

= Evangelical Missionary Church of Besançon =

The Evangelical Missionary Church of Besançon (French : Église évangélique missionnaire de Besançon) , formerly known as the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Besançon and The Mission , is a Christian movement established in Besançon , France , in December 1963 . In close communion with the Protestant Federation of France , this church belongs to the Pentecostal movement and in 1969 founded the Evangelical Missionary Federation (Fédération Évangélique Missionnaire , or FEM) to gather the various Pentecostal churches it created . The assemblies , which developed very quickly throughout eastern and northern France , numbered well over 2 @, @ 000 members .

The church was founded by Aldo Benzi , who converted to Christianity after being healed from a pleurisy . Subsequent leader René Kennel , a former Mennonite farmer who became pastor of the churches in Saint @-@ Dizier and in Joinville after discovering Pentecostalism through an evangelical Roma mission , has directed the church since 1977 . Its main beliefs (expressed in a creed of eight articles of faith) and practices are nearly identical with those of most Evangelical and Pentecostal groups , with a special focus on miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit and proselytism . In the late 1990s the church was embroiled in many trials (often on the grounds of defamation or for financial issues) , losing most of them . In 2006 a sex scandal within the church led the federation to be dissolved , and the church in Besançon became independent .

Since 1988 the church has been the subject of recurring public controversy ; anti @-@ cult associations and organizations (UNADFI , CCMM and MILS ? then MIVILUDES) , former members and the vast majority of media presented it as a dangerous group , mainly because of its intensive missionary activities and healing practices . The church was eventually listed as a cult in the 1995 and 1999 parliamentary reports established by the French National Assembly . Protestant and academic circles , however , disagreed with this assessment , considering the church to be a genuine Pentecostal group . The latter responded to criticism through a defensive strategy , which included outreach to sociologists and historians and better ties with mainstream religions , local and national institutions .

= = History = =

The founder , Aldo Benzi (born in 1919 , now deceased) , is said to have been miraculously healed of recurrent pleurisy by the Rev. De Siebenthal (a leader of religious groups in Switzerland) , which led him to be baptized on 15 June 1941 . Thereafter , with Pierre Nicole he created the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Besançon (documented in files with the Prefecture of the Doubs in 1963) . Benzi was the church 's president , followed by Nicole and then by René Kennel in 1977 .

Kennel was born in 1925 to a Mennonite family who lived in Chassey @-@ Beaupré . His father was a farmer and mayor of the city , and Kennel was expected to run the family farm when he was older . At age 20 , Kennel developed an interest in pastoral ministry and attended theological training at the Bible Institute of Nogent @-@ sur @-@ Marne in 1945 ? 46 , training which was later completed by studies at the European Mennonite Bible School in 1948 ? 49 . While still a farmer , he became a Mennonite missionary in the Meuse , Marne and Haute @-@ Marne departments . In 1960 , he discovered Pentecostalism through Roma missions , notably the Life and Light Evangelical Roma Mission (Mission Évangélique Tsigane " Vie et Lumière ") ; he was attracted to this form of Christianity , since it emphasized missionary zeal and legitimized his ministry . He founded an evangelical group in his city , which caused conflict with his family , other religious leaders and his neighbors . In the early 1960s , Kennel became pastor of the church at Joinville ; he conducted humanitarian activities on his farm , providing relief to homeless , former prisoners , drug addicts and alcoholics . In 1964 , he also directed the church of Saint @-@ Dizier ; three years later , he decided to give up farming to fully devote himself to religious activities . In 1975 he was appointed treasurer of the Federation of Free Evangelical Pentecostals , and elected president seven years later . Under Kennel 's leadership of the Pentecostal Church of Besançon , the church

quickly opened many places of worship in Northern and Eastern France ; Kennel trained pastors among his converts (including his son Étienne , who was ordained in 1981) , and sent them to direct the new assemblies . In 1989 Kennel legally registered the Evangelical Missionary Federation , whose purpose was to federate all the churches (then composed of over thirty pastors) .

