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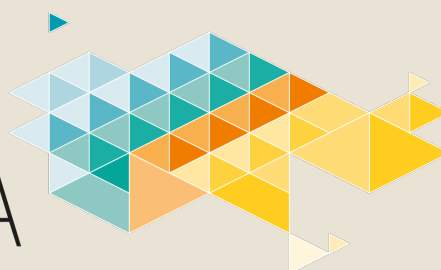
The Committee and the Uncommitted

Material Assistance to Members in Need at a Pentecostal Church in Western Kenya

Lena L. Kroeker and Yonatan N. Gez, 2022

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1 Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that part of religious organizations' mandate in promoting charitable activities involves the provision of material assistance to their members in their hour of need (Leutloff-Grandits, Peleikis, and Thelen 2009, 1-2). Such assistance is often perceived as part of a 'pact' between members and institutions, whereby the former regard such support as a right and actively demand it while the latter see themselves as committed to the empowerment of their congregants. Whether or not such assistance is actually transformative (Deacon 2012), it can offer invaluable supplementary social security or replace non-functioning state mechanisms. At the same time, from an institutional perspective, such assistance cannot be dissociated from the strategic interests of consolidating commitment: by showing their care for members and their material welfare, religious institutions seek to deepen intimacies and reinforce trust, thereby

cultivating exclusivist (or at least privileged) ties. Furthermore, such promise of material assistance, like promises of church roles, may not only satisfy bonds with current members, but also appeal to prospective ones (Gez & Droz 2017). This we can see, for example, with regard to debates surrounding the work of religious faith-based development organizations, where the promise of access to material benefits has at times been criticized as a missionary device (Freeman 2012a; Bornstein 2005; Clarke & Jennings 2008). On an everyday level, material provision can be an instrument for tilting the balance of commitment among undecided or irregular members—especially in contexts of high religious turnover, such as we find in Christian urban Kenya (Gez 2018).

In this article, we build on prior observations regarding widespread religious mobility and socio-economic disparity in Pentecostal urban Kenya to explore the dynamics of church-based material assistance. Recognizing that religious institutions are hierarchical structures, where various factions may pursue disparate objectives (Thelen et al. 2009: 7), we propose to go beyond a simplistic language of horizontal versus vertical relations. Inspired by recent studies that document the interconnectedness of social classes in Africa with regard to material assistance (Kroeker 2018; Neubert 2019; James 2015), we expand these observations to the case of church congregations, which are a central pillar of socio-economic support. By following the church's mechanisms of provision—who decides about assistance, who is likely to receive it, and how it is facilitated—we can articulate fundamental questions related to class, solidarity, and distribution of wealth within the church. Recognizing the primary significance that Pentecostal churches have on the socioeconomic lives of their members (Freeman 2012b) and their key role in Kenya today, familiarity with welfare dynamics within the microcosmos of the church may help us understand such practices in society more broadly. Such unpacking of a church's impact on the socioeconomic wellbeing of its members is not limited to formal teachings and theologies, but should also be attentive to institutional factors such as church structure and hierarchies, and competition and strategies for member retention. Above all we propose that, within a highly competitive religious environment, more attention should be paid to the interplay between socio-economic support and the institutional drive for commitment by members.

Illustrating this point is our emphasis on the central role played by the church committee, whose members come from a disproportionately high socio-economic status. Following the term brought forth by Naomi Haynes (2017) in her work on Pentecostalism in the Zambian Copperbelt, we recognize committee members as 'super-members'. As Haynes explains, super-members are a particular subset of Pentecostal laity who are financially prosperous and appear to be particularly devout. She suggests that super-members are given high visibility, as their very presence bestows honor on the leadership and an aspirational horizon for the congregation: "During Sunday services or prayer meetings they sit at the front of the church, smartly dressed and carrying large Bibles" (Haynes 2017: 137). These prominent figures offer high financial contributions, show commitment and dependability, and as such make up the backbone of the church structure. Though not formal leaders, they tend to occupy key positions in the church. Following these observations, and seeking to avoid the moralizing—and at times apologetic—colors that often paint discussions on Pentecostal church leaders in Kenya and in general, we propose an analytical perspective drawn from institutional structure and de facto practice, cognizant of both the sacrifices that the church's committee members make as well as the advantages gained by their gatekeeping role.

This paper is built around a study of a small Pentecostal church in the city of Kisumu, Western Kenya, which we shall call the Church of Everlasting Glory (henceforth CEG). Research at CEG was conducted over a period of three months in 2014, during which we engaged in participant observations at the church's Sunday services and on special occasions, spoke informally with members and leaders inside and outside the church, and conducted five formal, semi-structured interviews with church committee members focused around the structure of the church's modes of provision and assistance.

