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edited by
Nigel Rooms
and Steve Taylor

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EDITORIAL

Editorial Volume 5 Issue 1

Nigel Rooms

With this issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, we pass an initial milestone for our new journal of having published fifty articles since we began with our first volume in 2020. It has been quite a journey and we might stop here and rejoice for a moment and look back on our achievements so far. We have created a journal that is finding its place within World Christianity. In a recent survey of where our website is visited from, many thousands of times per year, we might have expected the UK, USA, Australia and Germany to feature in the top 10 places – yet South Korea, the Philippines, South Africa and India were also present (alongside 57 other countries). In this issue we continue this diversifying trend with seven articles authored from seven different countries on at least three continents representing a wide range of ecclesial traditions. Such catholicity is unified by a golden thread, running through many of the articles, which is the Church's requirement to seek first the Kingdom of God in all of its breadth and depth.

Jonna van den Berge-Bakker and Marten van der Meulen are both researchers in the Protestant churches of the Netherlands, a country which is well-known for its secularizing tendencies over many decades. They describe the first crisis of the local church in that country as its inexorable decline which leads to a second crisis, that of the church forgetting its true calling to be a “sign, foretaste and instrument” of the Kingdom of God. They explore in a simple, profound fashion the relationship between these two crises, noting that the first can lead to the second by focusing on paralysing “cramp” or, alternatively, active and busy initiatives to “repair” in the local church. They emphasize rightly, what organizational theorists have long advocated for, a focus on core purpose, or in their words, “calling”, without avoiding the sadness and lament for what we are losing through the first crisis. The importance of discernment in and with God emerges as a key practice along with recovering an eschatological, future-oriented perspective in ecclesiology which offers a wholly other horizon to the current crises.

The next two articles in this issue both illustrate in different ways, via case studies, responses to the crises of the church in the West and the behaviours that accompany

them. Alison Kolosova is an Orthodox theologian and missiologist, originally from Britain but now based in Russia and teaching in Estonia. She presents a fascinating study of an Orthodox parish in Bath, England which has been in existence since 1980. She points out that the Russian Orthodox Church faced its “post-Constantinian moment” in the 1930s, several decades before the rest of western Europe, and had to learn how to be church in a locality without the power of the State very close by. Out of this arose significant theological and ecclesial movements that can be traced even further back into the nineteenth century, and we are introduced to the authors concerned. Kolosova’s work here is important for subscribers to this journal for several reasons. First, for non-Orthodox readers here is a masterly introduction to the theological movements of Orthodoxy that have given rise to what we might call a robust missional ecclesiology that clearly has “legs”, as evidenced by the parish case study. The references alone will be worth reflecting on. Second, the practicalities of ordinary parish life where no stipends are paid and no building upkeep while creating a vibrant, living and fluid community surely point us to the future. Finally putting both together, here is a “thick description” of what church life looks like and is grounded on when the focus is on the coming Kingdom of God – as proposed by van den Berge-Bakker and van der Meulen.

The third article in this set is from Natalie Magnusson who presents part of her DMin thesis which researched her own Episcopal church in Jackson, Michigan. What strikes me, as an Editor who reads quite a lot of this kind of qualitative research within the Western congregation, is that it hardly matters what the starting point in the research question is, very quickly the researcher comes up against the same blockers to significant action as they dig down into the deep culture and behaviours of the Christian community. So, here where Magnusson begins with a question about this predominantly white congregation’s engagement in racial justice in their largely Black neighbourhood (surely a vital concern of the Kingdom), she quickly discovers some “deeply rooted theological challenges that inhibit our participation in the mission of God”. In addition, along the way she notices and admits to her own entanglement in whiteness and its toxic outcomes. Thus, the research demonstrates that in this congregation hosting and hospitality are expected to be offered, but hardly received; white privilege obstructs the ability to listen deeply to others; and what I call “practical atheism”, being unable to speak of the presence and activity of God in public, restricts the congregation’s imagination of what God might be up to as they address racial justice. This congregation, it appears, knows the “theory” perfectly well, but they find it almost impossible to turn that into practice across the boundary of their church in their neighbourhood. What Magnusson offers us here is practical theological wisdom for this and many other congregations on how to connect what they know in theory with their everyday praxis.

In setting out on the journey towards *Ecclesial Futures* it was axiomatic that we did not know exactly where we would be going, given the amazing state of flux that the world is in. The next two articles in this issue engage with the ever-advancing field of digital technologies and their implications for Christians and the communities in which we gather. David Hirome, currently studying in South Korea, does us a great service by reviewing developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in its many forms in a very helpful overview for those fairly new to this field (like myself!). He places the explosion of possibilities from the amazing power of contemporary computing into dialogue with theology, especially theological anthropology. This raises key questions about how ‘human-like’ the software and what it creates can be, when it can emulate and even surpass actual human capabilities. His work exposes the limits and biases of AI in its many forms while demonstrating the importance of understanding embodied human beings in a holistic and relational manner. He shares the serious implications of this endeavour for missiology and makes practical proposals for churches as they catch up with the possibilities on offer. My hope would be that this article stands as a “first word” in this journal on the subject and that others may take up the challenge of missional engagement with AI.

Geneva Blackmer, writing as a university-based researcher from Germany, addresses the question of what kind of human relationality (which Hirome emphasizes in his work) is possible when worshipping in digital worship spaces. She first addresses the question of the theological efficacy of “online church”, providing a robust theological defence of it from the literature. However, what happens in these spaces in terms of inclusion must go beyond simplistic questions of accessibility. Thus, Blackmer reviews research literature on what digital engagement can and cannot offer to different sorts of non-religious communities from around the world. She also proposes that the theology of disability informs the question of inclusion in digital spaces. She is therefore able to helpfully complexify the ability to gather, communicate and form community online. This is important critical and highly informative work and is a precursor for further research that she is involved in which might confirm some of her initial hypotheses in actual digital religious communities. We look forward to reading that research, should it come our way, in due course.

When we set out the kinds of article that we might hope for in our journal proposal in 2019, one of them was research and reflection on the systems that support local churches which are often termed church bodies or “judicatories”. While we haven’t had so many articles in this genre, I am pleased to introduce the next article from Stéphan Van der Watt which is firmly situated within the public role of the Reformed Church of Japan. Van der Watt, from South Africa, ministers and teaches in Japan. Here he presents reflection on a recent Reformed Church of Japan document – a

Peace Declaration. When the Church, especially when it is in a very small minority as it is in Japan, withdraws into itself out of public space it is very quickly endangered. It is therefore refreshing to read of this prophetic engagement with peace, not just in Japan, but with implications ecumenically through the World Council of Churches and globally via the United Nations. Of course, it is a small, even tiny contribution but as we know the Kingdom of God, which is a theme of this issue, begins with a mustard seed. Van der Watt helpfully reviews contemporary thinking in Peace Studies and pacifism as well as placing his reflection within Japan's Constitution and history of atomic devastation in World War II. There is something quite unique here which I commend to readers.

One of the two main sources of material for this journal is the *International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures* (ICEF – see www.ecclesialfutures.net); the other is the *International Association of Mission Studies*. What happens at an ICEF conference has been rather hidden within its invited membership until now, so I am very pleased to be able to conclude this issue with our first conference report from its meeting in 2023 in San Francisco. What is also good about the piece is that it is a collaborative work by four of the participants, including the local organizer, so we hear different voices and perspectives – and some summaries of papers that were given at the conference. Each ICEF meeting now has a specific theme around which the consultation happens – here it is “faithful innovation” – a not uncontested approach in churches today. There is rich reflection on offer here, and rather than repeating the arguments I simply commend the piece to our readers.

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ARTICLE

The Two Crises of the Church

Jonna van den Berge-Bakker and Marten van der Meulen

Abstract

In this article we examine the two crises of the Church: crisis 1, which is the decline of the Church, and crisis 2, which is the Church forgetting its calling. Crisis 1 draws the most attention from churches, but it is crisis 2 that churches should attend first. We argue that the order matters: a church paying attention to its calling will not solve its decline, but will help break free from tiresome attempts at repair. It will also help churches to practise an attitude of receiving, being directed at the kingdom of God. The distinction between crisis 1 and 2 will help churches and theologians name the challenges that the Church faces and will help prioritize them. It requires that discernment as a communal practice with others becomes an important part of the theological method.

Keywords: Church decline, Kingdom of God, Discernment, Calling, Eschatology

Introduction¹

There is a widespread sense that the Church is not doing well. In this article we describe the problem, analyse the causes and suggest a way forward. Seeing and naming the good that has already been given by God helps us out of despondency, without ignoring the sadness that the decline brings.

We find the words of Matthew 6:33 (NIV) important: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” The order is important here. It is about seeking the kingdom of God *first* and then the other things will be given as well. Churches tend to focus on the other things first, such as

1 We like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the many people who have been involved in the making of this article. The ministers, students, colleagues, diaconal workers, theologians and personal friends that have reflected on different drafts of our article and the preceding work have been essential in shaping our thinking and making this article possible.

church growth, the involvement of younger generations, or the social standing of the Church. Focusing attention on the kingdom of God helps churches to detach themselves from “these things”, to live more carefree lives and to experience what has already been given by God. This takes courage and might cost us more than we like. This article is intended to theoretically develop the distinction between crisis 1 and 2 further and to bring it into a broader conversation with colleagues. Our main question is: what is the nature of these two crises and how do these crises relate to each other?

The Two Crises of the Church

We distinguish two crises of the Church. Crisis 1 is the decline of the Church. Crisis 2 is that churches forget what they are called to. Both are related, but it is important to distinguish them. Crisis 1 is the crisis in which we “happen” to find ourselves. It is the situation of many churches in recent decades, in most Western societies, including the Netherlands. Crisis 2 is in fact a permanent crisis because, as sinful human beings, we constantly forget, ignore and frustrate our calling in ever new and ingenious ways. We should not be surprised that as a church, we do the same.² The good news is that crisis 1 can help churches pay attention to crisis 2. However, this is not a given, because crisis 1 also evokes other reactions. But first we review the current state of the Church in the Netherlands.

The State of the Church

We see three different trends.³ The first, major trend for Dutch churches is **decline**. It is clear to all that things are not going so well for the Church in the Netherlands. This has been going on for decades and, with a few exceptions, affects almost all denominations and churches. The decline makes many people so despondent that they no longer see the good things that already exist.

The decline of the Church in the Netherlands has been documented in various ways. The Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) found in 2022 that more than 50% of the Dutch consider themselves to be non-believers. This proportion is growing: in the period from 1991 to 2018, there was a sharp increase of non-believers from 16% to 29%. The Netherlands is now one of the most secular countries in Europe (De

2 Cf. Berkhof (1990, 426) who writes: “To a great extent official church history is the story of the defeats of the Spirit.”

3 Here we will give only a brief overview of these trends. For more details and references to empirical research see our article (De Roest et al. 2023).

Hart and Van Houwelingen 2022: 9). This trend is expected to continue, partly due to an ageing membership base of the mainline churches. Even the more conservative denominations have started to decline in recent years, partly due to falling birth rates (Wijma 2022).

At the same time, however, there are also **signs of new things** happening in churches, or **signs of surprising resilience**. This is a second trend we see.⁴ Churches and church members are finding ways to continue what they were already doing or finding new ways to be church. Some congregations are growing or showing a new vitality. These new developments are much less visible than the bigger picture of closure and decline. Yet, they are just as important to understand the situation of the Church today. Incidentally, in appreciating both new and old initiatives, it is important to see whether they address crisis 2 or are repair attempts to defuse crisis 1. We think new initiatives are not necessarily better at addressing crisis 2 than old practices of church. More on this later.

The small signs of renewal and resilience do not counterbalance the decline in terms of numbers or social impact. The new that is coming cannot, at least in the short term, properly replace what has been lost. What was, will not return. It is important to make room for lament and mourning over what has been, or will soon be gone (cf. Keifert 2006: 36).

The third trend we notice is that of a shyness, awkwardness or **embarrassment in living out and talking about faith**. The Protestant minister Wim Dekker summarises this as *geloofsverlegenheid* (Dekker 2011). The development of the loss of a sense of transcendence is evident in Dutch society as a whole and has its impact on churches. Dekker argues that the crisis of the Church is not merely a loss of members and buildings, but it is a crisis of faith:

This embarrassment, certainly among theologians, but also among church members, has to do with the fact that we are much more secularised than we realise ourselves. We no longer think from the reality of God, as the First. (Dekker 2011: 174. Translation by authors)

Wim Dekker's analysis is widely shared. People sense that the crisis is not just about decline, nor do they believe that new initiatives of being church will magically help

4 There are several books and articles describing what is happening with regard to these new initiatives in the Netherlands. See De Roest et al. 2023; De Reuver and Vellekoop 2019; Stoppels et al. 2020; Stoppels 2021. For academic research see Verburg-Janssen 2024 and De Jonge 2022.

the Church.⁵ We think Wim Dekker and others are exposing a deeper problem, which corresponds to what we call crisis 2.

It is important to note this multiple face of developments in the Church: there is a general, ongoing, structural and painful decline, new things are happening and people are sensing that there may be a deeper problem to do with our faith. We will describe this in more detail later. But first, let's take a closer look at how people respond to crisis 1.

Crisis 1: Three Responses

How do churches respond to decline? We distinguish three ways churches respond to crisis 1: namely cramp, repair and addressing the calling of the Church.

Response 1: Cramp

A common reaction is cramp: people channel their effort and energy into continuing with what is still there.⁶ The word "still" in particular is a common and revealing word. It indicates that people are aware that what they do and have is unlikely to last for long, but they carry on anyway. One of the most common questions asked by churches is: how do we find volunteers and ministers? A logical question, but one that focuses on maintaining the status quo. Most people don't think much about the fact that churches could be something completely different. They just go on doing what they are doing until they cannot go on. Often people do not feel the space to rediscover what their church's calling is in their own context.

Cramp – or even paralysis – is common in churches. Cramp is a dead end. Crisis 1 is too profound to ignore for long. Churches in cramp will eventually close or merge with another church.

Response 2: Repair

Another response to crisis 1 is the desire to fix the church system. This manifests itself in all sorts of proposals to address the symptoms of the crisis. Churches invent ways to involve more people in their faith community, they want to be relevant to the neighbourhood, or they start programmes for better faith communication in a post-Christian society. Crisis 1 is then effectively a problem to be solved. Above all,

5 For recent examples see Van Dijk and Van Leerdam (2023) and Van der Deijl (2023), who are Protestant Church ministers reflecting on the crisis of the Church.

6 Not just in the Netherlands. In her study of how churches in the US deal with change, sociologist Nancy Ammerman found that "inertia" was the most common response to decline: "proceed with business as usual" (Ammerman 1997: 63).

churches are expected to adapt to the new reality and come up with creative, innovative ways to overcome the crisis.

Repair is often presented as an alternative to the cramp. People are sold the idea that *this new method* will help them remain or become again a vital, growing and young church. This is not always said explicitly. Church organizations developing new programmes and methods are well aware of how tough and complicated church development is. However, implicitly, the new methods and programmes give the message: there is a solution to your problem. This subtext can make churches despondent when change does not occur or when they cannot start a programme due to a lack of resources.

The repair approach is alive and well in Dutch churches. Not infrequently, examples of successful churches are studied to discover the success factors that other churches should benefit from. In this light, it is interesting to pay attention to what people cite as examples of successful churches. For example, the Nieuwe Kerk in Utrecht is often seen as a success within the Protestant Church. The Nieuwe Kerk remarkably succeeds in involving many young people, aged in their twenties and thirties. A publication on this church (Westerbeek 2021) shared the lessons to be learned from their experience. However, Dirk de Bree, one of the ministers of the *Nieuwe Kerk*, is aware of the risks of church growth, and describes the challenges his church faces:

As the church attracts more and more members from all parts of the city, there is less involvement in the immediate area around the church building. The missionary DNA is less visible. This has also to do with the energy needed to keep 'things going'. Again, there is always a risk that as a growing church we become so busy with ourselves that the mission falls by the wayside. (De Bree 2019, translation by authors).

What is considered “successful” here is revealing. It says something about where people set their priorities. For us, the focus of many on these successful churches tells us above all else that most churches would also like to attract many (preferably young) people, especially to their Sunday worship. The idea that you, as a believer, are church for the purpose of something other than church, namely the kingdom of God, is usually secondary. Small, ageing churches are not held up as examples of successful churches, even though they can do just as well (or better) what they are called to do. A church made up of twelve frail elderly people being with refugees may be much more engaged in its calling than a large church with many churchgoers. But few will define that small church as a success.

In fact, any church renewal can be used as a way to repair the Church. The pioneering programme of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands could also be seen as a repair approach. One of the reasons for pioneering was a study by the Dutch research

agency Motivaction,⁷ which showed that of the eight “mentality milieus” Motivaction identified in Dutch society, only two were actually well represented in the Protestant Church. Pioneering was an attempt to involve people from these other groups in new forms of church. This is also reflected in the Protestant Church’s definition of pioneering: “A pioneering place is a new form of church, for people who do not go to church.” (Stoppels et al. 2020: 5).

We do think that a pioneer church can be a place where people rediscover the vocation of the Church. There are pioneers who, in their solidarity with marginalized people, rediscover what the gospel means in their context. However, this addressing of crisis 2 does not happen automatically. Quite often pioneers are “bothered” by the idea that their pioneering place must ensure that the existing church can continue to exist. They are often asked by people from the inherited church: “So, when will we see these people in church?” In this sense, the repair approach can damage new initiatives. They sometimes succumb to the added burden of having to be a solution to crisis 1.

Intermezzo: Why Repair Does not Work

There are three reasons why we think repairing the Church does not work. The first and simplest reason is that *the repair approach underestimates the depth of secularity*. Our culture is marked by what Andrew Root⁸ calls “secular 3” – most people in our society are not so much against faith, but find faith, church and God so irrelevant that it no longer has any meaning for their lives. “Secular 3, then, looks sideways and skeptically at any definition or articulation of human experience that draws on anything other than the immanent” (Root 2017a: 139; Root 2017b: 110).

Churches find themselves in a situation where what they do and are is considered strange, irrelevant and even inappropriate by much of contemporary society. Churches cannot do much about this. They can have the best programmes, train fantastic pastors and have the most beautiful buildings with modern kitchens, but at the end of the day, most people still find church irrelevant.

In practice, churches hardly acknowledge this cultural situation. They react within the frame of “secular 2”. This is an older version of secularity. The idea of secular 2 is that the secular and the sacred are two separate domains. The Church’s job then is to get people into the Christian domain or keep them there, thus reducing the secular domain.⁹ It turns out that many churches and believers think that there is a solution

7 Not publicly available.

8 Root here follows Smith’s (2014) interpretation of Charles Taylor’s book *A Secular Age*.

9 We will not elaborate here on what secular 1 is, but for completeness: secular 1 is the model in which the secular and sacred are present in the same domain and the sacred can enter the secular at all sorts of moments.

to secularization somewhere. In this line of thinking, it is difficult, but not impossible, to return to a more pious and Christian society, where secularity can be reduced.

A second reason why repair does not work builds on the first: it maintains *the illusion of a solution*. As long as churches still believe that the crisis is solvable and they themselves are repairable, they will feel the temptation to put their energy into repair. The thinking is: if only we work hard enough, put in place the right structures or believe the right things, our church will become vital and healthy again. As long as this illusion persists, there will be churches that spend a lot of time and energy trying to get their own organisation in order.

For this last thought, we are indebted to Andrew Root who traces how the focus on change keeps churches on a treadmill (Root 2021: 13). Constant change is an aspect of today's society. Churches try to adapt to (increasingly rapid) change. What churches often fail to understand is that this desire for change brings its own problems, because behind every change there is a new change on the horizon. In short, the solution for churches is not the next successful repair programme.

This brings us to a third reason why the repair approach does not work: *it keeps drawing churches' attention to themselves*. In our view, this is the most fundamental reason why the repair approach can be problematic. Churches can use their repair frenzy to keep themselves busy and feel like they are doing good. It helps churches to avoid paying attention to crisis 2. The busyness that is connected to crisis 1 is an obstacle to receiving Christ and keeps a church away from the kingdom of God. And that is a temptation that people and churches constantly fall for.

Response 3: Calling

The only thing left is to get off the treadmill. This is the moment when you can stop focusing on yourself and instead, direct your attention towards the goodness of God that surrounds you, and learn to receive it. Root also moves in this direction. He makes a case for transformation which he defines as an "invitation into grace": "[transformation] comes with an arriving word, 'Peace be with you' (John 20:19). Transformation is not the necessity to speed up but the need to open up and receive" (Root 2021: 15).

Churches therefore need not focus on themselves, but on that which comes from outside, and which only needs to be received. Doing this however is not easy for churches. We recognize what Rooms says in his study of missional churches and their relationship to the world: "God is at work in the world, but it is very hard for local churches to believe this" (Rooms 2019: 190).

While crisis 1 can obscure a church's calling, some churches will need to decline before they can pay attention to what they are meant to do. As Paas says: "In a time of decline we can rediscover what a church really is: a celebrating community through which God's salvation is realised. It is very likely that many congregations

will first have to become smaller in order to see this again” (Paas 2015: 221, translation by authors).

In this sense, crisis 1 can also be a blessing for some churches, helping them get to the question of what their calling is. Particularly churches who have attempted all possible solutions and have arrived at the conclusion that their crisis is unsolvable, and they are unable to fix themselves, have the opportunity to question the reasons behind all their efforts. And that question takes them in the right direction, namely towards their calling as a congregation. This is something Jonna discovered in her research of a diaconal faith community: that decline was one of the reasons to look for other ways of being church (Van den Berge-Bakker 2023: 26). Not all churches do this. We also encounter churches that consciously or unconsciously choose the option of slow but sure death. But some are letting go of the pressure to be successful, big or relevant. They let go of the idea that they first need enough (young) churchgoers, volunteers, money and buildings to fulfil their mission.

Crisis 2: We Forget the Church’s Calling

We have already said quite a lot about crisis 2, but it is good to be more specific here about what we mean by it. We believe that crisis 2 has to do with the Church forgetting its calling. There are many answers to the question of what its calling actually is, but we start with the idea that the Church exists for the purpose of the kingdom of God.

Church as Sign, Foretaste and Instrument of the Kingdom

We take the view that the Church is called to be “sign, foretaste and instrument” of the kingdom of God. This triad that has been in use, in different versions and variations, in missional literature.¹⁰ We think it is helpful, because it diverts attention away from church, without diminishing the importance of church itself. The triad is often associated with the Protestant missiologist Lesslie Newbigin (cf. Goheen 2000: 33). Newbigin corrected the instrumental approach of Hoekendijk, who saw church only as “a means in God’s hands to establish shalom in this world” (Hoekendijk 1964: 24). Besides Newbigin, there are many other theologians who characterize church in similar ways. According to the Roman Catholic theologian Borgman the Church’s right to exist “stands or falls with whether it is what it is called to be” (Borgman 2016: 40ff). Borgman comments: “The Church’s task is to make clear – she is the ‘sign’ – and to promote – she is the ‘instrument’ – that people belong together and take into account in their actions that they are dependent on each other, and that together

¹⁰ See for example Guder (2015: 54–5 and 74).

with the rest of creation they are connected to God" (Borgman 2016: 41, translation by authors).

The Protestant theologian Berkhof emphasizes that the Church should be oriented towards the world, on the basis of its identity as a community. The Church is then the "firstfruits of God's purposes, as the experimental garden of a new humanity" (Berkhof 1990: 419). Berkhof mentions that church is a "foretaste" and that the "apostolary orientation of the church is grounded in her communion with her Lord as well as in that of her members among each other" (Berkhof 1990: 418).

While Moltmann does not seem to use the "sign, foretaste and instrument" triad, he very clearly sees the need for the Church to be directed to the Kingdom of God. He argues: "'Christianity' has its essence and its goal not in itself and not in its own existence, but lives from something and exists for something which reaches far beyond itself" (Moltmann 1993: 325). The Church then is transformed by this "horizon of eschatological hope". On this basis the Church can "resist accommodation" and can say "something peculiar ... to the world" (Moltmann 1993: 305).

Summarizing, many theologians see the calling of the Church as being directed towards the kingdom. Relating this to our distinction, we argue that when the Church addresses crisis 2, it points to the other reality of God, which it does not control and on which it itself depends (sign). Nevertheless, we should expect that in every church there is something to taste of the kingdom (foretaste) and that what happens in and through the Church contributes to God's good world (instrument). Thus, while there is something at stake, the Church is freed from an unattainable compulsion to be perfect. It allows a church to seek God's goodness without having to realize it.

The Relationship Between Crisis 1 and 2

How do crisis 1 and 2 relate to each other? Firstly, we think the **order is** important.¹¹ Focusing on crisis 2 is not going to solve the problems with crisis 1, but focusing on your vocation does put crisis 1 in a different light. Secondly, this orientation requires an attitude of **receiving**, and this is a different response from that often seen in a response to crisis 1.

Order

If the Church is focused on the kingdom of God, as we argue above, this means that the Church must first address crisis 2. This is the actual crisis of the Church.

11 We do not go into detail here, but this reasoning connects with what has been called the "Chalcedonian pattern", where the hierarchical asymmetry between the divine and the human is important. Karl Barth's ecclesiology is built around this idea (cf. Bender 2005).

Addressing crisis 2 means the first question of churches should be what the Church's calling is and listening very carefully to this calling. You can expect that calling to come from outside.

Crisis 1 will not be automatically solved by paying attention to crisis 2. It does not prevent shrinkage. Far from it. The Church might stay small and insignificant. However, distinguishing between crisis 1 and 2 might help faith communities to see what they are doing, and take the edge off the panic that churches are experiencing. This does not mean that crisis 1 is not important. The decline is a sad thing because many things that are dear to us are disappearing. Buildings, volunteers, well-trained workers et cetera are all important. Knowledge of how to engage with young people, set up organisations properly and develop missionary strategies are important. However, our point is that these should be in the service of what you are called to as a church.

