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BOOK REVIEWS

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Editorial

Steve Taylor

Welcome to what is the twelfth issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, a journal focused on the mission of God in the world, particularly in local Christian communities and the systems that support them.

In this issue, you will find seven articles that explore the nature of the mission of God. Three of the articles are written by scholars in Global South contexts, three investigate charismatic and Pentecostal churches, while four study the systems that support local Christian communities. These include funding, ecumenical partnerships, diocesan strategies, and digital technologies. Together, these seven articles illuminate the interconnected and interwoven nature of God's mission in the world that God loves.

Original research

The **first** article, by Mishael Donkor Ampofo and Peter White, studies the funding of mission in denominational systems. They demonstrate through empirical research how the dramatic shift in global Christianity's centre of gravity towards Africa is transforming mission work dynamics, including in the funding of mission. Semi-structured interviews and extensive documentary analysis illuminate how the Assemblies of God in Ghana have combined traditional church giving with modern technological solutions. The denomination sought to finance 3,000 new churches within a five-year period. Strategies included collaborative partnerships, including with technology companies to support automatic mobile micro-giving programs. A feature of the article is the attention paid to indigenous approaches to mission funding. The implementation of robust accountability structures and cultural sensitivity marked an alternative to traditional funding models, which can create unhealthy dependencies.

A **second** article examines the limits and possibilities of missionary church development in the cities of Europe. Given a lack of research into interconfessional unity in contemporary church planting, Thomas Kräuter and Jack Barentsen interview church planters and ministers in Vienna, Austria. They found that ecumenical cooperation is very limited, due to theological assumptions and time constraints. Looking forward, they propose a regional ecumenical church planting hub across confessional

boundaries. In response to the isolation of church planting, a hub would encourage missiological togetherness through relational support, mutual learning, and spiritual community in developing new forms of church.

In a **third** article studying the systems that support local Christian communities, Andrew Dunlop investigates how dioceses as a church system might support innovation. He draws on the term "mixed ecology" which has been used by the Church of England to affirm how traditional and new forms of church can mutually flourish rather than simply co-exist. The article analyses almost every diocesan strategy in the Church of England, along with vision statements and publicly available documentation. Dunlop encourages dioceses to work at "amplification", where the sharing of stories legitimizes innovation and invites creativity.

A **fourth** article examines another system, that of digital technology. Heidi A. Campbell and Meg Boone develop findings from a three-year study of how Indiana churches utilized and integrated technology to sustain community and spiritual life amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. A central insight is the realization by church leaders that technology is not a peripheral tool pre-pandemic but an essential component. The research also affirms the value of intergenerational collaboration to enrich decision-making around the adoption and adaptation of technology. Older church leaders tended to favour Facebook as a platform, while younger leaders favoured platforms like Instagram and Twitter. Mission challenges remain, including "digital divides" within congregations and among smaller and rural congregations.

In a **fifth** article, Sara Oliva examines faith formation in independent charismatic communities in Perth, Australia. She offers an invaluable insight, first, because of her empirical work on new expressions of independent community churches as an under-researched population. Second, she focuses on the journey of faith as she extends empirical work on recent converts in Australia and applies it in relation to supporting congregants in lifelong spiritual journeys. The article thus has practical relevance for church leaders as it affirms the importance of relational authenticity in nurturing faith during seasons of doubt, crisis and transition. (On a personal note, I was privileged to supervise Sara Oliva in her post-graduate research and to explore with her ways to publish her findings. My thanks to *Ecclesial Futures* co-editor Nigel Rooms for coordinating the double blind peer review of this article).

A **sixth** article examines the growth of African Pentecostalism. Mookgoo Solomon Kgatle defines and develops two theoretical concepts, *missio spiritus* and indigenous provenance. The work of the Holy Spirit – in witness, redemption life and creation – is argued to be central in the development of Indigenous expressions of African Pentecostalism. Thus, Kgatle's demonstrates that the growth of African Pentecostalism is "informed by the way Africans have embraced the mission of the Spirit". This challenges how Pentecostal missiologists understand missions, indigeneity, and world Christianity. Equally, Kgatle also challenges African Pentecostalism by outlining how

embracing the role of the Spirit of creation can strengthen engagement in environmental issues.