While the Pentecostal movement is highly diverse in terms of denominational sizes, missions, ideological leanings, and leadership structures, the movement's 'many tongues' (Yong 2010) nonetheless share important characteristics, such as the emphasis on "pneumatic Christianity" where God's immediate and miraculous presence is contrasted with the supposed dryness and coldness of historical missionary Christianity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013). Indeed, as our reliance on Haynes' work in Zambia illustrates, the dynamics of Pentecostal church structure share certain similarities that traverse national borders, and many of our observations resonate beyond Kenya and across global Pentecostalism's transnational networks (Anderson et al. 2010). Following Gez' (2018) presentation of normative Kenyan Pentecostalism, we regard CEG's teachings and structure as falling well within this wide category. As such, our discussion of the church lends itself to generalization—with caveats that we attend to in the conclusion—at least on the national-Kenyan level. To support this argument, we set the discussion on CEG within a wider national context, and include secondary illustrations from other cases that fell within the purview of our research. This wider research context included fourteen months of accumulated fieldwork focused on religious identities in Nairobi and Kisumu (2011-2014), as well as three months of fieldwork in Kisumu focused on churches' social support mechanisms (2017). During this latter fieldwork, we focused on Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), a popular mega-church whose Kisumu branch neighbors CEG. By setting the case of CEG within its wider context and comparing it with CITAM, we gesture towards the relevance and limitations of our conclusions beyond the specificity of our single case study.

2 Kenyan Pentecostalism and the Provision of Socio-Economic Support

In Kenya, where between 80% and 85% of the people identify themselves Christian, churches have a long history of involvement in the provision of material services. In colonial times, religious institutions were at the forefront of provision especially on matters related to health and education, a role that they still maintain in spite of the nationalization of many such services (Droz & Maupeu 2013). Often enjoying sponsorship by overseas partners, churches may offer student scholarships, contribute towards hospital bills, or assist in covering funeral costs. In large churches, such activities are coordinated by designated offices. Thus at CEG's neighboring mega-church of CITAM, we find a 'benevolence office' responsible for supporting members in need. The benevolence office centralizes much of the church's formal assistance, as it is there that members apply for financial support as well as counseling with senior pastors. CITAM's benevolence office has a designated budget, and at times of personal hardship, members may book appointments with the kiti (Swahili: chair, colloquially used for the benevolence office presided by the chairperson of the church) to discuss the source of the problem and make the case for being

allocated support. While such activities are first and foremost aimed at (prospective) members, wealthy and socially conscious churches may also combine their support to members with outreach activities: thus at St. Andrew's Presbyterian church in Nairobi—a wealthy and historic middle class church, the 'welfare office', as it is known, primarily processes requests for assistance by extremely vulnerable individuals from among the urban poor, and assists them as a charitable activity. As the church's social worker explained to us, 'birds of the same feather flock together'. As she explained, outside applicants for support from the welfare office would not feel comfortable within St. Andrew's middle-class congregation, and are therefore unlikely to seek membership.

Whether directed at members or non-members, such support is particularly significant in light of Kenya's high poverty rates and the severe limitations of its formal social security apparatus. It has been noted that Kenya's meager national welfare programmes concentrate on two target groups: on the one hand, the extremely poor and vulnerable, and on the other hand, the formally employed tax payers (Künzler 2016). Left out is the majority of the population and its middle segment, who suffer from underemployment and limited income (Kroeker 2018; Neubert 2019). The un- and underemployed as well as the large number of small-scale, self-employed citizens cannot afford the monthly contributions needed for health coverage or pension funds, and, whenever facing an extraordinary economic challenge, they rely instead on solidarity-based models of support in order to collect funds for out-of-pocket payments for themselves and for their family. In doing so, Kenyans tend to rely on two solidarity networks above all else: kinship and religious community. This is illustrated by a questionnaire that we administered among forty-two members at CITAM in Kisumu, in which respondents named either their family network (54%) or religious community (37%) as their primary source of material assistance, and a total of 91% have put these two networks first and above all else. Our questionnaire also noted that, among the few people who mentioned reliance on support by governmental programs, all have been enjoying stable employment. In terms of specifications to the type of life challenge that would provoke such requests for assistance, the questionnaire identified primary preoccupation with the coverage of health and funeral costs, school fees, and support for small investments.

Such material reliance on the church has long been observed, especially in times of political, economic, and social crisis (Jones 2009; Piot 2010). Indeed, while converging with other global trends, the phenomenal rise of the neo-Pentecostal movement in the Global South since the 1980s is commonly explained in terms of response to crises, which in the case of Kenya included structural adjustment programmes and economic recession, an increasingly despotic one-party rule, and an HIV/AIDS pandemic overwhelming an ill-equipped health system (Dilger 2007; Burchardt 2015; Mhando et al. 2018). While religion in general is associated with both otherworldly consolations and concrete impact on socio-political action (e.g., Bodewes 2014), the neo-Pentecostal movement is particularly notable in fusing the two. In particular, scholars observe that Pentecostals tend to frame the dramas of contemporary socio-economic changes—with emphasis on economic—in a relevant 'mythopoetic' language that energizes and induces a capitalist/neo-liberal turn, and as such provides 'a positive resource for modern economic development' (Berger 2009: 71). The movement's pragmatic messaging offers an 'economically advantageous redemption' (Bialecki et al. 2008: 1149), in which 'salvation became increasingly this-worldly' (Marshall 2009: 79). In particular, the neo-Pentecostal movement brought about an unapologetic emphasis on material prosperity, known as the 'prosperity gospel' or 'health and