Reflecting further on this aspect of order, we believe that the Church is born in the context of the Kingdom and not the other way around. This is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer who says that the Church is where Christ is and is actualised by the Spirit. He himself cites as an example a conversation between two believers, which he also calls church:

Where the brother speaks to the brother, Christ is in the middle (Matthew 18:20) – there he stands as the middle between them. This is love – this is how the Spirit actualises the Church, not by words or claims, but by what happens between the members of the congregation. (Bonhoeffer 2018: 114 translation by authors)

So the Church *happens* in ever-changing places and formations. It is often assumed that the concept of church is already fully understood, leading us to believe that we only need to identify alternative methods through innovative theological reflection. Our thesis is that our understanding of the concept of church is yet to be fully realized, and its discovery is only possible through listening to our calling and following Christ. The Church, in turn, is considered as a divine gift from God, which is actualized (Bonhoeffer) by the Spirit of God. How Church is actualized can be different for every situation.

This approach is a quite radical departure from missional literature that is concerned with “new forms of church”. When the focus of the Church is on the Kingdom of God, the form the Church takes is of secondary importance. Again, that does not mean that form is not important, but rather that form follows calling, and not the other way around. Thinking in this way about order might help theologians and practitioners to prioritize and evaluate what they are doing and thinking.

A case in point is the work of Michael Moynagh (2012, 2017), who offers one of the best, practice-based works on what happens in new ecclesial communities, creatively

linking ideas and theories from different fields. His work has been influential in the pioneer movement, in the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland and other countries (cf. Müller 2016). However, his focus on work can be misused in a repair approach. While Moynagh argues that the Church should be shaped by the kingdom of God, he focuses most of his attention on the Church itself and how it can be adapted to changing circumstances. This makes his work vulnerable to be used as a solution to crisis 1.

Receiving

Crisis 1 puts people in an activist mode. Something has to be fixed, namely the Church. To be directed to the Kingdom, however, requires an attitude of receiving. Being attentive to God's Kingdom will make one receptive to what God is already giving, in and outside of the Church. Churches that focus on the kingdom of God, even if they are just a small group of people, have the space to experience what is already given to them. They can receive who and what comes their way as a special gift from God. As Samuel Wells says, churches that focus on what God gives will experience abundance and joy:

Abundance belongs with wonder. It is the conviction that if something is of God, there is no shortage of it; that joy lies in learning to live the things God gives in plenty, while misery awaits those who set their hearts on the ephemeral objects of scarcity. (Wells 2015: 130)

Addressing crisis 2 helps churches to realize they are working in a different economy, the economy of abundance.

Significance for Church and Theology

What can the distinction between crisis 1 and 2 mean for church and theology?

First, we think that **naming and defining crisis 1 and 2 helps** to see what is important first, and what is important next. There are many theologians who have written good things about crisis 1 and 2, without using these names. So crisis 1 and 2 are seen, but often discussed interchangeably. This is not surprising as in daily practice these crises get mixed up, but our simple distinction can help separate the goats from the sheep. For example, it can help a church that has to make a decision about which of two church buildings they are to close. The question, "What are we called to be here and now?" is different from "In which building can we continue Sunday worship service for as long as possible?" Thinking about their calling will lead churches down a different path, which, we believe, will bring more joy and surprise (and who knows, maybe also a full church on Sundays, but that will be of secondary importance).

Second, if focusing on the kingdom of God is the most important thing for churches, then this also demands something of **theological method**. Theology has a tendency to degenerate into expert knowledge. The demands placed on theology in the academy, but also the great challenges involved in decline and secularization, lead many people to call for more knowledge and further research. While we have nothing against this (and contribute to it – this article is, of course, itself an example of this), we think that here, too, the order is important.

To get a little more concrete: our approach calls for a theological method of discernment with a participatory action approach, where ordinary people who have insights on the kingdom have an important voice. This is a different approach from the ivory tower approach that so often characterises theology.¹² We are indebted for this thought to theologian Clare Watkins, who sees “enabling a culture for discernment” (Watkins 2020: 235) as a central task of the Church.

Discernment encompasses a very different set of skills from the models of change or missionary strategies used for crisis 1. This does not mean that this expert knowledge is not important, but rather that it is not the most important. Change starts with discernment and living out God’s good world. This is something you can do with all the people around you, including those who ‘happen’ to come your way and may not belong to your faith community. So this approach also puts into perspective what theologians (including ourselves), organizational experts or disruptive innovators have to offer.

A church becomes a community where people together discern the goodness of God. As a result, a church might start doing things differently. If this is the result of a collective process, people will be less inclined to want to maintain what is and more likely to try out an alternative. This is the place where theology starts.

Third, we think it is important to make **eschatology more central in ecclesiology**. Numerous churches are concerned about the future but consider it solely from their existing situation. Then they have a lot to worry about. Eschatological thinking works the other way round: you understand everyday existence in the light of what is to come. This approach comes from Moltmann. As he says: “The thinking of Christian hope draws God’s future into the present and thus opens the present to God’s future new world” (Moltmann 2019: 122).¹³

A church that thinks eschatologically identifies for itself and with others where the kingdom of God (for that is the future) can already be found and rejoices in it. Often church is thought of too narrowly and too imprecisely – too narrow because we don’t

12 Although the ivory tower also has its uses, see De Roest (2020: 253).

13 Original quote: “Das Denken der christlichen Hoffnung zieht Gottes Zukunft in die Gegenwart hinein und öffnet damit die Gegenwart für die zukünftige neue Welt Gottes.” Translation by authors.

call things that happen in everyday life “church”, and too imprecise because there are many things that we call church that actually are not.

Eschatological thinking lends the Church a clarity that can be put to good use. In its relationship with the world, the Church is not just a religious community, it is pointing to “the coming reshaping of the whole present world system” (Moltmann 2004: 338). And in this capacity, it is critical of the world around it and embodies itself – if all goes well – a different reality.

Conclusion

Concluding, we hope that the distinction between crisis 1 and 2 will help churches and theologians to focus their attention on the things that matter, in the proper order. We believe this distinction has been seen or felt by many people. By putting it in words and reflecting theoretically on the relation between the two, we hope to provide language that helps people discern what they are called to do and discover God’s wonderful abundance in doing it. We hope that the distinction will inspire new empirical research into what the calling of the Church might be. We believe this does not necessarily involve an organised, large, and successful Church, but that it does involve a Church that loses itself and finds new life for the sake of Christ.

About the Authors

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ARTICLE

Orthodox Perspectives on the Church as an Evangelizing, Eucharistic Community: A Case Study of the Orthodox Parish of St John of Kronstadt, Bath, UK

Alison Ruth Kolosova

Abstract

This article presents a case study of the Orthodox parish of St John of Kronstadt in Bath, UK, an Orthodox Christian lay community founded in 1980 in response to the inspiration of St John of Kronstadt and Fr Alexander Schmemmann. Based on interviews with parishioners and the author's own experience of the community, the article delineates the main features of the parish's communal life of liturgical prayer, hospitality and witness in the wider community. The second part of the article explores the broader contribution of St John and Fr Alexander to the development of Orthodox ecclesial and missional understandings and practices in the contemporary world. It delineates the historical, ecclesial and theological contexts in which their teachings and practices originated and argues that amidst these contexts we can trace the origins of the Eucharistic ecclesiology and understandings of human personhood and community which have pervaded Orthodox theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These have laid the groundwork for the perspective that Christian mission and witness are a continuation of the Eucharistic community's experience of the Kingdom of God, the 'liturgy after the liturgy'. The article concludes with a plea for greater dialogue based on the common ground between Western missiological discourse on the nature of post-Christendom evangelism and the ecclesial experience of Orthodox diaspora communities.

Keywords: Orthodox witness, John of Kronstadt, Alexander Schmemmann, Eucharistic ecclesiology, Liturgy after the liturgy

In recent decades, a recurrent theme of ecumenical missiological writings has been what Christian mission and evangelism could and should look like 'after Christendom', in societies where the Constantinian alliance of church and state has shattered and national identity is no longer so bound up with the Christian faith (Stone

2007: 10–1; Paas 2019: 28–54, xvi–xix). Such reflections focus almost exclusively on Western Christendom and so fail to appreciate how keenly this crisis of living in a post-Constantinian era was already felt in the 1920s and 1930s by theologians forced to emigrate from their homelands after the 1917 Russian revolution. For example, Fr Sergius Bulgakov, a founder and later dean of the St Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, wrote in the early 1930s of the crisis historic Orthodoxy was facing owing to the fall of the Russian Empire. He wrote intuitively: “We have perhaps witnessed the end of the Constantinian period in Church history.” Yet despite the challenges of exile and marginalization facing the émigré community in Paris, he continued on a positive, prophetic note: “The Orthodox Church is now faced with new problems, new perspectives, it contains not only the end but the creative way which leads to [the future].... This creative inspiration ... will bring in a new era of creative Christian life” (Bulgakov 1988: 193–4)

This article aims to illustrate one form that this “new era of creative Christian life” has taken by presenting in the first part a case study of the missional experience of the Orthodox Parish of St John of Kronstadt¹ in Bath, UK where the author lived in 1985–86, 1989–90 and 1994–96. Since then she has visited the parish once or twice a year, as well as being in regular correspondence and online communication with both parishioners and clergy. In early 2023, several members of the parish’s clergy and laity responded to specific questions about the forms that community and evangelism take in the community. The aim of the case study is thus to assess how one Orthodox community has sought to flesh out their understanding of mission and community in a context outside of traditional Orthodox homelands.

The aim of the second part of the article is to trace the roots of the Bath community’s understanding of mission and community by providing an overview of the historical, ecclesial and theological influences on two figures who have contributed greatly to shaping the Bath parish. The community is named after Fr John (Sergiev) of Kronstadt (1829–1908), while Fr Alexander Schmemmann (1921–83) was dean of St Vladimir’s seminary in New York when Fr Yves Dubois, one of the parish’s founders, was studying there. Each of these highly significant figures, in different ways, has also contributed to the wider development of Orthodox ecclesial and missional understandings and practices in the contemporary world. Father (now Saint) John provided one particular ecclesial response to the challenges of urbanization, secularization and poverty in the docklands of late nineteenth-century St Petersburg, capital of the Russian Empire throughout which he became a legend in his lifetime. By contrast, Alexander Schmemmann’s teaching, writings and pastoral ministry emerged out of the experience of rediscovering Orthodox ecclesial identity in the post-revolutionary

1 Hereafter referred to as “the Bath Orthodox Parish” or “the parish”.

Russian émigré communities of Western Europe and the USA where he is therefore better known.

Methodologically, this section sets in historical and ecclesial context their lives and personal writings as well as drawing on recent scholarship about them and the broader context of the Russian Orthodox Church in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By providing this context, the article aims to explain the origins of broader Orthodox perspectives on Christian mission predominant in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and influential both in traditionally Orthodox contexts and in the diaspora. It highlights the understanding of the local eucharistic community as both goal and springboard of the Christian church's witness, which is expressed both through the liturgy and what has frequently been referred to as the "liturgy after the liturgy" (Bria 1986: 12, 38–42; Yannoulatos 2010: 94–6).

The initial case study of the parish of St John of Kronstadt will focus on both these aspects of the Orthodox understanding of mission: the parish's communal life of liturgical prayer and the way it lives out the "liturgy after the liturgy" through hospitality and other forms of witness in the surrounding community.

Case Study of the Orthodox Parish of St John of Kronstadt, Bath, UK

Despite bearing the name of a Russian saint, the Orthodox Parish of St John of Kronstadt belongs to the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain which is under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The parish was founded in 1980 and since then, hundreds of people, some of them passing through, others putting down roots, have been impacted by the ways it lives as a community which seeks to witness to and draw people to the love of God. While on a typical Sunday you might find 50 to 70 people at the morning communion service, and on a major feast day you might find a hundred or more, it is not numerical growth which has been the main goal of the community. The focus has been rather on deepening relationships with Christ and with each other and out of this the community's evangelizing role has naturally emerged.

The priest Yves Dubois, one of the Parish's founders, points to Fr John of Kronstadt and Fr Alexander Schmemmann as those who particularly inspired the model of Christian community which has developed. The ministry of Fr John set a pattern for Christian engagement with the local community while his concern for a relationship with Christ through constant prayer and frequent communion has provided the model for pastoral ministry and spiritual growth. Fr Alexander Schmemmann taught that the future of Orthodoxy was in English-language parish communities led by a priest with a secular job, with a chapel in the house of the priest's family, and community meals after Sunday Liturgies.

This latter model has led to three great practical challenges which in the long run have proved to have positive consequences. The first such challenge is that the parish has never had a church building of its own. Community worship started in Fr Yves' family home, together with the family of Ann and Trevor Johnson, today Fr Seraphim, and an Orthodox nun, Mother Sarah Overton. One large room was turned into an Orthodox chapel with an iconostasis and icons, oil lamps, censers and relics of the saints, with worship and prayer always being followed by a communal meal in the kitchen downstairs.

This "house church" model eventually became impractical once the congregation grew, and in recent years two local Anglican parishes have provided a venue for liturgical worship, with community meals in the church hall. This has helped to develop good relations with other Christian confessions and stopped the parish from being too insular. For example, St John's, Bathwick Anglican parish and the Orthodox parish which they currently host are at present working on a joint fundraising project for Ukraine. Ecumenical relations have been an ongoing concern with one priest, Fr Richard Penwell, and Mother Sarah currently representing the parish in Churches Together in Somerset.

The parish's not having its own building has also resulted in the community having a strong element of mobility and a capacity to take Orthodox worship (liturgical prayer, icons, choral singing, candle stands) into many situations: to a local prison, to Greenbelt, on annual pilgrimage to the Saxon church at Bradford-on Avon and other holy places, to different homes and venues.

The second, related challenge resulting from Schmemmann's vision is that none of the pastoral team has ever been employed full time by the parish or the wider Orthodox Church. They have all had ordinary secular employment alongside their ministry in the parish, which has had the advantage that all of them have been working alongside local people and this has led to them and the parish becoming much more engaged with the local community than it could have been otherwise.

The third immense challenge has been the consequence of aiming to be an English-language Orthodox Christian community open to people of all and every nationality, rather than a parish formed to provide pastoral care largely for those from one particular country and national tradition which has often been the case with Orthodox diaspora communities. While there have always been a significant number of native English members, the community has drawn people from many countries: Greece, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, the Middle East.

On the one hand this has been a great source of enrichment to the community and has given the opportunity to many people of Orthodox background to often "rediscover" their faith in a new and meaningful way in a foreign land. Worship services

have always been in English, but phrases of other languages and their musical traditions are drawn into the worship. This change has been very demanding on choir leaders and members getting to grips with the complexities of Orthodox liturgy, all in four-part harmony without the accompaniment of organ or other musical instruments. Despite the challenges this presents to an amateur, even if highly musically literate, choir, many newcomers are drawn to Orthodox worship by the beauty of the music and the prayerful atmosphere it creates.

On the other hand, the multi-ethnic and multilingual aspect of parish life has meant that the wider political and ecclesial conflicts that have plagued the Orthodox churches in recent decades have been potential and actual sources of tension. The current war in Ukraine has put an obvious strain on relations within the community, although at the same time it has also brought out the community's strengths in looking after anyone who turns up on their doorstep. Several members are Ukrainian or have Ukrainian relatives whom they have taken into their homes.

At the heart of the community is communal worship with all the ways that Orthodox liturgical worship appeals to the whole person, body and soul: the visibility of icons, four-part choral singing, dousing with holy water, anointing with consecrated oil, as well as preaching by both clergy and laity. There are six people on the preaching rota and sermons are also distributed by email so that they reach far more people. One parishioner emphasized to me that she felt that the community witnessed to Christ particularly through its liturgical worship, the focal point of which is the Eucharist in which all participate, adults as well as children, who take communion weekly from the time they are baptized. Frequent weekly communion is practised, with each communicant participating in the sacrament of confession every month or so.

Everyone I have spoken to agrees that communal meals have been a key element of both building strong relationships within the community and of welcoming newcomers. Meals have taken different forms as the community has grown. For many years the whole community, sometimes 50 or 60 people, would visit different family homes each week and that family would make the meal. Nowadays, there is always a sit-down meal in the St John's church hall after the Sunday morning communion service, with each person bringing some part of the meal. While such meals often take place inside, towards the end of the pandemic, when restrictions had been lifted, this meal often took place outside in the street and at times had the atmosphere of a street party, leading passers-by to stop and ask what was happening. Last year's Parish Report mentions in particular the "Agape Vespers and meal" on the Sunday evening of Easter when traditional paschal foods from all around the world are eaten together. Of other special celebrations, the report says "we were blessed with the weather on many of the occasions and were able to spill out into the sunshine, and enjoy music and dancing after our meal" (Parish Report 2022).

A special role in the community is played by the Convent which is the home of the parish's nun, Mother Sarah, as well as her frequent lodgers and visitors. There is a regular cycle of morning and evening prayer at the Convent which means the community's life and outreach are rooted in communal prayer, as well as the personal prayers of each community member. Mother Sarah's home also offers hospitality to those who would like to experience Orthodox prayer and community life. I have been there on occasions when a specialist in Islamic Sufi mysticism came for such an experience, or when a group of Catholic nuns came to discuss the monastic life.

Mother Sarah is a rare phenomenon in the Orthodox Church as a woman who is involved in full-time pastoral work both within and outside the parish. For many years she has been a chaplain at Bath University and while her experience as a pastoral counsellor has been available to all the students of the university, it has led in particular to many links with students of Orthodox backgrounds who have found a spiritual home for a few years in the parish and consequently grown in their faith at an important stage of their lives.

There is a constant trickle of newcomers to the parish, not only students. A recent influx of newcomers with no particular previous church background is attributed to the online presence of such figures as environmentalist and writer Paul Kingsnorth, and artist and podcaster Jonathan Pageau. Each newcomer, if they so wish, can be involved in a catechetical process of instruction in the fundamentals of the Christian faith as well as discussing issues which arise from the experience of worship and community. This nurturing is also a continuing process which takes place in both Bible studies and a reading group which anyone in the parish can be involved with.

While much of the parish's witness arises out of its community life, there is one section of last year's annual report called "Hospitality and Evangelism" which details some more specific forms of outreach into the local and not-so-local communities. Among these are the Arts Festivals which have emerged out of the very identity of the community which has many people with some kind of artistic background: artists, icon painters, people who are skilled in pottery, embroidery, photography, stone masonry, musicians and singers. There is an art exhibition as well as interviews with artists and painters, a café with soup, tea and coffee, concerts with the Mosaic choir, a group of semi-professional young Orthodox singers of different national backgrounds, and a ceilidh to conclude the weekend.

Listed under the heading "Evangelism" in the Annual Report are environmental activism and community action concerning climate change, for example petitioning the government about burning of peatlands, and reducing its environmental footprint by aiming for zero waste. Further evidence of environmental concern was the theme of the annual parish weekend away in 2023, "God's Creation". Other forms

of outreach in the local community over the years have been involvement in the ecumenical Genesis Trust which works among the homeless in Bath, or teams of six or seven people who have gone to lead worship at a local prison. Currently the parish is working with local charities and agencies supporting Ukrainian refugees. Youth and children's work has always been a strong aspect of parish life. This is the way that the community evangelizes its own children and young people so that they develop into believing, witnessing adults, rather than just dropping out. There is a Sunday school, children's sermons once a month and an annual summer camp organized by the Archdiocese known as "The Greek Camp" which many in the community credit with enabling their young people to develop their own faith as it gives them a wider peer group and sense of the Church. Many of the parish's young people have not only attended the camp but gone on to be its leaders and in many cases it has led to long-term friendships outside of the Camp. The Camp has been a factor in the formation of the Mosaic Choir. In the same area of youth work, although further afield, the parish has developed an ongoing relationship with an Orthodox school and orphanage in Kenya to which it sends part of its annual income.

This case study has shown how the writings and vision of St John of Kronstadt and Fr Alexander Schmemmann played a significant role in the founding of the Bath Orthodox Parish and its central tenets of Eucharistic spirituality, hospitable community and pastoral care, core values which continue to undergird the parish. Yet as it has become rooted in both the local and wider ecumenical ecclesial communities, both in the UK and worldwide, with a younger generation of parishioners of diverse national backgrounds arising, the parish has acquired its own distinct ways of being a missional community. These currently embrace liturgical prayer and hospitality, social concern and service, environmental activism, international partnership, artistic expression, and ecumenical and inter-faith relationships.

In the second part of this article we shall explore in greater depth the broader influence of Fr John and Fr Alexander on Orthodox ecclesial and missional understandings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We shall focus in particular on their understanding of the local ecclesial community and its missional role.

Fr John of Kronstadt and Fr Alexander Schmemmann: Historical, Ecclesial and Theological Context

Although Fr John and Fr Alexander were born almost a century apart, they both need to be understood against the backdrop of the Great Reforms of the 1860s and the 1917 Russian Revolution. The emancipation of the serfs (1861) was arguably the most significant reform, bringing with it rapid social change and a mass influx of rural workers into the Russian Empire's cities where homelessness, unemployment and

poverty became problems on an unprecedented scale. Other aspects of modernity – industrialization, more opportunities for education and literacy, the greater circulation and influence of printed texts, the rise of politically radical movements to combat social injustice – all presented new challenges to the closely allied Tsarist government and Russian Orthodox Church (Hedda 2008). Fr John’s charismatic ministry was one particular ecclesial response to these challenges that had an immense impact at all levels of Russian society.

Fr John of Kronstadt: Eucharistic Fervour and Mutual Responsibility

Fr John Sergiev was born in 1829 into the family of a poor church sacristan in the far north of Russia. He was ordained priest at St Andrew’s Cathedral in Kronstadt (the docklands where many of the capital’s working population eked out a living) in 1855, the year that the Great Reforms began. His diaries during the first five years of his ministry are largely meditations on the words of Scripture which he copied out with the aim of internalizing them. He frequently applied them literally, as he did with the Gospel commands about sharing one’s wealth with one’s neighbour. Consequently he often came home without his boots as he had given them away to a bare-footed pauper. Commenting on the seawater which flowed in pipes into Kronstadt homes, he wrote, “As the sea-water belongs to everyone, does not my money belong to everyone who is poor? What kind of blindness is it that I persist in regarding it as exclusively my property?” (Kizenko 2000: 13, 68). He frequently irritated the St Petersburg aristocracy and shopkeepers with his criticism of the disparity between rich and poor, seeking to arouse a sense of mutual responsibility which would persuade them to part with their wealth. He did not restrict the biblical notions of the church as a “body” and “community” to the church, but applied them to all human society,

Ants build anthills in which they are warm and sated even in winter; ... bees build beehives.... Similarly, because people are made to live in communities and because according to God’s intent people must make up one body of whom individually they are its members, the strong must bear the burdens of the weak ... I appeal to you in the name of Christianity, in the name of loving mankind ... let us help these shelterless poor, ... let us not deny our solidarity with them as human beings ... Will we allow ants and bees to have the advantage over us? (Kizenko 2000: 74).

The *House of Industry* he eventually set up became a model for many such workhouses throughout the Empire. Medical care, food, clothing and shelter were provided to the homeless, while the unemployed could learn various trades (Morariu 2018: 2). As his fame grew in the 1880s and 90s, charitable causes throughout the empire appealed to him as a patron, and with the creation of the Duma, he called on it to address poverty and the causes of alcohol abuse (Kizenko 2000: 76–7, 84).

These expressions of his evangelical social consciousness arose out of an intense liturgical, especially eucharistic spirituality. Until the mid-nineteenth century, it had been common practice in Russia to take communion once a year as a civic duty. Fr John, however, encouraged not only frequent communion but a fervent awareness of Christ's presence in the bread and wine. He wrote,

When you receive the Holy Life-giving Mysteries [i.e. take communion], steadfastly represent to yourself Christ Himself under the form of the bread and wine ... send in thought into the depths of your heart and there lay and mentally preserve the Life-giving Guest ... the Body and Blood show themselves to be life-giving, burning embers in the believer's heart, according to the measure of the heart's preparedness. (Sergieff 1984: 483).

His diaries also reflect the intensity which Fr John considered fitting for a priest serving the Liturgy:

The celebration of the Divine Liturgy requires a man ... whose heart is wholly embraced by the flame of the Holy Ghost, by ardent love for God and mankind, for every human soul, and above all, for the Christian soul, so that with a sincere heart he may ever rise to God in prayer. (Sergieff 1984: 341)

He himself served the Liturgy in an ecstatic manner, weeping, shouting and crying out the words in order to engage his parishioners. He sometimes changed the words of the usually strictly unchanging liturgical text to remind them of Christ's genuine presence among them. By the 1890s, in order to make frequent communion more possible, the church hierarchy had allowed him to turn the sacrament of confession, usually held one-to-one with the priest, into a mass event with thousands of people crowded together, calling out their sins (Kizenko 2000: 53, 60).

Fr John's intercessory prayer eventually became legendary, with peasants walking to Kronstadt and shiploads of devotees arriving with prayer requests concerning healing, employment, finances, family and marital troubles. Kronstadt became a major pilgrimage destination with Fr John revered for his holiness as the "spiritual father" of the entire Russian people. In 1894, when Fr John was asked to minister to the dying emperor Alexander III, he became an international celebrity and the first publication of extracts from his diaries in English translation dates to 1897 (Sergieff 1984; Morariu 2018: 2).

There was a more controversial side to Fr John. The assassination of Tsar Alexander I in 1881 and the rise of the revolutionary movement led to him espousing the politics of the far right, while his support for monarchist right-wing organizations such as the Union of the Russian People led to the radical press targeting him as a symbol

of reaction. In his final years, groups of more radical adherents to his teachings, the Ioannites, were drawn to Fr John's apocalyptic warnings that Russia must recover its Orthodox faith before it was too late. While Fr John disavowed them, they gathered in communes, defending autocracy, while condemning both mainline Orthodoxy and liberal politics (Kizenko 2000: 13, 197–8, 283–4; Morariu 2018: 3–4).

Fr Alexander Schmemmann: the Roots of his Liturgical and Missional Understanding

Despite these controversial sides to Fr John's politics, Kizenko points to the long-term consequences of Fr John's ministry when she writes "A more regular and thoughtful observance of communion was perhaps his most significant contribution to Russian piety ... the revival of Eucharistic theology in Russian Orthodoxy which has lasted to this day, may be traced to this quiet revolution" (Kizenko 2000: 59). The footnote to Kizenko's sentence refers to Fr Alexander Schmemmann's *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Schmemmann 1988a), although Schmemmann's book does not overtly acknowledge the inspiration of Fr John. However, Schmemmann's aristocratic parents and grandparents had lived in St Petersburg at the height of Fr John's ministry, and Fr John certainly influenced the Russian émigré circles of Schmemmann's youth. Fr Sergius Bulgakov, who had a profound influence on the young Schmemmann in émigré Paris, attributed to Fr John a "prophetic" ministry which was a "manifestation of the spirit and its power" (Bulgakov 1988: 51; Plekon 2016: 2, 4).

