ARGOS
Perspectives in the Study of Religion
Perspectives en sciences des religions
Perspektiven in der Religionswissenschaft
Prospettive in scienze della religione

Generational transition and the transformation of authority structures in an African Pentecostal congregation in western Germany

Maren Freudenberg

Published on 05/05/2026

Abstract

This contribution focuses on how authority structures are adapted in African Pentecostalism in the process of transnational migration. Based on qualitative research conducted in an independent, non-denominational Pentecostal congregation established in western Germany by a small group of African migrants in 2015, it shows to whom (and what) authority is ascribed and on the basis of which legitimation, as well as which relationships of and attitudes towards authority can be distinguished in the congregation. Drawing from sociological literature on the concept of authority, the research results show that the church's leadership exerts authority, but not in a way one would expect in a Pentecostal setting. Instead of centralized authority structures and a dominating, "charismatic" pastor, authority is selectively pluralized; various people and groups are granted degrees of autonomy in shaping congregational life. This particularly includes the congregation's youth group, largely comprising African youth socialized in Germany and culturally fluent in both German secular and African Christian settings. To ensure a stable future for the congregation, its leadership is delegating authority to this group of young, bicultural, committed Christians—who, however, are reluctant to claim authority for themselves.

1. Introduction

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, a Christian tradition that emphasizes the so-called gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible, has been attracting an increasing number of followers around the world in the past decades. Despite a broad range of definitions of what exactly constitutes Pentecostal and Charismatic sub-currents and despite diffuse conceptions of membership—or precisely because of both—Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is typically labelled the fastest-growing Christian strain worldwide, with more than 600 million members in recent years (Johnson/Zurlo 2020; Jacobson 2021). Johnson and Zurlo (2020) report 644 million adherents worldwide, or 8.3% of the global population, of which 230 million are located in Africa, 195 million in Latin America, 125 million in Asia, 68 million in North America, 21 million in Europe, and 4.5 million in Australia and Oceania. Jacobson (2021) cites 450

Corresponding author: Maren Freudenberg, Ruhr University Bochum.
To quote this article: Freudenberg, Maren. 2026. "Generational transition and the transformation of authority structures in an African Pentecostal congregation in western Germany." *ARGOS* 5 (2), Special Issue *Contested, Conflated, Converted: Dynamics of Religious Authority in Minority Constellations and Digital Media*, 34–53. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2026.9757.

million Pentecostals and Charismatics worldwide plus an additional 200 million Evangelicals strongly affected by the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition.

This contribution focuses on Pentecostalism in the diaspora context, more specifically on how African Pentecostalism develops in the process of transnational migration and redefines itself as a minority religion. The case study, Christ Evangelical International Ministry (CEIM), is an independent congregation established in western Germany by a small group of African migrants in 2015 catering not only to other Africans but to the local German population as well. Because its members hail from a range of denominational backgrounds, Catholic and mainline Protestant as well as Pentecostal, various expectations regarding worship practices, Bible interpretation and congregational culture come together and sometimes clash at CEIM. Typical Pentecostal practices, such as glossolalia (speaking in tongues), prophecy, and healing, occur to differing degrees, while African Christian music and dancing are sure to be found on a given Sunday morning. Many members who are first generation African migrants are especially set on these practices, while others, particularly those influenced by mainline Protestant traditions, prefer more cognitive, intellectual approaches that focus on understanding biblical teaching and, from their perspective, correctly interpreting divine will.

The specific focus of the analysis to follow is on authority relations at CEIM as a congregation untethered to a specific denomination or mother church in Africa or elsewhere. To whom or what is authority ascribed and on the basis of which legitimation at CEIM? Which relationships of and attitudes towards authority can be distinguished? We will see that the church's leadership exerts authority, but not in any way expected in a Pentecostal setting. Instead of centralized authority structures and a dominating, "charismatic" pastor, authority is selectively pluralized, and different people and groups are granted degrees of autonomy in shaping congregational life. This particularly includes the congregation's youth group, largely comprising African youth socialized in Germany and culturally fluent in both German secular and African Christian settings. To ensure a stable future for CEIM, its leadership is delegating authority to this group of young, bicultural, strongly committed Christians.

To answer the questions regarding authority ascriptions and relationships as well as attitudes towards and legitimation of authority, the following section will introduce authority as a sociological concept that is distinctly relational and dependent on both "holders" of authority and submission to authority. The third section briefly sketches African Pentecostalism in western Germany and CEIM as a case study to provide empirical context before the fourth section delves into the analysis and research results, based on qualitative fieldwork (semi-structured expert interviews and non-systematic, non-participant observation) conducted between April and August 2024 and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The contribution closes with a short conclusion.

2. Framing authority as relational

Authority is a concept that has generated a host of debates and definitions in the social sciences, most of which are somehow related to questions of power and control. Whether investigating the legitimacy of modern nation states on a societal macro-level, such as in the long tradition of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), or focusing on the relationship between domination and violence as e.g. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) has done, or examining the micro-mechanisms (or "capillaries") of power with Michel Foucault (1926–1984), authority is part of the picture. More recent approaches have framed authority discursively, as tied to speech acts (Lincoln 1994); organizationally, as channeling power in highly heterogenous settings (Sofsky/Paris 1994); and as rooted in the desire for recognition (Popitz 2015). Particularly inspired by the latter approach, this contribution understands authority as distinctly relational: it is attributed by individuals or groups to individuals, groups, or even non-human entities (such as, to choose from a wide range of possible examples, political or religious documents). In this framework, authority has two dimensions: the willingness to submit to authority, on the one hand, and the legitimation of the authority holder through individual or collective submission, on the other. As such, authority is based on specific inner attitudes and can vary in terms of its degrees of allegiance. What is more, it can be conceived of as a dyadic relationship, i.e., between a leader and his or her followers, or as a network of relationships encompassing various levels of authority (Kalender/El-Wereny/ Nagel 2026).

