation and the nascent Pentecostals reached such a fevered pitch that a note appeared in the bulletin of the Northville Lutheran Church saying “Lord forgive them, then they don’t know not what they do.”<sup>39</sup> Rumors were rampant that anyone breaking away from Northville would lose their homes because of the immense financial requirements involved in starting a new congregation and questions were asked about where people would be buried if they could no longer utilize the Lutheran cemetery. As Ella Nurnberg provides, “...they got scared. Because the people came out of a Lutheran Church and it was 150 members and it was hard to decide from big church to come in a house together so they were not really for it.”<sup>40</sup> Thus pragmatic concerns were real and weighed heavily on all. Even so, Renate Schmidt’s memories of the time remain stirring and may better than anything else help capture the mindset of those who took the steps of finally breaking away from Northville:

I said, “I don’t care where I’ll be buried, I care where my soul will be. And this was even by Kaser [i.e. the days of the house meetings]...I don’t care where I lie, but where my soul is, this is important.”<sup>41</sup>

All through the tensions that existed between the congregations, attendance at the weekly house meetings remained sizable until what it would become when the main issue of religious

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<sup>38</sup> Schmidt comments on this situation in both interviews, and another source provided information off the record. The annals of the Estonian Church (Eevi Trumees and Emmi Bajars, eds., *1949-1999 Estonian Americans: Seabrook, NJ*. Self-published, 1999.) simply note that he resigned for “personal and health reasons.”

<sup>39</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Nurnberg.

<sup>41</sup> Schmidt, 2005. Schmidt’s words notwithstanding, it is clear that the issue of burial appears—at least in memory—to be an important one. As has been suggested, some of this may have to do with a deep connection to tradition and the ways of the Old World, or may be a direct connection to the ways of their former lands.

cleavage emerged—baptism. As Ziefle’s assistant Rudi Kolbe stated, when the issue of baptism arose “sixty percent stayed away...if it wouldn’t have been for the baptism, this would have stayed a lot bigger.”<sup>42</sup> While the difference between Lutheran and Pentecostal ideas about baptism are well-defined, in some sense it is surprising that it was this and not the various charismatic phenomena occurring during this time (including glossolalia) that were the main cause of controversy. Besides Pentecostal hallmarks such as long prayer services and speaking in tongues that occurred during meetings, one episode will perhaps suffice to describe the type of phenomena to which we are referring. From a certain meeting, Rev. Ziefle remembered the following:

On one Sunday I preached about the importance of being prepared to meet the Lord. It was an unusual service. And during the preaching I spoke a prophecy that in a few days that will come to one of our homes here—are you prepared? And I was shocked to spell out what I said. And I was looking at Edmund Martin...and I thought it was him in my mind. But right in the first or second row, there was little Karen...and she listened to me. And while we said goodbye to people, I shook hands with Edmund and said “Edmund, are you ready to ready to accept the Lord tonight?” And Edmund said to me, “Not tonight.” And I thought...“Is he that person?” And happened during the next week or few days, that he took his children to the farm...and Karen met with the accident [her death] with the tractor.

A poignant memory in its own right that was pregnant with meaning for the nascent congregation, it is also a reminder of the type of charismatic phenomena that occurred during the meetings, occurrences which while atypical for Lutherans nevertheless seem to have been taken in stride by the local Germans.

Another area that neither became controversial nor extremely divisive for the Germans had to do with the consumption of alcohol. Interestingly, this was an area in which Rev. Ziefle left the Germans generally to their own devices and did not require a decisive change. Though

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<sup>42</sup> Rudi Kolbe.

Pentecostalism as a movement carries with it the Holiness strains that make it almost uniformly opposed to the use of alcohol, when asked about this he said that he "we didn't make it an issue."<sup>43</sup> In his words, he would talk about it "in conversation," but that was the extent of the matter. Interestingly, however, Renate Schmidt relates that her own husband, who was very against the Pentecostal meetings at first and also drank quite a bit, was delivered from this after his conversion: "He was very against. He was drinking a lot...He never missed working, but he was a lot of drinking. One time he was even by Kaser's [house meeting] and took some wine with him and go out and drink. And when he was saved everything [changed]." When pressed further, she indicated that all those at the meetings drank quite regularly --"everybody was drinking"<sup>44</sup>--before their conversion, but afterwards become practicing teetotalers.

While there is no clear indication one way or the other in the extant interviews, based on what can be gleaned it appears that neither the issue of evangelical conversion nor Pentecostal practice was the deciding factor in many of the meeting attendees' choice between the Lutheran or Pentecostal faith. For that, we must return to baptism. A firm believer in adult baptism by immersion, Rev. Ziefle insisted that his new converts should follow the sacrament according to Pentecostal practice. The resistance amongst the group was immense. Renate Schmidt indicated that "there was a lot of people at first, but didn't come later on. When we was baptized they was going back."<sup>45</sup> Some left to return to Northville Lutheran, others hesitated, and those remaining were waiting to be convinced. In Ella Nurnberg's words "Brother Ziefle, he explained the salvation to us and he said if you give to heart to Jesus you have to be baptized in water

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<sup>43</sup> Ziefle.