Schmemmann's eucharistic ecclesiology and the liturgical missional vision which flowed out of it also had their roots in other strands of ecclesial response to the challenges of the pre- and post-revolutionary decades. In the late nineteenth century, a movement for church reform criticized the synodal system of church government introduced by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century which had subordinated the church to secular state control. The movement was accompanied by heated discourse revolving around the concept of *sobornost'* and how to restore conciliar practices to the life of the Russian Church. The term *sobornost'* has multifaceted meanings and has been translated variously as conciliarity, catholicity or synodality, while it has been used with a wider range of meanings embracing the relationality of the human person, and the communal perception of knowledge and truth (Bulgakov 1988: 60–1). The term emerged out of the writings of the mid-nineteenth-century Slavophile philosophers who stressed that divine truth can only be collectively or communally perceived, while the ultimate source of truth is the Holy Spirit who dwells precisely in the entire ecclesial community, the laity as well as the hierarchy of bishops (Khomiakov 2018: 71, 98, 151).

As the twentieth century dawned, critics of the synodal system made proposals to restore independence and conciliarity to the Church by replacing the Synod with

a council of bishops and restoring a patriarch as primate of the Russian Church. They also urged conciliarity at the diocesan and parish levels by holding assemblies composed of, and elected by, both clergy and laity to deliberate on local matters and restoring greater freedom and a missional role to the local parish community. The reform movement culminated in the All-Russian (Moscow) Church Council of 1917–18, the impact of which has been compared with the Vatican II Council (Kallistos 2019; Destivelle 2015: xv). It voted to restore the patriarchate and formulated wide-ranging decrees concerning many aspects of church life, including liturgical reform, the parish community and mission (Cunningham 1981; Destivelle 2015; Paert 2025).

The persecutions of the Soviet period prevented a large-scale application of the Council's decisions within the Russian Church itself. Yet its deliberations, which gave unprecedented voice to the laity, have in varying degrees influenced the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe and the diaspora over the last century. (Stavrou 2018; Paert et al. (eds) 2025) The legacy of the Council was brought to Western Europe by many emigres including participants in the Council such as Sergius Bulgakov who became a leading theologian in Paris (Destivelle 2015: xv, 63, 413 n.129).

It was into the ecclesial and theological world of the Paris emigration that Schmemmann was plunged as a seven-year-old boy in 1928. While he attended the Russian Cathedral in *rue Daru*, during his childhood and youth he was profoundly involved in the Russian Student Christian Movement (RSCM) which sought to strengthen Russian émigré youth in their faith. The RSCM, which celebrates its centenary in 2023, had been strongly influenced by the small lay-led groups for Bible study and prayer of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). These organizations became active in Russia after John Mott's visit to Finland in 1899, and so initially attracted Finnish Lutherans, yet their small groups or "circles" soon drew Orthodox young people as well (*Understanding Sobornost* 2023). It was in the emigration, however, that the "circles" of laity took on a more distinctively Orthodox confessional orientation. Among the founders and leaders of RSCM was the above-mentioned Sergius Bulgakov who stressed that the entire ecclesial body was responsible for the renewal and mission of the Church (*Understanding Sobornost* 2023). The RSCM was inspired by the notion of *sobornost'* with its implications for the relational nature of human beings who become more truly "persons" through the experience of ecclesial community.

Life in Christ ... is never given in isolation or separated from other men, but in a union, living and immediate, in the unity of many in one whole (the image of the Holy Trinity, consubstantial and indivisible).... He who lives in union with others, who frees himself of the "I" ... he it is alone who can receive the truth (Bulgakov 1988: 63–4).

This understanding of personhood and the ecclesial community as both mirroring and participating in the community and unity of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity was to become a major theme of many Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century (Louth 2015: 54–5, 218–22; Zizioulas 1985; Kallistos 1990: 33–4).

RSCM also had a strong emphasis on liturgical worship and frequent communion (*Understanding Sobornost* 2023), and Schmemmann's *Journals* testify to how his sense of the central place of the Liturgy grew out of his experience in émigré Paris and RSCM (Schmemmann 2021: 51; see also Louth 2015: 51–2; Plekon 2016: 8). Schmemmann studied and later taught at the St Sergius Institute which was founded after the second RSCM conference which voiced the need to educate the laity. Among his teachers, and later colleagues, were both Bulgakov and Nikolai Afanasiev, whose influence is evident from the themes of his writings that recur in Schmemmann's later works.

In Afanasiev's *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, the opening chapters are devoted to the "royal priesthood" of all believers and the Spirit-filled ministries of all the laity. "The gift of the Spirit which every believer receives during the sacrament of reception into the Church [i.e. baptism and chrismation] is the charism of royal priesthood.... The priestly ministry of all members of the Church has found expression in the Eucharistic assembly" (Afanasiev 1994: 3–4).

Afanasiev's teaching about the fullness of the Church being present as the local Christian community gathers for the Eucharist has led to Afanasiev being considered the father of "eucharistic ecclesiology" which dominates Orthodox ecclesiology to this day (Kallistos 2019 provides a classic example; Plekon 2022: 247).

All of these themes are woven together in Schmemmann's vision of the eucharistic, evangelizing community which he presents in *For the Life of the World*, originally a study guide for a conference on mission in December 1963. Schmemmann emphasizes the missional purpose of the "priesthood of all believers" who are called to transform the life of the world by taking on Christ's intercessory role, offering the world to God and calling the world into communion with him (Schmemmann 1988b: 15).

To be in Christ means to be like him.... And as he "ever lives to make intercession" for all "that come unto God by Him" (Heb. 7:25) so we cannot help accepting this intercession as our own.... Intercession begins here, in the glory of the messianic banquet, and this is the only true beginning for the Church's mission (Schmemmann 1988b: 44–5).

Dwelling on the meaning of the word *leitourgia* (Gk: the work of the people) Schmemmann wrote that it "meant an action by which a group of people become something corpo-

rately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals.... Thus the Church itself is a *leitourgia*, a ministry, a calling to act in the world after the fashion of Christ, to bear testimony to Him and His Kingdom" (Schmemmann 1988b: 25). This ongoing "*leitourgia* of mission" is the church's witness to all that it has experienced of union in and with Christ, and of the Kingdom of God at the Eucharistic table (Schmemmann 1988b: 45–6; Plekon 2016: 5, 8).

This understanding of the liturgy of mission flowing irrevocably out of the Eucharistic liturgy became the main Orthodox understanding of the church as a missional community in the late twentieth century, in large part due to Schmemmann's colossal influence. It also owed much to Greek and Romanian theologians of mission, especially Metropolitan Anastasios Yannoulatos and Fr Ion Bria, who popularized this notion of mission as "the liturgy after the liturgy". There has been some debate as to who initiated the term (Yannoulatos 2010: 94–6; Marcu 2016: 191–200; Sonea 2020) although as all three theologians were moving in the same ecumenical circles from the 1950s to the 1970s, it is safest to say that there was undoubtedly a great deal of multi-directional influence.

Schmemmann's influence can most clearly be seen if we compare Schmemmann's vision with the statement on Orthodox mission drawn up under the leadership of Bria, *Go forth in peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*.

The goal and aim of the proclamation of the Gospel, and thus of mission, is the establishment of eucharistic communities in every locality [which], centred around worship and the celebration of the holy eucharist, will initiate the kingdom of God and become the focal point for active and concrete witness ... the eucharistic community will witness most effectively through its own example of openness and unity, as well as through the spirituality and holiness of its individual members. (Bria 1986: 12)

Bria's language is more accessible than Schmemmann's and yet it is the core features of Schmemmann's vision which shine through.

Conclusion

The Bath Orthodox Parish, as the above case study has shown, can be viewed as one expression of what Sergius Bulgakov referred to as that 'new era of creative Christian life' which has arisen out of the post-Constantinian crisis faced by the Russian and other Orthodox Churches after the First World War and 1917 Revolution. Orthodox theologians such as Alexander Schmemmann have provided vision for the way forward out of the crisis, drawing on the spiritual, theological and ecclesiological heritage of the Russian Church before and after the 1917 Revolution, including the Eucharistic

spirituality of Fr John of Kronstadt, the discourse and practice of *sobornost'* associated with the 1917–18 Moscow Council and the Russian Student Christian Movement. This article points to the common ground shared by Christian communities seeking a renewed vision and practice of evangelism “after Christendom” and Eastern Christian communities who have migrated owing to war, revolution and political and economic crisis throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such common ground suggests that dialogue between eastern and western missiological traditions should be strengthened and more attention paid by both scholars and practitioners to the missional experience of Orthodox Christian communities, both Eastern and Oriental, who have found a home in the Western world.

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ARTICLE

Sharing in the indiscriminate generosity of God: Exploring missional engagement of racial justice funded by the economy of God

Natalie Magnusson

Abstract

This article further probes three of the findings of the author's DMin project thesis, which explored God's call of racial justice in a predominantly white, affluent Episcopal church. The research revealed theological and missional challenges that inhibit the church from joining in God's mission of justice, namely participants viewing the church as the host of missional engagement, white privilege hindering the practice of listening and the reluctance of members to articulate the presence and activity of God as it relates to justice. In consideration of these obstacles, this article recommends the indiscriminate generosity of God for funding the imagination of the missional community for faithful innovation related to racial justice.

Keywords: Racial justice, Economy of God, Missional engagement, Luke 14, Practice of listening, Eucharist

Introduction

During the summer of 2022, I implemented a Doctor of Ministry research project at St Paul's Episcopal Church in Jackson, Michigan seeking to discern God's call of racial justice in our local community (Magnusson 2023).¹ Being a socially progressive congregation, I anticipated little resistance from members and, instead, a readiness for joining in God's work of justice in our local community. While few participants

1 I participated as an active layperson at St Paul's for seven years preceding the research project. The Institutional Review Board of Lipscomb University approved the project prior to its commencement. The rector of the church and all participants provided informed consent permitting the church to be named and forbidding all individual participants to be named or identified in the project.

opposed the central aim of the project, data reveals theological and missional challenges that inhibit the church from joining in God's mission of justice, namely participants viewing the church as the host of missional engagement, white privilege hindering the practice of listening, and the reluctance of members to articulate the presence and activity of God as it relates to justice. This article briefly summarizes three of the eight findings of the project and posits the economy of God as an appropriate theological framework for deepening missional engagement.

Context and Rationale for the Research Project

St Paul's is a predominantly white, affluent church located in a predominantly Black, low-income neighbourhood of downtown Jackson, MI. In recent decades, the denomination of the Episcopal Church has made intentional efforts to confess and repent of long-standing complicity in systemic racism (General Convention 1989: 329–30; Spellers 2021). Over the past several years, many members of St Paul's have learned from books and films about racial justice, and the topic has surfaced frequently in sermons, prayers, Bible studies and fellowship groups. Unlike some predominantly white churches in the US who deny the presence of ongoing systemic racism, St Paul's began the project with a degree of awareness and consensus related to the reality of racial injustice and the Episcopal Church's historical participation.

The project pursued the following research question: How might a congregation of the most historically powerful, prominent and affluent church in the US imagine its life in the Jackson community in light of Luke 14 and encounters with people who experience racial injustice (Spellers 2021: 53)? I was motivated by the disconnect between discernible congregational interest in supporting racial justice and our insufficient practice of it. The Black community of Jackson is not experiencing equitable and just conditions as the result of the church's proclaimed support of racial justice. I found Jemar Tisby's invitation appropriate for St Paul's at the time: "[Y]ou cannot read your way, listen your way, or watch your way into skillful advocacy. At some point you must act" (2019: 214).

I suspected that a contributing factor to our paralysis is that we conceive of racism primarily in terms of racial identity and often overlook the exploitative realities of racial capitalism, a distinction Jonathan Tran makes in *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*. To get at this, Tran believes that asking the questions "What does racism accomplish?" "Whom does it benefit?" and "How does it work?" can get us closer to the exploitative and commodifying roots of racial capitalism (2021: 294). As an affluent congregation, we appear to have more comfort in taking the "love our neighbours" or "welcome everyone" approach of antiracism, which falls more within the scope of Tran's identarianism, than we are willing to name our ongoing complicity in and benefit from racial capitalism. Tran's work pulls back the curtain on the power of mammon in our lives: "Those Americans worried that justice will take

away their advantages like nothing more than to talk about identity. They love diversity, inclusion, representation, multiculturalism, and the like because it leaves their stuff – what Jesus in Luke 12 called ‘barns and bigger barns’ – untouched” (2021: 295). Therefore, I wondered if our attachment to material comforts is an untapped area of the conversation and desired to invite us to confront the greed of our white privilege.

Method of Research

As a way of stimulating these discoveries, the project revolved around two practices of listening: Dwelling in the Word in Luke 14 for seven weeks interlaced with three occasions called Listening Opportunities as a way of attending to perspectives other than our own. I invited all members of the congregation to participate in both listening practices and complete surveys after each of the Listening Opportunities. Additionally, I selected seven participants to attend a minimum of four Dwelling in the Word practices and two Listening Opportunities.² At the end of the study, I divided the seven participants into two focus interview groups and asked the same set of questions to each group. In reflection on both practices of listening, I invited participants to share regarding their most dominant feelings, moments of surprise, experiences of discomfort and grief, awareness of God’s presence, reoccurring themes from Luke 14, learnings from the practice of listening, God’s calling related to racial justice, and lingering questions.

Dwelling in the Word is an extended communal practice of listening to God through both scripture and one another. The practice followed the same steps each week: listen to all or a portion of Luke 14 while noticing the word or phrase that catches one’s attention; practise a minute of silence, “find a reasonably friendly looking stranger and listen them into free speech” (Keifert 2006, 163); gather again in the large group to share what each person heard their partner say, communally observe the week’s themes, and conclude in gratitude for God’s Word and the Holy Spirit that continues to speak through both scripture and the community. I gathered data from the Dwelling practice by keeping field notes of the responses that participants made to the text. Additionally, I asked questions during the focus group interviews drawing out the participants’ reflections on the Dwelling practice.

On weeks one, three and five of the study, I invited all members of the church to participate in Listening Opportunities hosted by three local Black leaders referred to as Conversation Partners (CP) in the project. I selected the CPs because they are each professionally involved in the work of racial justice in Southeast Michigan

2 I originally invited eight members of the congregation, four women and four men of various ages, to be focus group participants. I selected participants based on their ability to attend the practices consistently and reliably during the summer timeframe of the study.

and already had a trusted relationship with the rector of the church. CP 1 consults with various groups seeking diversity, equity and inclusion as well as advocating for racial justice in the local education system. CP 2 was incarcerated in Michigan for several years and now works with a non-profit organization to create policy changes that yield more just and flourishing conditions for formerly incarcerated persons returning to society. CP 3 is ordained by the Episcopal Church and assists congregations in the work of racial healing in their local communities. I asked the CPs to share about local racial justice efforts and appropriate ways that a predominantly white church might participate. Each of the three CPs shared a blend of autobiographical experiences, information about systemic racism, and opportunities for the audience to engage in racial justice.

After the seven weeks, I performed inductive coding of the data gleaned from the three Listening Opportunity surveys, the two focus group interviews, and my field notes from both *Dwelling in the Word* and *Listening Opportunities*. I identified eight themes and will explore the implications below of three of the findings through the lens of the economy of God.³

The Economy of God

I suggest that the economy of God may serve as a theological foundation for missional engagement of racial justice. Jonathan Tran contrasts the political economy of racial capitalism with the “deep economy” of God by describing God’s created order as one of liberation and flourishing (2021: 21, 207). Alternatively, racial capitalism marches to the synchronous beat of scarcity and insatiable consumption while rejecting the fundamental notion that the world and everything in it has been created by and belongs to God (2021: 210). Tran offers hope that the pervasive forces of scarcity and exploitation are mutable, especially when communities seek to share with their neighbors in the economy of God.

Due to the prevalence of the prosperity gospel, it is essential to differentiate between prosperity and God’s abundant economy (Mumford, 2011: 222). The prosperity gospel turns on the claim that God grants economic wealth and physical health to the righteous and faithful. The prosperity pursued in this approach often pertains more to the interests of the individual or the church than to the wider community. Conversely, the abundance of the economy of God is not for self-gain or the aggrandizement of the church. Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff make this distinction by noting Israel’s experience in the wilderness, “The manna economy displays an

3 The eight themes that emerged from the data are explored at length in the author’s project thesis (Magnusson 2023).

abundance that does not serve the purpose of accumulation. It serves the purpose of nourishment for the day, of fulfilling the basic needs of the community" (2007: 99).

Eucharistically-informed Missional Imagination

St Paul's as Host

One missional and theological challenge that surfaced for joining in God's mission of justice is that some participants unwittingly made suggestions that arranged individuals and St Paul's as the hosts and saviours related to racial justice. In Dwelling, the group frequently interpreted Jesus' table instructions to the Pharisees to "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind," as a model for the church to invite our neighbours into worship. "So, who are [we] called to invite to our banquet?" asked an interviewee in reflection on the text. St Paul's was typically seen as the location where God's banquet occurs. Conversations often went down the path of asking how St Paul's can become more inviting to our Black neighbors and diverse: "I would like people of other races to feel they would be welcome to attend St Paul's and that they would be truly welcomed." These sentiments led to palpable anxiety and concerns such as how St Paul's could get Black people to attend and remain; whites and Blacks not being able to relate with one another; and changing worship styles - "Can Episcopalians still revere / embed English culture while appreciating / celebrating / welcoming other cultures? Must we CHANGE to do this?" (emphasis original). Members rarely considered that God's banquet can take place in other social locations and on terms other than our own.

I also identified the impulse for some participants to serve as white saviours. For example, after CP 2 shared about their experiences of incarceration and current efforts of changing legislation, a member approached them offering to speak to other groups alongside them, "It might be nice to have a white [person] by your side.... I'd like to be your [person]." While the member had the intention of helping the CP, they overlooked how the CP was sufficiently compelling on their own as they spoke before a predominantly white group.

Willie James Jennings explores how predominantly white churches like St Paul's have come to assume the role of host:

[T]he Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways of life had to adapt, become fluid, even morph into the colonial order of things, and such a situation drew Christianity and its theologians inside habits of mind and life that internalized and normalized that order of things.... Indeed, it is as though Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality. It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it

entered, and demanded native peoples to enter its cultural logics, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities. (2010: 8, emphasis added)

Despite God being the host in the narratives of scripture, the colonial theological imagination of Western Christianity continues to have an insidious grip on communities of faith, even those who have emerging awareness of systemic racism and white privilege.

Disconnect Between the Eucharist and Missional Engagement

In reviewing the data, I was surprised that the Eucharist, the pinnacle of Episcopal worship, did not give greater shape to members' understanding of God as the host. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are principal actors in the liturgy, communicating clearly that God is the host of the table (Episcopal Church 2007: 361–6). After receiving the bread and wine, the community affirms that this feast is gifted by God and sourced from the body of Christ himself: "you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of [Christ's] Body and Blood" (2007: 365). The weekly gathering at the table of the Lord reveals the underlying belief in the unceasing abundance of nourishment that God provides. No one would return to a table known to be empty. Furthermore, because God is the host of the table and extends welcome to all, St Paul's participates in God's welcome and inclusion by sharing the Eucharist with whomever comes forward to receive. While the church regularly engages this theologically rich sacrament, seldom do members explore together or reflect consciously on questions such as, "What understanding of the world is implicit in this practice? What vision of the kingdom is carried in this ritual?" (Smith 2009: 199). The Eucharist does not appear to inform public engagement and is an underutilized gift for shaping the church's imagination of the relationship between God, church, and world and its impact on racial justice.

God as Host

Scripture offers many narratives that locate God as the host at the margins, particularly through the numerous table scenes in Luke and Acts. In these volumes, Jesus and the Spirit disrupt ancient social conventions of the table and transform it into a place of boundary transgression, intimate communion and belonging. Jesus rearranges the table and establishes himself as the host while simultaneously being one who serves (Lk. 22.7–30). Specifically in the Dwelling passage of Luke 14 selected for the project, Jesus unseats the religiously, socially and economically powerful Pharisees from the host position and rearranges the table in alignment with the kingdom of God.

In the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14.15–24, the privileged invitees snub the master's invitation with absurd excuses. One by one, they each tell the master's

servant that they must attend to their possessions: a piece of land, five yoke of oxen and a new wife. The parable signals their preoccupation with possessions while also exposing the deeper truth of the Pharisees' preoccupation with themselves. The privileged invitees do not regard the master as honourable enough for their presence. In a culture of beneficence and reciprocal obligation, to associate with this master potentially brings shame upon the initial invitees, a risk they are unwilling to take (Green 1995: 112–21). Jesus demonstrates to the Pharisees that the Greco-Roman code of honour and shame has shaped how they perceive God and God's kingdom more than they realize.

Jesus presses on and dispels societal arrangements of patronage by establishing God as the indiscriminate host or "Supreme Benefactor" of the table (Green 1995: 116). The Pharisees, who are the original hosts in this narrative, suddenly discover they have been replaced by a host who has endless room for those who would be regarded as having no honour. Laurence Hull Stookey concludes of this passage, "The heavenly banquet hall is vast, and God desires urgently that it be filled, for our Maker has an expansive nature, and the sharing of good things is at the center of divine creative love" (1993: 136). God's way of beneficence creates an economy of shared abundance, which Jesus holds in clear contrast to Greco-Roman exploitative practices of patronage.

Eucharistically-informed Missional Imagination

Though the sacrament of the Eucharist has its elevated place in the weekly service, St Paul's imagination for joining in racial justice may be additionally formed by the economy of "God's life as a 'perpetual eucharist' for all of creation" (Milbank 1995: 152). God is ahead of and beyond the church, feeding and nourishing the world long before and after the church gets involved. I anticipate that we will begin to be attuned to God's abundance in our community as we learn to consistently show up as guests at God's table wherever it may be found and regularly consider questions such as, "How might God be hosting us in our encounters and through our neighbors?" and "What gifts are we receiving from our community for which we may give thanks?"

Receiving Through Listening White Privilege and Listening

Unsurprisingly, white privilege was detectable despite the education about racism that the members of St Paul's had previously engaged. The first CP stood before a predominantly white, affluent crowd concluding that, "If we get down to the real root of it, in my opinion, fear and greed are the real issue." When I heard the phrase "fear and greed" I anticipated comments or pushback in the surveys. Surprisingly, out of

16 surveys for CP 1, only three mentioned the phrase and only one of seven interviewees briefly mentioned it.

Instead, there was a higher prevalence of two things. Participants freely offered opinions on the demeanour and effectiveness of the CPs. It is noteworthy that some of these comments were shared in response to the invitation for personal reflection: "As a way of describing your experience while listening, please share one to three words or brief phrases that express *your* most dominant feeling(s) or reaction(s)" (emphasis not on survey). Instead of participants sharing about themselves, they reversed the attention of the question and critiqued the presenters. Some said CP 1 was "confrontational", "extreme" and "antagonistic". Others viewed CP 1 more favorably by expressing they were "helpful", "engaging", "inspiring" and "courageous". Comments about CP 2 were less polarized and assessed the presenter as "effective", "persuasive" and "mesmerizing", and "had us eating out of the palm of [their] hand". Participants described CP 3 as "uplifting and encouraging" and "having very deep roots in God's presence, like an ancient tree". While it could be argued that these words and phrases reflect dominant personal reactions of the participants, it seems significant how often responses were an assessment of the CP more than a self-reflection of the participants' feelings.

Second, rather than focusing on the substance of the presentations of the CPs, there was a higher prevalence of comments about minor things than anticipated. When I asked about a surprise during the Listening Opportunities, some noted specific details of the personal lives of the CPs, such as their hobbies or the number of children they have. While personal anecdotes gave the audience a fuller and more autobiographical picture, I wondered why those were the chosen moments of surprise for participants. By focusing on the trivial, the white listeners might have been demonstrating that we have enough societal power to deflect difficult truths and be selective about our engagement.

Not only did the participants reveal white privilege, but I also discovered it in myself. When the first Conversation Partner declared that "fear and greed" are the root issue of racism, they quickly moved to a different segment of their presentation without expounding upon those words. This could have been a rhetorical strategy, some understandable nerves that overcame them, or something I cannot imagine from my limited perspective. Whatever the CP's rationale, I felt uneasy. It was not, however, because I disagreed with them. I designed the project with the undergirding belief that greed has something to do with racism. My challenge was CP 1's *method of delivery*. An interview participant shared my reaction: "It wasn't that you didn't agree with what CP 1 was saying. It was the way [they] said it. It was a matter of delivery. [They were] adversarial."

For days, I found myself vacillating between two thoughts. In the practices of teaching and preaching, I believe it is wise to invite others to walk alongside me to

grapple with a difficult truth. I desire to avoid provoking hearers from shutting down too early and wondered if the CP spoke too confrontationally. I sincerely wanted CP 1's words to be heard and was concerned that attendees would not have ears to hear because of the delivery. However, as I mentally gave CP 1 well-intended suggestions, I realized how white privilege and fragility were shaping my assessment and notions of effective rhetorical strategies. A person of privilege has the leisure to slowly and gently invite listeners alongside them. A person who experiences ongoing oppression needs immediate justice and should not be expected to remain quiet or peaceable. Further, I was allowing the predominantly white audience to determine the "wisest" course for racial dialogue. I was mentally tone-policing CP 1 and hoping for them to conform their delivery in such a way that white people could hear it. I had performance standards shaped by white privilege and fragility and was unsettled when CP 1 did not fit that mould. While there is value in knowing one's audience and speaking in a way that can be heard, this experience reveals that a predominantly white, upper-class audience would be wise to attend to the dialogical problems our privilege creates.