A **seventh and final** article examines unity and diversity in Pentecostal churches in Ghana. Working with recorded sermons and members' experiences, Eric Manu compares Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry and Believers Worship Centre. The research is important because it rejects generalizations by paying attention to living praxis. Rather than contrast unity and diversity, Manu argues for a coexistence of unity in shared elements and diversity in distinct differences within the Pentecostal practices of these two churches. The article offers fascinating insights into how Pentecostal worship and leadership practices support participants in the challenges of everyday life. Significantly, the research focuses on the emergence of women's leadership in community service and their pioneering role in what has historically been male-dominated communities of faith.

The seven articles are followed by five book reviews. The reviews are evidence of a community of scholars who are reading, thinking, and interacting together about the mission of God in the world in and through Christian communities. We always welcome book reviews, particularly of manuscripts relevant to mission and the future of the church in the Global South.

As always, my thanks to my colleagues Nigel Rooms (co-editor), Patrick Todjeras (editor of book reviews), Christopher Pipe (copy-editor), and the team at Radboud University Press and Open Journals for their skill and care. Because of Diamond Open Access, original research is available free to authors and readers. To receive updates about new articles and developments in *Ecclesial Futures*, please sign up to receive our newsletter at https://ecclesialfutures.org/.

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ARTICLE

Innovative Mission Funding: Approaches Used by Assemblies of God Ghana in the Vision 3000 Initiative

Mishael Donkor Ampofo and Peter White

Abstract

This study examines the innovative funding approaches employed by the Assemblies of God Ghana (AG Ghana) during their Vision 3000 church planting initiative (2015–19). Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with 14 key stakeholders and extensive document review, the research explores how AG Ghana developed funding strategies combining traditional church giving with modern technological solutions. The study reveals that AG Ghana successfully utilized mobile micro-giving programmes, corporate partnerships, diaspora networks, and systematic local church contributions. While achieving significant success in resource mobilization, the initiative encountered challenges including urban–rural economic disparities, and sustainability concerns in economically disadvantaged regions. The findings provide insights into contemporary mission funding approaches, suggesting the need for adaptive funding models that balance innovative financing mechanisms with traditional stewardship practices while remaining sensitive to local economic realities. The study also highlights the role of accountability and transparency, in mission fund mobilization and management. This contributes to ongoing discourse on sustainable mission funding in African Christianity.

Keywords: Mission funding, Vision 3000, Assemblies of God Ghana, Church planting, Resource mobilization

1. Introduction

The dramatic shift in global Christianity's centre of gravity towards Africa has fundamentally transformed mission work dynamics, particularly in funding approaches. This transformation is evidenced by Africa becoming the continent with the highest number of Christians, making up approximately 58% of the population in the year 2020 (Johnson and Grim 2020). As of 2024, Africa is home to approximately 734 million Christians, making it the continent with the highest number of Christians

globally (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary 2024). Within this context, the emergence of Africa-to-Africa missions represents a significant paradigm shift in how mission work is conceptualized, implemented and funded in contemporary times.

The financing of mission initiatives remains a critical challenge in contemporary African Christianity, as churches seek to balance local sustainability with global impact. The Assemblies of God Ghana (AG Ghana) provides an instructive case study through its Vision 3000 initiative (2015–19), which aimed to establish 3,000 new churches within a five-year period. This ambitious project exemplifies the innovative approaches African churches are developing to address mission funding challenges while maintaining indigenous agency and sustainability.

While missions have traditionally been associated with Western agencies' funding work in Africa, the rise of African churches taking leadership in mission work presents both opportunities and challenges in mission funding approaches. The complexity of mission funding involves various aspects, including generosity, poverty alleviation and financial sustainability (Myers, 2011: 130; Franklin and Niemandt 2015). Despite some scholarly attention to aspects of mission funding, Bate (2001: 50) asserts that there remains academic neglect regarding comprehensive research on money and missions, particularly in African-initiated projects.

Vision 3000 funding mechanisms present a particularly compelling case study in mission funding innovation for several reasons. First, it represents one of the most ambitious church-planting initiatives in contemporary African Christianity. Second, it emerged from African indigenous church leaders rather than a Western mission organization and leadership, offering insights into indigenous approaches to mission funding. Third, its implementation coincided with significant technological and economic changes in Ghana, allowing examination of how traditional funding mechanisms adapt to contemporary realities.