wealth gospel,' which condones God's material blessing to his true followers. Such teachings, however, are themselves quite varied and are not universally endorsed (Hasu 2012; Heuser 2015). At CEG, for example, one routinely hears that 'the prosperity gospel has gone too far' and has been distorted to benefit greedy self-appointed men—and women—of God.

This response to crisis also has a more mundane, personal face. In a city like Kisumu, which attracts many migrants from the countryside searching for employment and a better future, church affiliation can compare to the value of carrying a highly esteemed family name or graduating from a recognized school, as religious networks—similarly to familial or professional ones—offer 'long arms' that can open doors and reach out to assist its members (Birzle 2017: 58). Particularly along the transition from the village to the city, religious identification can become a pronounced marker of identity that takes over receding family networks (Rohregger 2009; Burchardt 2015). Such role-filling is not unexpected, as the idea of the church serving as a surrogate family is a common trope (Sharma 2012; Bonsu and Belk 2010). For marginalized migrants in particular, religious affiliation can help to build resilience through the expansion of social networks in an alien environment, empowering members both materially and spiritually in both direct and indirect ways (Gooren 2011). As Waweru (2010) notes, contemporary Kenyan Pentecostalism combines a language of individual empowerment that resonates with the population's entrepreneurial spirit of self-reliance with an emphasis on collective solidarity and social transformation. By having in their midst members who hold lucrative and influential positions, churches increase their co-religionists' opportunities to benefit from contacts infused by religious solidarity and—at least in theory—similarly achieve socio-economic ascension. At the same time, on an institutional level, the advancement of individual members increases the church's influence, wealth, and name recognition. Not without reason, CEG's recently appointed assistant pastor, Henry, explained to us that, 'for a church to be strong, you must have members who are also financially strong'.

It is on the backdrop of religion's central role in contributing towards material support that we may think about another key tendency within Kenyan Christianity, namely, propensity for religious mobility. The country's current religious climate is marked by vibrancy and high turnover, especially in urban areas. Since the explosion of the neo-Pentecostal movement in Kenya in the 1980s and the legal liberalization of the religious market in the 1990s, the number of the country's denominations has skyrocketed (Gifford 2009): According to Julius Gathogo (2011: 2), by 2010, Kenya had about 10,000 registered churches and counting. Quantitative studies such as the Nairobi Urban Integration Research Project (Bocquier et al. 2009; Wafula 2003) reinforce qualitative findings (Gez 2018; Gez et al. 2021) and agree that urban Kenyans tend to be religiously mobile. On the whole, Kenya's religious ethos tends to condone such mobility—at least within certain boundaries or 'territories' (Gez & Droz 2019) by emphasizing one's 'freedom of worship': a common legalistic formulation used to explain religious dynamism and agency more broadly. Religious institutions, on their part, support such mobility and, save rare and widely criticized instances, keep the church's gates wide open for congregants to join in, and—with some reluctance—opt out. The result is a wide range of mobile practices, which may be synchronic—partaking in multiple religious circles around the same time, for social, spiritual, or practical reasons—or diachronic—corresponding to what some scholars have termed 'conversion careers' (Richardson 1978; Gooren 2010).

This latter point lends itself to questioning the motivation behind such mobility. While the Kenyan middle class has, in recent years, been showing remarkable signs of growth (Kroeker et al. 2018; Ncube et al. 2011), the Pentecostal movement is largely associated with the urban poor and lower-middle class (Parsitau & Mwaura 2010). Unsurprisingly, therefore, it is along these lines of practical and material aspirations that explanations for Pentecostal participation and mobility are often given. While reasons for religious mobility certainly vary between individuals and circumstances, it has been suggested that precariousness resulting from limited financial resources, such as we find in Kenya's tough urban landscape, fosters a pragmatic outlook on religion, notably through emphasis on healing and success (e.g., Deacon 2015). Thus, for example, Paul Gifford (2009, 125n33) hypothesizes that hyperbolic promises of miracles and financial breakthroughs, highly common within Kenya's Pentecostal circles, would be attractive to the listener; but after a while, once their failure to materialize becomes apparent, such promises 'probably [offer] a partial reason for the frequent migration between these Pentecostal churches'. Outside of Kenya, many scholars similarly adopted explicative frameworks oriented around practical considerations—be they concrete and specific (healing, financial breakthrough) (Premawardhana 2018; Kirsch 2004; Wijsen 2007), or of a more abstract nature associated with reshaping one's life away from the insecurities associated with poverty (Smilde 2007; Daswani 2015; Haynes 2017). Responding to the challenge of high turnover and seeking to avoid dropout, churches try to bind their members through various means: some encourage marriage within the congregation, and may even go as far as alienating their followers from their families and other key networks. Yet another practice aimed at drawing members in involves appealing to their responsibility by integrating them into the leadership circle, thus keeping them from visiting other denominations (Gez & Droz 2017). To these we add the promise of access to 'members only' benefits, and above all the offering of support in one's hour of need. As Dilger (2007) notes with regard to healing practices, struggling Pentecostals who have been cared for by their church tend to reciprocate and become more committed in turn.