Signalling Mastery

Perhaps one could say that the questions on a survey immediately following a speaker solicit evaluative responses. In our consumer-oriented society, people are frequently asked to rate their customer service representative or answer presidential approval polls. Due to this kind of cultural conditioning, participants possibly assumed that the survey questions were of that nature. I wonder, however, if the trend of a white, upper-class group immediately evaluating the demeanour and effectiveness of the Black presenters is more than customer service and more than a deflection tactic. This phenomenon might signal what Willie James Jennings calls "the performance of the self-sufficient white man" (2020) and Miranda Fricker's "testimonial injustice" (2007: 9–29). Jennings describes how the colonial legacy of Western education has distorted our imaginations in such a way that we are enthralled by the performance of possession, control and mastery (2020: 6–7). We have learned to love a specific kind of intellectual form of whiteness and measure all performances in relation to it (2020: 29). A highly educated group that has been historically shaped by the performance of white, male priests seems to freely evaluate everyone by these standards. Fricker uses different terms to explore the listening dynamics between two groups of people. She describes how speakers of colour experience "testimonial injustice" because white hearers' hearing is shaped by implicit biases and scepticism of non-white cognition (2007: 2–3, 5–6). The white hearers' ingrained habit of "judgment of credibility" supersedes the testimony of the speaker and blocks the flow of new learning (2007: 3). This dynamic increases what she calls "hermeneutical marginalization", where some social groups are unable to contribute to the pool of shared

social meanings (2007: 152–61). While it is impossible to know the extent to which the participants' judgment of credibility was at work, it is valuable to reflect upon these possible explanations for the evaluation of the CPs.

God's Economy of Encounter

In a "zero-sum" constructed world, white privilege maintains the myth that there is not enough space for multiple voices and perspectives to be shared, so the assertion of one voice means the negation of another voice (McGhee 2021: xix). The habits of criticizing, correcting and directing – Andrew T. Draper calls this "exercising the ethnographic gaze" — help white listeners to maintain control of the assets of the conversation, even if the thoughts go unspoken (2018: 204).

An additional barrier for interracial conversations and encounters is that white, upper-class people tend to view white people as having and deserving all the goods and racialized others as having all the needs, which is ironic on the heels of contending that white people demonstrate a scarcity mindset! With seemingly endless access to education, employment and resources, white listeners have difficulty recognizing the deficiencies and needs of the white community and the abundant gifts existent in other racialized groups. Complicating matters is the misconception that goods consumed with financial capital are more valuable than gifts that cannot be purchased. This perceived imbalance of surplus and needs between racialized groups predisposes white listeners to have an unreceptive posture.

In God's economy, however, the gifts of God are always at hand. Encounters with the other are occasions for God's abundance, not scarcity. Though we believe that God's Spirit is poured out upon *all* flesh, we struggle to embody the truth of this statement (Mather 2018: 14). Asset-Based Community Development expert Michael Mather insists that many of God's gifts go unnoticed because we are asking the wrong questions and looking for the wrong answers (2018: 17). Rather than focusing on needs, he suggests that communities learn to ask things such as "Who are the healers, teachers and artists around here, and how may we invest in them so that their gifts may flourish?" (2018: 33). Additionally, Andrew T. Draper suggests that white Christians "practice hearing and speaking the glory of God in unfamiliar cadences" (2018: 203). Whatever and however a person communicates their experience may be received as a gift. Draper wonders, "What if we as White people saw correction and anger as gifts given to us by people of Color, gifts that signal a desire to relate in a healthier manner?" (2018: 184). These gifts reveal passion and engagement, not apathy and resignation. As the members of St Paul's practise receiving what is unfamiliar or what might be perceived as undesirable, I anticipate we will discover the abundance of God's gifts for the work of racial justice.

Speaking of the Living God

Where is God?

For several years preceding the project, St Paul's utilized the phrase "Celebrating Christ's Presence in a Changing World" as a way of communicating to our neighbours what St Paul's believes about Christ, the church and the world. Given the ubiquity of the phrase, I was surprised to discover that several participants were hesitant to name the presence of God during the project. As I was processing the Listening Opportunity surveys, I noticed that the question that was most frequently left blank was the question that asked, "If you were aware of God's presence today, write 1-2 sentences to describe what you noticed." Out of 44 responses, this question was left unanswered 16 times, far more than other questions. Possibly due to the overwhelming nature of systemic racism, one response said, "If anything, it feels like He's decidedly absent."

Hesitant Speech

There are several reasons why participants were less likely to name the presence of God in these instances. One is that Christianity in the West has largely kept God out of public matters, especially when it comes to social justice (Dupont 2013). God is experienced in the worship setting, and possibly during private devotions, but not often in other arenas of our lives. This has largely been shaped by the Western theological and ecclesial imagination that locates God in the church and positions the church over and against the world. When Christianity has been brought into public matters, it has often been for the sake of further subjugation of already marginalized groups, such as efforts of some conservative Christians to limit the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. This kind of public engagement has not fostered a sense of God's presence and has typically done the opposite.

One interviewee named the troublesome history of Christians using the Bible to condone slavery, which causes this participant to feel some hesitancy around involving the Bible in discussions on racial justice. It seems less complicated to avoid God in the discussion and advocate for racial justice on humanitarian terms. This participant expressed that they want to avoid evangelicalism, and I suspect that their avoidance is shared among much of the congregation. In my observation, Episcopalians often try to distinguish themselves from American evangelicals. In the effort to keep from misrepresenting God's presence, we find greater comfort in avoiding speaking about the activity of God altogether.

Additionally, Charles Taylor has identified that we find ourselves in an age of disenchantment and secularism where the assumption and belief that God is present and acting in miraculous ways has faded (2007). This posture has become so prevalent that many progressive Christians rarely attribute anything to the presence and activity of God. If something miraculous occurs, it is more often deemed as a

flake rather than the work of God. In *Dwelling*, for example, the comments largely exhibited an intellectual criticism and curiosity about Luke 14 and less often considered how the Spirit might be calling us to respond.

Healing is Possible

Inherent in the claim of the economy of God is a living and active God. The Spirit of God, the giver of life, is the source of the ever-flowing stream of justice and righteousness (Amos 5.24). When Christian communities seek to participate in God's work of justice, we confess that God is interested and involved in creating more just conditions for all of humanity and creation. It is not purely up to human efforts to address systemic racism. In mysterious ways, God brings unexpected harvest (1 Cor. 3.5–9). It is easy for the daunting work of racial justice and the seemingly endless bad news of police brutality, unjust incarceration, housing discrimination, underfunded schools and banned literature to cloud our vision. Further complicating efforts of justice is our own attachment to white privilege. The project demonstrates that St Paul's could benefit from attending to the ongoing work of God in the world, thereby increasing trust that God can bring liberation and justice.

The *Dwelling* text for the project offers good news in this regard. Luke 14 opens with a healing that appears to be disconnected from the table instructions that follow. One Sabbath day, Jesus is eating in the home of a leader of the Pharisees when a man with dropsy – excessive water retention – suddenly appears before him (Hartstock 2013: 342). Jesus heals him, and it seems as though the purpose of the healing story is to expose the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees' Sabbath customs. However, Chad Hartstock demonstrates that dropsy was a prevalent metaphor in the ancient Greco-Roman world for greed, such as Diogenes referring to money-lovers as "dropsies" (2013: 349). Hartstock insists that Luke employs dropsy as an accusation of the insatiable greed of the Pharisees (2013: 353).⁴ Luke's audience would have readily made the connection. Those with never-ending desires for wealth and power are akin to those who suffer from dropsy and in need of a miraculous healing they cannot generate themselves. While Jesus elevates mercy, healing, and liberation for those who have been marginalized, he also offers healing for those attached to privilege. In this simultaneous healing, Jesus offers a new vision of human flourishing for all.

4 Several instances in Luke highlight the theme of the greed of the Pharisees: 11.39; 12.15, 18, 45; 16.1–14, 19–31. Contrast with Zacchaeus' generosity in 19.1–10.

Taking a Risk on the Living God

At St Paul's, there are not many spaces where members speak of God's involvement in our lives other than the bold claims about the activity of God in the liturgy. I have heard a few people timidly share accounts of God's stunning work in their lives while being quick to offer a caveat, "Now, some of you might not believe this, but ..." In large part, members take a curious and intellectual approach to the Bible. On the one hand, unbridled engagement with the text is a gift. Many of the questions and comments at St Paul's would never be spoken in a conservative Christian setting. On the other hand, intellectual inquiries and bold critiques of scripture appear to hinder the community from hearing the calling of the Spirit. As an effort to separate ourselves from that which might be regarded as undiscerning theological speech of conservative evangelicals, the St Paul's community has swung in the opposite direction of struggling to identify the presence and activity of God. Therefore, I see an opportunity for St Paul's to grow in our belief in the living God and risk articulating what God appears to be up to in our community (Hagley 2019: 124–6). As we make it a regular habit to share how we sense and believe God is present in our daily lives, we might realize that God can heal us from our attachments to privilege more than we imagined.

Contrary to what is often assumed in Christian spaces, humans move from experience to theology rather than from theology to experience (Love 2023: 132–3). Mark Love discusses the theological significance of the practice of reflection in the life of the congregation: "We seldom draw people into meaningful reflection on their experiences. Because we do not think of experience as a source for theology, we do not ask our members to consider how their experiences are related to what God is doing in the world" (2023: 133). Today, within any church context, there are endless daily experiences people may bring forward for theological consideration. As St. Paul's struggles to articulate the presence of God outside of worship, the regular practice of communal storytelling might be one avenue for surfacing the activity of God. Practising theological reflection together as a community brings in necessary other perspectives and guards against the formation of self-serving theological conclusions. Additionally, for those who are uncomfortable with making theological claims, we hold space for future corrections by using words of possibility, "God *might* be present or leading in this way..." Risking theological speech trusts that the economy of God is generous with grace and mercy when we get it wrong.

In bringing attention to the power of God for justice, in no way do I desire to promote a pollyannaish approach to racism. Injustice is alive and well in the US, and it is beyond time for white Christians to participate more radically in racial justice. In this endeavour, we discover that hope and celebration are bundled up with discouragement and lament. I am heartened by Ruth A. Meyers' eschatological frame for this tension: "Our thanksgiving does not deny the suffering and struggles of the

world, but rather locates them in the larger horizon of the arc of salvation history” (2014: 168).

Conclusion

When I began my research project at St Paul’s, I hoped it would yield clear and immediate paths for the church’s participation in racial justice in the city of Jackson. Instead, I discovered some deeply rooted theological challenges that inhibit our participation in the mission of God, specifically viewing ourselves as the host, white privilege hindering receptivity in the practice of listening, and hesitancy in naming the liberating activity of God. In this article, I have identified that these inclinations are each reflective of racial capitalism’s economy of scarcity and considered how locating ourselves within the indiscriminate generosity of God’s economy could reshape our engagement in matters of justice.

Regarding the first identified challenge of participants inadvertently viewing the church as the host, I suggest that the liturgy of the Eucharist contains great potential for reorienting churches around God as the host. In this, churches may discover the abundance of God that is available beyond the walls of the building and around the tables of our neighbours. The second challenge reveals how white privilege continues to exert itself in progressive spaces, skewing perceptions of the gifts of God that are available in all people. By cultivating the practice of hospitable receptivity, churches may discover the abundance of God in the neighbourhood that is available for justice. Finally, the research reveals that a church’s reluctance to identify and articulate the activity of God potentially weakens the church’s partnership with the living God in the work of racial justice. Through the practice of risking theological speech in storytelling, churches may become more attuned to the power and presence of God in the social fabric of our communities and experience the necessary empowerment for justice. While socially progressive churches might be eager to take swift actions of justice, the work appears to be hindered without missional and theological impulses flowing from the generous and indiscriminate economy of God.

About the Author

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ARTICLE

A Missional Church Strategy in an Era of Humanlike Chatbots

David Hirome

Abstract

The recent prominence of advanced chatbots that greatly mimic human intelligence and conversation appears to have set a new stage in the rapidly developing field of Artificial Intelligence. Chatbots such as ChatGPT and Bard have risen to global popularity among internet users who interface with the chatbots in a nearly humanlike manner through a question-and-answer format. But such great technological developments also give rise to questions regarding theology and spirituality. Thus, this paper asks: what does it mean to be human in an increasingly AI-driven world? How can Christian communities around the globe respond to the ongoing developments in the field of AI? Based on missional anthropology, this paper argues for an understanding of humans as embodied agents of God as central in a missional strategy to respond to the proliferation of advanced AI chatbots today.

Keywords: Chatbots, Artificial intelligence, Human intelligence, Christian communities, Missional anthropology, Embodied agents

Introduction

We are now living in an era where a Christian can simply swipe their smartphone and instantly get curated responses to difficult spiritual questions, interpretations of the Bible, personalized prayers and written sermons, all with a human touch. This is the power of Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT), a recent advance in Artificial Intelligence that continues to excite and engage internet users across the world since its launch in November 2022.

Despite its recent appearance on the technological scene, ChatGPT has already made significant inroads among Christians in Southeast Asia. This has been more pronounced in South Korea, a global technological powerhouse. ChatGPT-powered startups have penetrated the South Korean Christian landscape at an astonishing

pace (Ko 2023). One of these startups is called Meadow and it can write wonderful sermons for pastors. The other is named Biblely and it can have the Bible read to you in your pastor's voice or even in your parent's voice. Such technological developments raise pertinent areas of theological and missiological reflection for the Church today.

Background

ChatGPT exemplifies the ongoing progress in artificial intelligence (AI) that is revolutionizing human-machine communication online. However, it's important to note that chatbots like ChatGPT rely on distinct artificial intelligence technologies, highlighting the need to view AI as a diverse rather than uniform technological system (Coghill 2023: 605).

AI chatbots are designed to simulate human conversation and respond to user queries in real time. Originally emerging as tools for customer support and online assistance, these AI-driven conversational agents have evolved to encompass a wide range of applications, from virtual assistants in mobile devices to integrated communication platforms on websites and social media (Følstad and Skjuve 2019).

AI chatbots continue to impact human communication by altering traditional modes of interaction and reshaping the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. For instance, unlike conventional communication channels, chatbots operate 24/7, providing instantaneous responses and information retrieval. This accessibility has transformed the way individuals seek and receive information, fostering a culture of immediate gratification and expectation in communication.

The proliferation of AI chatbots is part of a broader trend in the increasing integration of technology into virtually every facet of contemporary life. From healthcare and education to business and entertainment, AI technology has become an omnipresent force, reshaping the way individuals interact with their environments and with each other. Chatbots are categoric technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and particularly artificial intelligence. The technology of AI has been considered key for 4IR and thus needful of "serious scrutiny as it will influence humanity and the world" (Mdingi, 2020: 2). Advances in AI present challenges to the biblical view of humanity and that of the world, a locus of God's mission. Thus, the relationship between advanced technologies such as AI chatbots, and the Church's mission, is an area that requires sustained scrutiny (McAlpine, 2011: 144).

It is against this background that this article asks: what does it mean to be human in an increasingly AI driven world? How can Christian communities around the globe respond to the ongoing developments in the field of AI? From a perspective of missional anthropology, this article argues for an understanding of humans as embodied agents of God as a central tenet in a missional strategy to respond to the proliferation of advanced AI chatbots today. In talking about a missional church

strategy, the aim is not to propose a model or structure but rather spur local Christian communities to “engage their context, learn to listen and see where God is at work in the midst of all the confusion, anxiety, pluralism, and technological transformation” (Roxburgh and Boren 2009: 86).

Purpose of the Article

The primary objective of this article is to propose steps towards a missional church strategy in light of the proliferation of humanlike chatbots. This entails an exploration of how the Church, in the face of advancing AI technology, can adapt and leverage humanlike chatbots in a manner that enhances its mission. In doing so, this article examines the intersection of humanlike chatbot technology and missional anthropology with particular emphasis on the *Imago Dei*.

Importance of the Topic

Humanlike chatbots (HLCs) present significant challenges and opportunities in the context of the Church’s missional engagement in the world. The technology of HLCs continues to evolve with a goal of producing chatbots whose performance appears to erase the distinction between machines and humans. It is thus significant to ensure that such technological advancements align with the core values and identity of the Church. By proactively engaging with these considerations, the Church is better placed to harness the positive use of AI while mitigating potential pitfalls in its missional engagement in the world. In this way, the people of God are formed for mission-shaped lives in an era of humanlike chatbots.

Literature Review

Overview of Humanlike Chatbot Technology

It is evident that theological research today strives to keep up with the rapid advances in artificial intelligence as new prototypes of chatbots evolve on a regular basis. What is certain is that AI chatbots have emerged as sophisticated tools in the realm of digital communication, exhibiting remarkable capabilities in understanding and responding to user queries. A chatbot is an AI system “which responds like an intelligent entity when conversed with” (Khanna et al. 2015: 277). Chatbots are diverse and oftentimes different AI systems may be identified as chatbots. Thus, a chatbot is often synonymous with “the terms ‘conversational agents’ and ‘dialogue systems’ and may refer to task-oriented as well as non-task-oriented solutions” (Skjuve et al. 2021). The history of chatbots stretches way back to 1966 with the earliest example of ELIZA (Weizenbaum 1966). More recent examples from the last decade include virtual assistance systems such as Google Assistant and Siri. ChatGPT illustrates the capability that chatbots have gained today.

The current state of AI chatbot technology reflects advances in the areas of natural language processing (NLP) and deep learning (DL) contributing to their widespread adoption across various industries. NLP is a key chatbot technology that enables algorithms to build and represent human languages (Singh and Mahmood 2021). Conversely, DL technology mimics the human brain function to “decode patterns from the training data and uses the same patterns to process new information” (Maher, Kayte and Nimbhore 2020: 507). Together, NLP and DL enable chatbots to interact with users in a nearly humanlike manner. OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, have leveraged NLP and DL in a framework known as Generative Pre-training Transformer or GPT (Radford et al. 2018). This has enabled ChatGPT to implement “unsupervised pre-training and supervised fine-tuning to generate human-like responses to queries and provide responses to topics that resemble that of a human expert” (Dwivedi et al. 2023: 3).

Furthermore, the advances in HML chatbots extend beyond text-based interactions to include multimodal capabilities. Some chatbots can now interpret and generate responses based on images, videos and audio inputs, providing a richer and more interactive user experience (Lin et al. 2023). For instance, ChatGPT4, an advanced version of OpenAI’s chatbots, can output text in response to a users’ input of an image (OpenAI 2023). The incorporation of such multimodal capabilities in HLCs further serves to anthropomorphize these machines. This prompts a review of the societal impact of these HLCs.

Societal Impact of Humanlike Chatbots

HLCs are becoming influential actors in shaping societal interactions, transforming communication patterns, and redefining community dynamics. This means humanlike chatbots pose a significant impact on individuals and communities. Some of the ways in which this impact unfolds include: enhanced accessibility, shift in communication channels, personalised experiences, and human relationships. Ethical issues related to chatbot use in society also raise concern.

First, HLCs contribute to enhanced accessibility, providing users with immediate and convenient access to information and services. This is particularly evident in sectors like customer service, where chatbots offer instant support, reducing response times and increasing overall convenience (Xu et al. 2017). The increased access and convenience afforded by HML chatbots points to a possible wider deployment of these chatbots in virtually all sectors of society.

Second, the increased integration of HLCs has led to a notable shift in communication channels. Users increasingly engage with organizations and services through chat-based interfaces, influencing expectations for real-time and asynchronous communication (Li et al. 2021). This shift has implications for traditional forms of

communication as an increasing number of users interact with HLCs perceiving them as similar to humans.

Third, HLCs leverage data analytics and machine learning to personalize user experiences. By analysing user preferences and behaviour, chatbots can tailor responses and recommendations, fostering a sense of individualized interaction. This personalization can enhance user satisfaction and engagement (Tamara, Tumbuan and Gunawan 2023: 168).

Fourth, the prevalence of HLCs raises questions about the impact on human-to-human social interactions. Some studies suggest that an over-reliance on digital communication, facilitated by chatbots, may lead to a decrease in face-to-face interactions, potentially affecting the quality of human-to-human relationships as users find it more comfortable to self-disclose to a chatbot than a human (Lee et al. 2020). Such developments imply that users may soon perceive HLCs to be real humans. But this would also imply an erasure of the distinction between a human and chatbot with repercussions for Christian theology and its teaching on the uniqueness of humans. Hence the need for sustained missional and theological responses to the evolving chatbot technology in the world today.

Finally, the societal challenges with HLCs relate to issues of trust and ethical concerns regarding the interaction between humans and chatbots. For instance, there is a direct relationship between the degree of trust that users confer upon chatbots and the level of human likeness in the chatbot (Go and Sundar 2019). This means the more HLCs are designed to mimic human language and behaviour, the more confidence humans will put in these chatbots. Ethical issues have also been raised regarding the unidirectional emotional bond that users form with their HLC (Scheutz 2011). This suggests that the chatbot manufacturers prioritize a user dependence on these machines. With all this integration of AI technology in society, Christian communities have moved to harness AI for missional purposes.

Missional Approaches amid AI Technological Advancements

The integration of the technologies of 4IR in society has prompted churches to incorporate these innovations into their missional approaches. The uptake of technology by the Church stretches from the first century, and the manner in which technological shifts have aided Christian mission throughout history is variously documented. From the technology of writing to the global reach of electronic and digital media, mission has always been on a par with the technological innovations of the time. But as Hollinghurst notes, digital technology presents “probably the most important development facing Christian mission” (Hollinghurst 2020: 75). The evolving digital technologies, such as social media, streaming services and mobile apps, provide churches with unprecedented opportunities to share their message, connect with a global audience, and engage in online evangelism at a scale not equalled in mission

history. Accompanied to this is the rise of virtual communities facilitated by online platforms. This has led to discussions about how these spaces can foster discipleship. Several studies have examined how churches can leverage technology to create virtual small groups, Bible studies and discipleship programmes, allowing for meaningful connections and spiritual growth beyond physical church spaces. Yet the incorporation of AI technology and particularly chatbots by Christian communities for missional purposes is not yet widespread. Instances of missional use of AI technologies have been identified in the fields of community engagement and pastoral care. The Church of England was one of the early adopters of chatbots for missional purposes with the use of Amazon's virtual assistant Alexa to offer prayers and answer theological queries for people (Church of England 2018). Following the 2022 advent of ChatGPT, several Christian innovators created chatbots to reach an even more diverse group of people. Chatbots on sites such as Biblemate.io can now answer difficult theological questions while biblemate.org provides options for Bible study and counselling. Pastors.ai allows churches to customize chatbots using digital resources of their local church. These innovations open up the space for a sustained missional use of chatbots in the digital space.

But at the sametime, theological frameworks should inform how Christian communities ought to respond to AI technology. To illustrate, a vast difference exists in the fundamental nature of humans and products of AI. Individuality as espoused in AI "starts from a substance into personal and, finally, interpersonal. However, humanity as a created being is interpersonal from the beginning, both in essence and existence" (Saragih 2023: 242). Thus the question of human identity is linked with relationality and forms a point of departure to examine theological perspectives in the context of HLCs and missional approaches of Christian communities.

Understanding the Intersection: HLCs and Theology

Theological Perspectives on Humanlike Chatbots

In navigating the intersection of HLCs and missional church, it is crucial to consider theological perspectives that shape how technology is understood within the context of human interaction. Theological frameworks provide a lens through which the church interprets and responds to the advancements of technology. The two main questions that arise at the intersection of AI technologies and theology deal with issues of ethics and anthropology (Puzio 2023: 35).

Ethical dimensions of human enhancement through AI technology centre on whether certain technological advancements such as chatbots align with the theological understanding of human nature and the moral responsibilities of humanity. HLCs may appear morally superior to humans. As part of the latest in the developments in AI, an HLC such as ChatGPT, can be "seen in a form that is purer and less affected

by defilements than human beings, meaning it is technically in a better position to preach, practice, or even reach the final goal of Enlightenment” (Travagnin 2023: 41). Arguing from the reformed theology of archetype-ectype distinction as regards moral agency, Xu notes that artificial moral agents, such as HLCs, are imitations of human moral agency (Xu 2023: 644). He considers human moral agency as archetype while HLCs are ectype and thus imitate human moral agency. Such imitation means that AI moral agency can be described in at least two ways: as an extension of human morality but also as limited. The extension of human moral agency through AI artefacts means that “humans mediate their moral values into these artefacts while creating them” (Xu 2023: 644). But this extended human moral agency is limited since it is “only related to particular moral issues” (Xu 2023: 644). This demonstrates that HLCs have no moral agency of their own and instead display extended but limited human morality. It is thus suggestive that in spheres that require moral agency, HLCs should be approached as replicas rather than replacements for humans. For instance, HLCs can be deployed in pastoral care to extend the human agency. However, attending to the unique moral matters of those receiving pastoral care is presently beyond scope for HLCs and can only be addressed by humans. Another way in which AI imitates humans is illustrated by the inherent bias that surrounds AI systems. Developers of AI often model these systems after themselves (Foerst 2005: 67). The result is that the bias in human society is carried on in these systems especially in the areas of “race, class, gender and territory” (Coleman 2023: 350). For instance, Chat GPT-2 was known to produce “racist output even when conditioned on non-racial contexts” (Wallace et al. 2021). It is evident that HLCs like ChatGPT are trained on millions of internet pages and thus imitate the human culture contained in those pages.

The same is reflected in the religious sphere as HLCs often project the bias inherent in the data they are trained upon. It was revealed that “there was clearly a sharp and distinguishable strain of Evangelical theology in GPT-2” (Reed 2021: 8). This calls for attention to the inherent bias in Bible based HLCs such as those running on ChatGPT. It is also worth recognizing that this bias is not purely down to data upon which the HLCs are trained but to what occurs at “every level of the construction of A.I.” (Reed 2021: 6). Bias permeates the whole culture that produces the AI. It is in the people, data, algorithms and processes.

As regards anthropology, an understanding of how the concept of humanity is expressed in technology provides a base “for a theological engagement with AI and technology” (Puzio 2023: 35). Theologians have long affirmed the uniqueness of humans based on human beings’ creation in the image of God. A theological approach to the anthropological debate on the technologies of 4IR has been marked by an “interest in what it means to be made in the image of God in an age of robots and AI” (Green 2018: 237–8). However, an appeal to the concept of the image of God appears

to have waned in modern theology. The image of God as understood through power of intellect, reason and rationality is no longer unique to human beings but has also been interpreted to apply to AI agents. This leaves the relational and functional views of *imago Dei* as the only available points to contrast humans and AI agents (Fourie 2020: 25–6).