The relationship between mission expansion and financial sustainability has generated significant scholarly discourse. Alawode (2020: 2) emphasizes that successful African churches must balance global connection with local relevance in their financial approaches. Similarly, Short (2021: 4) argues that effective religious fundraising requires endowing fiscal transactions with spiritual meaning, highlighting the need for both practical and theological considerations in mission funding. Asamoah-Gyadu (2021: 158) notes that technological and economic advancement in African Christianity requires new approaches to financial systems and resource mobilization.

The complexity of mission funding in African contexts presents unique challenges that demand critical examination. The intersection of theological principles, cultural realities and economic factors creates a multilayered environment where traditional Western funding models may not be fully applicable. This article examines how AG Ghana addressed these challenges through innovative funding mechanisms during

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their Vision 3000 initiative, focusing particularly on the integration of traditional stewardship practices with modern innovations.

This article contributes to the growing body of literature on African mission funding by providing a detailed analysis of an indigenous initiative that successfully navigated the complexities of modern mission financing. Through examining AG Ghana's Vision 3000, this study offers insights into innovative funding approaches that may inform other African churches' mission strategies while maintaining cultural authenticity and financial sustainability.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to assess the Vision 3000 initiative funding approaches within the Assemblies of God Ghana. Following Malhotra and Birks' (2006) approach to exploratory qualitative research, the study combined a historical and a phenomenological approach. Mustafa (2010) defines a historical approach as a methodology that enables the assessment of evidence to establish specific events and draw conclusions about past developments in the church's mission work.

Data collection involves semi-structured interviews with 14 participants; Rev. Professor Paul Frimpong-Manso (Immediate Past General Superintendent, Visioner of Vision 3000), Rev. Dr. Sam Ato Bentil (Chair of Vision 3000 Committee, Immediate Past General Treasurer, Senior Pastor of Liberty Centre AG Lapaz), Rev. Dr. Sylvanus Amegashiti-Elorm (Secretary of Vision 3000 Committee, Regional Director for OneHope Africa, Senior Pastor of Trinity Temple AG, Tema), Rev. Anthony John Doe (Current Foreign Missions Director, Seen as Operations Head for Vision 3000, Senior Pastor of North Kaneshie AG), two current Regional Superintendents, one former Regional Superintendent, one Regional Missions Director and six Senior Pastors from the 24 AG Ghana national regions. These participants were supplemented by an analysis of church documents and reports. The study utilizes purposive sampling, which Groenewald (2018) describes as identifying participants who can meaningfully contribute to understanding the phenomenon.

The data analysis followed Creswell's (2018) thematic analysis framework, where interview transcripts and document reviews were systematically coded and analysed to identify emerging patterns and themes. The coding process included open coding to identify initial themes, axial coding to link categories, and selective coding to refine and integrate core themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 101–3; Saldana, 2015). NVivo software was utilized to manage and organize the large volume of qualitative data. The findings are presented thematically and structured around the key funding approaches identified: local church participation and traditional giving, technological innovation, corporate partnerships, and diaspora network mobilization.

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Direct quotations from participants are integrated throughout the discussions to provide rich, detailed evidence supporting the theme. All participants consented to be named or anonymized and signed informed consent forms following Stellenbosch University's ethical protocols. Thus, this article forms part of a broader Missiological project approved under ethical clearance number REC: SBE 27453. Following the discussions on the methodology employed in this study, the discussion will now focus on discussing some existing literature on mission funding with special reference to Africa. This would therefore make room for discussions on the Assemblies of God Ghana's mission funding approaches for the Vision 3000 Initiative.

3. Mission Funding in the Contemporary Context of Africa

The literature on mission funding reveals an evolving perspective on financial sustainability in church growth initiatives, particularly in the African context. Traditional approaches emphasize local church giving and foreign mission support, but contemporary scholarship advocates for more diverse and contextually appropriate funding mechanisms. This evolution reflects broader changes in global Christianity and the increasing importance of indigenous church development.