German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was the first to focus on the willing submission to authority in his study on sociology and forms of communalization (also translated as "sociation") of 1908: *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. He identified a degree of ambivalence (*Doppelverhältnis*) between authority and submission, in the sense that voluntary acceptance of authority on part of an individual is typically balanced by a degree of opposition to and independence from that very same authority (Simmel 1908). German sociologist Max Weber (1884–1920), whose work on authority and power remains seminal to this day, draws from this idea when stating that domination (or authority, as the term *Herrschaft* is also translated), which he famously defines as "the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (1978: 53), requires a "minimum of voluntary compliance" (Weber 1978: 212). The willing submission to, or voluntary compliance with, authority thus has the effect of legitimizing that very same authority (see Freudenberg/Radermacher/Schüler 2022 for a more detailed discussion). In the chapter "The Types of Legitimate Domination" in *Economy and Society*, Weber identifies three meanwhile widely known types of what he calls "pure" and legitimate authority (1978: 215). Famously, legal/rational authority draws its legitimation from existing rules; traditional authority, from a group's or institution's history; and charismatic authority, from the devotion to an individual considered exceptional or exemplary (Nagel 2026).

Two more recent approaches to theorizing about power and authority build on Weber's work in fruitful ways. German sociologist Heinrich Popitz works in Weber's interpretative tradition when

outlining key characteristics of authority. These include that authority is (seemingly) non-violent; that ascribing authority to another person means adjusting both visible and invisible actions as well as inner attitudes to this person's expectations; and that to cede authority over oneself to another person implies accepting this person as superior (2015: 108–110). Popitz differentiates between personal and institutional authority (2015: 134–139), holding that the latter is comprised of sacral authority (superiority of the divine) and generative authority (superiority of elders). Notably, personal and sacral authority both resonate with Weber's charismatic authority type, while generative authority is reminiscent of Weber's traditional authority type (Freudenberg 2022). Popitz goes beyond Weber when he frames authority relations as the desire for recognition—not simply by others, but as a certain type of "social subjectivity", as he calls it (2015: 139). He distinguishes five such types, which aspire recognition (1) as a member of a group; (2) as fulfilling an ascribed role; (3) as fulfilling an acquired role; (4) as fulfilling a public role; and (5) of one's own individuality (2015: 140–150).

Building on both Weber and Popitz and seeking to conceptualize authority as channeled power in organizations, German sociologists Wolfgang Sofsky and Rainer Paris (1994: 22–42) define authority as something ascribed "from below", i.e., from supporters who see themselves as subordinate and who recognize authority as encompassing the entire person that is deemed an authority, including character traits, abilities, and the values a person stands for. Authority, in this sense, can be conservative, emphasizing traditional values, or innovative, creating its own values which often break with tradition. In processes of ascribing and recognizing authority, the self is located in an intricate web of social relationships that includes "in-between authorities" (*Zwischenautoritäten*) and reciprocal "currents of recognition" (*Anerkennungsströme*). These flow not only from below to above but, importantly, in both directions: Not only is an authority recognized as such from below, but so are its supporters from above. Supporters align their attitudes and expectations to the authority, with effects on their identities: praise by the authority boosts one's self-worth, reprimands cause self-devaluation. Although Sofsky and Paris' conception of authority remains anthropocentric—for them, authority is always ascribed to individuals—their approach is helpful for the case at hand because they hold that personal, or charismatic, authority is a necessary counterbalance to the impersonal, bureaucratic rules and structures that define organizations. In this sense, authority provides order at the same time as it allows for identification as a group member. While this anthropocentric perspective does not focus on the structural contexts in which authority relationships are embedded, which is a central question guiding the analyses in this special issue (Kalender/El-Wereny/Nagel 2026), the concepts of "in-between authorities" and "currents of recognition" prove highly useful to the analysis of authority, as we will see in what follows. We return to these theoretical remarks in the contribution's analysis and conclusion.

3. African Pentecostalism in western Germany: Christ Evangelical International Ministry

In recent decades, Pentecostalism has surged in growth and influence in a majority of sub-Saharan African countries, particularly in western African nations such as Nigeria and Ghana. In Nigeria, on which the largest number of studies in this context exist, Pentecostal churches gained societal traction starting in the 1980s as they embraced the prosperity or health and wealth gospel, a set of beliefs and practices centered on the conviction that God will reward believers for generous giving to their churches with good health and material wealth (Wariboko 2014; Marshall 2009; Ukah 2008; for an introduction to the prosperity gospel, see the contributions in Attanasi/Yong 2012). Today, Nigeria hosts the largest Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian population in Africa (and the fourth-largest worldwide) and has become a crucial carrier of African Pentecostal Christianity to Europe through transnational networks of migration (Burgess 2020; Adogame 2013). Whether in the form of subsidiary churches to large African Pentecostal denominations, such as Nigeria's Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), or of independent African congregations, such as this contribution's case study Christ Evangelical International Ministry (CEIM), African Pentecostal beliefs, practices and structures are imported to societies in the Global North in the process of migration and are adapted to different degrees to their new contexts.

Since the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, sub-Saharan Africans have migrated to Germany for education, work, and asylum (Freudenberg/Yeboah Lartey 2025). Many of them are Pentecostal Christians (Strübind 2021), and the churches they have established have become larger, more numerous, and more stable with time, despite manifold challenges their members face while integrating into German society—including dealing with the authorities, learning the language, finding work, getting children settled into school, and more. African Pentecostalism has thus become a visible marker within Germany's increasingly plural religious landscape (Dümling 2018). While precise, independent statistics on African Pentecostal congregations are hard to come by, the Association of Pentecostal Churches in Germany (*Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden*) reported a total of 966 Pentecostal congregations in the country as of January 2024. While 399 of these are of non-German origins— "congregations of other languages and origins" (*Gemeinden anderer Sprache und Herkunft*) in the official terminology (Währisch-Oblau 2005)—their average size is not specified.[1] The academic literature identifies approximately two-thirds of all migration churches, and 90% of African migration churches, in Germany as Pentecostal (Strübind 2021: 57). Most of these roughly 1,000 African congregations are located in the Ruhr area (*Ruhrgebiet*) and the greater Frankfurt area (Ludwig/Eriksen 2022: 386; Etzelmüller/Rammelt 2022: 13).