However , in 2005 Pastor Étienne Kennel was accused of adultery by church members , which resulted in his expulsion in January 2006 . His father (considered guilty of covering up his son 's actions) refused to retire , which led many believers to leave the church and pastors to vote for the federation 's dissolution ; this one was officially announced as defunct on 25 November 2006 . 14 churches in the northwest , previously members of the FEM , are (as of 2011) gathered under the name Union of Missionary Churches (Union d 'Églises Missionnaires , or UDEM) , an association registered in Châlons @-@ en @-@ Champagne . Other places of worship are independent ? including the church in Besançon , which was reregistered as an " Evangelical church " in late 2006 .

= = Beliefs = =

About his church Kennel said : " We are situated at the crossroads of the Pentecostal and Mennonite movements " . Various explanations were provided by sociologists to define the place of the religious group within Christianity : Danièle Hervieu @-@ Léger wrote that the church was created from " the meeting between a movement of evangelic sensibility inside the Reformed Church of Alsace and Lorraine , and a French Mennonite movement from the tradition of peaceful Anabaptism " , Laurent Amiotte @-@ Suchet considered that it " fits into the Assemblies of God " , but also " in the history of a second wave of European Pentecostalism which experienced its revival in the 1970s and 1980s " , and J. Gordon Melton described it , in his 2005 Encyclopedia of Protestantism , as one of the " newest Protestant groups " . Evangelical Protestantism expert Sébastien Fath deemed the church a " non Baptist " group , but " with some common characteristics " and explained that it professed a very high degree of religious activism , embracing conversionism , biblicism and crucicentrism . According to the Protestant Federation of France , the church displayed a " classical and structured Pentecostalism , with very little contact with other churches . " The anti @-@ cult association Centre contre les manipulations mentales said the church " comes from the classical Pentecostal movement which emerged in France in the 1950s and which now includes various groups " .

The church 's main beliefs are expressed in a creed , initially composed of twelve articles of faith based on biblical passages and adopted by the church . These beliefs are almost identical to the ones of most evangelical and Pentecostal groups , including biblical authority viewed as the Word of God , literal biblical interpretation and the Trinity , with a special focus on miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit and proselytism . Later , the number of articles of faith were reduced to eight points , and Amiotte @-@ Suchet noted that they were reworded in 1998 to become less explicit concerning issues which were the subject of public controversies . He also said that the pastors ' sermons show an evolution linked to a generation gap ; René Kennel continues to advocate healthy living , illustrating his speeches with stories of curses resulting from a non @-@ Christian lifestyle , while his son placed more emphasis on " the discernment of spiritual gifts and the depth of faith " . On its website the church defines itself as apolitical ; it respects current principles of secularism and freedom of conscience , does not discourage medical treatment , encourages believers to participate in social life and does not claim exclusive salvation .

= = Practices = =

The church has six weekly services , one of them located in the Rue Battant especially for people with disabilities . Each meeting is devoted to a particular Christian practice : evangelization , prayer , Bible reading , singing , and weekly worship . Meetings are composed of biblical sermons and studies , testimonies of religious experiences , hymns , meditation , worship , and prayers . Services are dynamic , charismatic and emotional , often evolving into ecstasy and trance ; glossolalia results

when the pastor calls the Holy Spirit to come upon the congregation , and usually lasts 30 to 60 minutes . Women must have their heads covered during worship .