<sup>44</sup> Schmidt, 2005.



baptism...It was kind of a hard decision, because we were torn between the Lutheran church and starting the church in the house."<sup>46</sup>

There was one woman, at least, who appears to have been ready to be rebaptized regardless of what the others would do. In her words, "If nobody will be baptized, I be baptized all by myself...I know Ella and Paul...they say if thirty people will be baptized, then they will be baptized. Otherwise no. And I said I if nobody will be baptized, I will baptize by myself."<sup>47</sup> As for the rest, the story related by Rev. Ziefle is both humorous and informative:

Some stayed back, even those who became members, some were hesitant. As a matter of fact, just before the first service, the first baptism service, I received a call, we lived in Philadelphia, by a man, and he said "We had a meeting last night and we decided not to get baptized." And of course, next morning I took off from work, and we came right here and the very first house we started with [Schmidt's]...and I said "What's going on?" "Well, That's what we decided last night." Mrs. [Schmidt] said, "Well that was talked about, but I want to get baptized. How we going do it? We not going to baptize only one person?" And I said, "Well, I said, I'm going to make other visits right now"...and while we were talking and praying and began to weep there Mr. [Schmidt] said "So I get baptized too." So we had two people. And then we continued the day and in the evening we had the service and everybody who said, "We decided not to get baptized" said "We decided to be baptized." And we had the baptism service.<sup>48</sup>

Though Renate Schmidt claimed they had not expected there to be such controversy and tension between the Lutherans and newly rebaptized Pentecostals, the baptism held in 1965 drew a proverbial line in the sand. Another eyewitness related the following: "One big thing was that they didn't want...to be baptized was that they knew they were going to be kicked out of the Lutheran church and they really worried where they were going to be buried as if they wouldn't have something to fall back on. And that was the big issue."<sup>49</sup> In this one can begin to see the

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<sup>45</sup> Schmidt, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Nurnberg.

<sup>47</sup> Schmidt, 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Ziefle.

<sup>49</sup> Helene Kolbe, interview by Suzanne Nurnberg and author, 9 August 2004.

anguish these few went through as they agonized over their decisions. Despite their best intentions, ties were cut with the world they had known and friendships were ended. Of her conversion to Pentecostalism, Renate Schmidt noted the following: "But we lost friends, but we gained a lot of friends. With Kasers we was not enemies, you understand, but not close. And so...we lost these friends before. But we another friend. Most important was I know that Jesus was my friend."<sup>50</sup>

With such a clear division between the new group and the old, the Pentecostals begin to make plans for their own building, which was constructed by the spring of 1966. From that point on the congregation grew by means of conversion and the immigration of friends and family members, all the while maintaining German language services within their own ethnic community throughout much of the 1970s.

#### **IV. Initial Impressions and Conjectures:**

With an understanding of the general course of events firmly in tow, some tentative thoughts and suggestions seem appropriate. None of these conjectures are contended for as the answer to our query to the exclusion of all others, but rather are here marshaled in an effort to anchor the investigation in its main purpose.

Of all the factors at work in this series of events, the immigrant status of those that converted seems most vital. If for no other reason than that it was the one main shared experience of all that became Pentecostal, the process of coming to the United States enters into the calculus of conversion with serious import. In his landmark book of the past century, Oscar Handlin writes well of the immigrant psyche of previous generations, noting that: "A man holds

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<sup>50</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

dear what little is left. When much is lost, there is no risking the remainder. As his stable place in a whole universe slipped away from under him, the peasant come to America grasped convulsively at the familiar supports,<sup>51</sup> religion being perhaps the most important one. For this reason finding piety amongst immigrants is hardly a surprise. The important wrinkle here is that Handlin notes they tend to group solely with the Old World faith in an effort to seek identity: "there was no alternative but to continue as before to hold on to what was left, the form; to resist where possible any change in that. The religious life accordingly grew rigid; they became far more conservative than those of their fellows who had remained in Europe."<sup>52</sup> Thus even though the immigrants we are considering are not of the same era as those Handlin treats, we are not surprised, in the first instance, to see a number of German or Estonian immigrants to South Jersey gathering around the local Lutheran church as a means of preserving identity.

What is surprising, and still not entirely certain, is why some of the German Lutherans who, following the Handlin thesis, should have been becoming rigid, unyielding "super-Lutherans", decided to split away from their congregation and take on an entirely new faith. If all or most of the German Lutherans had decided to do this, it would make good sense to lay blame for conversion at the feet of immigration, but in this case matters are too divided to say that the immigrant experience was the deciding factor. This said, we would be wise to remember David Martin's words regarding Italian Pentecostal converts, "Although Italy is a Catholic country, the experience of migration can breed a transmigration of souls, finding in

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<sup>51</sup> Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951), 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

Pentecostalism a portable identity. When it comes to religious choice, ‘global air makes free.’<sup>53</sup>