The label "migration churches" has been critiqued both because these churches do not call themselves such and because it reduces their members to their migrant status, which contributes to processes of othering (Nagel 2022). While this critique is certainly justified, the term

[1] See https://www.bfp.de/de/statistiken-und-zahlen-zum-bfp.

nevertheless draws attention to the fact that this part of the German religious landscape shares a common history of migration from the Global South—bringing both advantages and challenges not faced by other churches in Germany (Matawana 2022; Ludwig/Eriksen 2022). What is more, migration churches are accepted as ecclesiastical Christian congregations, not as communities still requiring integration onto Germany's Christian fold, by the country's religious establishment (Etzelmüller/Rammelt 2022). Elsewhere, we have highlighted the inherently transnational nature of African Pentecostalism in Germany (Freudenberg/Yeboah Lartey 2025). Suffice it to say in the framework of the present contribution that migration churches in Germany and their members, particularly African Pentecostal congregations, may be considered transnational in that they maintain a web of social ties to their country of origin as well as to other migrants and migration communities around the world.

This contribution's case study is an African Pentecostal congregation called Christ Evangelical International Ministry (CEIM) that was founded in 2015 in Herne, a city with an approximate population of 156,000 in the Ruhr area in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Its founding pastor initially migrated to Germany from Ghana to seek a university degree. He soon became actively involved in supporting refugees arriving in Germany and planted CEIM as a spiritual and logistical haven for incoming migrants, particularly but not exclusively from sub-Saharan Africa (a more general dynamic investigated in Matawana 2022). Because he was also hoping to reach Herne's indigenous German population—something the church continues to work toward today—he added the "International" to Christ Evangelical's name to mark the congregation as "more" than a typical African migration church; this was emphasized in several interviews I conducted in the congregation between April and August 2024. While the majority of its members today do in fact hail from Africa, there are some Germans, Americans, and people of other nationalities who attend regularly as well.

The leaders interviewed at CEIM in spring and summer 2024 pegged the number of congregational members at around 300 people. They come from a range of denominational backgrounds, including Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Roman Catholic. During fieldwork conducted in spring and summer 2024, about 150 people attended the Sunday service, including numerous children. A special service, Youth Sunday, stood out not only because it was organized independently by the congregation's youth—more on which below—but also because attendance doubled that Sunday morning. When asked about the congregation's religious self-understanding, both leaders and members were quick to identify as "Bible believing", Evangelical, and Christian (in that order). Nevertheless, Pentecostal practices are frequent in worship services, particularly glossolalia and testimonies of having personally received the Holy Spirit, e.g., in experiences of healing. In this sense, CEIM may be considered a non-denominational African Pentecostal church that functions as not only a spiritual but also an ethnic enclave for its members.

4. Transforming authority structures at Christ Evangelical International Ministry

CEIM was chosen as a case study because it is an independent congregation without organizational ties to a larger religious denomination. As such, variations in the ways authority is structured, understood, and enacted as well as potentially novel sources of authority compared to classical transnational African Pentecostal congregations were expected (or at least seen as a realistic possibility) going into the field. In what follows, I draw from first-hand qualitative empirical fieldwork which employed semi-structured expert interviews (Luhrmann 2021) and non-systematic, non-participant observation (Thierbach/Petschick 2019). Both of these methods of data collection lend themselves particularly well to exploratory research. Six formal interviews with the church leadership and members of the youth group plus a much higher number of informal conversations, including with other congregational members, as well as observation in worship services at least every other week over the period of five months comprise the basis of the following analysis. The sample is contrastive in the sense that church leaders are older and have higher education, while members of the youth group are younger and are still in the process of attaining their formal education. Both groups were included to equal degrees. The data were gathered between April and August 2024 and analyzed with qualitative content analysis (Mayring/Fenzl 2019). More specifically, deductive (theory-oriented) qualitative content analysis was applied using those conceptualizations of authority sources and relationships as categories that are discussed in section 2 above and the introduction to this special issue.

An additional interlocutor in the context of my research at CEIM is not a member of the church but an observer interested in the variety of African Pentecostal congregations in the Ruhr area. A transnational migrant originating from West Africa herself and having lived in Germany for several years now, she attends a mainline Christian church but enjoys worship services at CEIM particularly for the songs and the atmosphere that remind her of home. In a number of informal conversations, I was struck by her knowledge and degree of reflection on religious adaptations in the context of transnational migration. When she agreed to a formal interview, we spoke at length about African Pentecostalism both in sub-Saharan Africa and in Germany, and she repeatedly emphasized the importance of the "spirit world" for African Pentecostals, a parallel world of spirits, gods, demons, ancestors, etc. The prominence of the Holy Spirit and his gifts in Pentecostalism resonate well with this spirit world belief, she remarked, and access to the spirit world—in the form of, e.g., prophesying or healing—gives Pentecostal church leaders an elevated status:

> "So they could all be [members] in the church, but if one is able to prophesy, if one is able to do something that is spiritual or has access to the spiritual world, then they see that person as probably […] being closer to God as compared to another church member who is, just, maybe has a personal conviction to maybe always come early and clean the church or do something or maybe give something to the poor.

> And so even when a leader of a Pentecostal movement does not possess these abilities to maybe prophesy or to deliver or to heal, there is always somebody on the team who is able to do that. (Interview #4, 5 June 2024)

In the African Pentecostal context, according to my interlocutor, access to the spirit world thus increases a religious leader's authority. This perspective, of course, is mirrored in a host of literature arguing that Pentecostalism has been so successful in spreading around the globe precisely because it is flexible enough to incorporate local and regional systems of beliefs and practices into its own overarching cosmology, nevertheless maintaining the degree of coherence and unity necessary to remain recognizable as a shared Pentecostal tradition (Robbins 2004; on the specific African context: M'fundisi-Holloway 2018; Wariboko 2014).