The relational view of *imago Dei* is particularly relevant since it necessitates embodiment. The relationality of humans, such as argued by Karl Barth, is an expression of the *imago Dei* and is displayed in embodied human to human encounters (Barth 1960: 225–6). But efforts are underway to enhance human to machine encounters through embodiment of HLCs, like suggested by OpenAI (Degeurin 2024). Thus, a consideration of HLCs and embodied intelligence is vital as churches strategize missions in a rapidly evolving AI environment.

Embodied Intelligence

The combined technologies of robotics and AI are geared towards creating machines which possess humanlike intelligence in the physical world. This technology is known as embodied intelligence. Cangelosi et al. (2015) note that embodied intelligence is a foundational term in computer intelligence which refers to:

The computational approach to the design and understanding of intelligent behavior in embodied and situated agents through the consideration of the strict coupling between the agent and its environment (situatedness), mediated by the constraints of the agent's own body, perceptual and motor system, and brain (embodiment).

The new frontier in embodied intelligence aims to enable HLCs like ChatGPT to ground their language into concepts of the physical world. ChatGPT, like other Large Language Models (LLMs), possesses vast knowledge of the physical world but lacks an experience of the same world (Biggie et al. 2023: 2). Thus, for ChatGPT to ground its language implies “associating words with sights, sounds, and actions, in order to anchor their meanings in day-to-day life and in communicable expressions” (Oregon State University College of Engineering 2024). A typical case is an experiment based on the human brain-body system that integrated a robotic arm and three LLMs including PaLM 2, GPT-3.5 and GPT-4, to successfully perform a task in the real world (Bhat et al. 2024). This creates a key avenue for theological reflection.

Embodied intelligence is an important point for a theological critic as regards AI and robotics because AI agents are designed to mimic the nature of a human being in the physical world. Some theologians have thought positively of embodied intelligence. For example, Hazel notes that “embodied intelligence is a point of contact in the dialogue between AI and Christian theology, which affirms the psychosomatic

unity of the human person” (Heltzel 1998: 22). To Hazel, an AI agent that is designed to perform tasks with intellect is a bridge to a human.

But other theologians stress that the issue of embodied intelligence is key in delineating the difference between humans and AI agents, and this is more relevant as LLMs are integrated with robotics. Humans are intellectual embodied beings who are dissimilar to embodied AI agents. Herzfeld has this in view when she asks, “Does a human-like intelligence require a human-like body?” (Herzfeld 2010: 119). She adds that the human experience of the world is unique from other creatures such as dogs. This implies that “a different body would mean we would experience a different world” (Herzfeld 2010: 120). Thus the experience of embodied AI agents as they accomplish human tasks in the real world would differ significantly from the human experience. For Haugeland, intelligence in humans is not simply a mental occurrence, “it’s in their bodies and, even more, out there in the world” (Haugeland 1997: 26). In this way, human intelligence takes on a holistic dimension.

Humans are also conceived to dwell holistically with the environment and the overall ecosystem. This view is promoted by ecotheologians who “argue for a worldview grounded in cosmogenesis – the whole universe story – which decentralizes the human as individual and promotes holistic thinking about both the human and its broader context in creation” (Green 2018: 29). The holistic view of humans looks beyond the “traits associated with the human mind and individual human bodies” (Green 2018: 29). A human being is thus understood in consideration to both his immediate and distant surroundings. These surroundings include all aspects of creation whether natural or artificial.

The holistic view confronts “the focus on individuals as the locus of wisdom and relationality and expand theological imagination to include all webs of relationship, including societies and ecosystems” (Green 2018: 29). On the other hand, AI agents are often one-dimensional in their replication of humans. The holistic understanding of humans also challenges the focus on individual wisdom that is prevalent in AI agents. Thus, humans are able to intelligently function in harmony with others in the society and environment. An appreciation of the holistic and relational qualities of humans is thus essential in understanding the difference between humans and AI agents.

Towards a missional church strategy

Christian Communities as Embodied Agents of God in Humanlike Chatbot World

The technologies of AI as shown above particularly in the combined fields of robotics and HLCs call for relevant responses from the church. Christian communities need theological exposure to the functioning of the technologies of AI chatbots. Fourie

points to the fact that “the lack of literacy is one of the contributing factors why efforts to address the significance and impact in theological terms have been somewhat scattered and disorganised” (Fourie 2020: 13). Intentional effort to acquire a knowledge of robotics and LLMs is vital if Christians are to learn how to live as embodied agents of God in a world of advancing HLCs.

Stephanus Joubert notes that “believers must be present in this never-ending drama of technological change, culture and human experience without losing their identity” (Joubert 2020: 8). The aspect of embodiment is thus an essential guide for Christians in the world of HLCs. As shown in the preceding section, the concept of embodied intelligence is evolving as LLMs are combined with robots to function in a more humanlike manner in the real world. Joubert notes that “the church must facilitate immersive, yet provocative performances of the Gospels while simultaneously embodying and empowering others with wisdom to traverse this uncharted terrain of technological innovation with insight and discernment” (Joubert 2020: 1). Christians are therefore better placed to respond to these technologies by emphasizing the relational and holistic qualities that define each member in their communities as an embodied intelligent being who differs from a combination of LLMs and robots. Green’s (2018: 109) reminder is also important for Christian communities, “honouring the relational quality of the human also helps underscore differences between us and robots. As it stands now, robots and AI are at best superficially relational, and function independent of social and ecological contexts.”

The above note is important in guiding Christians as embodied agents of God in a world of advancing HLCs. An intentional effort at stressing the relational qualities of humanity as Christians in a context of embodied HLCs will not only differentiate humans from these advanced chatbots. More importantly, it will enable a Christian to act as an embodied agent of God and bring an authentic human presence to others. A Christian’s bodily presence that engages in activities or movements such as sports, dance, and work, in person and with others, will emphasise the relational and holistic qualities of humanity. This human bodily engagement will, at same time, set a clear boundary with HLCs, and ultimately with advancing technologies of LLMs and robotics.

Missiological Implications in a World of Humanlike Chatbots

The Great Commission as spelt out in Matthew 28.16–20 demands “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” This phrase has also been interpreted in missiological circles to include the domain of the cyber world. Christian mission is called to “enter into the domains of the cyberspace in order to deliver the minds and souls – essentially, the consciousness – of the present generation who are either alienated or captured in the cyberspace” (Kim 2019: 64). An undertaking of this nature requires

several considerations, one of which includes “embracing the essence of the incarnational model and practicing embodiment principles of integrating mind, body and action in all aspects of life, ministry, and mission” (Kim 2019: 64).

A pattern of embodiment of the whole person in the whole Christian life also relates to the concepts of “relational and holistic anthropology” (Green 2018: 263). These concepts also relate to the contextual and ecological theologies that are relevant to mission studies and praxis. This will aid in thinking more missiologically in terms of social justice and liberation for the less advantaged in an era of humanlike chatbots. In relation to social justice and liberation in an age AI, Eugene Baron (2020: 8) notes:

There is a need for missiologists to have their contextual theologies (postcolonial, Black Liberation, etc.) in their front pockets. It will be imperative to read the Bible from the perspective of the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. Public theology of human dignity is crucial to understand our value, contribution and agency in the Kingdom of God on earth.

A first missiological implication in a world of humanlike chatbots regards human dignity. Human dignity is an important concept in regard to AI agents. It is necessary to ensure that mission is always directed at the embodied human rather than humanlike chatbots. A poor human being needs more attention than the most intelligent chatbots.

A second missiological implication regards the necessity of human agency in mission, Baron (2020: 4) notes that

The idea that the 4IR will reproduce the human being's functions and abilities in the form of artificial intelligence (AI). Though this would rapidly change the efficiency of responsibilities and tasks being carried out in business environments, as well as promise various benefits within ecclesial contexts, missiologists should be posing critical questions on the (non)-agency of human beings.

Chatbots may outperform humans in all fields and this includes church contexts where for example a chatbot counsellor would be preferred to a human being. In a related way, robots equipped with AI will pose questions of standardisation. Barron notes that “it would be imperative ... to ask in terms of human agency: whose human being standards, actions and patterns would all human beings be standardised?” (Barron 2020: 4). Such questions are important when taking into account issues of race and class. There are missiological implications for instance in standardising robots to white in a South African context that has suffered apartheid.

A third missiological implication in a world of HLCs concerns the authentic experience of humans. Baron notes that “the agency of the world in ‘God’s mission’ (*missio Dei*)

will also be tested on the sharing of authentic experiences of God's creatures" (Baron 2020: 4). This is particularly important in cases where a victim interfaces with an AI agent on behalf of the perpetrator. As illustrated in the context of trauma, the use of robotics raises questions about authentic human encounters in the healing process. While AI may facilitate interaction, the absence of personal involvement from those responsible for the pain poses a challenge to the idea of true reconciliation and healing (2020: 4).

Thus, a context such as a trauma raises questions about the relational and holistic attributes of humans, which are deficient in AI agents such as HLCs. Mission in the era of humanlike chatbots will therefore need to consider the relational and holistic nature of human beings even as engagement is made with attention to the need for human dignity, human agency and human experience. Christian communities should also consider that "as the bearer of God's image, it is our duty to direct technology development for the greatest good. It demands wisdom and care; we should never delegate the duty to machines" (Saragih 2023: 243).

Practical Considerations

Some practical concerns related to missional approaches in Christian communities in an era of HLCs are reflected in the following five suggestions.

1. Maintain human oversight in AI chatbot interactions, especially for complex pastoral care issues. Back this up by training pastoral staff to collaborate with chatbots, ensuring a seamless integration of technology with the church's human-centered approach. This will help to balance AI capabilities with human oversight and ensure that the church maintains its relational and pastoral focus, using technology as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for genuine human connections.
2. Not all members may have equal access to technology, leading to a potential digital divide within the congregation. Therefore, seek to implement inclusivity measures such as providing technology resources for those in need, offering offline alternatives, and ensuring that AI chatbots complement traditional communication channels.
3. Privacy concerns may arise as members express concerns about data privacy when interacting with AI chatbots. A solution here is make early communication about the church's commitment to privacy, implement robust data protection measures, and offer opt-in/opt-out features for individuals to control their level of engagement.
4. Aim for community building beyond technology. Emphasize that while technology enhances community engagement, it does not replace the essence of human connection. As such, encourage members to balance digital interactions

with in-person relationships, reinforcing the importance of face-to-face connections.

5. Seek transparency and communication. Foster a culture of transparency by openly communicating the role and limitations of AI chatbots within the church community. Regularly update members on how technology is being used to support the church's mission.

Towards a Missional Church Strategy

The advancements in AI technologies have posed a number of challenges to Christian communities today. One of the key concerns for Christian communities in an era of the humanlike chatbots is how to foster an understanding of a human being as an embodied agent of God. It is also crucial for Christian communities to consider the avenues of mission in a world increasingly adapting to AI chatbots. Christians are therefore better placed to respond to these technologies by emphasising the relational and holistic qualities that differentiate humans from embodied chatbots. They can help other humans affirm these qualities while also advocating for a definition of each member in their communities as an embodied intelligent being that far surpasses the possibilities of AI technology. A missional church in the era of advancing HLCs will therefore need to consider the relational and holistic nature of human beings even as engagement is made with attention to the need for human dignity, human agency and human experience.

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ARTICLE

Digital Worship as Fostering or Inhibiting Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address the ways and extent to which participation in digital worship might be seen as fostering or inhibiting social inclusion and social cohesion, and to assess the current state of research on this important topic from both a sociological and theological perspective. It aims to broaden digital theological understanding beyond sacramental and ecclesiological concerns towards more wholistic concerns of participation and belonging, intersecting with the digital divide and theology of disability. Drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum and the capabilities approach, this paper proposes consideration of digital participations with respect to their significance for cultivating participation in community by conducting a literature review of various studies. Further, it addresses ambivalences which arise out of these studies, as digital access seems to enhance certain forms of connectedness while rendering other forms less stable. Observation of these ambivalences is framed into research desiderata for future study on the interrelationship of digital participation in religious community and the facilitation of community and social resilience. With the intention of building upon this recent research to address the more specific question of what kinds of digital participation foster social inclusion with a focus on religious communities, it identifies concrete pathways for further academic inquiry, and suggests a framework for new practical theological questions centring justice and inclusion.

Keywords: Digital worship, Theology of disability, Social inclusion, Digital inequity, Digital theology, Capability approach

While scholars have investigated the subject of online religion for over 25 years (Campbell 2005), the theological discourse has largely remained concerned with questions pertaining to ecclesiology and the overall legitimacy and authenticity of the digital church. Surprisingly less prevalent are theological concerns surrounding the impact of the digital church in areas of access and social inclusion, including the actualization of liberation theologies like the theology of disability. If one expands

considerations beyond systematic theological questions to encompass both practical theology and social theory, this creates space for reflection regarding how bonded groups relate to one another by way of systems and structures. In the context of the digital church, it is hard to consider these questions without drawing one's attention to the problem of the digital divide and digital inequity. Conversations around the "digital divide" are frequently framed in a limited capacity which narrowly considers access as the only precondition for achieving digital equity. Evidence suggests that improving access to digital technologies does not necessarily predict social inclusion and improved societal participation. Drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen and their capabilities approach, a more nuanced analysis must be pursued regarding what people are actually able to do and achieve in community and how digital technologies foster or inhibit these capabilities. According to Nussbaum (2011), just societies inherently promote a substantial number of opportunities and freedoms by which individuals possess equal autonomy to exercise their choice. Social inclusion and cohesion closely relate to Nussbaum's central capability of "affiliation", which involves the right to engagement in various forms of social interaction. Nussbaum notes that this capability pervades all other capabilities, in the sense that affiliation encompasses respect for each person as a dignified, social being; this precondition must be met for any capability to be actualized (Nussbaum 2011: 34–40). Many studies have assessed the significance of digital participation in supporting mental well-being and social inclusion in a variety of forms, including for example, studies on digital participation among the elderly (Delello and McWhorter 2017; Friemel 2016), among indigenous communities (Walker et al. 2021), and among refugee communities (Andrade and Doolin 2016). Others have considered the relationship between digital religious communication and social and community resilience (Fröh and Robinson 2023). However, additional research is required regarding the more specific role of digital participation in facilitating social inclusion within religious communities. A recent study from Mora and Martínez (2022) explores digital diasporic spiritual consciousness among Venezuelan Evangelicals through the digital worship collective, *Adorando en Casa* (AeC). Their findings suggest that the incorporation of social media into regular church worship channels has fostered improved sense of community and belonging among diaspora communities who have been able to reconnect with churches in their home countries through digital worship projects. Further consideration is required regarding the correlation between the type of social inclusion fostered by digital religion and the concerns of other justice issues, including the theology of disability, and the extent to which these interests overlap.

Theological Framework

There is a great deal of concern and hesitation among church leaders regarding the legitimacy of the digital church, and a strong desire to preserve the physicality of communal, sacramental, and liturgical embodiment. Further, there is increasing anxiety that the digital church will serve as a substitution or replacement for historical modes of worship (Chow and Kurlberg 2020). Introduction of a new perspective to digital church that is less theological, and more ecumenical, does not intend to invalidate these concerns, nor to suggest that digital religious spaces can unequivocally replicate or replace the physical presence of embodiment which occurs during in-person worship services, nor to take a position regarding its role in sacramental life. Rather, it simply offers greater weight of importance to social issues than theological ones, particularly digital equity, and social inclusion. In a post-pandemic context, willingness to give new ecclesiological consideration for digital religious spaces is inherently interdependent to maintaining relevance in the contemporary world. Demonstration of how digital worship can positively foster religious community in online spaces should not be viewed as a threat, but a supplementary asset and enhancement of existing church worship structures which occur in physical spaces. The existence of a new, growing, digital spiritual community does not diminish the fundamental importance of physical, in-person communion. However, to dismiss religious experience in digital spaces as invalid, based on digital hesitancy alone, challenges even the most traditional ecclesiology. In Colossians 1.18, the church is understood as the body of Christ, the essence of which is a divine and spiritual reality, not an inherently physical one. A Christological ecclesiology is one which fundamentally challenges this notion of church as a purely social, historical human institution (Chia 2020). This is not to dismiss the role of “place” in the context of worship. After all, in Exodus 26, God commands the Israelites to build the tabernacle, describing its specifications in great detail. Place of worship, symbol and ritual are all elements of great importance which provide a strong foundation and direction for the praise of God. Although God will “meet” the Israelites at the tabernacle, it is important to note that it is not anchored to one location. This suggests that the place of worship is synonymous with encountering God’s presence (Musa 2020). In effect, space facilitates a relationship between God and the worshipper and the worshipper and themselves. The nature of space helps to facilitate the experience of worship as both transcendent and immanent. Certain attributes of space cultivate this feeling of transcendence, including scale and volume, light, art/architecture, and organization. All these elements should be considered when facilitating worship in digital spaces (Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2023) In 1 Corinthians 3.16-17, the Church is described as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwells in the Church through both the individual and the community. This theologically informed understanding inherently challenges the notion that the Church’s identity is dependent or

bound by historically contingent forms, or that the character of the Church is diminished or altered by external circumstances that shape her model of worship. The digital church cannot be exempt from this spiritual reality of communion with God, composed of the members of Christ's body, made possible through faith and the power of the Spirit (Chia 2020).

Beyond the ecclesiology of the digital church, consideration must also be given to how Christian worship is defined. Worship, like church, is characterized by human activity, yet it also transcends human experience. Christian worship is made possible only through the grace of God and the power of the Spirit; a doxological response cannot be actualized externally from this context. It is the Spirit that gathers the church and cultivates unity among its individual members, fostering spiritual community. It is only by the agency of the Spirit that Christians can participate in worship and therefore this participation in worship as a spiritual reality cannot be diminished regardless of whether the gathering engages a traditional space or a digital one (Chia 2020). It seems the dilemma is less related to the authenticity of digital worship and more a resistance to the deconstruction of traditional hierarchical worship and communal structures. Digital worship challenges conventional models of community in favor of a worship space that is more dynamic, adaptable and organic. The digital church transcends its historical geographic network of community towards a fellowship which is united more by way of relationship (*koinonia*) than by affiliation (*ekklesia*) (Campbell 2022: 71–2; O'Lynn 2022).

If fellowship (*koinonia*) is cultivated through Christ alone, then surely this cannot be eliminated by the limitation of virtual gatherings (Chia 2020). If God's presence exists at all times and in all places, this affirms the sacred throughout all things, places and history. Digital church offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between the secular and the sacred, the traditional and the contemporary. As digital spaces continue to become more prominent in public spheres, the Church must bring the gospel to its audience. This is a natural trajectory, and if approached with the intentionality of keeping God at the centre of worship, it can draw believers closer to God and cultivate a heightened sense of community (Musa 2020). The very heart and essence of the digital rests in the cultural reality of communication; it is this very concept which presents a theological invitation into the mystery of the triune God, and the communication of God's existence by way of revelation throughout the course of human history. In the ultimate revelation found through Jesus Christ, as the Word incarnate, salvation is communicated through his life, death and resurrection. Illuminated by the Spirit, the Church becomes the vessel which spreads the good news of the gospel throughout the world. As modes of communication continue to evolve in the wake of technological progress, digital religious communication may be understood as an advantageous new strategy for fulfilling this mission (Zsupan-Jerome 2014: 2). Further, the adoption of polymodal forms of worship, which allow for full

participation both in person and online, are inherently more inclusive of those who are unable to return to physical in-person worship spaces due to medical vulnerability and disability (Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2023).

Literature Review

While digital spaces are inherently value-neutral until their applied application, recent studies suggest a strong correlation between participation in digital access and an enhanced sense of community belonging among a diversity of populations. A case study conducted by Andrade and Doolin (2016) involving 50 resettled refugees and the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) focused specifically on measuring its potential to foster increased social inclusion and societal participation. In the study, these New Zealand refugees were provided with 30 hours of basic computer training, a refurbished desktop computer, and internet access, as part of a government-funded initiative. After a series of interviews with participants from eight different countries, the authors noted that the pervasiveness of ICTs in society, or simply providing access to the necessary tools, did not automatically promote social inclusion. With an interest in what individuals are actually able to do and achieve with ICTs, Andrade and Doolin identified five capabilities improved during the study with the incorporated usage of ICTs: participation in digital society; effective communication; improved understanding of new society; social connectivity; and expression of cultural identity (Andrade and Doolin 2016).

A comprehensive review of recent literature, policy responses and case studies, conducted by Walker et al. (2021) regarding Indigenous youth in Australia, demonstrated the correlation between access to digital technology, improved mental health and wellbeing, and increased societal participation and social inclusion. Their findings determined that due to inequities in affordable access to digital technologies, only 63% of Indigenous Australians have access to the internet at home. Concurrently, their research also concluded that when access to digital technology and social media is achieved, it strengthens cultural identity, improves mental health, and reduces isolation from community and country (Walker et al. 2021). Note that access in this case presupposes participation, or one's ability to effectively use the technology provided.

Other studies, such as Delello and McWhorter (2017), focus on technology usage as a mechanism for counteracting social isolation and an overall decline in health among older adults. The researchers conducted a case study at a senior living centre in the Southwestern United States involving access to and usage of iPad technology. In addition to providing access to these devices, the study offered small group training sessions which included information about content sharing and social media usage. Upon conclusion of the study, it was determined that access to iPad technology

and improved digital literacy resulted in increased social connection with friends and family members and enhanced societal participation (Delello and McWhorter 2017). A second study related to technology usage among seniors was conducted by Thomas Friemel (2016), in which a random representative sample of 1,103 seniors in Switzerland over the age of 65 were interviewed. The interviews conducted revealed that only a quarter of seniors in Switzerland engage in regular internet use. Friemel found that barriers to usage disproportionately affect seniors over the age of 70. In all cases, the existence of a social context in which encouragement from friends and family is prevalent, coupled with opportunities for learning in private environments, were strong predictors for technological engagement (Friemel 2016).

Collectively, in the case of refugees, Indigenous youth and the elderly, these studies unanimously affirm that technological access does not necessarily predict social inclusion or societal participation. They also conjointly suggest that when certain preliminary conditions are met regarding equitable access, tailored digital literacy training to improve user ability, and a social context which fosters encouragement and support from friends and family, all three groups experience a heightened potential for digital engagement. Further, strong evidence suggests that when the culmination of these conditions is achieved, resulting in increased digital engagement, it has the potential to foster improved sense of community belonging, social inclusion, and societal participation.

Ambivalences

Despite the obvious potential for benefit presented in these studies, certain ambivalences undoubtedly arise, as digital access seems to enhance certain forms of connectedness while rendering other forms less stable. As Andrade and Doolin (2016) suggest, access to technology is helpful, but it is not always adequate in actualizing capability and fostering participation. Further consideration must be given to what Schejter (2021) calls the “right to communication”, or the ability to communicate, in the context of the digital religious community. Utilizing the framework of Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach, Schejter makes the argument that communication should be understood as a fundamental right and capability. Schejter’s theory on the “right to communicate” asserts that free expression is a universal right that is interdependent with communication and therefore technological characteristics for communication should be made universally available in a digital age. In a digital society and participatory culture, the author views communication as a required function for participating in political, cultural, social, educational, and commercial spheres of life, making it a necessity for community belonging. In this context, participation extends far beyond the right to own or have access to digital media, and

communication is a basic requirement for humanity's well-being and their ability to function within any society or social institution (Schejter 2021).

While technology can be useful in facilitating the navigation of new contexts, further consideration is required to determine if the social or cultural cohesion cultivated through technological connection bonds participants more to their localized communities, their communities of origin, or some other facet of the global community. This raises important questions surrounding the nature of the type of "cultural cohesion" or "social cohesion" produced by digital religious engagement. In the case of Andrade and Doolin (2016), refugee participants reported the use of ICTs to make sense of New Zealand society and to become familiar with the new culture and way of life. Many participants said they felt more comfortable communicating in an unfamiliar language with the use of ICTs rather than face-to-face or in-person interactions. Regarding social connectivity, many refugees reported the use of digital communication, such as social media, to connect with other members of their particular ethnocultural group in New Zealand and in other parts of the world. It also afforded them the opportunity to connect with friends and family in their home countries and maintain certain expressions of their cultural identity, such as accessing resources in their native language (Andrade and Doolin 2016).

In Walker et al. (2021), similar findings suggest that participation in digital technologies and social media by Indigenous youth enhance cultural identity, and connections to both community and culture. The authors emphasize the importance of access to Indigenous culture, connection with Elders, family members, and community as an underlying facet of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing (Walker et al. 2021). In both cases, social and cultural cohesion often manifests within the local community but is informed by connections with unique ethnocultural identities that do not necessarily fit the dominant social discourse. In the case of Mora and Martínez (2022), the digital worship collective *Adorando en Casa* (AeC) was specifically designed to facilitate religious experience among Venezuelan Evangelical diasporic communities on a global scale, with membership spread across South America, the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica and Spain. The study demonstrates the effectiveness of digital religious communication as a mechanism to affirm and strengthen religious cultural identity and sense of community, inspire collaboration, and provide emotional and spiritual support in digital spaces (Mora and Martínez 2022). While the intentionality of this initiative was to inspire global community among diaspora communities with a shared religious identity, evidence from Andrade and Doolin (2016) and Walker et al. (2021) suggest digital religious communication has the potential to foster social and cultural cohesion across a diversity of religious traditions and ethnocultural communities on a local, national and global level.

Theology of Disability

Historically, theology of disability often centered the perception of what able-bodied people believe is in the best interest of persons with disabilities. Disability is often viewed as a flawed human condition, inherently representing a disadvantage or a problem to be corrected. This perception of disability as human flaw is unfortunately reinforced within biblical representation as New Testament authors draw parallels between healing and forgiveness of sin (Lk. 5.18-26; Jn 5.14) or lack of faith (Mk 5.34; 10.52; Lk. 17.19). This model inherently perpetuates disempowerment, exclusion and isolation. Thankfully, contemporary discourse surrounding disability has shifted its perspective to consider disability as more of a social problem, rather than a specific medical problem impacting individuals. With this understanding, a person becomes “disabled” only when barriers to access exist. In this way, impairment becomes socially transformed, not only as disability, but as an obstacle to full societal participation (Reynolds 2008).