Bonk's (1991: 58) seminal work on mission funding highlights the complex relationship between financial resources and mission effectiveness. He argues that traditional funding models often create unhealthy dependencies, suggesting the need for more sustainable approaches. This perspective is developed further by Myers (2011: 130), who emphasizes that effective mission funding must address both spiritual and material dimensions of sustainability. Myers particularly notes that the complexity of poverty involves limitations across the physical, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual needs of mankind, which all impact mission funding dynamics. However, in AG Ghana's Vision 3000, a strategy was deliberately developed to mitigate dependency by designing micro-giving structures rooted in local participation and ownership.

Building on these foundational insights, Walls (2002: 91) introduces the concept of the translation principle in mission funding, arguing that financial strategies must be meaningfully translated into local cultural contexts. This theoretical framework helps explain why some funding approaches succeed in certain contexts while failing in others. The principle particularly resonates in African contexts, where traditional communal resource-sharing practices often intersect with modern financial systems.

Furthermore, African scholarship provides crucial insights into contextual mission funding challenges. Bediako (1995: 187) argues that mission funding must resonate with African notions of community and self-reliance. This perspective is further

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developed by Asamoah-Gyadu (2005: 226), who suggests that giving in African contexts often intertwines with deeper cultural and spiritual significance.

Tongoi (2015) builds on this by examining how poverty impacts giving patterns in African churches. He observes that in contexts of poverty, people often develop low self-esteem and may constantly look to others for their needs. This creates particular challenges for developing sustainable local funding models. Gathogo (2011: 133–51) further notes how corruption in both church and society can entrench poverty cycles that affect mission funding capabilities. Notwithstanding, Vision 3000 offers a counter-narrative by empowering local communities through structured innovative micro-giving rather than much reliance on external relief dependence.

Furthermore, some studies reveal several emerging approaches to mission funding. Pocock et al. (2011: 53–7) describe various models, including self-supporting, indigenous and partnership approaches. They particularly note how the self-supporting model has evolved from its early missionary roots to take on different interpretations in different contexts.

Franklin and Niemandt (2015) introduce the concept of a "missiology of generosity" that seeks to integrate theological and practical perspectives on mission funding. Their work suggests that effective funding approaches must be grounded in both sound missiological principles and practical financial realities.

Notwithstanding, emerging literature increasingly has raised concerns about the need for mission funding to focus on technology by scholars such as Mawudor (2016: 179–84), and Lederleitner (2010: 838–928). Asamoah-Gyadu (2021: 158–63) notes the growing importance of digital solutions in African Christianity's financial systems. This technological integration represents a significant shift in how African churches approach resource mobilization and financial management.

Besides the call for technology and its usage in mission funding, recent scholarship also emphasizes the importance of appropriate funding structures. Clark (2005) analyses different structural approaches to mission funding among African Pentecostal churches, noting both the strengths and weaknesses of various models. Ezemadu (2012:12) provides practical examples of structured funding approaches, such as the case of Glory Tabernacle mobilizing significant resources for mission support. However, Lederleitner (2010: 838–928) cautions that technological solutions must be implemented with careful attention to cultural dynamics and local capabilities.

Oduro (2014: 86) offers a contrasting perspective, noting how some African Initiated Churches intentionally avoid formal funding structures, preferring more spontaneous, Spirit-led approaches to resource mobilization. This tension between structured and spontaneous approaches remains an important theme in contemporary mission funding literature. Van Rheenen (2001: 5) emphasizes the need for contextually appropriate models that avoid creating dependency while fostering

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sustainable local resource mobilization. Stout (2008) argues for greater attention to long-term sustainability in funding approaches.

Analysis of the above discourse demonstrates the complex interplay between theological principles, cultural dynamics, practical constraints and emerging opportunities in mission funding. It suggests that effective funding approaches must navigate these various factors while maintaining a focus on sustainable kingdom advancement. Despite the comprehensive analysis of the existing literature, none have addressed the funding strategies associated with Vision 3000 in AG Ghana. Consequently, the following section aims to contribute to the discourse on funding approaches relevant to Vision 3000 in AG Ghana.