Focusing on the social position of African Pentecostal leaders, my interlocutor described how in Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa, a pastor's elevated status is emphasized not only when he (or, less frequently, she) preaches and displays the gifts of the Holy Spirit to enthusiastic affirmations by the congregation, but also in the deferential reactions on part of congregants and, for instance, preferential seating arrangements where leaders are given special seats in the first row or on the stage. Those leaders longest in the ministry are considered "spiritual fathers or spiritual mothers", she highlighted, especially if they are perceived to have access to the spirit world and to receive gifts of the Holy Spirit regularly. This suggests that both the spirit world and the Holy Spirit are important sources of authority for African Pentecostals, and that this authority is channeled through spiritual "fathers" and "mothers"—who, with Popitz (2015), unite both generative and personal authority within themselves. Age and life experience clearly play a role when it comes to being granted authority, but so does personal charisma (Weber 1978)—a point to which we return below.

The typically hierarchical and centralized structures in African Pentecostalism do not characterize CEIM, however. At CEIM, leadership is visibly pluralized: For instance, different members of the congregation will preach sermons, lead prayers, engage with testimonies, and more on a given Sunday. In addition, because every element of the service is translated either from English to German or vice versa to include both the older generation that speaks little or no German and the younger generation that feels more comfortable in German than in English, translators among congregants rotate to take their turns on the stage with no visible hierarchy. The person who just preached the sermon may stay on to translate the prayers to follow and so on. I would not have guessed the congregation's pastor to be the highest church leader had he not been pointed out to me on the second or third Sunday I attended worship. My interlocutor who is not a member at CEIM observed:

> So it's like he's the opposite of everything that you will find in a typical Pentecostal church when it comes to an authority figure. He doesn't have his own special chair. Nobody is clapping and jumping and screaming when he's coming to stage. He's even sometimes playing drums. He's translating sometimes. He's sometimes going to do children's church and all that. (Interview #4, 5 June 2024)

In other words, the pastor's status is emphasized much less at CEIM than would be expected in a classical transnational African Pentecostal church. In fact, it seems to be purposely downplayed—including by the pastor himself. When I asked my interlocutor about possible reasons, she pointed out that CEIM does not have a mother church in Africa but was founded as an independent church in Herne and that its members have "done a lot of adaptation […] to fit into their environment" (Interview #4, 5 June 2024). What she seems to be indicating is that the authoritative and centralized structures prevalent in African Pentecostal churches do not resonate as well in the German diaspora setting, particularly without an African mother church or a parent denomination to provide support for this type of congregational culture. In addition, CEIM's pastor, who migrated from Ghana to Germany in 2003 to study psychology, became involved in the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD), the country's largest Protestant federation of Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional churches, soon after his arrival. The EKD's congregational culture influenced him deeply and affects the way he leads CEIM today. As he told me in an interview:

> "I had a Pentecostal background in the Assemblies of God Church in Ghana. And when I came to Germany, I joined *Evangelische Kirche*. There were no speaking in tongues, but I felt very good because of the love. They don't have to shout hallelujah, amen. […] Love glorifies God and love is God. So, this is what is keeping us together, irrespective of differences in our theological understanding. Where there is no love, everything becomes chaotic. (Interview #3, 16 May 2024)

This excerpt suggests that the novel religious culture CEIM's pastor experienced in the EKD context left a lasting impression. Although he was religiously socialized as a Pentecostal in Ghana, he quickly came to appreciate the quieter, more reflective elements he encountered in German Protestant churches. Our conversation quickly turned to the merits and challenges of Pentecostal worship styles, particularly the centrality of highly emotive practices. He continued:

> "The Pentecostals, we are sometimes so emotional, whereby some people go beyond the borders [*of what is acceptable*, *MF*], I have to be very honest. […] This very generation, those who grew up in the 1980s, the 90s and 2000s, all these main churches in Africa, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and all these churches, they became Holy Spirit oriented. […] So, we believe that the Holy Spirit gave us their power according to the promises of Jesus to do what is beyond natural […]. But it's rather unfortunate [that] some people abuse it and overdo it, and they are too overemotional. That one, it causes chaos. Because the Spirit of God brings order and discipline, but not confusion. (Interview #3, 16 May 2024)

This excerpt reveals a discrepancy regarding expectations of worship culture between Pentecostal Christians, including Pentecostals at CEIM, and the pastor, who emphasizes "order and discipline" over "confusion". A similar assessment, worth quoting at length, was offered by CEIM's current president, also a native of Ghana and a Baptist who joined the congregation in 2018. He told me in an interview:

> African people are more emotional. They are more emotional with their faith and stuff. And sometimes that can lead to a lot of troubles. So therefore, we [*CEIM's leaders*, *MF*] focus more on teaching and getting people to understand more than being driven by their emotions. […] It's a trade-off, right? So, what's happening is some of us enjoy being loud [during worship]. I am not necessarily in support of that idea to be loud. Right? So currently some of the conversations that we're in, especially our music team here, sometimes [they are] really, really loud. You know, playing the instruments and stuff. […] And then you also have to be seeing that from a cultural perspective. Right? Because we have said among the leadership that we don't want to create the impression that this is just some African church. Right? We want to reach out to the community. And the community in which we live has to be reflected in the church, which means […] in this case not only on white people but elderly people who are coming in there. You know, sometimes they will struggle with that level of noise. […] It's sometimes very difficult finding common grounds for everybody. […] But at a minimum, I think we should be able to find a position everybody's going to be okay with. (Interview #2, 13 May 2024)

This extended excerpt suggests that although Pentecostal expectations of louder, more emotive worship services seem to dominate among CEIM's members, particularly the church band, the leadership is aware that this type of worship culture does not resonate with the entire congregation and that especially older and non-African members and visitors can quickly feel alienated by it.[2] On the level of language, this awareness becomes evident in repetition ("more emotional", "really really loud") and rhetorical questions ("right?") (see Freudenberg 2024 for an analysis of preaching style and rhetorics in a different context). The leaders I spoke with frame this dilemma as a cultural challenge of integrating opposing ideas of good worship practice; they identify learning about and understanding religious teachings as more important than emotions devoid of such understanding. As we will see in the remainder of this section, they reflexively exert authority to meet this goal in the hopes of securing a stable future for the congregation.