Theology can wrongly equate disability with questions of theodicy and the problem of suffering because it falsely presumes that all persons with disabilities suffer. If disability is understood as an affliction sourced from God in parallel with prosperity, it is quite natural to fall into the trappings of “otherness” rather than to acknowledge one’s limited understanding of God’s compassion. Recognition of humanity’s limited capacity for divine knowledge should undoubtedly lead to humility rather than judgement (Morgan 2021). A more accurate understanding is that persons with disabilities suffer not from their impairment but rather the failure of society to practice radical inclusion, and consequently, the perpetual dehumanization of their circumstances by able-bodied people (Michalko 2002). It follows that any theology of disability must be liberatory, centring the voices of persons with disabilities, and granting stigma only to the institutions and social attitudes whose barriers construct disability, rather than misdirecting this stigma towards non-conventional bodies (Eiesland 1998).

When discussing the capability of “affiliation”, Nussbaum highlights the social reality that all aspects of society and public policy must be understood in the context of relationships. She discusses the insufficiency of making options available without proper consideration of this interdependence (e.g., employment options and workplace relations or privacy boundaries within healthcare). These considerations, which fundamentally centre human worth and dignity as social beings, is an important lens by which both the theology of disability and the digital church can be practically understood and applied (Nussbaum 2011: 39–40). Nussbaum’s framework points to the interrelationship between digital theology and theology of disability, recognizing the inefficacy which inevitably occurs when responses are done in isolation rather than affiliation (e.g., addressing digital access in separation from literacy).

This intersection can perhaps best be understood within the framework of theology of access, which considers the realities of how persons with disabilities are able to exhibit presence and participation in all aspects of church life and society. This scope expands well beyond the right to physical access of houses of worship to encompass a wide range of barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from full participation in ecclesial life. This includes concepts of worship and sacrament that intrinsically include language, sight, hearing and other elements that could potentially create barriers for “authentic” participation (McLachlan 2021). These components which inherently exclude many persons due to lack of consideration for diversity of bodies are quite synonymous with critiques of digital worship and its ability to cultivate full embodied presence. This suggests that current digital ecclesiology might require radical deconstruction of bias towards non-conventional bodies.

If the task, or concern, of theology of disability is rooted in the liberation of persons with disabilities from the limitations imposed by institutions, social structures and human perception, does it not offer the same considerations as a sociological perspective of the digital church? Digital worship offers a valuable space for social inclusion in many of the same ways that theology of disability challenges us to consider. Further, it serves as a readily available means for church bodies to mitigate barriers to access related to theology of disability, socially transforming the church in a way that upholds equal value and participation of all its members. The incorporation of theology of disability into digital theology proactively corrects many of its inherent limitations by fundamentally broadening its spectrum of accommodations. Reflection on the capability of “affiliation” fosters consideration for the interrelationship between the accessibility of digital church and barriers faced by persons with disabilities. For example, offering church services online is advantageous for those with differing levels of mobility or those who suffer from compromised immune systems resulting in higher risk at in-person communal gatherings. By centering one’s understanding of the digital church and digital worship within the framework of justice and radical inclusion, one’s theological questioning moves beyond the sacramental and ecclesiological towards more wholistic concerns of participation, belonging and salvation.

Conclusion

A more serious pursuit of theological questions related to justice, inclusion, and its intersection with the digital divide calls for the following types of considerations. The presence of ambivalences suggests much potential opportunity for the future of research on the interrelationship of digital participation in religious community and the facilitation of community and social resilience. First, in consideration of Schejter’s (2021) “right to communication” and the case study presented by Andrade

and Doolin (2016), it can be deduced that simply providing access and opportunity to engage in digital worship and other forms of digital religious communication does not necessitate community participation, nor does it necessarily facilitate social cohesion in the way of shared religious experience and enhancement of collective religious identity. Evidence suggests that to truly alleviate digital inequities requires movement beyond bridging the gaps between the “haves” and “have nots” to ensure that members of faith communities are actually able to achieve the full potential of their capabilities required to engage in the type of full digital participation that can bring about radical social cohesion. All the studies presented here (Andrade and Doolin 2016; Walker et al. 2021; Delello and McWhorter 2017; Friemel 2016) suggest that when certain preliminary conditions are met (e.g., equitable access to ICTs, customized digital literacy training, and social/community support), digital engagement offers the potential to produce improved sense of community belonging, social inclusion, and societal participation.

This observation raises important questions regarding whether faith communities can effectively aid in the facilitation of meeting these necessary preconditions within their congregations. Further, what *kinds* of digital participation in religious communities foster social inclusion and thereby promote social cohesion? Plüss (2020) has already identified the occurrence of interchurch cooperation in which congregations in rural areas were successful in adopting new technologies by receiving help with digital material from more technologically advanced congregations. Additionally, he identifies the increased implementation of analog methods of communication across various congregations during the global pandemic, to help parishioners mitigate access barriers or lack of digital literacy (Plüss 2020). Further research is required to consider, does ecumenical cooperation have the potential to help alleviate digital inequities which impact religious institutions and their members, so that all parties can actualize their capability for full digital participation?

The second gap brought about by observation of these ambivalences is the lack of case studies specifically related to digital religious communities necessary to address more specialized facets of research, e.g., Do any observable digital participations exist specifically in religious settings/communities that foster inclusion and cohesion in those religious communities? Do any observable digital participations specific to religious communities/settings that foster inclusion and cohesion exist in the wider community (e.g., beyond the religious setting)? This article reviews a sample of ethnoculturally diverse, non-religious studies by which inferences can be made regarding their relationship with online religious communities, but only the Mora and Martínez (2022) study deals with this question directly. The findings of Andrade and Doolin 2016; Walker et al. 2021; Delello and McWhorter 2017; Friemel 2016 suggest that, when appropriate conditions are met, digital communication has the potential to improve mental and emotional well-being, enhance sense of community belonging,

and foster social and cultural inclusion and societal participation. The study by Mora and Martínez (2022) demonstrates evidence that these attributes are transferable in a digital religious setting, with the potential for additional benefits, including facilitation of collective digital religious experience, direct worship collaboration, emotional and spiritual support through digital prayer spaces, improved sense of belonging and connection with home countries among diaspora communities, and a strengthening of a more specific religious identity and sense of religious community. Further studies like Mora/ Martínez are required to draw stronger conclusions regarding the transfer of benefits found within non-religious digital communities to online religious spaces, and to produce stronger determination of the unique benefits that only digital religious communication can provide.

Finally, further consideration must be given regarding the extent to which addressing digital inequality inadvertently addresses the concerns of theology of disability and how an interdisciplinary approach to these two disciplines can collaboratively foster justice, social inclusion, and social cohesion.

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ARTICLE

Proclaiming and Embodying Peace in Pacifist Japan: a Reformed Church Perspective¹

Stéphan van der Watt

Abstract

This article assesses a significant Peace Declaration which was recently released by the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ). Through this declaration the RCJ affirms her calling and responsibility – as a missional church which is part of a 1% Christian population – to proclaim and embody peace in Japan and beyond. The article uses an integrative literature review and in-depth theological reflection as its main research techniques. The systematic review addresses the question: What is the significance and meaning of the RCJ Peace Declaration within the wider field of Peace Studies and in connection with the notion of pacifism in Japan and globally? It is argued that theological understandings of peacebuilding can indeed constructively promote peace and justice in worldwide conflicts. The article further explains how a vast corpus of knowledge and practice includes the body of Christ in Japan which, through the RCJ Peace Declaration, represents a pro-active vision of God's *shalom*. Public witness is not an add-on to the church's mission. Instead, the Church realizes its missional calling when it publicly engages in testifying to true Christian peace by rejecting imperial claims.

Keywords: Peace, Pacifism, Japan, Reformed Church, East Asia, *Shalom*

Following Japan's loss in World War II, the nation renounced war in its Constitution (Preamble and Article 9). The foundation of post-war Japan has been laid by this pacifist stance. Now, however, approaching eight decades after the war, the memories of the conflict are fading, and authoritarian tendencies in Japan are intensifying. These tendencies include a resurgence of Shintō nationalism since the late Meiji Era (also

1 This article was partially presented as an academic paper at the Asia conference of the International Association of Mission Studies. The conference theme was 'Global Sustainability and Mission in Scholarship' and was held from 22 to 24 November 2023 at De La Salle University in Manila, the Philippines.

known as State Shintō) and efforts to rewrite the country's laws and constitution to officially make it a fully war-capable nation once more (Shimazono and Murphy 2009).

Globally, the frightening destruction caused by an increasing number of authoritarian regimes continues unabated. Current conflicts make it clear that those who intentionally make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable. The destructive battles worldwide serve as a warning against oversimplifying complex conflicts between good and evil, as well as against readily taking sides and dividing the world into "oppressor and oppressed" or "colonizer and colonized". Rigid viewpoints like these lead to odd conclusions, like the idea that innocent civilians killed were somehow deserving of it. What we can however safely conclude is that the wounded world we live in is in desperate need of peace.

Reformed theology has often underlined that all governments should be respected because the state is God-given and can employ power to combat evil. But many governments become corrupted and do not respect religious freedom. As "watch-keeper" over the state, the church is called to remind state leaders to protect vulnerable people and promote justice and peace. Is this strategy viable today, and how might it apply in current political contexts, for instance in Japan, where Christians represent a mere one per cent of the population?

In Reformed thought, the right to resistance was often tied to "just war" (*jus ad bellum*) principles, greatly derived from the moral roots of Augustine of Hippo's apologetic book *City of God*. During the Reformation this tradition guided Reformed theologians between the poles of pacifism and the justification of a "holy war". International humanitarian law now incorporates some just war ethics. The issue is whether international legal terms alone can define justice (Sweeney 2003), because there is an evident dearth of virtue-ethical consideration in contemporary just war discourse (Vorster 2015). Moreover, how can theological understandings of reconciliation and peacebuilding promote peace and justice after conflicts?

In consideration of these questions, this article presents and assesses an important Peace Declaration which was recently released by the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ). Through this declaration the RCJ affirms her calling and responsibility – as a missional church in a 99% non-Christian population – to proclaim and embody peace in Japan and beyond. The primary research methodology employed in this article involves, first, an integrative literature review of relevant materials collected on the subject matter (Torraco 2016: 62). The interpretation and synthesizing of important data follow the examination of pertinent documents. An in-depth process of theological reflection eventually results in the identification of core findings and the formulation of a conclusion.

The systematic review of applicable literature addresses the basic question: What is the significance and meaning of the RCJ Peace Declaration within the wider field of Peace Studies and in connection with the notion of pacifism in Japan and worldwide?

Reconsidering the Meaning of Peace Today

How can peace be properly understood? Peace can imply apathy and the acceptance of injustice when it is defined narrowly. However, peace is more than the absence of war; it also maintains order and justice and promotes the movement toward freedom and human flourishing. Norwegian peace studies pioneer Johan Galtung's typology of violence – direct, structural and cultural – helps us comprehend peace today (Galtung 1990). According to Galtung (2008: 92–105), direct violence is visible in terms of aggressors, victims and harm. But structural violence – caused by socio-economic and political institutions that inhibit human freedom – is more subtle. Galtung also helpfully distinguishes between negative peace (where there exists no direct violence) and positive peace (with fair and equitable institutions and structures).

With the laying down of weapons, negative peace is achieved, but positive peace is still far off. Importantly, the most economically, politically, or socially marginalized members of society are frequently those worst affected by the lack of positive peace. Thus, whilst negative peace can simply mean the absence of war, positive peace implies concurrent justice. Significantly, Meiji Era Christian and Japanese pacifist Kanzō Uchimura (1861–1930) made a similar positive/negative distinction in terms of pacifism. He asserted that objection to war is a negative part of pacifism, whilst its positive part consists of creating, fostering and maintaining well-being and peace in society (Moroi 2012: 378).

Peace studies – also known as “irenology” – have been neglected for centuries and only became a discipline in recent decades. Peace studies specialist David Cortright (2008: 1–5) notes that the first peace-related academic programmes and institutions appeared after World War II. To better understand the processes that lead to a more desirable human condition, peace studies identify and analyse both violent and nonviolent behaviours as well as the structural mechanisms attending social and other conflicts. Today these concerns have increased importance and require serious theological contemplation due to the geopolitical aspect of many ongoing global conflicts, in which religion often plays a role.

The nature of war has altered drastically in recent decades, with intrastate wars surging while interstate wars have declined. Nations now often fight battles over ethnicity, language, religion, or geography, with currently 114 global armed conflicts being fought (Geneva Academy 2024). How should we theologically interpret (geo)political violent conflicts? Can Reformed theology make a constructive contribution to debates and practices concerning these issues?

Religion may “justify” aggression and terror but it can also promote peace and reconciliation between adversaries and borders. Religious views influence ethical and political discussions over (non-violent) resistance to oppression or protecting innocent people with force. Intrastate violence has increased international humanitarian intervention and peacebuilding. The UN and other global and regional institutions have institutionalized peacemaking efforts to identify and change war’s root causes (Bellamy 2010). This article explores the ways in which the RCJ Peace Declaration can support such peacebuilding goals in Japan and beyond.

Pacifism in the Early Church Era

Though many sacred books also contain arguments in favour of violence, the religious traditions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism all include peace-making fundamentals and activities (Cortright 2008: 183–210). The absolute pacifism of the early Christian communities reflected the gospel of Jesus’ unwavering dedication to love and non-retaliation to harm. Theologians during the first three centuries of the Christian era all agreed that Christians should neither fight in wars nor serve in the armed forces. They held that seeking peace was required by their theological convictions, drawing on the life and teachings of Jesus (Rae 2014: 29–40). Quotations promoting pacifism abound in the writings of Tertullian (AD 155–220), Clement (AD 150–215) and Origen (AD 185–253), and in the testimonies of martyrs like Marcellus (mid third century–AD 298) (Burkholder and Holl 2005: 2; Kreider 2016: 159–60). Early Christians were against war because of Christ’s commandment to love one another and because they thought that soldiers’ oaths to the emperor were an act of idolatry. Significantly, Mennonite historian Alan Kreider (2016: 233–34) describes one core effect of *The Teachings of the Apostles (Didascalia Apostolorum)* in the early church as creating an “ecosystem of peace”. As a concrete embodiment of this ecosystem, the peace greeting formed part of worship services led in Tertullian’s and Cyprian’s churches. The Christians carried peace with them as it were, saying “Peace to this house”, from home to home. Kreider therefore argues that “The ‘peace’ built a sense of transgeographical family. Communities in Egypt received strangers from other cities as ‘brothers,’ allowing them to take part in the Lord’s Supper and no doubt sharing materially with them when they came ‘in peace’ with the recommendation of another church” (2016: 220).

Peace appears throughout the *Didascalia*. In the Gospels, Jesus exhorted his disciples to follow him in peacemaking, according to the *Didascalia*’s authors. They believed Jesus’ peaceful path was salvific and that he invited his Church to represent his work by living in peaceful relationships and unity of spirit. However, according to Kreider (2016: 295–96), today Western Christians live in a post-Enlightenment and post-Christendom world where Christianity is often deemed violent, and that “Christian

mission – however loving its professed intentions – is essentially an exercise in imperialism.”

Kreider thus calls for a return to the humble patience of early church pioneer Christians like Cyprian (AD 210–258), Origen and Tertullian, because after them followed Augustine (AD 354–430), whose habitus seemingly lacked patience and peace. Augustine turned a corner in the early fifth century. He used top-down means for Christian purposes and encouraged rulers to serve God and spread the Christian faith. Augustine believed he should abandon the patience-saturated Christian missional approach and instead rationalized the notion of just war. Moreover, the conversion of Roman Emperor Constantine (AD 272–337) in the early fourth century led to military service being fully accepted among Christians. Consequently, core convictions concerning Christian peace and absolute pacifism quickly began to waver.

Notions of Pacifism after the Twentieth Century

Many modern theologians in the West have exerted considerable influence on the debate about war and peace. Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Reformed ethicist, is one of them. According to Niebuhr (2011), the core mistake of pacifism is its rejection of the Christian concept of original sin and belief in human perfectibility. Another very prominent theologian is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose peace ethic and his participation in the plot to destroy Hitler and National Socialism originated in his Reformed theology. Insightfully, Green (2019) links the evolution of his Bonhoeffer's peace principles to a type of conditional pacifism that primarily focused on Christological, ecclesial and biblical-dogmatic aspects.

Following World War I, the word “pacifism” came to refer to a previous, more narrow tradition of non-resistance, or the religiously motivated refusal to support or take part in any kind of warfare. The more popular traditions of pragmatic or conditional pacifism, which rejected war in principle but acknowledged the use of force in self-defence or to defend the weak, were different from this absolutist stance. Furthermore, Augustine's just war doctrines were not the same as extreme pacifism. Just war theories limited, yet still justified, war (Cortright 2008: 8–10).

Pacifism thus existed as a movement and established idea long before the actual word was coined in 1901 (during the 10th Universal Peace Congress in Glasgow). But pacifism does not mean social passivity. Political programmes and social reforms were all part of it. Pacifism contrasted with quietist religious sects, and after World War I the notion of pacifism was scrutinized and debated. Although often overlooked, Cortright (2008: 334) believes the distinction between absolute and pragmatic pacifism is crucial. Nuclear pacifism absolutely forbids the use of indiscriminate, destructive weapons. However, pacifism is conditional and pragmatic in other conflict dimensions. Conditional pacifism assumes a presumption against armed violence

but recognizes that force, restrained by strict ethical criteria, may be necessary for self-defence and for the protection of innocent people.

Cortright (2008: 335) concludes that pacifism has been distorted beyond repair and may not be worth reconstructing. Peace theory and practice may benefit from using peacebuilding and peacemaking instead of the notion of pacifism. Peace may never be achieved, and conflict prevention needs proactive human behaviour. Peace-builders are more practical and probably wiser after the twentieth century's painful experiences. They have learned to not ignore repressed victims' suffering and pleadings or the links between peace, democracy, social justice and human rights. Peace activists know that justice and peace are linked and care strongly about those victimised by repressive regimes and armed groups.

Christianity's Role in Asia and Japan

Christianity's role in Asia is particularly complex because of its identity and status as a minority religious tradition among numerous and dominant ethnic and religious groupings. To fairly evaluate Christians' involvement in both peace and violence throughout Asia, Christianity must be analysed with reference to various, unique circumstances that are characterized by interrelated and shifting political, social, cultural and religious dynamics. From a historical standpoint, these social change dynamics in Asia may be traced back to the globalizing currents and practices of different periods, i.e. colonial, postcolonial and post-Cold War. More specifically the Pacific, Korean and Vietnam Wars need to be taken into consideration (Fernando 2014: 283–84). This article takes cognizance of these realities, although a detailed exploration thereof falls outside its purview.

The difficulties that Asian churches have are (1) how to work towards changing political structures and distributing power, and (2) how to cultivate a theology of peace amid nationalist strife. In numerous ways, Christians have supported efforts to promote peace in Asian ethno-nationalist conflicts. For example, in Japan, certain churches have opened small windows for much-needed peace and reconciliation in the region by admitting their government committed war crimes during the Pacific War and by pleading for forgiveness with the relatives of those killed (Fernando 2014: 291–92).

During the Pacific War most Japanese churches embraced the regime's imperialist doctrine under government duress. They may have done this out of fear of being hounded by the government as unpatriotic. However, not all churches fully succumbed to governmental pressures under the State Shintō powers during World War II. A handful of denominations protested and did not join the United Church of Christ in Japan (called the *Kyōdan*), the body which united all the different pre-war Protestant denominations under a legal religious "umbrella" of strict bureaucratic

and Imperial domination. Several congregations who wanted to re-establish their religious autonomy apart from state control in the post-war era came together and created the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ) in April 1946.

Having given brief historical overviews of how peace and pacifism have been viewed and of Christianity in Asia and Japan, the discussion now turns to consider the challenges that Christianity and the Church face in proclaiming and embodying peace in East Asia generally and in Japan in particular.

East Asia and the Quest to Conquer through Strategic Partnerships

During the past few years, the East Asian region has seen an increase in the level of security cooperation. South Korea, the United States, and Japan recently conducted their first joint aerial exercises, which included a nuclear-capable B-52 strategic bomber aircraft from the US. The Japanese Defence Ministry planned a record-breaking budget of ¥7.7 trillion in the last few months, to restructure the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) and equip them with an enormous arsenal of weapons and new, joint headquarters that will enable Japan to engage in protracted combat on the front lines of the Indo-Pacific region (Johnson 2023).

With the long-standing Japan-ASEAN cooperation, Japan has strengthened its private-sector cybersecurity collaboration with several South-East Asian nations and is considered a partner of choice in terms of defence and security (Dominguez 2023). At present, in Okinawa, on the south-western tip of Japan, military training is being performed on a large scale at the US Forces' Japan bases. In recent months, recruitment advertisements for the Japanese SDF have appeared nationwide in convenience stores. Levels of alertness among Japanese citizens are significantly on the rise, with the looming Taiwan Strait crisis adding to the anxious uncertainty.

Proclaiming Peace in Japan, in Unison with Global Christian Faith Communities

Since the experiences of Japanese Christians in the wake of World War II were distinct in several ways, it is not sufficient to see Japan's post-war context as a mere addendum to world Christianity. It is important to note that Japan was both a defeated aggressor and a devastated victim in World War II. Moreover, the people of Japan are the only people in the world who have lived through the horrific experience of atomic bomb attacks (Van der Watt 2023a). This places a unique responsibility on the body of Christ in Japan to respond. How have churches reacted? In the past, several church denominations have responded to the issue of war, for instance the Presbyterian Church in Japan released a statement in 1993 (Jennings 2003).

The recently adopted Peace Declaration of the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ 2023) is one example of a church denomination that takes a pro-active, prophetic stance in this matter.² The RCJ, as a small but vibrant church in a 99% non-Christian country, is called to be a strong and credible witness to God's peace and justice, whether the Japanese government take due note of its Peace Declaration or not. In an era of great relativity, where "anything goes", the RCJ's unmistakable evangelistic nature and scripturally trustworthy preaching are commendable. Congregations are battling to survive in a socio-political context that is hostile, albeit clandestine.

The RCJ's proclamation of peace should be viewed as a particular faith expression, as part of the worldwide Christian faith community. The RCJ proclaims peace in unison with many other churches, for instance with the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa which by its Belhar Confession of Faith calls the church blessed because it is a peacemaker. Globally, for example, churches are urged by the World Council of Churches to walk hand in hand and see their shared existence as a focused walk of faith, a religious pilgrimage of justice and peace, "and to join together with others in celebrating life and in concrete steps toward transforming injustices and violence" (WCC, n.d.; see also Enns and Mosher [eds] 2013).

As a concrete example of this pilgrimage, the WCC also recently initiated its Emerging Peacemakers Forum (WCC 2023). At an international meeting for peace held in Berlin in September 2023, WCC General Secretary Jerry Pillay aptly contended, "Indeed, it takes courage to choose peace as it often implies taking risks, pushing boundaries, and daring to be different, to be disliked, to be criticized and even to be condemned. In today's complex world, *achieving and maintaining peace is perhaps one of the most audacious acts imaginable*" (Pillay 2023, emphasis added).

In addition the WCC has recently created various very significant documents. *Together towards Life* is an ecumenical mission affirmation which seeks to further God's mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish. The affirmation argues that Christian mission and evangelism involves active struggle and public resistance. *Missio Dei* works for justice, peace, and reconciliation to bring about the fullness of life for everyone on earth. It should be countercultural "because mission belongs to the God of Life, justice, and peace and not to this false god who brings misery and suffering to people and nature" (WCC 2013, par. 108). The church's evangelism cannot be forceful or violent if God's life represents/is peace. The affirmation duly ends with the prayer: "God of Life, lead us into justice and peace!"

In other global Church circles, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) – representing roughly 600 million Christians in over 140 nations – has also added its voice to the

2 This declaration can be downloaded from <https://tinyurl.com/39yet4rp> and although it cannot be included here (because of a limited word scope), should be read in full as integral part of this article.

“New Agenda for Peace” which was launched in July 2023 by the United Nations. The WEA strives to actively participate in Christ’s call to peacemaking and the creation of resilient societies characterized by “positive peace” (Global Peace Index 2022: 70). Therefore, the WEA’s Peace and Reconciliation Network proactively joined the global conversation by submitting their appeal to the UN as follows: “A New Agenda for Peace in a globalized and pluralistic age should welcome and include the convictions, learnings, insights, contributions, and corrections of faith communities that are forming people who inhabit, labor, and serve within the areas and pillars that require crucial attention for the global public good” (Schirrmacher et al. 2023).

It would be fitting to view the RCJ’s Declaration of Peace as a relevant, local expression of a similar desire to contribute to the global public good, or in biblical terms to God’s holistic *shalom* in this world (see also Lausanne Movement 2010, *Cape Town Commitment* part II.B and part I.5.c on peacebuilding). *Shalom* is a complicated and profound concept that defines peace as the harmonious expression of all human ideals. *Shalom* embodies the conditions and principles required for war prevention, such as self-determination, economic well-being, social justice, human rights, and dispute resolution through nonviolent means (Schwarzchild 1994: 18).

The beliefs and actions of Christian faith communities aimed at *shalom* and the global public good – like the RCJ, however apparently insignificant the church may be in terms of numbers in the Japanese context – indeed have a deeply formative potential. This potential can (but should not) be ignored by power-wielding politicians or international leaders (see Van der Watt 2023b: 3–6 on the issue of power and the gospel).

Revisiting Japan’s Constitution, in particular Article 9

Demilitarization, democratic principles and the redistribution of power and wealth were all impacted by the post-war (US-led) Allied occupation (1945–52), which also cleared the path for Japan to experience unparalleled economic prosperity. However, the US military leaders’ intention – led by US General Douglas MacArthur’s Chief of the Government Section at GHQ, General Courtney Whitney – with the new constitution introduced during the occupation had another double-edged irony: the constitutional gift of peace and democracy was, as Douglas Lummis (1982: 43) contends,

not merely a good idea supported by reason, it [was] also a command supported by the most terrifying power in the history of the world, the power of the atomic bomb. The Pacific War and the Occupation of course played a tremendous role in shaping the post-war historical stance of both nations, but the lesson each drew from the experience was different. What the Japanese people learned was hatred of war, contempt for militarism, love of democracy and awe for technology. To the

Americans, on the other hand, the Occupation gave the opportunity to experience the sweetness of absolute power, and to convince themselves that the atomic bomb, if in U.S. hands, is a democratic force.