Pastors established a record of public testimonies of every baptized member . Kennel 's life is known by the faithful , and has an important place in the church . The pastor 's break with his former religious affiliation , and his determined foundation of a new group despite many obstacles , are said to be directed by God 's will ; therefore , Kennel 's spiritual course (which mixes " extraordinary and intransigence ") is presented as an example to follow . As noted by Amiotte @-@ Suchet , all testimonies (whose purpose is to strengthen the converts ' faith) generally have a common thread ; the former lifestyle of the faithful is almost always presented as " a story of an aimless wandering , covered with failures , disappointments and misfortunes " until God decides to manifest himself in the life of the future member . The future convert then demands a sign of God 's reality , requires a variable length of time to strength his faith and experience the Holy Spirit , then engages fully in the church . Conversion is always said to lead to a healthier lifestyle and provide an expanded network of friends .

All members actively participate in evangelization , both personally (family , friends and professional associates) and with the church (door @-@ to @-@ door , proselytism under the big tent and on public squares , " mission weeks " which follow a tightly planned program) . The church has denied practising proselytism among Christian people . However , after criticism of its methods the church became more discreet and avoided insisting publicly on miraculous healings , although it continued to highlight evangelization . In particular , it decided to stop proselytizing in hospitals , to discontinue loudspeakers in the streets , and to reduce the frequency of evangelization under the " big top " .

The church features religious instruction for various ages , leads a choir and football team and celebrates the Holy Thursday Last Supper , believers ' marriages and funerals . Baptism is practiced by immersion with the pastor 's approval , and is reserved for people aged over 15 years . Fasting on two Sundays a month and between eight and ten conventions per year for each church are also scheduled . The church participates in social and humanitarian activities and organizes recreational days , including activities such as theater , library , trips , a clothing exchange and a paint shop .

= = Organization and finances = =

The church headquarters in Besançon were first located in the Rue Battant , then in the Rue de Belfort , and eventually moved in 1994 to 4 Rue Larmet , in a building costing about four million francs . In 1999 , the federation associated with SOS Hope (SOS Espérance , established in Vesoul to assist suffering people) , an evangelical musical group , Flambo , and La Bergerie in Besançon for property management . The church owns a printing house that publishes writings for worship and evangelization , including a quarterly newsletter , The Concierge 's Ear (" L'Oreille du concierge ") which has been published since 2000 . In 2005 René Kennel was the president , Daniel Gloeckler vice @-@ president and church spokesman , Étienne Kennel secretary and R. Cuenot the treasurer of the federation . Each year , a one @-@ week course is organized in one of the churches belonging to the Evangelical Missionary Federation ; named " Blessing School " (" École de la bénédiction ") , this intensive Bible training consists of prayers , religious teachings and history , singing lessons , film screenings and debates .

In its organizational structure the church is similar to congregationalism , as the local assembly is autonomous . This form of congregationalism , however , is unique ; the centralized organization gives to the Church of Besançon the role of head church , and the other assemblies of the federation are considered annex churches . Thus , Amiotte @-@ Suchet opines that " the unifying spirit is much more coercive than the one in other Protestant groups " . Decisions of the federation are made by all church pastors at monthly pastoral meetings . In the Church of Besançon , the leadership team attending the " brothers ' meeting " is composed of René and Étienne Kennel , six appointed elders and men who have been members for a certain length of time .

The church has been criticized for its wealth , as monthly or quarterly donations were encouraged in the second article of the statutes of the Federation of Evangelical Missionary . According to the

CCMM , property acquisition was evidence of significant income . The 1999 parliamentary report considered the church a " small cult " (a cult whose annual income is less than five million francs) which provided " relatively accurate information " to the Parliamentary Commission . The annual budget of the church was estimated between 2 @. @ 4 and 3 @. @ 1 million francs (the total of donations in 1998 and 1995 respectively) , mainly from Sunday offerings , donations , loans , financial products and property income . In 1999 , the commission estimated the church 's property at about 15 million francs . As of 31 December 1998 , the church 's net active wealth (composed of real estate and stock) reached 7 @. @ 3 million francs . Concerning its finances , the church said it applies five major principles : economy , recovery , devotion , voluntary work and solidarity . Money comes from Sunday collections , sometimes from personal loans and from donations intended for a particular use ; there is no external financial support . Accounts are published at the annual general assembly of the church , by the financial commission of the Federation and by Social Security . Trainee pastors work outside the church ; permanent pastors receive a low salary , and are affiliated with the Caisse d 'assurance vieillesse , invalidité et maladie des cultes (CAVIMAC) .