Importantly, while CEIM's pastor avoids taking the center stage in worship services or other congregational activities, thus declining to visibly exert his authority, he is very involved in deciding who takes on leadership roles, such as preaching, praying, or asking for testimonies during worship, or leading small groups such as the youth or the men's and women's ministries. To him, it is a divine task to fulfil what he perceives as God's intentions for his church: "Thanks be to God that I'm very, very careful. I don't give people the room to stand all the time to perform. I need to discern, that's the *Unterscheidung*. […] I select who is to preach, who is to lead a prayer, who is to do this." (Interview #3, 16 May 2024) The fact that he mentions discernment highlights

[2] Incidentally, this partially reflects my experience when conducting observation in worship services in spring and summer 2024. The sound system was set much too loud for comfort on most Sundays, and I noticed other attendees protecting their ears with earplugs and carefully covering their children's ears. Regardless of the congregants' personal tastes in music, dancing, praying, etc., the sheer volume of the music was visibly painful to several people.

that, at least from the pastor's perspective, he alone can identify what God's will is for the congregation through the gift of discerning. The congregation seems to trust his decisions to be beneficial for all, but interestingly—especially in a Pentecostal setting—he does not frame himself publicly as a charismatic leader endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In fact, he is a driving factor in pluralizing authority structures at CEIM: A range of people is actively involved in leadership duties and the pastor is visibly comfortable sharing responsibility and authority with others. While he makes certain decisions in the background, either on his own or involving the church council, it is clearly not his goal to present himself as the sole and elevated leader at CEIM. This indicates that authority is shifting, albeit gradually, from unilateral to multilateral decision-making.

In particular, the pastor and other members of the church council are working towards involving the church youth, as the next generation, more strongly in the life of the congregation. The church president and leader of CEIM's youth group told me in an interview that two years ago, he decided to make it the "major focus" (Interview #2, 13 May 2024) of his activities at CEIM to engage the church's youth and formally establish a youth group. This group functions as a space for young members to talk about a range of topics that are important to them, including peer pressure, alcohol, drugs, the internet and the media, etc., and discuss how their Christian faith informs these issues. He said that this approach has caught on with the youth, in part because many are alienated from their parents, whose everyday life is very different from their own. While the younger generation of people of African background in Germany is typically well-integrated culturally and in terms of speaking German, the older generation of African migrants is less well adapted, causing generational conflict to erupt in families (a dynamic that has been attested in other migration contexts in western Germany as well: Weiß 2017; Marla-Küsters 2015). Against this backdrop, the CEIM youth group offers its members a familial space that is often lacking at home. The youth group leader reported that the group has grown from initially seven African youths to currently around 40 members, some of which are German, Russian, Albanian or of other non-African nationalities.

Several times a year, the youth group independently organizes a worship service, called Youth Sunday. I attended such a service in May 2024 and upon entering the sanctuary I immediately noticed a much larger crowd than the usual average of 150 attendees. The members of the youth group were gathered at the front, dressed all in white, and opened the service not with the usual loud, rhythmical beats but contemplative music with soft singing and repetitive lyrics that would not be out of place at a Hillsong, Vineyard, or International Christian Fellowship service.[3] The service, entitled "Joy is coming" on the big screen above the stage, consisted of an extended prayer session, including short bouts of preaching to the audience, and a podium discussion on the meaning of joy, interspersed by singing, dancing, and testimonies from the congregation.

[3] These large, neo-Pentecostal or neo-Charismatic churches practice a "softer" version of Pentecostalism that is less explosively emotional but more contemplative and inwardly oriented. See Hunt (2002) for an overview and Freudenberg (2019) for an introduction to the Vineyard Church.

Interestingly, the service took place in German and was translated to English (instead of the other way around, as it is usually the case at CEIM). The prayer session was led by a young Black man and was translated by a young Black woman. It focused on Psalms 100, 4–5, encouraging everyone to thank and praise God and ask for his blessings by praying out loud individually, which the congregation did for several minutes.[4]

About an hour into the service, five Black youths headed onto the stage for a podium discussion on "how to seek and receive joy". The moderator, carrying a Bible, was male, and while he equally directed his question to all four discussants, two males and two females, I noticed the young men's answers were more elaborate and received more applause from the audience than the young women's responses, which resulted in a majority of follow-up questions addressed to the young men. Both young men radiated humility at being the center of attention and self-assurance about their answers alike, emphasizing their conviction that Jesus is joy, Jesus saves, and that the Bible as the source of all knowledge and wisdom proves this. While this argument is of course unsurprising in the given setting, the podium discussion format struck me as unusual: Apparently, the youth group was aiming for a reflexive, rational exchange of ideas as opposed to the emotionality of a fire-and-brimstone sermon. Shortly after the podium discussion wound down, the service came to an end.

The Youth Sunday service is insightful when considering authority relations at CEIM because it shows that while the leadership delegated authority to the youth to plan and hold the worship service, the members of the youth group nevertheless deferred to both the church elders' preferences and the congregation's general expectations when structuring the service. The more contemplative music style as well as the podium discussion (which had been used at a regular service at least once before) suggest a less emotionally explosive worship culture, which the church leadership has been trying to encourage among congregants, as we saw above. At the same time, the extended prayer sessions, the testimonies, and the sheer amount of music reflect standard elements at CEIM's Sunday services and thus arguably meet the church members' expectations. In other words, the youth group seems to have struck a fine balance between a rational and a celebratory approach, as it were, in shaping the worship service. From this perspective, two types of authority are clearly evident at CEIM: The authority of church elders, or generative authority (Popitz 2015), plays a crucial role, as we will see below. But so does sacral authority (Popitz 2015), or the authority of the divine—because the congregation believes the Holy Spirit to be among them during worship and manifest in prayer and testimonies. This indicates that authority can have various sources and that individuals are embedded in networks or "webs" of authority. For Popitz, generative and sacral authority together constitute institutional authority, a concept reminiscent of Weber's traditional authority, or the authority of established structures and practices (Weber 1978). But a closer look at authority relations at

[4] As an aside, I noted later that the prayer leader brought to mind the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Burke/McDowell 2012; Gallagher/Wood 2005); ironically, as I was contemplating the fact that his style reminded me of Black male rap culture, he was preaching about the "devil" being in the pop culture industry.