Even here, where such a thesis does well to establish that some immigrants latch on to Pentecostalism as they are freed to do so, it does not answer the question of why they change their faith. Further, though we may assert with Robert Hefner that “as a society is thrust, sometimes against its’ members wills, into a larger or reorganized microcosm, new lifestyles and ethical options appear,”<sup>54</sup> one still wonders why the changes we have been observing were not more uniform. If not fully a sociological function of immigration it remains possible that a transplanted deeper religious heritage also had importance for the group. Comments from Renate Schmidt related to exposure to Baptist thought in Europe—“I was couple times, more in Ukrainian church. I liked the songs and the praying”<sup>55</sup>—and Ella Nurnberg’s discussion of a certain religious vision—“My mom had a vision, she saw Jesus on the sky and he walked from Russia to Germany. She saw the footprints on the sky”—remain intriguing episodes and indicate that there were clearly other religious factors at work. While raising important questions for further study, we would hesitate at this juncture to conclude that these issues were solely or even primarily responsible for the events that occurred.

A second factor related to the first has similar problems as a viable solution. Here the status of the Germans as *volksdeutsch* retains some importance. Renate Schmidt’s earlier comments regarding her lack of welcome in either Poland or Germany help to provide some of the context for understanding the situation. As displaced persons following WWII and outsiders

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<sup>53</sup> Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 49.

<sup>54</sup> Robert W. Hefner, “Introduction: World Building and the Rationality of Conversion,” in *Conversion to Christianity*, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

in the larger German world, the *volksdeutsch* were constantly on the margins in their home societies. With their transplantation to America—with culture all its own and at the same time not their own—and move to a place like Seabrook that had such a dizzying array of cultures, a case could be made quite compellingly that they wanted to cease their attachment to ways that made them appear more as “outsiders.” Considering too that the Germans were one of the last ethnic groups to arrive in Seabrook, their feelings of marginality can only have been heightened. Japanese, Jamaicans, Estonians and others had all faced some of the pressures they now faced, but had done so before them and were farther along the line in the process of acculturation. Thus in practice they may have formed both an ideal to which the Germans so recently immigrated may have aspired to as well as a core against which the *volksdeutsch* constantly and unwillingly defined themselves. Even though area Japanese resident John Fuyume later recalled concerning racism at Seabrook Farms that “people were told that no matter what your creed, religion, and all that sort of thing, if anybody came in and had a problem with a colored person, it was dropped...If you don’t like it, you don’t work here, that’s all. We don’t tolerate it”<sup>56</sup> and for her part, Renate Schmidt said that “Over here, they treat us very good...I was born in Poland, raised in Germany, but this is my best country,” questions concerning the practical tensions operating just below the surface of the native, immigrant, and “newcomer” cultures were likely more complex.

To imagine that conversion to Pentecostalism was a means of shedding their formerly marginal status and becoming more “American” is a thesis that echoes well some of David

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<sup>56</sup> John Fuyume, interview by William Brown, *Seabrook Village: Oral Histories of a Community*, vol. 1, (Seabrook, NJ: SECC, 1997), 29.

Martin's thought. Writing about the lure of the United States, he comments that Pentecostalism "does bring people from all kinds of background into contact with North Americans, and with their expectations, and provides channels along which American ideas and ideas of America may move...Pentecostalism, after all, is about spiritual power and empowerment, and it would be surprising if some believers were not impressed by the United States as a fount of power."<sup>57</sup> Yet at the same time, one must wonder why in the 1960s a group of Lutherans would ever choose to convert to Pentecostalism as a means of asserting a new American mainstream identity. For though Pentecostalism in the form of the Assemblies of God during the 1960s was beginning to move out of its heretofore self-imposed exile with participation in the National Association of Evangelicals and the growing influence of healing evangelists and the burgeoning charismatic movement, it would be rather a leap to assert that it was anything like a "respectable" American institution. Even today, with evangelicalism becoming more and more influential in the halls of power, Pentecostals do not quite hold the limelight as do others such as Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists. Thus while Martin's notion that conversion from Latin American Catholicism to Pentecostalism may be a way for South Americans to assert a more American identity<sup>58</sup>, in the case of our Germans it simply seems that they were trading one minority faith for another. The only difference was that the former was defined by nationality and ethnicity, the latter by the bounds of polite American culture. Further, even if their conversions were motivated primarily by the concern of becoming more American, it is of great importance once again that only a

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<sup>57</sup> Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 204.

<sup>58</sup> Though in *Tongues of Fire*, 204 Martin does include the caveat "Not to suggest, as many nationalist intellectuals would argue, that conversion to Pentecostalism is the straight path to Americanization" some of what he says does speak to the allure of America as an ideal and goal.

certain percentage of them ever decided to leave Northville Lutheran Church.

Beyond this, any conclusion related to immigration and outsider status must address the matter of time. One might expect, for instance, that if the Germans in question were affected that severely by the trans-Atlantic migration or the immediate affects of incorporation into a foreign land amidst numerous foreign peoples already well on the road to assimilation they would have made decisions about religious conversion or a change in lifestyle relatively soon after their arrival. This is not the case. Rather, if we are to posit most of their arrivals around the early to mid 1950s, this means that around ten years passed before the time of their decision to change from Lutheranism to Pentecostalism. While possible that the immediate experiences of being outsiders and immigrants took a full decade to manifest, this seems by itself problematic and likely necessitates the presence of other complicating factors.