3 Introducing the Church of Everlasting Glory (CEG)

The Church of Everlasting Glory (CEG) resides in an unassuming iron-sheet-structure first inaugurated in 2005. Plastic chairs offer sitting for forty to fifty people every Sunday, but even that number is aspirational as the church—which boasts up to one hundred members—is seldom, if ever, full. Just across the road, an imposing landmark edifice throws its shadow, hosting a hall with seating for 3,000 people, a primary school, and a range of administrative buildings: the main Kisumu branch of CITAM, one of Kenya's best-known Pentecostal churches. Hundreds of private cars pass the mega-church's security point, while across the road, the majority of CEG's congregants come on foot. The glaring difference between the two churches in part owes to a particular geography: the churches are located on the seam between the affluent Milimani neighborhood and the nearby slums of Nyalenda. Every Sunday morning, CEG's thinly decorated hall is filled with jubilations, with special emphasis on inspirational singing accompanied by the sound of a single synthesizer. The interspersed singing is complemented by two sermons, delivered in Swahili or English—or, most commonly, a mixture of both. As chants begin to fill the air, they leave the small hall and intertwine with CITAM's superb musical production from across the road in a discordant medley.

Considering the stark material differences between CEG and CITAM, it is noteworthy that many of CEG's members have been attending CITAM prior to joining the humbler alternative. For example, Steve and Robert, two lower-class members at CEG, felt both attracted to and intimidated by CITAM. Steve recounted having been on his way to attend CITAM for the first time when God miraculously revealed CEG to him and led him there instead. Robert did attend CITAM but was soon disappointed, feeling that it is not sufficiently accommodating towards the urban poor (cf. Waweru 2010). Another interviewee, James, accused CITAM's guards for functioning as bouncers, barring people who do not fit the church's target group from entering. While it is always difficult to rely on ex post facto descriptions of religious—and other biographical—self-narratives (Stromberg 1993; Wuthnow 2011), among our interlocutors at CEG who had formerly attended CITAM, a recurring theme was the supposed contrast between the warmth and coziness they felt at their present church and their sense of alienation at CITAM. Grace, for example, arrived in Kisumu from Nairobi in the early 2010s and has been attending CITAM before discovering CEG. At the mega-church, she, 'felt lost [. . .] because, you know, there is nobody you can sit down and talk to after church.' She added that, due to the congregation's huge size, at CITAM nobody would notice if she has been absent and would check in on her, whereas at CEG, somebody will surely make contact to see that she is well. Indeed, she proposed that a main advantage of CEG is its sense of community, which makes her feel supported as well as 'impactful'. It is noteworthy that such comparison between the two churches revolved around social and socio-economic differences rather than substantive distinctions: actual teachings in both churches are largely comparable, with both sharing a progressive Pentecostal tone (Waweru 2010; Miller & Yamamori 2007). In both churches, the excesses of the prosperity gospel are shunned, teachings deliver an inspirational message of empowerment and hope that considers the wider betterment of society, the church revolves around a community rather than the charisma of individual leaders, female leadership is accepted, and trance states and miraculous healing are kept in check (see also Gitau 2018).

Despite its small size, CEG follows a strikingly elaborate institutional structure—echoing that of CITAM and of many other Kenyan Pentecostal churches both small and large. Similar to other Pentecostal churches, CEG's ten or so ministries can be classified under 'gender/age' (women, men, youth), 'education' (Sunday school, discipleship), and 'service' (instruments, praise and worship, ushering), as well as a ministry for intercession and one for church development. Despite this clear-cut language, the church's allocation of roles is fairly fluid and, in the eyes of an external observer, may appear chaotic (e.g. Balswick & Layne 1973). As Grace explained, 'what is formal is that we know who is the pastor, but the other roles, you just find people who are shifting'. CEG's ministries are subsumed under the church committee, which includes three deans/elders (term used interchangeably), a pastor (who also serves as treasurer and secretary) and an assistant pastor, as well as a representative of the youth ministry and an interpreter, for whom there is no special department. Overall, the church committee makes up a tightly knit group of about fifteen committed members, including several married couples. This echoes the structure in many small Pentecostal churches, but varies from larger denominations, where the majority of members do not take an active leadership role.