= = Membership = =

Between 1977 and 1988 , the Church of Besançon enjoyed significant growth , and Professor Grace Davie wrote that the whole religious movement had reached " the status of a small denomination " in the decades following its foundation . In 1983 , there were 150 churchgoers in Besançon ; in 1989 , the number rose to between 400 and 600 . In 1995 , estimations of church membership by the Parliamentary Commission varied from 500 to 2 @, @ 000 members . In 2000 the federation declared that 2 @, @ 800 people regularly attend the Sunday service , including 600 in Besançon . In 2005 there were 4 @, @ 000 members and 500 churchgoers at the Sunday worship in Besançon , according to Fath . In 2006 , Amiotte @- @ Suchet reported that the federation had 2 @, @ 400 members and 37 pastors . He noted that criticism had an impact on the church 's growth ; since 1988 the number of baptisms has fallen to about 50 a year , just enough to compensate for the number of people who leave the church . After the sex scandal in the founding church in 2006 , attendance at the services in Besançon dropped to 70 .

In 1989 , there were 18 assemblies belonging to the Evangelical Missionary Federation . In 1995 the church (then widely established in several French regions) was called " a big regional cult that has now spread throughout eastern France " by the CCMM . The following year , the parliamentary report of the National Assembly listed 24 places of worship ; the church stated the list was incomplete and incorrect as three places were missed , and eight belonged to other churches . Before it was dissolved in 2006 , the federation counted 35 churches .

= = Court cases = =

The Direction générale des impôts contested the religious status of the church and taxed its donations , saying " the association is devoted to proselytize . It has therefore not for exclusive purpose the celebration of a worship " . As a result , a 600 @, @ 000 @- @ franc tax @- @ recovery notification was sent to the church on 20 December 1996 , which rose to 2 @. @ 6 million francs two years later (penalties included) . This tax was considered a " tragic situation " by Human Rights Without Frontiers and " fiscal and administrative harassment " by sociologist Régis Dericquebourg . The church deemed this decision discriminatory and tried by all possible legal means to challenge it . On 31 January 2013 , the Church and its president Éric Salaün were awarded 387 @, @ 722 euros by the European Court of Human Rights which overturned the tax considered a " material injury " and sentenced France for violating the freedom of thought , conscience and religion on the basis of the 9th article of the European Convention of Human Rights .

On 29 September 1986 , in a case related to custody of a six @- @ year @- @ old child , the Tribunal de Grande Instance de Besançon left the child with his father (who was not a member of the church) rather than with his mother (then a fervent member) , stating that " people affiliated to [the church] submit their behavior of each time to the precepts of their beliefs , practice proselytism ,

and do not hesitate to involve some very young children in their meetings and religious practices " .

In 1992 , the CCMM was sued twice by the church on the grounds of defamation . A first complaint was filed on 4 February after a letter from CCMM in which the movement was labelled as a cult , with the following definition : " Groups whose activities have on others for result a notable mental manipulation of minds , a profound degradation of the human person , managing to make people lose all critical sense in locking them in intellectual ghettos . " On 16 June 1993 the Court of Vesoul , and on 24 March 1994 the Court of Appeal of Besançon , sentenced the church to pay court costs and damages to the CCMM . In a second complaint filed on 27 November , the CCMM and the Centre Information Jeunesse in Haute @-@ Saône were sued after distributing a publication critical of the church . Both complaints were dismissed . In 1996 , the two appeals for cassation filed by the church were rejected ; the court held that the CCMM 's writings did not fall under defamation , said that damages to the church 's honor were not proven , that " no reproach can be done when CCMM called ' cult ' the Evangelical Church of Pentecost " , and that the association " merely assesses the nature and trends of a religious community , reports some of its practices , including those relating to the disease healing and its methods of recruitment through agencies providing relief without indicating that they are the community 's emanations " .