To this end, it is important that attention be paid to the situation at Northville Lutheran Church from the time of the German immigration through to the mid-1960s. There, the German people shared both a building and a pastor with an Estonian people whose language and customs remained foreign to them. Though the Estonian pastor of the church held a separate service for the German people, he was not of their people. While both *volksdeutsch* and Estonian had not long before experienced the life of the refugee, even this commonality belied an important difference. For while each group was displaced during WWII it was not lost on the Estonians that they had suffered at the hands of German-speaking peoples and not vice versa. As Philip Tammaru remembers of his homeland, “In Estonia everything went smoothly until of course when the second world war started...in 1941, the Germans kicked the Russians out and of course

they themselves started to govern which didn't help the Estonians at all."<sup>59</sup> Further, it was the Estonians who came to America educated and worldly-wise, while by all indications the *volksdeutsch* remained simple workers and craftsmen.<sup>60</sup> The Germans, while forming a community amongst themselves and perpetuating their cultural heritage through "German services and even German Sunday School service for the children...German dances, and sometimes...dinners, and everyone was invited,"<sup>61</sup> they do not seem to have done so to the extent of the Estonians, who celebrated their Estonian Independence Day<sup>62</sup> and formed the "Estonian Freedom Fighters of Seabrook."<sup>63</sup> With such differences between the two sides of Northville, it seems safe to conclude that at least some of the Germans may have wanted to have their own German pastor and leapt at the chance when it arose, regardless of whether or not he was Lutheran.

Despite the fact that Renate Schmidt indicates that the Germans and Estonians got on well and "talk a lot German" and "sometimes eat, like a dinner or something we had together,"<sup>64</sup> the need for a sort of national differentiation from the Estonians remains a viable possibility. More easily understandable in terms of time elapsed since immigration, it has the benefit of describing what seems to be an organic development of religion and culture. One here is

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<sup>59</sup> Tammaru, 2.

<sup>60</sup> As indicated above, Charles Harrison points out the educational and civic accomplishments of the Estonians. No similar comments are made for the Germans. Further, in both my own anecdotal experience and in conversation, it appears that at the very least the *volksdeutsch* were not as educated as the Estonians.

<sup>61</sup> Hintz, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *The Seabrooker* (February 1956). In this month's issue of the company magazine, the "Estonian Independence Celebration is listed under "Your Community House Activities."

<sup>63</sup> Trumees and Bajars indicate that "the primary goal of the Union was to keep alive the fighting spirit for the freedom of Estonia, under Soviet occupation since 1944. The chapter in Seabrook was founded in 1953 by one Peeter Labidas.

<sup>64</sup> Schmidt, 2005.



reminded of the thought of R. Laurence Moore, who in his *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* shows quite well how groups that remain on the outskirts of religious life in America learn to wear that distinctiveness as a badge of honor. In his words, "New religions, which have often been linked to ethnic identifications, have served as vehicles through which people have nurtured a sense of antagonistic culture."<sup>65</sup> In this way it might make good sense that conversion from the traditional church life of Northville Lutheran to the idiosyncratic traditions of Pentecostalism could be read as a way in which the Germans clearly marked their distinction from the Estonians. Thus with a "carefully nurtured sense of separate identity against a vaguely defined mainstream or dominant culture,"<sup>66</sup> these German, like their fellow "Americans needed an unusual differentiation of religious persuasions because they had an unusual need for a wide variety of social identities."<sup>67</sup> Understood in this way, it seems logical for the *volksdeutsch* to have converted to a faith so widely dissimilar from that which they had known.

The Estonian/German thesis thus remains intriguing, but is not without its own sense of contingency. There is, quite simply, little indication in any of the interviews that such tensions existed. Even if this thesis is correct we must once again raise the question of why so many remained in the Lutheran church. If tensions between the nationalities were heightened enough, the risks and cost of being rebaptized and losing a spot in the church cemetery would have certainly been justified. Yet because of the fact that not all—indeed, only a relatively small

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<sup>65</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xi.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

minority—took this step continues to indicate other forces at work.

It is worth noting with respect to the initial “coming of Pentecost” to the Germans of South Jersey that family connections were important. Since many of those who had immigrated to the area were interrelated in the first place, this should come as no surprise. Early on it was a cousin of Ella Nurnberg who first told the family about the Oral Roberts Crusade in Philadelphia. Later it was family and friends of theirs who were invited to the initial meetings with the Reverend Ziefle:

We invited our friends and relatives and told them that there’s a preacher coming from Philadelphia and he’s going to preach us from the salvation –you must be born again—they should come and listen to him.<sup>68</sup>

At the time of the first baptismal service, seven of the eleven baptized were related to each other through kinship and marriage bonds.<sup>69</sup> Additional relatives would be baptized and join the church as time progressed. But lest one think that the matter of Pentecost was in this instance simply a function of consanguinity, it is important to note that some family members never joined the Pentecostal group. Others were a part of the group but had no blood relation whatsoever to any of its members. Indeed, Renate Schmidt—who was instrumental in encouraging others to take the step of baptism— was neither related nor very close to the core group of family members involved with the meetings. Despite what the Kaser clan decided, she was certain that “If nobody will be baptized, I be baptized all by myself.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore while family was an important deciding factor, it was clearly not the only consideration.