CEIM—a web of ascriptions and recognitions of authority—reveals why Popitz' terminology hits the mark more accurately than does Weber's.

In an interview with a member of CEIM's youth group, my interlocutor explicitly framed the youth as less experienced, and thus as less knowledgeable, than the church elders throughout our conversation. Consider the following excerpt:

> "As a youth, I do represent the congregation in a way, but not as centrally as do Uncle Samuel [*the youth group leader*, *MF*] and Pastor Christian. And because Pastor Christian is our pastor, the way he lives is representative for the congregation. […] When you see how the Pastor lives by, like, love, then you want to go to his church, of course, and be a part of that. […] So, I have the perspective of a youth. So, my perspective is, of course, that the congregation should grow, also grow spiritually. But my perspective, or, to be honest, my focus, is still a little bit on myself and on the youth group. Because I want to grow more spiritually. But, for instance, Pastor Christian is already very mature spiritually. And of course, he probably wants to grow more spiritually himself. But his focus is on the congregation because he is its pastor. And the same with Uncle Samuel, they really want the congregation to grow physically and spiritually. And my focus is just on myself and the youth group. (Interview #5, 8 August 2024)[5]

Clearly, my interlocutor is highly deferential to both his pastor and his youth group leader, addressing them with the honorifics "Pastor" and "Uncle", and ascribing them a great deal of authority in spiritual and congregational matters while downplaying his own abilities and influence (he is a junior youth group leader, biblically highly literate, and regularly leads the congregation in praying out loud). Despite being 21 years old, living on his own, and pursuing a degree in engineering, he perceives himself as a "youth" and speaks of himself almost as of a child when reflecting his position in the church and his faith. His answers to my questions seemed genuine and warm-hearted—he was visibly pleased to welcome me to the youth group and to be in conversation—but our exchanges clearly showed how much he considers "Uncle Samuel", "Pastor Christian", and other church elders as role models who are firm in their faith and from whom he wants to learn. With Popitz (2015), this reflects my interlocutor's desire to be recognized as (1) a group member—as someone worthy of belonging to the congregation—and (2) as fulfilling the role ascribed to him by the church leadership, namely taking an active part in the youth group.

My interlocutor's comments suggest that both knowledge and expertise, but also seniority and experience are important sources of authority that congregants willingly submit to at CEIM. As such, CEIM's authority structures are reminiscent of conventional African Pentecostal congregations, though lacking the central focus on the pastor: The elders function as role models and are perceived to know from their experience what is best for the congregation. This

[5] Only this interview is translated from German and smoothed by the author. Names changed for anonymity.

perspective becomes evident elsewhere, too; for instance, the fortnightly youth group meetings are structured around a leader who steers the group through discussions, e.g. on Bible passages, by offering interpretations without prescribing them. All youth group members I have encountered at CEIM seem to know their Bible well and participate actively in these discussions, yet nevertheless without fail defer to the group leader's authority. At the same time, the youth group leader emphasized in our interview that the leadership is careful about "minimal interference" in the youth group because

> "[…] they need to organize themselves, but we are not going to be telling them what they have to be doing. They have to have that flexibility to design their own concept, to come up with their strategy and then have a conversation about that. And then at the end of the day, that responsibility will also be lying with them. (Interview #2, 13 May 2024)

This approach must be understood against the larger backdrop of the church elders' concerns regarding the future of the congregation. As noted above, they are aware that the younger generation needs to remain committed to the congregation and be equipped with the skills necessary to take over its leadership at some point in the future, and this is arguably the reason for encouraging self-reliance and a degree of autonomy on part of the youth group. Regarding the Youth Sunday church service described above, the youth group leader told me:

> "The interesting thing about this […] is that now a lot of the adults are like, okay, I think we can even learn from them. Right? Because they will be organized, their church service, it was a little bit different from ours. And to be honest, […] the way we have been doing our church service sometimes was a little bit chaotic. But with the youth service, we realized that they had a well-structured plan, and they did things differently. And then we admitted that […] they're doing things that we can learn from them. Right? I personally thought the way they did the podium discussion, I thought it was really amazing. And something that we can also learn from as an example. (Interview #2, 13 May 2024)

His comments reveal that the church leaders are ascribing authority to the youth because they deem the youth to be able to teach the congregation something about structure and organization in worship, which is perceived as lacking in the church's Pentecostal worship culture. While the youth themselves defer to their elders and are influenced by their elders' expectations of how to go about things, the elders, in turn, perceive the new generation as introducing novel and necessary elements into CEIM's worship culture, and thus defer to their ideas while at the same time encouraging their autonomy. From this perspective, reciprocal "currents of recognition" (*Anerkennungsströme*, Sofsky/Paris 1994) become evident in which authority is ascribed to the elders by the youth, but the youth are recognized as sources of authority in their own right by the elders. The idea that authority is characterized by such reciprocal currents of recognition, among other factors, presents an important addition to the conceptual thoughts offered by the guest editors in the introduction to this special issue (Kalender/El-Wereny/Nagel 2026).