One noteworthy fact about CEG's committee members is that none of them is paid by the church, and they all dedicate much of their own personal resources—both time and money—towards maintaining the church, and in particular the specific ministry that they oversee. For example, the

head of the instruments department, James, regularly contributes from his own pocket to the maintenance of the church's sound system and instruments. CEG's pastor, John, is an educated man with a graduate degree and a stable administrative employment in one of the city's institutes of higher learning, who performs his church role pro bono. Pastor John shows explicit aversion towards the prosperity gospel and the excesses of some pastors—a message that he delivers using a carefully worded, softly spoken tone—and which reinforces the church's friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Pastor John's dedication to his members manifests through common visits to people's homes and hospitals, and through special acts of devotion that won his congregation's admiration. In one instant, he transported a coffin containing a church member's departed child on the roof of his car all the way to the family's shamba (homestead, farmland), where he then presided over the funeral. Such stories of dedication are touted by CEG's members as a proof of the honesty of their commitment, while the church's elaborate structure conveys a sense of latent infrastructure awaiting greater things to come. To quote James, 'the church is small, but whatever is going there is bigger'.

Included in this last statement are the many activities organized at the church for its members to show solidarity and mutual empowerment. As the focus of our attention is on material support in times of need, it is enough to briefly illustrate some of these 'softer' types of everyday (economically) empowering activities. For example, similar to Pentecostal denominations elsewhere in Kenya (Deacon 2012), the church regularly coordinates meetings on business and entrepreneurship, held on Sunday afternoon at the initiative of the Kenyan Congress of Pentecostal Churches. Henry, CEG's assistant pastor, gave the example of a recent talk given by representatives of a local bank, who introduced the congregation to loans for small businesses. Henry suggested that such talks are particularly appealing to lower class church members, who are looking to develop their business acumen beyond a single humble employment, for example as a night guard or a moto-taxi driver. Indeed, the church pays substantial attention to the financial independence of its members. In Kisumu's harsh employment market, where, as we were told, looking for a job is a full-time job, the use of church contacts to find employment can be invaluable. Such involvement of fellow church members in one's enterprises also makes business sense, we were told, as it allows one to be surrounded by trustworthy coworkers and subordinates. As James explained, involving a fellow church member as a business subordinate means that, 'I can send you to an office and pick one million [Kenyan Shillings], that's a lot of money, so I must trust you'.

Such emphasis on solidarity raises questions concerning the actual modes of support within the church, especially in light of widespread material scarcity. In the next section, we propose a classification of four categories of congregational support, before turning to discuss the relations between leaders and lay members that, we propose, is key for understanding the actual deployment of these categories

4 Four Modes of Material Support

At CEG, we identified four modes of assistance to members in need: direct support from fellow congregants, support within a ministry, support by the church committee, and support by the entire church assembly.

The first category involves direct interpersonal support between members in a way that makes no mention of formal church mechanism. Such spontaneous generosity is presented in the spirit of Christian love and reflects the core ideal of congregational solidarity. By bypassing institutional mechanisms, such direct interpersonal engagement allows for quick and discreet support. Ideally, the beneficiary may not even make an explicit plea for assistance, as fellow congregants may sense his or her hardships and voluntarily come to aid. As Henry explained, 'as individuals, because now we have known you, I've known your status, I've known how you live, I know your financial capability, so sometimes it becomes easier to help one another.' The fact that the majority of CEG's members live in proximity to each other in the slum of Nyalenda makes such ongoing mutual support easy both inside and outside the church. For example, about eight committed female church members stay in the same part of Nyalenda, where they routinely engage with each other through their small businesses. Grace explained,

'Most women in our church, they are businesswomen, they do small businesses. One sells fruits, the other has a salon, there is one who has a small shop and sells supplies. So they work closely, and they have a strong network of working together: "you bring me customers [and] I bring you customers."'

While Grace presented such ties as an indication of equality and mutuality, it also lays bare internal economic disparities. The fact that she herself—a committee member and a so-called super-member—does not live in the slum and does not participate in this network is an indication of her somewhat elevated economic status compared to her peers. However, Grace does make use of the church's informal network of self-help and small-scale business empowerment in other ways: like others in the church, she has her shamba upcountry, whose produce she often sells in the church. Indeed, not long before our interview, she came to church selling bags of mung beans that she herself had cultivated.

The second category of assistance involves support through a particular section of the church, such as home-based cell group meetings or such ministries as youth, men, or women. In such circles, joint activities and visits to fellow congregants' homes facilitate intimacies and mutual accountability (Rohregger 2009: 151-152). Located halfway between the institutional and the private, such activities serve as spaces for deepening connections, confessing hardships, and asking for support in a half-discreet environment, which also proves effective for recruiting new members (Brusco 2010: 83-84; Marshall 2009: 68-71). Meeting on a weekly basis for common prayer and bible study, such meetings may be used to pool money together in order to meet small expenses for mourning members, visit bedridden members, or simply discuss jobs and business opportunities. Expectedly, the distinctiveness of this category of assistance is less pronounced at CEG—where everyone knows everyone and there is no real need to divide into cell units—than in the large congregation down the road, CITAM. As we observed in our visits to cell group meetings at CITAM-Kisumu and elsewhere, such home fellowships allow to counter the alienation and anonymity of the larger congregation and create intimacies based on geographic proximity and shared class orientation.