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<sup>68</sup> Nurnberg.

<sup>69</sup> Karl and Anna Kaser, Paul and Ella Nurnberg, Kurt and Lilly Vohland, and Malwina Metzger were all related. Only Renate and Peter Schmidt, Rebekah Ossiboff, and Magdalena Schurbas (a friend from Philadelphia) were not related to the larger group.

<sup>70</sup> Schmidt, 2004.

A last matter that is worth giving attention to before turning to larger schemes is the death of a young girl during the period of the early meetings. Occurring at a time when attendance at the meetings was still comparatively large and before the first baptismal service, young Karin Martin's death had what seems to be immense impact upon the group. As Helene Kolbe remembers of the situation:

Martins had a little girl...that girl is frozen in my mind, what she looked like. But that was just before she was killed. And that was so traumatic, because the parents had just started to come and getting to know the Lord and that little girl had told them that they must serve the Lord from now on, before the accident happened. A three year old talking to the parents like that is just awesome.<sup>71</sup>

What is important here, it seems, has not as much to do with the fact that she died, but that she died as bonds were beginning to be formed in the meetings, that she died after what was remembered as a Pentecostal prophecy was applied to her, and that she died after taking on that Pentecostal faith as her own. Though the full emotional impact of this event upon those gathered is impossible to determine at this distance, the fact that the story is remembered with such power is telling. Thus while only conjecture, an episode of this type can help show the relationships that were beginning to form amongst those at the prayer meetings. Furthermore, it was during this time that some begin to make faith commitments in response to the tragedy. As founding pastor Alfred Ziefle recollects:

And of course, when we came back the next Sunday, you know, people wept and said, "Where is our Karen?" and "What happened?" and was during that service that Edmund Martin and his wife and Oma Nurnberg accepted the Lord. Because, they said, "We want to see our child, our grandchild again." So this was a beautiful, beautiful, how God worked.<sup>72</sup>

While not all stayed or made the decision to be baptized, those that did were there at this time

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<sup>71</sup> Helene Kolbe.

<sup>72</sup> Ziefle.

and no doubt deeply affected by this and other connections that were being made within and outside of traditional family bonds. In many ways, a new family was beginning to be formed through shared experience.

#### **V. A Sociological Conversation:**

While admittedly piecemeal and conjectural, the foregoing suggestions have been offered as a means of laying the groundwork for what might eventually become a more developed thesis, but which right now remains ensconced in the realm of exploratory research. However, towards the end of applying a larger narrative to the events in question, we now turn our attention to the work of David Martin on Pentecostalism and in dialogue with his suggestions explore some of the larger sociological questions at work. While engaged in this enterprise, we will also treat a detractor of Martin's, Daniel Miguez, whose ethnographic study of Pentecostals in Argentina forms a unique counterpoint to Martin's highly systemic thought and whose research interests and methods are in many ways close to my own.

David Martin has written extensively on the topic of Pentecostalism both in Latin America and elsewhere. His study of the movement in dialogue with his continuing work on secularization/modernization has yielded results that are as insightful as they are applicable to the situation discussed in this paper. Though his thoughts have developed over the past twenty years, at least three important insights are worth raising up with regards to our investigation. The first of these is that he tends to see Pentecostalism as deeply related to the forces of modernity. As both a basic response to modernity and a means of carrying it forward, Pentecostalism continues the trends of modernization or secularization that Martin spells out as follows: "my

analysis both treated Latin America as a hybrid combining the North American and 'Latin' modes of secularization through the introduction of competitive religious pluralism on a massive scale, and espoused Pentecostalism as a major metanarrative of global modernity."<sup>73</sup> What this means is that Pentecostalism simply follows along established lines of personal and individualistic faith and represents the most recent and differentiated form of his "four Christianizations."<sup>74</sup>

Pentecostalism as just the latest force of modernization sits is a perspective that sits well with the situation we find amongst the Germans we have been discussing. Indeed, in many ways it helps to bring together some of the themes that we have been discussing all along. For in imagining the moves from more traditional cultures in Europe through to the events of the Second World War and on to the more freeing and culturally heterogeneous world of Seabrook Farms in the 1950s, the Germans were, it seems, all at once enmeshed in a modern and changing world in a country whose traditions of personal liberty and personal choice ran deep. In deciding to break away from the more traditional, "stage three" Christianization model of the Lutheran congregation towards a movement that was all about "individual heartwork and inward feeling"<sup>75</sup> they help to typify exactly the type of phenomena Martin describes in his more recent work, *On Secularization*.