This dynamic—the fact that the elders perceive that they have something to learn from the youth in the diaspora context—may reflect the type of socialization that younger generations of African migrants experience in the German context, which differs markedly from the socialization of their parent generation, who grew up in sub-Saharan African social and cultural settings. The strong commitment to CEIM on part of its youth certainly reflects how important their Christian faith and the congregation as a community is to them, and this seems to make CEIM a special case. Other African churches in the Ruhr area, and likely elsewhere in Germany, are having trouble retaining their youth, who feel alienated by the African languages, songs, and other cultural elements that shape worship services, as my interlocutor who is not a member of CEIM pointed out. Because CEIM exhibits flexibility and even the desire to depart from these standard African church practices, and because it grants its youth autonomy to contribute to the congregation in ways that they see fit, the younger generation remains committed to the congregation, at least for the time being.

5. Conclusion

The analysis has revealed that CEIM's congregational structures are noticeably less centralized and pastor-focused than those of traditional African Pentecostal congregations. While its leaders enjoy a high standing and are deferred to by the rest of the congregation, they are working towards selectively pluralizing authority structures to ensure the congregation's future. In particular, they actively cede authority to the youth group, granting it the autonomy to hold their own Bible studies and independently organize worship services. While the youth themselves claim little authority in the congregation and remain focused on the church leaders and the Bible as sources of knowledge and wisdom, shifting authority structures become visible in a larger process of generational transition.

In the Pentecostal context, with its emphasis on strong spiritual leadership and the "gifts of the Holy Spirit", we would expect charismatic authority (Weber 1978) to be particularly evident. However, charismatic elements are intentionally downplayed at CEIM to encourage a less emotional and more rational approach to faith and worship. Instead of charismatic authority, generative authority (Popitz 2015)—authority of the elders based on age, experience, and the wisdom derived from both—becomes especially visible. The church elders are conscious of this dynamic and intentionally wield their authority to encourage a more rational, reflective congregational culture based on understanding the core tenets of their faith instead of what they perceive as overly emotional and "chaotic" Pentecostal practices. Teaching and learning are emphasized while emotional and bodily experience untethered from what is considered Christian doctrine is discouraged. As such, CEIM is an African Pentecostal congregation attempting to shift from Pentecostalism to a more mainline Protestant culture. At the same time, the fact that Pentecostal practices still play such a central role suggests that sacral authority (Popitz 2015), or the authority of the divine, is important as well.

While Popitz' concept of institutional authority—comprising generative and sacral authority—is reminiscent of Weber's idea of traditional authority, this latter concept is not as easily applicable as Popitz' framework. CEIM is a young congregation, founded by a small group of African migrants in Germany a decade ago. Its members come from diverse denominational backgrounds and worship cultures, and because there is no African mother church or a single ecclesial tradition that the congregation draws from, there is little shared tradition in a Weberian sense that CEIM can rally around. Instead, it has assembled its unique congregational culture out of a multitude of traditions, led in the process by the church elders and their understanding of Biblical doctrine (generative authority) and of course by their conviction of being guided by the Holy Spirit as promised in the Bible (sacral authority).

Clearly, then, both the church's leadership and the Bible are the central sources of authority at CEIM. The legitimacy of the former is structurally derived: Leaders hold elevated positions due to their seniority and experience. The legitimacy of the latter is based on the personal conviction of all members that the Bible is the eternal source of knowledge and wisdom in the world, evidenced in frequent experiences of the Holy Spirit and reflected in the often-used description of CEIM as a "Bible-believing church". This indicates a plurality of sources of authority. At a first glance, authority is ascribed to the leadership by the congregational members through deference and humility in a dyadic relationship. However, this contribution has shown that by pluralizing authority structures, the church's leadership has begun to frame the youth as a source of knowledge to learn from as well: the youth group, arguably influenced by their socialization in Germany, is advancing a more rational and reflective congregational culture by leading their own Bible studies and Youth Sunday worship services. Increasingly, it seems that the church's youth is seen as a source of authority as well, revealing reciprocal "currents of recognition" (Sofsky/Paris 1994) at play in relationships of authority. In this sense, authority is linked to recognition: both the recognition of a group's leader(s), from below, and the recognition of its members as belonging to a specific circle of people, from above. Authority thus requires submission and autonomy alike in the slow process of generational transition at CEIM. Similar dynamics regarding generational differences in religious minority contexts in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia in western Germany have been attested among Korean Christian and Tamil Hindu communities (Weiß 2017; Marla-Küsters 2015). This suggests that the transformation of authority structures at CEIM as revealed above are not an isolated but a more general phenomenon among second-generation migrants.

To conclude, this contribution has approached authority as a relational network characterized by a variety of sources and inner attitudes. It has also shown that the structural contexts in which authority relationships are embedded must be taken into account to properly understand how these relationships play out. It follows that additional empirical research that sheds light on the diverse factors influencing the transformation of authority structures is necessary to further develop approaches of "authority" on a conceptual level. Grasping empirical reality and furthering conceptual theorization, in this sense, must be understood as mutually constitutive.

Finally, this contribution's case study is grounded in exploratory research that requires more in-depth fieldwork and systematic comparison of the findings with classical African Pentecostal churches in western Germany (i.e., those with denominational ties and mother churches in sub-Saharan Africa) to make explicit both the uniqueness of the case at hand but also its similarities to such "classical" congregations. A broader comparison to other migration churches and ultimately "German" independent congregations (*Freikirchen*) would constitute further steps to better understand the transformation of authority structures in Germany's non-denominational religious landscape.

Bibliography

Adogame, Afe. 2013. *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury.

Attanasi, Katherine / Amos Yong, eds. 2012. *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burgess, Richard. 2020. *Nigerian Pentecostalism and Development: Spirit, Power, and Transformation*. London: Routledge.

Burke, Kelsy / Amy McDowell. 2012. "Superstars and Misfits: Two Pop-trends in the Gender Culture of Contemporary Evangelicalism." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 24 (1), 67–79.

Dümling, Bianca. 2018. "Migration verändert die kirchliche Landschaft in Deutschland: Entwicklung und Geschichte der Migrationskirchen." In *Begegnung in der Glokalität: Christliche Migrationskirchen in Deutschland im Wandel*, ed. by Claudia Rammelt / Esther Hornung / Vasile-Octavian Mihoc. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 77–90.