The third category involves support by the church committee. This category shares similarities with the previous category of collective support by a certain segment within the church. However, as the supporting group in this case makes up the church's leadership, this mode of support introduces clearer structural hierarchy. Unlike the earlier two categories, where support may be

offered spontaneously, assistance by a church committee is normally offered in response to an explicit request put forth by members. Indeed, procedure obliges that any request for formal assistance from the church must first pass through the church committee. As James explained:

'Most of the time, we have strong members, committed members in the church, we come and receive them, we discuss those issues, "so-and-so, they have a problem," be it sickness, school fees. . . So, we sit with them and we discuss with the church committee. If you go to the pastor, the pastor will call the committee members, the committee members will sit down together and discuss.'

As mentioned, at CEG, the church committee is represented by some fifteen highly committed members, the majority of whom belongs to the church's economic and educational elite and meet Haynes' (2017) definition of super-members. In the next section, we will draw on this financial disparity between the committee and the general congregation for understanding why requests for assistance are often resolved at the committee level rather than being brought before the entire congregation.

The fourth and last category involves the church assembly as a whole. Such collective action normally takes the form of fundraising events that are held at the end of the Sunday service. Such events, which are neither the most common nor the preferred form of church assistance offered at CEG, are known as 'harambees' (fundraising), a term that has a long history within Kenyan social and political culture (Mbithi & Rasmusson 1977). As noted elsewhere with regard to family networks, gift-giving serves as a social lubricate between donors and benefactors. In particular, through giving, donors are granted recognition, respect, and the right to involve themselves in the lives of others (Kroeker 2018: 288). For better or worse, of all the categories of support that we described, this option is the least discreet, and exposes one's life challenges for all to see. While sums of money collected in such a manner surpass those collected through other categories of support, they are limited to rare occasions and to challenges of extraordinary magnitude, such as death in the family, although at times they may be used to support joyous occasions, such as members' weddings. As Grace explained:

'The most common problem is funerals. Someone lost their mother, father, brother, sister. We do contribute for them, we do a fundraising for them, and even on the personal level, if you feel like you want to give something extra, then go ahead. Sometimes the pastor even gives his vehicle to ferry people to the funeral.'

This four-way typology may bring to mind the intuitive distinction between vertical and horizontal church ties. For example, Haynes (2017) writes that, to become Pentecostal in the Copperbelt, 'people are drawn into relationships that take two primary forms: vertical ties to church leaders that reflect the overarching paradigm of dependence, and horizontal ties to other believers that, as networks of religious practice, also have the potential to facilitate moving by the Spirit.' When it comes to material provision, we may think of the vertical-horizontal distinction along the lines proposed by Rohregger (2009). As Rohregger suggests, vertical support relates to formal, unilateral institutional provision, while horizontal support relates to bilateral, interpersonal modes of support within the congregation.

However, we have seen that, at CEG, it is often hard to draw such a clear-cut distinction: the church's small size, the dominance of its 'super-members', and the case-by-case policy (or absence

thereof) together create fuzziness as for who is acting as a formal agent of the church and who is acting in the capacity of an individual well-wisher. Indeed, it is striking to note that, despite its elaborate structure, CEG has no designated coffer or ministry aimed at supporting members in need. Reflecting the church's internal disparities, attempts to create such a joint fund did not materialize due to disagreements concerning the fixed monthly sum that all members were to contribute, with some members considering proposed sum to be too high and others too low. But even as CEG relies primarily on informal modes of support, it does seek to project an air of top-down institutional outreach to members in need.

Rather than putting the emphasis on the vertical-horizontal distinction, we propose that, at CEG, a more revealing focus would be on the dynamics of class and commitment. It is to this dynamic that we now turn.

5 The Pivotal Role of the Church Committee

In the previous section, we began to see how, at CEG, leaders and super-members—whom we have subsumed collectively under the church committee—and lay members play different roles around the allocation of funds for assisting members in need. The centrality of committee members is observable in categories two to four of material support, and especially in three and four, as it is the committee that decides how to handle formal requests for assistance brought before them. This dynamic, together with the risk of disaffiliation on the part of lay members, can help us understand the deployment of specific modes of assistance. While being assisted by the church may help to bind a non-committed lay member by demonstrating the church's care and commitment towards him or her, organizing a formal church collection risks repelling others, who already feel burdened by churches' emphasis on economic contributions. As a leading committee member and super-member, James, explained, 'when we say, "next week we have fundraising, we need money to assist somebody's school fees, we hope to do like this"—we realized that when they reach that day, other members are not coming—[namely,] the non-committed ones.' James went on to explain that,

'When we have a problem, there are some [things that] we announce and there are some things we cannot announce. We gage, you know, there are some things you can say and you make people go away. Not all problems we announce, not all. But, like sickness, serious sickness, we can announce: "somebody is sick and they need this and this, there is money needed, what can we do?" That one we can announce to the whole church because that is a member who has a serious problem.'