A second feature of Martin's thought concerning Pentecostalism has special relevance to

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<sup>73</sup> Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 141.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 3. Martin spells out the four here as "a Catholic Christianization in two versions: the conversion of monarchs (and so of peoples), and the conversion of the urban masses by the friars. I then identify a Protestant Christianization in two versions: one seeking to extend monasticism to all Christian people but effectively corraling them in the nation, and the other realized in the creation of evangelical and Pietist subcultures. The last collapsed quite recently and so we are immediately in its wake."

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 5.

his work on the Latin American scene. There, he sees that in response to the spirit of *machismo* the Spirit of Pentecost finds a home amongst women as a means of civilizing and controlling the often destructive tendencies of their husbands including abuse, philandering, and bad fiscal policy. In both of his major works on Pentecostalism and again more recently, Martin spends time discussing the ways in which this new faith, because of its more rigid and traditional requirements, makes it a safe and secure option for women and families. His comments are on this point worth citing:

The context here [in Latin America] is male irresponsibility, generated initially in a history of child 'labor,' the reinforced by the machismo of the male work group, and working itself out in alcoholism, dissipation of resources, sexual depredation, violence, and family deterioration. Home and work are undermined by the culture of the street and the bar, symbolized in the weekend soccer spree. At some point, however, a minority of men contemplate the dreary future ahead of them and are ready for the change many of their womenfolk ardently desire: a new social network in the church that breaks with the street, cherishes the home, and promotes thrift, discipline, mutual respect among spouses, trust, honesty, self-confidence, hard work, and sobriety.<sup>76</sup>

Martin speaks to a similar process at work in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain when he writes that "orderliness in the sphere of work and effervescence in the sphere of grace links together the Methodist and Pentecostal movements...at [the] edges and margins the new culture of relatively autonomous and/or marginal people became the core culture...in Wales the erosion of the sharper edges of class distinction went much further, and the key difference came to be more between the respectable chapel-goers and the disreputable drinkers."<sup>77</sup> Because the process he sees at work in Latin America can be observed elsewhere, it seems appropriate to suggest that the situation described in this paper provides some interesting points of contact with this line of thought.

Admitting from the outset that founding pastor Alfred Ziefle never preached harshly against alcohol, there are nevertheless circumstances that help to prove Martin’s thesis at work in the Germans studied here. First is the fact that two of the women first baptized had husbands who were very against their conversions. According to Rev. Ziefle,

So, and of course in some cases the wife came, got saved, baptized, and became a member, and the husband did not. So there were conflicts. OK, on the one hand they admired them and us as a church but on the other hand they were also very cautious...<sup>78</sup>

In the case of Renate Schmidt’s husband, smoking, heavy drinking and severe resistance to the fledgling group were a part of his lifestyle. Her conversion preceded his by “a half year, six months,”<sup>79</sup> but around the time he turned to Pentecost, his use of alcohol stopped immediately. Another woman in the church<sup>80</sup> came by herself to the meetings but had a husband that was as abusive as he was unsupportive of her faith. Though the details of this story were related in an unofficial matter, it bears mentioning here because it speaks to the way in which Pentecostalism helps provide a safe space for women and also a means by which to work towards a husband’s conversion. While Renate Schmidt insists that it was only her and the other woman whose husbands were initially in this situation<sup>81</sup>, the admission that everyone who went to the meetings drank before their conversion and stopped thereafter speaks loudly to the connections and observations David Martin makes concerning Pentecostalism in Latin America and may help to

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<sup>76</sup> Martin, *The World Their Parish*, 85.

<sup>77</sup> Martin, *Tongues of Fire*, 34.

<sup>78</sup> Ziefle.

<sup>79</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Because of the sensitivity of the situation, her name will remain anonymous. Her story was related to us during one of the interviews, but as per their request, we did not record this part of the story. Another notable fact about this woman is that she was the only Catholic to join the new group.

<sup>81</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

explain part of the process of conversion that we have been considering. For if in that region of the world "the difficulty for Catholicism resides in its subtle combination of sacred and secular" which "the clean break offered through Pentecostalism"<sup>82</sup> corrects, then the stakes at play between our group of worldly-wise Lutherans and more pietistic Pentecostals is hardly different.

The third and final aspect of David Martin's thought speaks to issues of the center and the periphery as a means of discussing secularization as well as Pentecostalism. In *On Secularization*, he notes with reference to Europe that he has "used the concept of centre and periphery both to contrast metropolitan secularity with provincial religiosity...and to suggest wider relationships"<sup>83</sup> such that religion is reinforced by the heightened self-consciousness of a threatened or dominated nation."<sup>84</sup> In other words, when a group finds itself on the periphery it will attempt to define itself over and against the center that might try to control it, in essence asserting its own independence and right of self-determination. One here is reminded of R. Laurence Moore in that his "outsiders" are simply another way of referring to Martin's "periphery." In an effort to turn the situation around, both maintain a self-definition and image that attempts to create their own new center out of the periphery. Further, one detects in this discussion the background for which the complex dialogue between liberation theology and Pentecostalism emerges. While there is not room in this investigation for a full comparison and analysis, it suffices to note David Martin's understanding of Pentecostalism and liberation theology as rivals.<sup>85</sup> What this means is that both continue to jockey for the same space and

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<sup>82</sup> Martin, *The World Their Parish*, 72.