How this historical issue can or should be interpreted remains very contentious and exceeds the limits of this short article. However, the issue that is indeed relevant here is the fact that, notwithstanding Article 9's clear ban on war, Japan maintains a capable modern military force. Although the pacifist constitution was enforced by the US in 1946 and "made the emperor and the Japanese people into instant pacifists" (Kimijima 2009: 170), its ban on the upkeep of armed forces was rapidly being circumvented. To keep American military supremacy in the Western Pacific and restrain communism during the Cold War period, US policymakers looked to Japan as a possible strategic ally. The Japan-US Security Treaty was signed after the Korean War broke out in June 1950 and gave – and still gives today – the US extensive authority over Japanese foreign policy (Cortright 2008: 120). Considering the above, a complex conundrum remains: How much of Japan's development vis-à-vis pacifism was self-determined and how much was because of US influence?

Over the past three decades, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has been a great deal of political discussion regarding changing Article 9 and other provisions of the constitution. The leading Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) drafted constitutional amendment plans in 2005 that included the removal of Article 9, which states unequivocally that the "Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes" (Japan 1946).

In 2012, the LDP published a comprehensive draft constitution with numerous modifications, including a rewrite of Article 9. Two years later, the constitution was interpreted to include "collective self-defence", and more recently, in 2022, Japan updated three important security documents, giving the country extra "counterstrike capabilities". Scholars and opponents have branded Japan's expanding military as a "de facto denial of Article 9" because of these amendments (Harrison et al. 2023: 1–2). In addition, the conservative government is attempting to restore loyalty to the state utilizing the emperor and Shintōist symbols. For example, the current government actions harken back to 1890–1945, when all Japanese school children were systematically indoctrinated into Japan's nationalist ethos by the regular, solemn recitation of the Imperial Rescript on Education (Hastings 2003: 113; see also Hardacre 1989 and Ion 2003).

The post-war Japanese anti-militarist stance has no (explicit) theological roots, in contrast to many notions of pacifism in the West. The Japanese pacifism is borne from the existential impact of war. A significant portion of the Japanese population has responded to the country's ongoing militarization with great fear and discontent.

In the early decades following World War II, many peace movements made progress in providing a strong opposition against the revision of Article 9.³ After the war, each time the Constitution's pacifism was tested the Japanese people reaffirmed it, adopted it and survived the crisis (Kimijima 2009: 173). Mari Yamamoto (2004) therefore rightly contends that Japan is unique among nations in the size and breadth of its grassroots peace movements.

However, as Sakamoto (1982) argues, after the 1960s the fragmented nature of such initiatives made it impossible to create a consolidated, effective peace movement. Moreover, "The absence of a national catalyst like the church and the general depoliticization of national labor unions which used to take political leadership in popular movements have created an additional difficulty in identifying national actors for a unified peace movement" (1982: 4).

Peace Studies and the Notion of Pacifism in Japan

Peace studies in post-World War II Japan has largely focused on the issue of pacifism. Very often leaders from the Meiji Era onwards, many of them Christians or social activists – like Kanzō Uchimura and Toyohiko Kagawa (see Tao 2019) – are referred to as pioneering figures. Much fewer attempts have been made to give a comprehensive description of the intellectual history of the development of the notion of peace in Japan. Robert Kisala's book *Prophets of Peace* is a welcome exception to the rule. Kisala (1999: 16–19) aptly emphasizes the often-ignored fact that Japanese intellectual history, stemming from Confucian inner morality (or so-called "philosophy of the heart") and the pervasive focus on stability and order, predates the Meiji Era (1868–1912) discourse on pacifism. Until this Meiji period Japan has only been involved in conflicts with very few external combatants, but after the turn of the twentieth century pacifist and just war notions entered Japanese discourses, mainly via prominent Christian leaders.

Today Japanese people view peace as a moral and political commitment tied to human rights, democracy and economic well-being. *Heiwa Shugi* (平和主義 – Japanese for 'peace' and '-ism' – is the usual phrase for peace campaigning. Many people confuse absolute and conditional pacifism because of the term's ambiguity. *Heiwa Shugi* has no English equivalent, although the Glasgow definition of pacifism was

3 Anti-Vietnam War protests, including nuclear armaments docking in Japan, also took place during these years. How much protests were against such "de facto" military acceptance of US initiatives or against an alleged revision of Article 9 needs delineation. However, such delineation exceeds the scope of this article.

meant to reflect the Japanese term's principled yet pragmatic peace commitment (Yamamoto 2004: 10).

The Reformed Church of Japan's Prophetic, Proactive Response

Japan has a conflicted past concerning its relationship with Christianity. In previous eras Christians have suffered considerably when professing their faith. Although Japan's postwar pacifist constitution includes religious freedom, the challenge remains: how do Christians take up the responsibilities that accompany this freedom today? Christians in Japan (from all denominational backgrounds) are called – as elsewhere – to proclaim and embody peace. Many realists typically write peacemakers off as hopeless romantics or, worse, paralysed prophets of doom who refuse to face reality. Yet, Jesus said that peacemakers are to be blessed as children of God (Mt. 5.9), clearly indicating God's will for peace and his blessing upon those who make peace instead of war (Rae 2014: 32).

Church confessions are typical of Protestant (especially Reformed) churches. The RCJ Synod initiated its Peace Declaration, in a sense, as a reaction to the (above-mentioned) Japanese government's proposed change of its Constitution's Article 9. The Peace Declaration, however, not only prophetically speaks to and critiques crucial decisions made during times of war, but it also directs the Church in the actions that are needed in times outside of war. The question "How should we then live, now?" constantly needs to be answered. As the body of Christ in Japan, the RCJ is determined by Christ-centred biblical theology that teaches them to focus on deeper spiritual realities with their eyes wide open to the indescribable suffering in this world.

The RCJ Peace Declaration can serve as a shared foundation of thinking about a complex variety of issues from the perspective of peace. For instance, in people's daily lives, where structural violence – based on social injustice and intolerance, including poverty, discrimination, human rights violations and environmental destruction – undermine the right to live in peace and is increasingly prevalent, this declaration can edify the next generation of peacemakers. There are already some projects planned which will be executed in the next few years, to embody the declaration practically.

Conclusion

What is the significance and meaning of the RCJ Peace Declaration within the wider field of Peace Studies as well as in connection with the notion of pacifism in Asia and worldwide (as explicated in this article)? As we face complex issues and try to make

sense of continuing global conflicts, what can we learn from this Peace Declaration in our varied (church) contexts today?

The Peace Declaration is aimed at a wider audience than just Japan. There are several reasons why it is important for those outside the RCJ and outside Japan to engage with the Peace Declaration's content. First, such a conversation can edify all participants who engage in peacemaking. Christian faith takes shape and grows deeper and wider across political, cultural and linguistic boundaries. The Church of Jesus Christ is both universal and local in nature. Christians need to be reminded regularly of the greater reality of God's work around the world.

Second, the theme of peace itself must be continually exposed to renewed exploration and discussion among Christians (and others) in general. In times of war, our longing for peace should grow stronger. Other items on our socio-political agenda could hardly be more urgent to consider now. A changing post-Covid world order forces us to pay fresh attention to the urgent realization of peace and justice, as emanated by the Triune God of the Bible.

Thirdly, the RCJ's Declaration of Peace offers a unique perspective of (Reformed) Christians in Japan, the only nation in the world that lived through the indelible devastation of atomic bombs. Reformed Christians in Japan have something to share that should be taken to heart by other members of the body of Christ across the globe. After all, despite our radical differences, there is but "one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope ..." (Eph. 4.4)

We can benefit from a renewed reflection on the issue of peace, as we continue to heed Christ's call to become peacemakers in our own time and place. In this way, we participate in the ongoing, transformative history of the body of Christ in connection with biblical *shalom*. By critically reclaiming our history and constructing our future identities from the ground up, we are constantly and constructively reforming: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (the church reformed, always reforming).

The Early Church participated in public witness by overturning the status quo. Speaking truth to power as a public witness is the Christian practice of presenting critiques and alternatives to reform our societies, based on the vision of God's Kingdom. Public witness is not an add-on to the church's mission. Instead, the church realizes its missional calling when it publicly engages in testifying to true Christian peace by rejecting imperial claims.

The corpus of knowledge and practice around peacemaking has grown because of the simultaneous contributions of religious leaders, philosophers, moral reformers and many others for the sake of a safer, less violent society. This article has explained how this corpus of knowledge and practice includes the body of Christ in Japan. The RCJ, as a minority group in Japan, deeply identifies with the predicament and convictions of the Early Church. Therefore, it is important to note that the RCJ Peace Declaration embodies and declares God's *shalom*, *not* from a position of power, but from

the margins of society and from below. The Peace Declaration indeed gives a vivid Christian *raison d'être* for realistic peacemaking efforts.

Finally, the RCJ's Peace Declaration itself (under its second heading called "War, Peace, and the State") speaks to the core of its pro-active peace vision:

What God is ultimately trying to teach us through the biblical accounts of war in the ancient world is the truth that "all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Mt 26:52), so that his people will trust in him as their Lord rather than in force of arms. So-called "just wars" or "lawful wars" in Christian history were also originally condoned as a last resort to deter war and maintain justice and peace, let alone the claim of "holy wars" to actively promote war in the name of God, which is a fundamental error. Therefore, the Lord's Church should not justify war as a means of settling disputes, much less affirm contemporary wars that use weapons of mass destruction.

We call for the defense of all human life – created in the image of God – to be the path to peace, without being deceived by national politicians and the mass media, who create enemies and try to replace peace issues with military security issues. Therefore, we actively cooperate in all non-military work to avert war and create peace among nations, and in particular, as the Church in the only country to have experienced the devastation caused by nuclear weapons, we demand the abolition of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. (RCJ 2023)

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ARTICLE

Reflections on Faithful Innovation in the City of Saint Francis: ICEF Conference Report

Scott J. Hagley, Dorte Kappelgaard, Dustin Benac and Scot Sherman

Abstract

The annual meeting of the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) took place in July 2023 in the San Francisco Bay Area of the United States. Participants from the United States, Europe, South Africa and Australia gathered to share research around the theme “faithful innovation” and to reflect together on the challenges and possibilities for cultivating innovative missional ministries. This paper reflects upon two significant themes from the consultation: (1) clarifying the tensions between innovation and Christian faith, and (2) reflecting upon the ecological conditions that cultivate room for innovation that is faithful, and expressions of the faith that are innovative.

Keywords: International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures, Faithful innovation, Creativity, San Francisco Bay Area

Above a stairway overlooking Frida Kahlo Avenue in San Francisco, a statue of Saint Francis stands, arms outstretched to welcome the city, body shaped like a cross, beatific eyes peeking out under a monk’s hood. The statue was made by the renowned artist Benito Bufano from over a thousand firearms willingly surrendered after spate of violence in the late 1960s. On the cloak of St Francis, a mosaic of assassinated public leaders – John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Abraham Lincoln – witness to the possibilities and impossibilities of peace in violent culture. Each figure offered hope, and each figure was tragically gunned down. But as Bufano knew, weapons meant to take life can be refashioned into something beautiful. And now St Francis, he of “all creatures of our God and king”, whose gentle care for the vulnerable and life of intentional poverty inspired the faithful across medieval Europe, is now perched on the lawn of the City College of San Francisco, offering a sign of peace.

Known for its social, technological and economic innovations, San Francisco is not thought of as particularly religious. But it has been the site of a peculiar kind

of American religious innovation, often generating new activity that migrates elsewhere, such as the Jesus People of the 1970s or the adventurous ecumenism of the Consultation on Church Union in the 1960s or the interreligious cooperation of the 2000s. But these religious movements seem to float above the deep undercurrents of privatized spirituality and fierce independence that have come to characterize the Bay Area. For these reasons, San Francisco focuses the various challenges of missional ministry in a post-Christian context into the question of *faithful* innovation. In a context known for innovation, the modifier *faithful* does significant work. How might Christian communities innovate in ways that are faithful to the gospel? How might such innovations be plausible within the cultural soil from which they emerge, and thus be faithful to a particular place and a time? How, in other words, can congregations in a Post-Christian context bear witness like “St Francis of the Guns”, by reshaping cultural materials of time and place to be a sign (and, in the words of Newbigin, instrument and foretaste) of God’s Reign?

The International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) gathered scholars, pastors and judicatory leaders from the United States, Europe, South Africa and Australia in the Bay Area during a week in July 2023 to consider the theoretical, theological and practical dimensions of faithful innovation for post-Christian and post-Christendom contexts. The ICEF is an invitation-only theological learning community from four different continents who meet annually to work together on questions of Christian faith and practice in post-Christendom and post-Christian contexts. Seeking to share wisdom across cultural contexts, each consultation offers opportunity for members to share research around the given topic. Seeking to ground the conversation in the soil where the consultation is taking place, each gathering has an “open day” where local pastors and judicatory leaders join in the proceedings. And finally, because God’s mission is always located in a place and attentive to the particularities of people and culture, each gathering situates the conversation within the missional questions of the context where the consultation meets.

In San Francisco in 2023, the consultation focused on the question of faithful innovation, working with, and learning from, the Episcopal Diocese of San Francisco during the “open day” and sharing research focused on that theme the other days. Serving as both muse and case study, the Bay Area guided and grounded our conversation, causing us to interrogate the two terms and see them in new light. What follows is a brief account of faithful innovation, drawn from the soil of Menlo Park and viewed from American, European, South African and Australian vantage points.

Finding the *Faith* in “Faithful Innovation”?

In some ways, we remain puzzled thirty years after Lesslie Newbigin inquired about the conditions of possibility for a renewed missionary encounter with the West.

On the one hand, “the West” is too broad to include the different manifestations of post-Christendom in different regions of the United States, or between European state-churches, or in post-apartheid South Africa and rapidly secularizing Australia. On the other hand, the rapid pace of social and cultural change makes the question a moving target in each of our contexts. As Newbigin suggested many years ago in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, a gospel-encounter in the modern/post-modern West is not simply a challenge of rhetoric or theological imagination, but an invitation for Christian communities to witness to the gospel in public and plausible ways (1989). In many judicatories, this task falls to new faith communities and experimental ministries in hope that a mixed ecology of new and traditional ministries might engage both emerging and legacy generations. But rather than a mixed ecology, we too often end up with a division of labour, where new faith communities are expected to innovate, and legacy congregations seek to protect the tradition. Innovation and faithfulness are treated like competitors that must be managed rather than a necessary feature of gospel ministry. Because, as Andrew Walls says, there never has been nor will there be a society which can “absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system”, faithfulness to the gospel necessarily makes us pilgrims, makes us odd and at times uncomfortable in our cultural setting (1996: 8). If we are faithful to the word of Christ among us, even our legacy congregations will innovate with elements of its traditional inheritance as a matter of attention to this gospel-culture dynamic. Similarly, the gospel constrains and redirects our quest for innovation, giving plausible Christian witness a bifocal lens. We seek faithfulness to the gospel itself and also the socio-cultural locale.

Faithful innovation, we suggest, is the gospel-work of the whole church. There is neither a status we can hold onto that says “faithful” nor an end we can claim that says “innovation”, there is only the invitation to join with the uncertain and messy work of cultivating Christian community at this time and place, faithful to both God and neighbour, to tradition and God’s future. Two papers from our gathering instantiate this approach, showing how church systems might faithfully innovate as part of missional discernment.

Nelus Niemandt, in his role at Huguenote College in South Africa, has recognized the need to create institutional spaces for creativity, innovation and experimentation. Such institutional spaces need to be mission-aligned and integrative, so that groups can work across disciplines on an issue or question related to the mission and context of the institution. In the case of Huguenote College, Niemandt has created a School for Social Innovation, which sits between its theological and social work faculties, creating room for theologically-informed projects in community-building for the improvement of society. While a new and innovative structure for the school, it emerges from a contextual assessment of its tradition and history. An innovation itself, the School of Social Innovation exists to help others do the same by helping

students and social entrepreneurs to consider their faith, values and theology in relationship to pressing social issues and structural inequalities. Improvising with existing materials and deeply attentive to the challenges of one's locale, faithful innovation opens itself to a future in God, to God's future. As such, it is *faithful* innovation and also faithful *innovation*.

We need more than institutional space for innovation, however. Popular discourse regarding missional innovation tends to put a term like "creativity" on a pedestal, making innovation an end in itself. As Andrew Root (2022) shows, innovation and creativity make poor ends for the church. In a paper presented at the consultation, Dorte Kappelgaard reflected upon her work with congregations in Denmark and Norway, exploring how a theology of creation and a Christian aesthetics can reframe the pursuit of innovation from a never-ending quest to forge "the new" to an act of surrender to the mission of God.

Creativity, Kappelgaard argues, should be understood in relationship to a theology of creation, rooted in the biblical narrative of God as creator and human beings as created in God's image. In the book of Genesis, the Spirit of God soars above the dark void, seeing and imagining possibility and bringing order out of chaos. God speaks "let there be light", and there is light. God creates the universe, the earth, nature, animals and human beings, and God blesses them all and sees them as good. Several voices in the early church tradition stress the creative movement of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: God is one who sends energies of love toward creation and who invites us into the Triune God's own creative dance of love and being (Fuhrmann 2011: 56–9). Human creativity participates in this movement of God, potentially taking part in the creative, life-giving movement of God's Spirit through the world. In this perspective, creativity is fundamentally about being human. Creativity reflects God's energies of love, moving from person to person, participating in God's creation and giving shape to one's local context. It should be a question of love, joy, even playfulness, taking the shape of church, searching to reach out towards the other in fresh, responsive ways.

In a Christian worldview, participating in God's creativity will always be flawed. It carries, as Winner notes, "characteristic damage" (2018). Even our most creative and hopeful acts will reflect selfish motives, fear, worry and/or pride. The church thus faces a choice regarding its own understanding of the human creature. In one approach, being human and being church can be envisioned as competing goods, turning the other into an object for use, consumption, or success. But within another approach, the other person is understood to be a living mystery, a potential co-creator in Christ for the sake of something much more beautiful and interesting than the story of one church.

In this second perspective, the world is full of possibility and longing, waiting to be released and for life to spring forth, partly in this time and age, partly in the world to

come. Understood in relationship to creativity, innovation is a form of self-forgetting, a people caught up in the creative dance of God and God's world. Like listening to music or viewing art, innovation as creativity reconfigures subjectivity, enabling one to be moved and transformed as an actor. This is what the German Hartmut Rosa describes as resonance between the subject and the world (2016: 298).

Kappelgaard argues that there is a close relationship between such theological approaches to creativity and theological aesthetics. Among many philosophical definitions of beauty, one is that which holds a value in itself (Scruton 2009: 26). In the Genesis narrative, the goodness of God's creation is not related to its instrumental value, but rather to its value in itself, a creature of God. In the light of the above, creation holds an inner beauty that God recognizes. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that without sensitivity towards beauty, we lose our ability to love (1982, 1: 18). The world was created out of love, just as it is the beauty of God's creation that makes us love it. Creativity – understood as participation in the creative love of God – cultivates spaces, communities, programs, art and music which hold a sense of beauty, of value in themselves, and call for us to love.

In her work with congregations, Kappelgaard draws from such theories of creativity and beauty to help congregations envision innovation as an open-ended act of communal creativity and exploration in the hope for beauty to appear, without being able to evoke or control it. In listening to God, to each other and to the local context, the church is on a constant, dynamic journey of looking for the deeper beauty, which calls for us to love the other. Asking God to help us see the world with God's eyes, it is the beauty of a potential, a deep dark void in the local neighborhood that calls for us to get up and engage in a journey of creative exploration with the Spirit and the stranger.

This is not to say that tradition is set aside for the sake of the beautiful. Beauty is not in itself related to "the new". Tradition, both understood as that which we hold dear and as the meaning of Christian tradition, is connected to beauty in some form. It is through seeing the beauty of the faithfulness of those who have gathered, Sunday after Sunday over several decades, that we come to love tradition as beautiful. When listening to people's emotions and narratives connected to the church community or its rituals, we may sense a glimpse of this depth of richness and experience. This is often where the conversation begins, in celebrating the beauty of what is, as well as mourning the beauty of what is now only in the past. Recognizing the beauty of the present can help communities to explore new ways in which this beauty might spill over and bless the context in new forms. Being given a space and time to mourn the beauty of what used to be can set people on a journey towards travelling with a lighter rucksack, becoming open to that which may be coming toward them as potential new life. This is the eschatological aspect of creativity.

Innovation, so understood, calls us to repent of our tendency to objectify the other, turning them into a tool for our success or survival, either through sustaining the well-known or inventing the new. And, like Jesus calling out “repent and believe”, innovation also requires a posture of surrender to God, coupled with an openness to the community, the stranger, and that which might be surprising or unexpected. There might even be a call to look for the beauty in the process, approaching each formal meeting or each spontaneous conversation with a stranger as a place where the beauty of God is reflected in all its brokenness.

One could argue that this calls for a movement of surrender to God when we realize we have fallen short in imagination and hopefulness, in sensitivity to the beauty of the existing, in welcoming the stranger in courage, or in responding to the movement of the Spirit. But what types of places are people free for creativity and the embrace of beauty? What types of contexts are more likely to cultivate such practices?

Faithful Innovation as an Ecological Challenge

As mentioned above, the proceedings of ICEF developed a view toward faithful innovation deeply connected to the locale in which the church or denomination operates. Faithful innovation exercises fidelity to the Christian gospel as well as those to whom God sends the Church. Such a dynamic cultivates creativity and the possibility of beauty, if the congregation can remain open to the new, the surprising, the unexpected, the possibility of guns melting into a sign of peace. Faithful innovation, then, considers the local wisdom of a place and seeks to support the people of faith. Faithful innovation requires and helps sustain a particular kind of social ecology, as demonstrated in the work of Hagley, Rohrer and Gehrling (2020), James (2017) and Benac (2020). It perhaps goes without saying, but it is within the thick web of connections shaped over time by individual relationships and institutional partnerships that new possibilities emerge. Faithful innovation both reflects an ecology of attentive discernment to the movement of God in our midst and also cultivates a social space within which such discernment can take place.

Given the fact that neither new experiments in missional church nor existing establishment congregations have a monopoly on either term – neither *faithful* nor *innovation* – we must imagine faithful innovation as an ecological orientation. We describe this as an orientation or capacity for drawing attention to the contemporary challenges that are present in existing ecclesial ecologies in ways that help the organization learn how the reordering and renegotiation of relationships creates opportunities for new possibilities. It is not up to heroic and visionary missionaries or social entrepreneurs to show the way for our congregations, but rather the task of the whole Church to create hospitable space for theological discernment and social innovation. To this end, we explored during the consultation three aspects of this

ecological orientation: the conditions for faithful innovation in an ecclesial ecology, the challenges before faithful innovation in an ecclesial ecology, and the cultivation of faithful innovation in an ecclesial ecology. This section will briefly detail each of these aspects.

Conditions

Throughout the ICEF gathering, we observe five different conditions for an innovative ecosystem: connection, context, creativity, convening and contrast. Connection describes the need for thick bonds and healthy communication between individuals within faithful communities, existing and emerging experiments in the community or the larger denominational system, those who interpret and interrogate the tradition (the theological and practical resources from the past), and the Triune God. The relational properties of connection are equally important. For example, connection requires trust and often takes time. In so far as connection is condition for faithful innovation, it cannot always be measured on fixed timelines and predetermined outputs.

Second, context is an essential condition for faithful innovation. While the people of God have always been rooted in particular contexts, many of the most hopeful signs of faithful innovation are (re)turning to place and a more local faith. This is reflected in studies like Chris James's (2017) exploration of new faith communities in Seattle, where "neighbourhood incarnation" communities offered vital and timely reimagining of church life and ministry. So also, Doret Niemandt, in a paper presented at the consultation, studied online church ministries in South Africa during the COVID lockdowns. She offers a rich description of multi-layered contextual ministry, where both online worlds and embodied practices cultivate intertwined and contingent contexts within which innovative experiments in Christian community must take place.

Third, faithful innovation requires a culture that cultivates and gives permission for creativity. Creative ecosystems are not only restless with the status quo, but open to surprise and expectant of beauty in their life together. As mentioned in the previous section, the form of creativity that nourishes faithful innovation within an ecclesial ecology is sustained by hope; amid the many contemporary challenges that confront faith communities and faith leaders, hope stirs a form of creativity that innovates not from fear or anxiety, but from an orientation of offering. Ecosystems that innovate are characterized by this restlessness, hope, and openness to beauty, such that the work of faithful innovation simply bears witness to God's ongoing generosity by seeking to offer creative and compelling work, words, and wonder into the world.

Fourth, innovative ecosystems convene individuals and community for the sake of reflection, worship, and collective discernment. Representing more than a practice of gathering, convening is a form of individual and collective inquiry that orients

a collective in worship of God. To this end, the gathering of the ICEF purposefully convened scholars, practitioners and judicatory leaders through worship and across the silos and geographic divisions that can inhibit faithful innovation. Too often church systems fail to convene groups across difference for the sort of reflection, worship and discernment that deepens connection and fosters creativity.

Fifth, innovative ecosystems tolerate and learn from unexpected and contrasting experiences. Too often, innovation is sacrificed at the altar of assimilation and sameness. We sacrifice innovation for a narrow understanding of faithful. As a condition for an innovative ecosystem, contrast – understood as space for difference – names the need for a holding environment in which various forms of contrast can become generative for faithful innovation rather than inhibiting it. In many contexts present at this the ICEF gathering, the seeds of faithful innovation emerged from the existence or experience of contrasting realities in some way. Scholars of leadership and innovation have described this phenomena in various ways (e.g., “liminality” [Carson, Fairhurst and Rooms 2021]; or “boundary zones” [Gunderson 2004]). Our description here draws attention to how polarized realities or experience have the capacity to draw into sharper contrast the particular work faithful innovation requires. For example, faithful innovation may require discerning how to curate new expressions while also discerning the role and legacy of what is inherited. Faithful innovation may require navigating the contexts between the need for organizational structure and the forms of transcendence that draws this work forward. It requires tending to the need for boundary-crossing connection as well as the forms of belonging that often emerge from separate communities. And faithful innovation requires cultivating a dynamic of sharing learning through the contrast of “Ressourcement” and “Aggiornamento” in the spirit of Vatican II. While the precise combination of conditions may vary, our work together drew attention to these five conditions for faithful innovation.