On 30 September 1999 , the Administrative Court of Besançon recognized the religious status of the church and granted it tax exemption on its place of worship . In a decision issued on 2 October 2003 , the judge of the Administrative Court stated that the refusal by the prefect to grant donations and bequests to the church was not supported by evidence . In 2008 , MIVILUDES President Jean @-@ Michel Roulet said that complaints from the faithful against Kennel for physical abuse were dismissed .

= = Reception = =

The French Parliamentary Commission on Cults included the church in the list of cults of the 1995 and 1999 parliamentary reports , based on reports by the Direction centrale des renseignements généraux which labelled the church as an " evangelical " and " healer " movement . Despite their similarities , other churches associated with the Evangelical Missionary Federation were not included in the list . The 1995 report said the group was among the " most active evangelical groups " and the Parliamentary Commission said they are " often motivated by genuine pastors who slid into the role of guru " and " always benefit from freedoms by Protestant official structures to prosper at their edge . " However , the parliamentary reports and the list of cults had no legal status and were criticized by religious historians , sociologists and academics . In May 2007 , a circular by Prime Minister Jean @-@ Pierre Raffarin and a statement by MIVILUDES secretary Gilles Bottine , said the list of movements attached to the 1995 parliamentary report had become less relevant and no longer recommended its use .

Several anti @-@ cult groups also considered the church a cult . The local branch of the Centre contre les manipulations mentales (CCMM , or Centre Roger Ikor) directed an intense campaign against the group with repeated warnings in the media , and the President of the Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l'individu (UNADFI) , Catherine Picard , said on television that she considered the church a cult . Criticism against the Church includes methods of recruitment (considered aggressive proselytism) in psychiatric hospitals , schools , buses and similar environments directed to suffering people , a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible , pressure on prospective members to quickly join the group , family breakdowns , identical language and clothing of followers reflecting a loss of individuality , education of children which is considered indoctrination , many banned activities (among them music , television , makeup and trousers for women who must also have long hair covered with a scarf) , an hysterical environment at worship , desocialization of the faithful , excessive appeals for money , unverifiable and dubious healings which may be detrimental to members ' health and the strong influence on members and lack of qualifications of Kennel . A delegate from the CCMM said that criticism was based on facts collected from former members and their families , some of which had been used in court (as in Vesoul) . In response to writer in the Protestant journal Réforme Benoît Hervieu @-@ Léger , who contended

that a sole case in Besançon would have been sufficient to criticize the whole federation , the delegate also stated that complaints did not come exclusively from the church of Besançon . The association also noted many similarities with another Pentecostal church it considered a cult , the Mission of Full Gospel - Christian Open Door . As of 2010 , MIVILUDES continued to monitor the Church of Besançon because of its hold over the faithful .

The media were generally critical of the church , presenting it as a cult . The first negative local press articles appeared in 1988 , mentioning miraculous healings , proselytism , Kennel 's status , fundamentalist beliefs as controversial issues , and included critical reports by former members . Fath noted that the vocabulary and arguments used in the media were intentionally slanted and the repetition of those developed by the CCMM , and that the disproportionate media coverage of the church did not facilitate an objective investigation . According to a study by an expert in new religious movements , Massimo Introvigne , when a former member destroyed furniture belonging to the church in Langres in July 1994 , anti @-@ cult associations and some news media took the former member 's side , presenting him as the " victim " of a " cult " . On the French talk show *Ça se discute* (broadcast on 25 May 2005 on France 2) , a father (whose nine @-@ year @-@ old daughter was a member of the church with her mother) said his daughter was brainwashed ; he criticized her proselytism at school , closed @-@ mindedness and the role of women in the church . He explained that when he had suffered from cancer two years earlier , she had tried to miraculously heal him ; however , she considered him a liar and a sinner because of his homosexuality . He said he found her diary , in which she spoke of her imminent death when she would reach heaven to meet her grandparents . The association for the defense of religious freedom and conscience , CICNS , criticized the talk show for its lack of alternative viewpoints .