<sup>83</sup> Martin, *On Secularization*, 59.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>85</sup> Martin, *Tongues of Fire*, 290.



needs of the poor and downtrodden in Latin America. In his words, "some observers are coming to see both groups as intimations of civil society, capable of clearing a space outside the corruptions of the political arena, and a space, moreover, in which people can re-create themselves."<sup>86</sup>

At this point it almost goes without saying that the *volksdeutsch* in New Jersey were a people on the periphery in almost every way imaginable. Shunned in their adopted European lands, treated as foreigners in Germany, actual foreigners in America, latecomers in a bewildering mix of ethnic cultures at Seabrook Farms, and second-class citizens in their own church, they in many ways can be seen as a people on the outskirts of society. When some of them finally decided to be baptized and removed themselves from Northville Lutheran, they took the final steps and pushed themselves to the farthest reaches of the periphery. While the actual effects of this final move is not the concern of this paper, it seems possible or even probable that the impetus behind this Pentecostal shift had to do with a complex of factors mediating between center and periphery.

While David Martin provides three elegant and insightful discussions of the dynamic of Pentecostal conversion that each have immediately applicable relevance in our own investigation, there is a sense in which the question of why only this group of Germans converted and no others did remains open. In two of the three theories we have posited vis-à-vis David Martin—modernity and center/periphery—it seems that the systems at work affected all or most of the Germans in the area. That only a small group decided to convert raises questions as

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<sup>86</sup> Martin, *Forbidden Revolutions: Pentecostalism in Latin America, Catholicism in Eastern Europe* (London: SPCK, 1996), 39.

the efficacy of Martin's explanation as a conclusive narrative. The second of Martin's theses, that specifically related to family integrity and the supposed "civilizing" effect of Pentecostalism by being that which "renews the innermost cell of the family, and protects the woman from the ravages of male desertion and violence,"<sup>87</sup> is more specific and readily confirmable in our research and in some sense points the way towards the conclusions of this paper. Yet even here, it does not seem that the same phenomenon affected all in the group with the same intensity or in some cases, even at all.

In an effort to get more towards the heart of the issue, it is important to consider Daniel Miguez's book *Spiritual Bonfire in Argentina*,<sup>88</sup> for it contrasts somewhat with Martin's more widely macroscopic approach. Taking Martin and others to task over the use of explanatory social factors that make the process of Pentecostal conversion appear rather structuralist he looks at specific situations in the lives of his own Argentinean subjects. Miguez's criticisms include:

...a too structuralist stand. In what refers to the specific religious dimension, authors compare religions only in terms of a very general doctrinal and institutional statements... They are not able to see the complex processes that individuals face when changing religions... authors' tendency to substitute actors' perceptions for overarching theories and speculations has...damaging consequences.<sup>89</sup>

In sum, Miguez concludes that often more specific local and personal religious concerns are the motivating factors in conversion to an important extent that the larger systems proposed by sociologists such as Martin miss. Having conducted interviews and held discussions with Pentecostals in Argentina, Miguez provides some convincing evidence for the multiplicity of

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<sup>87</sup> Martin, *Tongues of Fire*, 280.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel Miguez, *Spiritual Bonfire in Argentina: Confronting Current Theories with an Ethnographic Account of Pentecostal Growth in a Buenos Aires Suburb* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1998).

<sup>89</sup> Miguez, 9.

reasons for conversions amongst Argentineans and what they hope to find:

Almost all stories indicate how stress in economic, health, and family problems produces identification...[as well as] strong emotional experiences in ritual contexts...the role of social networks...the appointment of not highly educated people to leading roles in the church...the view of the congregation as a family...another important element is hope: the idea that God will always, in the end, help to face and solve what at first appear as unsolvable problems<sup>90</sup>

In his mind, personal and local situations that often varied between individuals and families are what led to identification/conversion. Whatever the situation—whether the death of a child, a husband in need of conversion, or a deeply religious search—Pentecostalism was turned to for the answer.

When compared to the situation in New Jersey, the Argentina upon which Miguez offers comment seems familiar. While his interviews were more focused and longer than some of the materials at hand in this study, many of the stories echo similar tales told by the Germans. By taking a step back from the larger, all-inclusive systems of Martin and others as a final explanation for Pentecostal growth and instead looking at matter on a “micro” scale, Miguez has helped to show the ways in which conversion can work on the ground level. As with those that left Northville Lutheran Church, there were varied and specific factors at work. We forget, perhaps, that it was a desire for physical healing at one Oral Roberts Crusade that started the whole process in motion. Beyond this, such factors as family ties, the death of a child in the midst of the gathered community, and the home life of some women with unsupportive husbands were all contributing factors towards conversion. Hints of religious dissatisfaction with the old community and even softer whispers of previous religious experiences help to show that in some ways, both emotion and a search for religious meaning may have been the most important