Challenges

Nevertheless, barriers to faithful innovation exist. Even as an ecological orientation for faithful innovation draws attention to the abundance of resources and opportunities that exist, it also requires a somber assessment of the living system that surrounds existing and emerging experiments. Our work together drew attention to a constellation of related challenges. First, there is a need for space where existing ecclesial expression and new churches invite individuals and communities to explore faithful innovation. Amid the contemporary demands on religious leaders’ time, there may be a desire to explore faithful innovation, but there is a limited amount of time and creative energy. Moreover, existing educational pipelines do not always equip religious leaders with the skills and imagination to consider the process of

faithful innovation beyond a pragmatic calculus of survival. Second, faithful innovation requires a risk and willingness to step into the unknown, and many contemporary institutions, churches, governing bodies, and Christian communities simply lack what they need to take the first step. For participants drawn from the United States, competition leads to loneliness for pastors as well as congregations. Further, amid the generational transitions in wealth and giving practice, some communities may face financial challenges that can make the possibility of trying (and funding) something new a risk that is too much to take. In Europe, the parish structures suffers in its own way. While it helpfully indexes religious life to a particular locality, parishes are not always resourced with the personnel and capital faithful innovation requires. Third, relational, structural and institutional barriers can inhibit gathering and exploring across traditional and new expressions. While an ecological orientation toward faithful innovation invites individuals and communities to see the possibility that comes from these forms of encounters, seen and unseen barriers persist that discourage the process and can leave innovators isolated and working against formidable challenges.

Cultivation

Finally, we want to conclude by exploring ways we may cultivate an ecological orientation for faithful innovation. Just as living ecologies require care in order to flourish, faithful innovation in and for the flourishing of our ecclesial ecologies requires purposeful cultivation. We identified three areas of work. First, there is a need for new meeting spaces that center the wisdom of local congregations and provide opportunities to collaborate and foster the resources (financial as well as relational) that nourish an orientation for faithful innovation. In so far as the work of the ICEF provides a test case, the work of this group over two decades has served as an incubator for experiments, a space to form new connections, and meeting place for friendships that span geographies. Second, the inevitable tensions and contrasts evoked by innovation are both vital to the ecclesial ecology but also require management. Without pressing the ecological metaphor too far, we will simply note that the flourishing environmental ecology includes members who do not always get along. While our work together wants to envision and anticipate the “kin-dom of God”, as Isasi-Diaz notes (2004), we also do not want to heedlessly diminish polarization. Rather, when differences are affirmed and connections strong, polarities can move groups toward discernment and offer surprising forms of community. Finally, there is a need for processes where insights, best practices, and learnings from one part of an ecclesial ecology can find their way back to members in other parts of the ecclesial community. As one participant noted, this can be represented by a figure eight movement that gives space for the best insights from two “poles” to migrate toward

common ground in a way that minimizes the contrasts that might come from two approaches. When cultivated and maintained over time, this cycle of information sharing creates an environment where we think faithful innovation can continue to form and flourish.

An Invitation

Finally, in the spirit of our work together, we want to extend a humble invitation. The kind of imagination that resources and nourishes faithful innovation in and for an ecclesial ecology is carried forth by stories. Story is and has been one of the dominant genres of Christian faith and practice, and we anticipate that the work of faithful innovation – in so far as it seeks to retain connection to patterns of Christian thought – will be nourished by stories of the living people and communities or are labouring to do this holy-yet-ordinary work well. And even when the work is unfinished or it doesn't fulfil conventional models of success, telling the story has the power to give witness to God's ongoing work in and through our creaturely creations. We offer these words in a similar spirit and hope, giving our creaturely testimony to a broader ecclesial ecology where we hope faithful innovation will find a home.

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BOOK REVIEW

Hartman, Tim. 2020. *Theology After Colonization: Bediako, Barth, and the Future of Theological Reflection*

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press
ISBN: 978-0-268-10653-9

Reviewed by Pieter Labuschagne

Hartman's book delineates the arrival of colonization and Christendom in Africa as intricately linked, interdependent and mutually reinforcing phenomena that have wielded a profound influence on church history spanning the last seventeen centuries, particularly in the context of the unfolding Western pursuit of expansion and dominance. The book is divided into two sections. The first addresses the contemporary state of Western Christian theology. It elucidates the effects of pluralism and secularization, which have given rise to cultural hegemony; the deterioration of the inherent connection between Christian faith and political authority; and the transformative impact of globalization on the erstwhile objectives of colonization.

The second part examines theology through the lenses of Christological, contextual, cultural, constructive and collaborative reflection. This involves a comparative study of the responses of two twentieth-century theologians to the colonial-Christendom complex within their respective contexts. The first theologian, Karl Barth (1886–1968), a Swiss-German scholar, addressed the challenges posed by Christendom and the escalating secularization of Europe. Barth grounded his dogmatic reflections on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, rather than relying on official institutional structures (including the church) or societal consensus.

The second theologian, Kwame Bediako (1945–2008), from Ghana, presented a post-colonial theology. Writing from the global South, where Christianity experienced substantial growth following the withdrawal of Western missionaries, Bediako espoused the belief in the infinite translatability of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He contends that the gospel could be incarnated in Africa as a non-Western religion, distinct from the influences of colonization.

There are striking similarities between their theologies: both couple Christianity with political power; both develop theologies that are independent of the

colonial-Christendom complex – even before it collapsed; their work indicates the way forward for Christological, contextual, cultural, constructive and collaborative theological reflection; both respond in the same way to nineteenth-century European Protestantism, in wanting to break the connection between the gospel and the colonial culture that had been forged in Africa, and a similar religion that was promoted in Europe; they are both interested in matters of revelation, religion and culture.

At the age of 25, Bediako underwent a profound conversion to Christianity that played a pivotal role in the rediscovery of his African identity and spirituality – he believed that turning to Christ made him more African than Western. Half a century earlier, at the age of 28, Karl Barth, then a pastor in Switzerland, also underwent a significant awakening that substantially redirected the trajectory of his life. Barth wanted the church to confront the state rather than align itself with its policies. When his theological mentors supported the military policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Barth lost faith in nineteenth-century theology.

Over the past five centuries, Christianity has witnessed a decline in Europe, attributed to the phenomenon of secularization, while the church in the global South has experienced remarkable growth in the last fifty years, following the end of colonization. Hartman, therefore, rejects the European-driven progress propagated by Christianity in the nineteenth century, supported by three pivotal failures: World War II, the Holocaust and the movement towards colonial independence.

Another shift identified by Hartman involves a transition from community-oriented values to an emphasis on individualism, where societal approval no longer served as the arbiter of meaning; individuals themselves assumed the authority to legitimize their own meaning. In anticipating this postcolonial critique of universalizing standards in Christianity, Barth and Bediako offered Jesus Christ, as the only universal truth, as the only alternative.

The second part of the book presents a fivefold approach to contemporary theological reflection.

Christological Reflection

In 1933, Barth authored a pamphlet critiquing church reform, the establishment of a national bishop and the collaboration of Christians with the Nazi government. He emphasized the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the exclusive theological authority. Prior to its confiscation by the Nazis in July 1934, over 37,000 copies of this pamphlet were printed.

Meanwhile, in Africa, Bediako confronted distinctly different challenges as he defended the centrality of Jesus Christ against syncretistic movements such as Afrikania, Islam and African traditional religions. He proclaimed a Christocentric theology,

with emphasis on the possibility of being both Christian and African; Christianity was a non-Western religion inherent to Africa; it was Christ who brought missionaries to Africa, not the other way around.

For Barth and Bediako, Immanuel, Christ with us, is the foundation and substance of theological reflection. We can learn the following from them about the rationale and methodology for a Christological focus of contemporary theology: (1) The gospel of Jesus embodies a prophetic and indigenous character; (2) all revelation is a manifestation of God's self-revelation; (3) this revelation is intended for all humanity; (4) it is an ongoing process; and (5) the universality of Christ serves as the grounding for theological reflection.

Contextual Reflection

Christina Afua Gyan (1900–1987), was a yam farmer, midwife and oral poet from Asempaneye in eastern Ghana. Her expressions of prayers and praises to God were inherently contextual, communicated in the Twi language. Images from her immediate environment served as background for the various names that she ascribed to Jesus, such as Hero, the Python, great Rock, big Tree, Chief of Police, the Elephant Hunter, and the Bravest of Muscle-Men. Bediako praises Gyan's work as an exemplary instance of contextual theology. By employing ancestral and royal titles to refer to Jesus, Gyan underscored the presence of Christ in Africa prior to the arrival of Western missionaries, challenging the notion that European vocabulary was necessary to encapsulate African theology.

It should be noted that the gospel and culture intersect in a specific locale, with the questions posed and the theological responses offered intricately tied to that place, a perspective both Barth and Bediako adhere to, notwithstanding the tendency to interpret Western theologians, such as Barth, without due consideration of their context. Barth asserts that much of his theology emerged as a response to the people, events and circumstances surrounding him. While recognizing context as the foundation of theological reflection, he maintains that it should not dictate or confine theology.

Context, as Hartman contends, inevitably shapes our comprehension, a fact not always appreciated by Westerners engaging with Africa. Both Barth and Bediako reject the notion of religion as mere projection, seeking to discern the essence of Jesus beyond human projections. They contend that God's revelation is accessible to all people, through the universality of Jesus.

Cultural Reflection

Culture is the location of revelation, though explaining the role of culture in theology is challenging and complex. Both Barth and Bediako emphasise the significance of culture but neither formulate specific methods for its analysis. For Barth the gospel was unique and identifiable amid culture, while Bediako believes that it is impossible to separate the two.

Constructive Reflection

At times Bediako goes too far in his emphasis on the interplay between the Bible and elements of African culture, like drawing a direct line between Jesus, the ancestors and the traditional Akan festival, in a sermon that he preached in 1990. Though Bediako claims that Western theology is more syncretistic than African theology, the opposite seems to be true when he claims that revelation occurs in and through culture. This elevates cultural theology above the pure gospel. In contrast, Barth emphasizes that there should be no synthesis of the Bible, Christ, ideas, religion or culture. There is no place for Christ plus culture; no system of thought should be placed above Christ or the Bible. Though Barth and Bediako have differing views on syncretism, the question must be asked whether there is not an element of syncretism present in all Christians.

Bediako promotes a new African theology that must make room within the historically inherited traditions for new ideas – an approach that starts with African culture and approaches the Bible from within culture. Barth holds that God’s self-revelation begins outside of culture and penetrates culture through Christ’s ministry.

Collaborative Reflection

In comparing Barth and Bediako, it becomes clear that contemporary theological reflection must be attentive to voices beyond one’s own immediate context. In the process one can learn valuable lessons:

- African Christians should learn to avoid the false dichotomy of either fully embracing or fully rejecting African traditional religions (ATRs), which will result in a balanced theology of ancestors, without embracing all the teachings of ATRs.
- Westerners could learn more about primal imagination.
- Westerners could be more self-critical about the combination of theology and culture that often becomes religion, more than revelation.
- Westerners should learn more about kinship with brothers and sisters in Africa.
- Changing contexts present a challenge to Western and African Christians to rethink and to rearticulate theology.

- Theological thought must move beyond the dichotomies of saved/lost, Christian/pagan, white/black and even Western/African.
- In our globalized, secular, pluralistic societies, the church must become outward-focussed.

The main contribution of the book is that for theological reflection to remain vibrant in a changing world, collaborative theology is not only a possibility, but a necessity.

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BOOK REVIEW

Müller, Sabrina. 2023. *Religious Experience and Its Transformational Power: Qualitative and Hermeneutic Approaches to a Practical Theological Foundational Concept*

Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter
ISBN: 978-3-11-100005-3

Reviewed by Shaun Joynt

This monograph is based on the habilitation thesis of Sabrina Müller who is Managing Director of the University Research Priority Program “Digital Religion(s)” and researcher and lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Zurich (see <https://communication.dsi.uzh.ch/member/sabrina-muller/>). Within the research study Müller sets out to “search for traces of how young urban adults understand and interpret their religious experiences and relate them to their everyday lives” in order to “provide impulses for current practical theological theory formation on the horizon of social change” (3). Müller offers the reason for this approach as “personal experiences have become the individual point of reference and orientation for interpreting the world and understanding oneself and God” and “human existence cannot be understood ... without experience [as it] is one of the most central concepts of practical theological research, social science, and humanities theory formation” (4). Her detailed exposition concerning religious experience as a practical theological challenge, sensitizing concepts, methodological choices and implementation, and her discussion and findings, all contribute to the value of the monograph as both a contribution to the current debate on religious experiences from a practical theological perspective as well as an example of a well-executed research study. Müller describes her research as an interdisciplinary study that is inductive, empirical and contextually Western (European and North American), which offers a foundational exploratory contribution to practical theological research by investigating “how and why urban people perceive their experiences as religious and how they categorize them and put them into language” (6). She conducts this in the paradigm of grounded theory by offering two sensitizing concepts, namely, religious experience (chapter 2) and human existence in late modernity (chapter 3) which includes a

focus on social changes with particular consideration of urbanity's influence therein. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the results of the qualitative data analysis (chapters 5–7). Finally, the inductively elaborated theories are discussed theologically (chapters 8–9).

Müller's interest in religious experiences stems from numerous discussions concerning the topic during her ten years as a youth worker and six years as a pastor and she spends considerable time indicating the interaction between faith, research and reflexivity advocating that the "awareness of the interrelatedness of personal religious existence and academic theological work, especially concerning theological preference and difference, does not hinder the necessary self-reflexivity but promotes it" (8).

Next, Müller goes into great detail concerning religious experience as a conceptual approach by considering an etymological definition of the word *experience*, contrasting experience (*Erfahrung*) and lived experience (*Erlebnis*), providing a brief historical overview of religious experience (Aristotle, Monasticism, Luther and Pietism), focussing on 1) sociological (Durkheim, Weber and Taves), 2) religious phenomenological (Schleiermacher, James, Otto and briefly Kant), and 3) theological concepts (Barth and Tillich) of religious experience. Next she covers human existence in late modernity by considering urbanity (Bauman etc.) and digital spaces (Harari, Schulz and Foucault) and how these two aspects contribute to an "individualized and pluralized space of experience" (40). Thereafter urbanity research is discussed and a case is made for its importance which includes the conditions and characteristics of being human in urbanity, for example, freedom and foreignness, individuality and sociality, as well as a section on the theological perspectives on life in the city.

Müller's methodological interlude (chapter 4) includes her selection of grounded theory (leaning towards classic Glasserian), participatory action research (includes 20 co-researchers), case studies (six groups in three locations) and focus group interviews (between two and four participants at a time). She offers particulars of a survey consisting of five phases that is completed in a 90-minute period. These include a welcome and introduction (phase 1), a standardized questionnaire (phase 2), a creative approach to the topic, namely, making a drawing (phase 3), a biographical-narrative explanation of the drawing (phase 4), and a group discussion (phase 5). Next she goes into great detail concerning the data collected from her 20 co-researchers in each of these phases (chapters 5–7) considering religious experiences (chapter 5) "as a snapshot in which a process is triggered" (116), associated with transcendence, "uncontrollability, (God) cognition, new insights, and high emotionality" (117) and that "the changes that come from it are the work of God or experiences of faith" (118). Chapter 6 considers the "inner aspects and basic observations on the religious experiences of the cross-case and cross-group evaluation" (119) which includes the importance of these religious experiences in the lives of the

co-researchers, the role of religious imprinting, and the subjectiveness of the experience. Chapter 7 considers “religious experience and the change of the personal frame of reference [through a] cross-case and cross-group evaluation” (127) which includes changing the frame of reference processually through religious experiences – these religious experiences occur in everyday settings, and transformation “leads to a reinterpretation of one’s identity and position in the world and thus to a changed view of oneself, others, and the world” (169).

Müller’s interpretation of the results (chapter 8) includes practical theological anthropological considerations (Knoblauch, Luhmann, Luckmann, Buber and Ricoeur), the epistemological character of religious experience (Tillich, Schottroff, Fischer, Ward and Gadamer), and “the transformative aspects of such experiences for personal life” (204) (Luckmann, Dalferth, Gräß and Tillich). Within this chapter a comprehensive definition is offered based on the research, namely, “Religious experience is a *Widerfahrnis* with a God experienced as relational (relational event), which can transform the personal frame of reference into the horizon of a Christian perspective of hope, whereby the interpretive and understanding handling of this experience is an integral part of the experience” (196). Chapter 9 provides a practical theological outlook, namely, Christian perspectives of hope. Here Müller shows the link between religious experience and lived theology (Tillich, Astley, Salazar, Luther and numerous others) and concludes that “prioritizing contextual religious experiences brings practical theology into the midst of life ... and leads to the existential, meaning-giving, and liberating perspectives of hope of human life” (223).

An analysis of Müller’s monograph includes the theoretical framework used, methodology selected argument presented, evidence provided, contribution to the current debate and relevance to its intended audience.

The theoretical framework and methodology selected by Müller is grounded theory and this is suitable considering that her intent is to “discover” how and why her 20 co-researchers have religious experiences. Classic grounded theory methodology (GTM) usually begins without a literature review; however, this is found problematic by some from a more traditional research background and thus her use of sensitizing concepts ensures that there is an adequate literature background for the study without compromising GTM’s core values, that is, discovery. One of the outcomes in GTM would be a basic social process which in this case is not too clearly indicated as was done with the phases of the survey. Another outcome would be a substantive theory or even grand theory, with the former being present in the monograph. In GTM, open, axial and selective coding is pursued until theoretical saturation is achieved and no new categories or themes emerge. Various themes are evident in the research study, for example, contingency, transcendence, subjectivity and lived religion.

The argument presented is contained in the comprehensive definition previously mentioned, that is, religious experiences are transcendental in nature and contextually related to God (notably this study is from a Christian perspective) and are experienced relationally (with self and other humans) and often result in a transformation of the personal frame of reference that is associated with hope and “the interpretive and understanding handling of this experience is an integral part of the experience” (196). There is evidence of more than adequate engagement with numerous scholars and schools of thought concerning religious experiences that augment the argument throughout the monograph. This evidence includes engagement with sociological scholars (Durkheim, Weber etc.), theological scholars (Luther, Schleiermacher, Barth, Tillich, Gräb etc.), and philosophers (Aristotle, Foucault, Gadamer, Ricœur). The contribution of this research to the current debate lies in its processual perspective of religious experiences as lived religion. These religious experiences are to be understood as “discursive phenomenon[a] related to everyday life” (204), that they are liquid (not bound to the classical dualisms), that the person is both the subject and object of knowledge (see her exposition of the Hebrew word *ידע* meaning *to recognize*), and that *Widerfahrnis* captures the experience and resulting transformation and is to be viewed as “a relational gift of God” (194). One aspect that seems to be lacking is a legend indicating the convention used to identify the co-researcher’s words. For example, a footnote indicates “1 EZ L.A. 1 Abby, 12.16” (89) and it is not clear what each of these identifiers mean. This reviewer was able to ascertain that 1 = Group 1, EZ = (unclear), L.A. = Los Angeles (one of the three group’s locations), 1 = (unclear), Abby (the co-researcher’s name), 12.16 = (unclear). The monograph’s relevance to its intended audience cannot be over-emphasized. First, it serves as an example of a well-researched and written PhD thesis. Secondly, it is freely available in electronic format via an open access publishing arrangement with De Gruyter which means students and lecturers as well as scholars interested in the topic of religious experience are able to retrieve it without cost (the hardcover is available for purchase). For these reasons it is highly recommended.

In conclusion, the research study succeeds in its aim to “contribute to a better understanding of every day, individual and social religious reality construction, religious imprints, and the emergence of religious identity” (6). At the end of the monograph Müller cautions her readers that “practical theological teaching and learning that does not take the (religious) experiences of students seriously and does not integrate them misses its mission because the goal of theological education cannot be a dissociated contact between personal experience, lived everyday theology, and practical theology” (220). An apt ending indeed.

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BOOK REVIEW

Spijker, J. van 't. 2021. *To Participate: Looking for an ecclesial structure to be a witnessing church today*

Utrecht: Eburon Academic Publishers
ISBN: 978-94-6301-361-1

Reviewed by Rein den Hertog

Missionary fruitfulness in the form of new ecclesial communities in a Western context is liable to generate uncomfortable scenarios for traditional church denominations. After all, new missionary communities do not always take existing ecclesial cultures into account and often deviate from well-trodden paths. Not surprisingly, God's mission often puts pressure on ecclesial cultures. In this light, the pursuit of fruitful cross-fertilization between traditional denominations and new missionary communities is of utmost importance.

Ecclesial Discomfort

It is this very tension that led Van 't Spijker to conduct his study of a small Reformed denomination in the Netherlands: the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (CGKN). This denomination is characterized by Van 't Spijker as having a pietistic slant, thereby placing an important emphasis on the believer's personal relationship with God. At the turn of this century, a joyful development occurred within the CGKN with missionary communities of new believers emerging in major cities. Initially these developments were greeted with joy, but as the years passed, discomfort increased. This discomfort was already painfully visible in the naming: the new congregations were called "missionary congregations", thereby implying that the traditional congregations were not characterized by the same adjective. But it went beyond the naming, which in itself could be dismissed as a being a matter of mere semantics. The practices within these communities deviated from what was standard in the culture of the CGKN, straining the relationship between the new ecclesial communities and the denomination. At one point, the synod of the CGKN even proposed that the new communities form a separate denomination. It did not come to that, but the

mere suggestion indicates that missionary fruit was seen as a possible danger to the own ecclesial culture. So, which would take precedence: the missionary calling or church culture?

Missiological Conferences and Missiologists

In his research, Van 't Spijker is looking for a fruitful interaction between traditional denominations and new ecclesial communities. How can existing denominations learn from missionary fruitfulness? To do so, he first turns to the missionary discussion of the last century. An overview of ecumenical conferences shows that the church is called to participate in the mission of God, not as an activity alongside its "ordinary" life, but as an expression of its very nature. The church should not be primarily focused on its own growth, but on its service to the kingdom of God.

Next, to look for starting points for the *missio Dei* within Reformed ecclesiology, Van 't Spijker puts his ear to the ground of some Reformed missiologists who have been decisive for the situation in the Netherlands. He discusses successively J. H. Bavink, Kraemer, Verkuyl and Newbiggin. Remarkably, the name of Hoekendijk, who after all had an enormous influence in the Netherlands, is missing here. This is unfortunate, because a balanced treatment of Hoekendijk's radical critique of ecclesiocentrism could have helped to bring Reformed vulnerabilities into focus.

Practical Theological Research

With both overviews in mind, Van 't Spijker focuses on the CGKN. Using the Theological Action Research method, he listens to the normative, formal and espoused voices within this denomination. The conclusions that Van 't Spijker then draws on this basis are perhaps not as surprising as they are painful. The pietistic slant of the CGKN results in a vision of salvation "in mainly individual, spiritual (non-physical), post-mortem categories: It is about justification of sin and entering into eternal glory with God. Related to this, the physical and communal aspects of salvation that are taking shape in today's world are only secondary"¹ (190). Within the CGKN, therefore, there has always remained a certain reluctance toward the concept of *Missio Dei*, prompted by the fear that in this way the gospel threatened to become very horizontal. After all, the gospel is about the justification of sinners and not about the betterment of the world. Van 't Spijker therefore argues that within the CGKN there

1 Van 't Spijker realizes that a pietistic slant need not necessarily result in an inward focus – examples from the past show that pietistic communities can be very much committed to work in the world – but he sees the main problem of the CGKN's pietism lying in a lack of theology of God's kingdom.

has hardly been an eye for God's action in the totality of reality. In such a setting, mission risks narrowing into a form of proselytism.

Conclusions

Van 't Spijker draws to a close with a chapter in which he gives impulses for a church structure that does justice to the concept of *missio Dei*. As far as he is concerned, this begins with the fact that the whole of church life must be rethought from the *missio Dei*. This means, for example, that the church order must be re-examined to see if all canon law arrangements are serving the growth of God's kingdom in this world. It also means that the CGKN must take a critical look at the agenda of church meetings: Are the things the CGKN puts on the agenda actually on God's agenda? In addition, the CGKN must rethink how ecclesial ministry is designed. In the current situation, ecclesial ministries are particularly internally focused, but an open eye to God's kingdom means that a shift is to occur here as well.

Assessment

Van 't Spijker's research is a welcome addition to the missionary discourse in the Netherlands and Western Europe. Based on practical theological research, he convincingly shows how an existing denomination is primarily focused on its own ecclesial culture and therefore has insufficient regard for the work of the Spirit outside the walls of its own church. It is to be feared that the CGKN are not an exception in Western Europe in this regard. Van 't Spijker's study is therefore useful for existing churches that want to live up to their missionary nature while facing a highly secularized culture.

Van 't Spijker takes a comprehensive approach in which he provides an overview of discussions and states of affairs with a birds-eye view. Instead of zooming in on one aspect of ecclesiology or a particular church practice, Van 't Spijker observes – from a distance, as it were – an entire denomination. This helps to get the big picture in view without getting bogged down in details. But there is also a downside: the consequence of a birds-eye view is that the vulnerabilities and possible solutions are only drawn sketchily. The final chapter of the study remains therefore slightly unsatisfying: the general areas of concern are localized and loosely characterized, without serious in-depth reflection. Positively stated: Van 't Spijker's research calls for a follow-up in which the sketchy drawings are further developed.

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Ecclesial Futures publishes original research and theological reflection on the development and transformation of local Christian communities and the systems that support them as they join in the mission of God in the world.

We understand local Christian communities broadly to include traditional “parish” churches and independent local churches, religious communities and congregations, new church plants, so-called “fresh expressions” of church, “emergent” churches, and “new monastic” communities.

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The journal fills an important reflective space between the academy and on-the-ground practice within the field of mission studies, ecclesiology, and the so-called “missional church.” This opportunity for engagement has emerged in the last twenty or so years from a turn to the local (and the local church) and, in the Western world at least, from the demise of Christendom and a rapidly changing world – which also affects the church globally.

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