= = Response to criticism = =

Before 1988 , the church was the subject of many neutral press articles and appeared " normal and respectable " ; it contends that in the late 1980s Alain Vivien , then @-@ leader of the CCMM , said to its representatives in Épernay that he did not consider it a cult . The church explained that the first criticism came from a Catholic vice @-@ president of CCMM , who opposed the conversion to the Pentecostal church of his son @-@ in @-@ law and several seminarians (this explanation was later denied by the CCMM) , by an educator hostile to the group , and by other evangelicals (including pastor and co @-@ founder of the anti @-@ cult group *Vigi @-@ sectes* Gérard Dagon , a source for the 1995 parliamentary report who was critical of Pentecostal beliefs) . The church also reported discriminations after the publication of the report (including refusals of building permits) and to have spent , over a period of ten years , ? 82 @,@ 000 in legal fees to defend its interests . In 2003 , the church participated in a survey led by CESNUR about a possible change in government policy towards new religious movements .

Following the publication of the parliamentary report the church reacted by seeking help from academics and sociologists specializing in religious issues , including Jean Baubérot , Jean Séguy , Jean @-@ Paul Willaime , Massimo Introvigne , Laurent Amiotte @-@ Suchet , Bernard Blandre and Émile Poulat , who generally criticized its cult classification . Willaime and Poulat , among other sociologists , deemed the church 's danger was never proven . Danièle Hervieu @-@ Léger said the classification as a cult was an " absurd decision " . Sébastien Fath considered the church " a bit radical but overall harmless " , noting that this group had never been sued , and maintained that the church was criticized because of its proselytism and its rapid growth . Amiotte @-@ Suchet deemed that the pastor 's influence on the faithful was far from being as coercive as critics said . Poulat said , " We can debate whether it may be a ' sect ' in the sense of Weber ; it is certainly not a ' secte ' [cult] in the popular and parliamentary sense of the term " . Contacted by academics to participate in a documentary about the church , UNADFI and CCMM refused to explain their position . The Center for Studies on New Religions said the church 's theology is " clearly mainline " , but was criticized " because it does not belong to the World Council of Churches or other establishment church bodies " .

The church established a dialogue with the Catholic Church and the Protestant Federation of

France (FPF) ; the latter agreed to meet Daniel Gloeckler in Châlons @-@ en @-@ Champagne , and Étienne and René Kennel in Besançon . At first reluctant (since it did not want to serve as an " umbrella " against cult accusations) , the FPF agreed to establish , at its meeting on 4 ? 5 October 1997 , a bilateral dialogue with the church and advised it to develop ecumenical ties ; it publicly deplored the cult status of the church on 22 January 1998 . Many Protestant figures and churches (including FPF president Jean @-@ Arnold de Clermont , the Protestant Church of Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine and the Salvation Army) provided support , expressing a favorable opinion of the church .

The church also established ties with local and national institutions , such as administrative courts , municipalities and tax authorities . In 1996 it asked Alain Gest , a member of the French Parliamentary Commission on cults , the reason for its cult designation . In his response Gest did not provide details on the content of the work by the Direction centrale des renseignements généraux used for the report , but advised Kennel to ask the Observatoire interministériel sur les sectes for more information . On 4 June 1997 the church 's representatives met the president of the Observatoire , prefect Antoine Guerrier de Dumast , who advised the movement to integrate the FPF to clarify the situation . The church also appealed to the European Center of Law and Justice , a Christian @-@ oriented organization , to protect its freedom of religion and belief before the European Court of Human Rights .