While a fundraiser would be held in such extraordinary situations, the church would think twice before referring cases to the entire congregation. Indeed, even though the church committee is at liberty to pass a member's problem to the Sunday assembly for a fundraiser, it is careful and mostly reluctant to do so, fearing not only resentment and accusations of favoritism by lay members, but also that such demands may drive out the uncommitted and economically fragile. As James explained,

'Most of the time, what we do, when somebody comes to us and they say, "I want school fees, I have the problem of school fees," there are some members, you know these kind of things you cannot say in front of the church. You know, sometimes, if we say we have a fundraising for someone, there is somebody on the other side who will be in need for school fees too.'

We thus see that, in an environment where the majority of the population experiences material lack, CEG has to walk a tight rope—giving members a sense of institutional support while avoiding opening the floodgate of unrealizable demands that could turn away uncommitted members. One common way in which CEG seeks to resolve this challenge is for the church committee to absorb the costs of members' assistance all by themselves. James gave the following illustration:

'[If] somebody, they don't have a transport to go and see someone who is sick in Nairobi, a relative, go and see a relative in Nairobi, and we announce that in church—we cannot. They need a transport, so we come and sit [in the church committee], we give 500, 500, and we give you [money for] transport and you go. [. . .] If somebody is sick, they need 2,000, if [Pastor] John gives 500, I give 500, Henry gives 500, that money is enough'.

We thus see how the politics of material assistance to members in need passes through evaluations that take into consideration leadership/lay member disparities, and weigh the risks of members' flight versus the wish to mete out support and bind lay members towards greater commitment. This highlights an important point, whereby the church committee does not only demonstrate greater commitment, but also corresponds to the congregation's financial and educational elite: At CEG, overall, members of the church committee hold more prestigious, middle-class jobs (accountant, teacher, businessperson) compared to lay congregants, who are less well-trained and rely on petty jobs, and many of whom are youth. This socio-economic disparity is illustrated through CEG's lucrative car hire business, which takes the form of a network of privately-owned vehicles that can be rented out directly from their owners whenever they are not in use. The business involves six committed members—nearly half of the church committee, including the pastor himself and the assistant pastor and his newly wedded wife—and no member from outside the committee.

While such overlaps between leadership roles, religious commitment, and socio-economic privileges are not absolute, they are also not coincidental. In our research, we often noticed that better educated and better-paid individuals tend to gravitate towards church positions. While this might be because such individuals see themselves, and are perceived by others, as more skillful or as natural leaders, they may also be coaxed into such positions in attempt to ensure access to their talents and means, and to harness them to the church's 'long arms'. Indeed, placing a member in a position of institutional responsibility involves a tacit expectation of him or her to become dedicated to the success of that particular ministry—among other things, by sustaining it through economic contributions. These observations are fully in line with Haynes' (2017) understanding of the higher class attribution of super-members and their elevated institutional status. At the same time, Haynes also notes that super-members' influential position as confidants of the pastor and recurring donors can lead to suspicion of favoritism and even to accusations that they are buying their way into religious influence. Along these lines, we must remember that CEG's committee's decision-making role may serve not only the interests of the church but also those of individual super-members. For example, a year prior to our arrival at the church, two super-members—one of whom is Henry, the appointed assistant pastor—got married to each other, and

the committee got on board, organizing a harambee and generously absorbing most of the wedding costs. Indeed, the church not only held the ceremony, but jointly donated money for food, transport, and the wedding party. These contributions, which attracted much pride, supposedly amounted to over 100,000 KSh (nearly 900 EUR), covering about three quarters of the event's costs. While the entire congregation was invited to contribute to this special cause, as did specially invited harambee guests, it was announced and facilitated by the church committee. A critical reading may suggest, therefore, that while the church committee may indeed reach out and assist lay members, such support largely touches on minor matters, and is offset by the value of retaining control over principle church decisions. Whatever we make of the wedding example, it shows how the church committee enjoys advantages associated with their decision-making role. Whether read in purely institutional-strategic terms or also involving implicit personal interests, we observed the church committee's intent on retaining its privileged power of arbitration.