Etzelmüller, Gregor / Claudia Rammelt. 2022. "Migrationskirchen: Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums vor Ort." In *Migrationskirchen: Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums*, ed. by Gregor Etzelmüller / Claudia Rammelt. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 13–29.

Freudenberg, Maren. 2019. "Dynamics and Stability in Globally Expanding Charismatic Religions: The Case of the Vineyard Movement in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland." *Entangled Religions: Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Religious Contact and Transfer* 8.

Freudenberg, Maren. 2022. "Explaining Glossolalia Instead of Speaking in Tongues: Emotional Energy and Authority Relations at a Midwestern Pentecostal Megachurch." *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 32, 534–558.

Freudenberg, Maren. 2024. "Joel Osteen's Prosperity Gospel and the Enduring Popularity of America's 'Smiling Preacher'." In *Ritual and Social Dynamics in Christian and Islamic Preaching*, ed. by Ruth Conrad / Roland Hardenberg / Hanna Miethner / Max Stille. London: Bloomsbury, 105–126.

Freudenberg, Maren / Martin Radermacher / Sebastian Schüler. 2022. “Introduction to Special Section 3: Religious Authority in Practice in Contemporary Evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal Christianity.” *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 32, 471–481.

Freudenberg, Maren / Angelina Yeboah Lartey. 2025. “Transnational African Pentecostalism in Germany: The Case of the Christ Evangelical International Ministry Herne.” In *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Supplements Online*, ed. by Michael Wilkinson. Leiden: Brill.

Gallagher, Sally K. / Sabrina L. Wood. 2005. “Godly Manhood Going Wild? Transformations in Conservative Protestant Masculinity.” *Sociology of Religion* 66, 135–160.

Hunt, Stephen J. 2002. Deprivation and Western Pentecostalism Revisited: Neo-Pentecostalism. *PentecoStudies* 1 (1), 1–29.

Jacobson, Douglas. 2021. *The World’s Christians: Who they are, Where they are, and How they got there*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Johnson, Todd M. / Gina Zurlo, eds. [3]2020. *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Leiden: Brill.

Kalender, Mehmet T. / Mahmud El-Wereny / Alexander-Kenneth Nagel. 2026. “Introduction: Religious Authority in Minority Constellations and Digital Media.” *ΑΡGOS* 5 (2), 2–14.

Lincoln, Bruce. 1994. *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ludwig, Frieder / Stian Sorlie Eriksen. 2022. “Forschungszugänge zu afrikanischen transnationalen Gemeinden und Kirchen insbesondere in Großbritannien, Deutschland und Norwegen.” In *Migrationskirchen: Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums*, ed. by Gregor Etzelmüller / Claudia Rammelt. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 375–404.

Luhrmann, Tanya Marie. [2]2021. “Interview Methods.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Michael Stausberg / Steven Engler. London: Routledge, 345–364.

M’fundisi-Holloway, Naar. 2018. “When Pentecostalism Meets African Indigenous Religions: Conflict, Compromise, or Incorporation?” In *Pentecostalism and Politics in Africa*, ed. by Adeshina Afolayan / Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso / Toyin Falola. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 87–100.

Marla-Küsters, Sandhya. 2015. *Diaspora-Religiosität im Generationenverlauf: Die zweite Generation srilankisch-tamilischer Hindus in NRW*. Würzburg: Ergon.

Marshall, Ruth. 2009. *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Matawana, Benson Elisamoni. 2022. “Role of Ghanaian Immigrants’ Churches (GICs) in supporting refugees.” In *Migrationskirchen: Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums*, ed. by Gregor Etzelmüller / Claudia Rammelt. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 419–435.

Mayring, Philipp / Thomas Fenzl. 2019. “Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse.” In *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*, ed. by Nina Baur / Jörg Blasius. Wiesbaden: Springer, 633–648.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth. 2022. “Religionswissenschaftliche und religionssoziologische Perspektiven auf das Phänomen der Migrationskirchen.” In *Migrationskirchen: Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums*, ed. by Gregor Etzelmüller / Claudia Rammelt. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 199–220.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth. 2026. “Patterns of Change in Religious Authority: Routinization, Oligarchization and Institutionalization.” *ΑΡGOS* 5 (2), 15–33.

Popitz, Heinrich. 2015. *Phänomene der Macht*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Robbins, Joel. 2004. “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (1), 117–143.

Simmel, Georg. 1908. *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Berlin: Duncker und Humboldt.

Sofsky, Wolfgang / Rainer Paris. 1994. *Figurationen sozialer Macht. Autorität – Stellvertretung – Koalition*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

Strübind, Andrea. 2021. “Pentekostale Migrationsgemeinden in Deutschland und ihre Beziehungen zur EKD.” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 34 (1), 52–70.

Thierbach, Cornelia / Grit Petschick. [2]2019. “Beobachtung.” In *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*, ed. by Nina Baur / Jörg Blasius. Wiesbaden: Springer, 1165–1181.

Ukah, Asonzeh. 2008. *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power: A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Währisch-Oblau, Claudia. 2005. “Migrationskirchen in Deutschland: Überlegungen zur strukturierten Beschreibung eines komplexen Phänomens.” *Zeitschrift für Mission* 31 (1/2), 19–39.

Wariboko, Nimi. 2014. *Nigerian Pentecostalism*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Weber, Max. 1978 [1922]. *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weiß, Sabrina. 2017. *Migrantengemeinden im Wandel. Eine Fallstudie zu koreanischen Gemeinden in Nordrhein-Westfalen*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

About the author

Dr. **Maren Freudenberg** is a sociologist of religion and associate professor at the Center for Religious Studies, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. Holding a PhD in sociology, her research focuses on contemporary Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in the United States and Germany as well as the intersections between religion, politics and the economy.

Mail: maren.freudenberg@rub.de