answer to our question regarding conversion. While in Miguez these factors stands somewhat against Martin, the latter avers by noting Miguez "eschews purely structural or actor-centered approaches to which he rather fancifully consigns earlier researchers, and concentrates on the ambiguity of Pentecostalism in the experience of those attracted to it."<sup>91</sup> Critiquing and answering some of Miguez's work, Martin offers a defense in noting that an idea such as that which sees illness leading to conversion is "certainly the case in my own interview material."<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless it does seem that Martin's tendency is, as a sociologist, to provide broader theories while the ethnographic study of Miguez is one of more extended focus. At the same time, this need not mean that the two must be directly opposed. Just as Miguez must pay attention to larger trends, so too Martin must remain well aware of the "heart-faith" of his fourth stage of Christianization and the personal specificity that may necessarily entail. For indeed, the complex combination of factors at work in the conversion process seem unable to be limited to one set, or even type of explanation. In other words, to fully explicate what is occurring, one must look both at the larger picture and engage matters on the ground level. Understanding the reasons the Germans of South Jersey left everything they knew demands a number of answers on multiple levels. Making sense of the following story means nothing less:

There was friendships, different. We didn't have any more friends...I have from Vineland friends, very good, I was even...I was by them god[mother] twice and they stopped, I was invited one time, Christmas Eve. And I start praying and I didn't drink anymore, and this was the last evening that they was coming. Was friendship out.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Miguez, 118.

<sup>91</sup> Martin, *The World Their Parish*, 84.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>93</sup> Schmidt, 2005.

## **VI. Future Trajectories/Further Research:**

In the process of conducting research for this paper, a number of questions were raised which deserve further study and research. First, more engagement in the field of religious conversion seems wise, especially in order to probe the nature of the German’s move to Pentecostalism more deeply. Together with this, further investigation of primary or secondary accounts and/or analyses of other German Pentecostals in the United States—or for that matter any ethnic minorities converting to Pentecostalism—will be important for widening the scope of the investigation. By so doing, I would hope to find new perspectives with which to approach the testimonials parsed here. Second, and perhaps most importantly, additional interview work should be done with the surviving early members and pastoral staff. Turning away from the more devotional line of questioning that persisted through the interviews of 2004, further inquiries must delve into issues much more deeply seated amongst the converts. The specific family and religious background of the individuals involved should be examined in an effort to get at the matter of any religious predisposition to Pentecostalism that may have come with them from the Old World. Lastly, research should be conducted on those outside the local Pentecostal community. The Estonians that were a part of the Lutheran congregation would be important resources to consult regarding any ethnic tensions that existed during those times, and their unique perspective on the entirely intra-German affair would be fascinating. So too the recollections of German Lutherans who has little interest in Pentecostalism together with those who attended the Pentecostal meetings but remained unconvinced would help to provide a much needed counterpoint to the largely one-sided discussions with which our investigation has

currently been engaged. While it is hoped that these future lines of inquiry will help either to inform this paper or spawn new scholarship of its own, simply learning the rich stories and reminiscences of those that were there will be a reward all its own.

## **VII: Conclusion:**

While this exploratory investigation raises a number of questions—perhaps more than it in the end is able to answer—what it does help us to see the process of conversion at work in a definable community and guide our understanding of the issues at stake. For whatever else one may say about the German community in Seabrook, the difficulty and tension that their Pentecostal conversion entailed must not be ignored. The loss of friends, the alienation of family, and the rejection of an ethnically defined faith carried with them from the Old World all weighed heavily upon those contemplating conversion. The issue of burial symbolically helped to represent and embody these fears by representing to the local Germans the price of conversion as represented by baptism.

Yet in spite of the fears and stakes which for many were very high, some did elect to join the nascent Pentecostal fellowship. Why this happened has been the driving question of this investigation. In the end, little more can be said at this juncture than that it was a combination of very complex factors that led to the massive religious change. While the ideas of Martin related to center/periphery and *machismo* have been shown to have some bearing upon the situation at hand, questions have been raised as to how explanatory these theses are in this situation. So too Miguez’s focus upon specific local situations and religious motivation have clear parallels in the trials and struggles of the Germans’ stated stories of faith and conversion, yet even here one is

left wondering if there is nothing more to the equation—no larger narrative that would help to clarify matters. To be sure, Miguez’s insistence upon ground-level concerns leading to conversions is lent great credence through the stories of these Germans and does so to an extent more easily observable than David Martin’s systematic approach, both must be held in balance to understand what really happened.

In conclusion, holding both the general themes and particular events of the story in tension seems to provide the best means of explaining the events of the 1964-65 in Seabrook, NJ. Though impossible to prove at this juncture, it seems highly probable that it was a combination of their status as *volksdeutsch* and minority membership at Northville Lutheran Church that first led them to consider other religious alternatives and their own previous religious experiences hinted at in our interviews and the growing emotional and extant familial bonds within the home fellowship meetings that gave them the desire and courage leave their old church and begin something entirely new. While admittedly conjectural, it provides an excellent framework for understanding the forces at work in conversion both visible and invisible that are constantly in play throughout our world.