This control, however, may be tested by the issuance of membership cards. In the wake of the explosion of the neo-Pentecostal movement, many denominations have been trying to concretize their special relations with their members through the issuance of membership cards, with the hope that this move will enhance congregants' loyalty within an otherwise high-turnover religious landscape. Practically, membership cards also serve as a useful reference, especially among job seekers, who may show it as proof of their religious commitment, implying trustworthiness and an upright moral character. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, CEG too experimented with issuing membership cards, with the hope of drawing a clear distinction between irregular visitors and proper members. Not long after the initiative was launched, however, it was already called off. In a turn of events reminiscent of other small Pentecostal churches, the about-turn followed a series of awkward standoffs, as irregular church goers and even former members treated the card—which had no expiration date—as a proof of entitlement to church support. In a conversation with CEG's Pastor John, he shared his concern with incoming requests by such reemerging card carriers, who would unfairly vie against fully committed church members in asking to gain access to the church's limited resources. The pastor's worries seem to echo a wider national trend, and indeed today, Kenyans seem to be more likely to rely on alternative proofs of church affiliation such as baptism cards, dedication cards, church certificates, and specially written attestations from their pastors.

We argue that the membership cards episode illustrates the tension between the desires to set fixed guidelines and to retain flexible arbitrational control at the hands of the church committee: The idea of automatic entitlement as implied by the cards is in tension with that of the church committee serving as an entitlement gatekeeper authorized to adjudicate distribution and modes of assistance according to its own considerations, institutional-strategic or otherwise. In light of the subtleties that go into such deliberations, the concentration of decision-making power at the hands of the committee offers flexibility in the form of finer filtering of requests and tailored responses to individual cases. In other words, the retreat from membership cards is a retreat from a latent one-size-fits-all ideal of parity and its replacement by a sober recognition of members' difference in commitment and socio-economic status, which require church leaders to walk a fine line and employ case-by-case deliberations. At the same time, as we already saw, this regulative role also leaves open the prospect for privileged access and favoritism.

6 Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the provision of assistance in times of need at a Pentecostal church through the lens of leadership/lay members dynamics. We noted that CEG projects a sense of institutional dependability, while also shying from overly relying on irregular and little-resourced members in providing for the collective coffer. This, we argue, results in the consigning of support to informal modes of members and church groups' assistance, and even more so, in CEG's committee members bearing the brunt by personally absorbing much of the costs of assisting members in need. This sacrifice is especially noteworthy in light of what by now has become a common trope within Kenyan Pentecostalism, whereby leaders are depicted as self-enriching hypocrites who are careless about their congregation's socio-economic sacrifices—a charge supported by the routine uncovering of church scandals (Gez & Droz 2015; Parsitau & Mwaura 2010). By contrast, our findings recognize the personal sacrifice made by the church committee. Indeed, our presentation of a dominant flow of support from committee members to lay members qualifies the common allegation against Pentecostal teachings as laying excessive demands on lay members to sacrifice their often-meager resources and surrender them to the Pentecostal pastor (Van de Kamp 2011; Heuser 2015). Without external or overseas support, CEG's leadership contributes greatly from its own resources of time, talent, and money, with the hope of advancing its community and with nobody among them—not even the pastor—being on the church's payroll.

This, however, still does not tell the whole story. Within a highly dynamic religious landscape replete with material scarcity and socio-economic disparity, the basic obligation for churches to reach out to their members in their hour of need ought to be understood in the context of the church's institutional structure and interests, and in particular, in the context of fundamental concern with members' commitment. Churches like CEG identify ways for ensuring that their material support will serve as a token of the mutually binding relations oriented towards the making of an exclusive membership. The church's modes of support provide its leadership with a range of possibilities—we may say a toolkit—for asserting such special bonds with non-committed members. This gatekeeper role is assumed with great care: on the one hand showing the church's generosity, and on the other hand making sure not to open the floodgate of demands for assistance by less-committed members, as CEG had experienced after its introduction of membership cards. Lastly, and while recognizing the church committee's dedication to institutional interests, we raised the question in what ways might such involvement allow committee members privileged access to personal gains.

Considering CEG's orientation within normative Kenyan Pentecostalism (Gez 2018), and considering the movement's diffusive global networks and mutual influences regarding such elements as teachings, style, and modes of operation (Meyer 2010), we believe that our findings are applicable beyond the specific case of CEG. This assertion is certainly supported by our wider research frame, where we found echoes of similar institutional dynamics. At the same time, recognizing the movement's internal diversity, we should also acknowledge that not all Pentecostal churches share the characteristics identified at CEG. For one thing, the high percentage of members' participation in leadership roles that we see at CEG would not be possible within a mega-church like the aforementioned CITAM. Indeed, CEG's modes of support have much to do with its small size, which allows for such degree of informality while not putting too great of a financial strain on the church committee in its provision to members in need. Going beyond the

matter of size, we note that CEG's collectivist spirit that allows the church committee its substantial latitude. This would probably not be the case in churches with a more centralized structure built around the charisma of a single leader. Lastly, while we embraced the notion of super-members to express the gravitation of higher-class church members into the church's inner circle, the nuanced relations between leadership and class require further research and refinement.

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