4. Funding Approaches Used in the Vision 3000 Initiative

The implementation of effective funding strategies plays a crucial role in contemporary mission work, particularly in the African context, where innovative approaches are increasingly necessary. Vision 3000's funding strategy represents a significant evolution in African mission funding models, combining traditional ecclesiastical approaches with innovative technological solutions. This section of the article examines how the Assemblies of God Ghana (AG Ghana) effectively mobilized resources while maintaining local ownership and sustainability through their Vision 3000 initiative. Vision 3000's funding approach demonstrates how African missions can develop sustainable funding mechanisms that maintain local ownership while accessing broader resource networks. These funding mechanisms will be discussed further in subsequent subheadings.

4.1 Local Church Participation and Traditional Giving

One of the ways Vision 3000 raised its funding was through local church participation as a way of local church giving towards missions. The success of Vision 3000's funding strategy hinged on the active involvement of local churches, illustrating the vital interplay between community engagement and sustainable resource mobilization in the African church context. Oduro (2014: 86), in his reflection, noted that local church participation is a crucial element for African church sustainability, which represents the delicate balance between external support and local resource mobilization. As reported in the Assemblies of God Ghana *Documentary on Vision 3000* (2018), regular training events in each area provided opportunities for churches to share stories of God's goodness when they worked together toward fundraising at their local levels. This indicates that Vision 3000's financial model was not just structurally innovative, but also deeply embedded in Ghanaian ecclesial values of collective responsibility and storytelling.

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However, the implementation faced certain challenges. Participants such as Yeboah, Adehenu, Ainooson and Apaloo noted that "grassroots support for the dedicated Missions Fund fluctuated due to competing initiatives such as other local churches seeing another project as a priority to them than Vision 3000" (personal interview with Yeboah et al., 2023). These fluctuations were also observed during national election years such as 2016 and 2020, where economic uncertainty impacted donation consistency.

Clark (2005) describes the essential balance needed in African Pentecostal missions between maintaining local ownership and accessing broader resource networks. Vision 3000's approach achieved this balance through integrated digital and traditional giving systems that preserved local church autonomy while expanding resource access. This integration demonstrated how modern technology could enhance rather than replace traditional giving methods.

4.2 Technological Innovation in Fundraising

The integration of mobile technology into fundraising strategies heralds a transformative era in mission funding that redefines traditional giving dynamics. Vision 3000's partnership with Airtel Ghana marked a watershed moment in leveraging mobile technology for mission funding in Ghana. According to Doe (personal interview, 2023), "Airtel at the time remained the sole network in Ghana possessing the technical capacity and platform infrastructure to support automatic mobile micro-giving programs." This technological integration transformed traditional giving patterns, enabling consistent small-scale donations that collectively made significant impacts.

Bentil and Doe (personal interview, 2023) reported that "well-respected pastors were carefully selected as 'Missions Fund Ambassadors' to explain this innovative opportunity during visits to local churches nationwide. Interested members signed consent forms to automatically donate as low as GHS10 monthly from their registered mobile account towards AG Ghana headquarters for Vision 3000 church planting support" (personal interview with Anthony Doe, 2023). Lederleitner (2010: 838–928) emphasizes and encourages the importance of accountability and accessibility in mission funding through contemporary technological solutions.

The initiative faced initial challenges, as noted by an anonymous participant: "Many colleague pastors discouraged their congregation members from participating, and he did not know why" (personal interview with anonymous participant, 2023). Additionally, Doe (personal interview, 2023) acknowledged that "early smartphone technology limitations hampered seamless adoption across elderly members unfamiliar with menu settings for recurring payments." Franklin and Niemandt (2015) identify mobile platforms as a crucial element of contemporary mission funding. They assert that digital transformation enhances donor engagement. The platform's automated monthly contributions, instant tracking systems, and comprehensive

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financial reporting demonstrated how appropriate technology could enhance both participation and administrative efficiency.

A significant innovation in Vision 3000's funding approach was its collaboration with mobile telecommunications networks. Short (2021: 1) observes that religious organizations adapting commercial strategies for sustainable operations is an innovation for mission funding. The initiative allowed for micro-contributions through mobile accounts, democratizing participation in mission funding.

However, the funding approaches faced significant challenges, particularly in rural sustainability. Ainooson (personal interview, 2023) highlighted that "deprived regions' economic limitations hinder providing sufficient tithes or donations to cover long-term budgetary needs, especially during vulnerable early stages." Alawode (2020: 2) broadly observes that there are difficulties in providing monetary support to native churches in rural areas without fostering unhealthy dependency.

4.3 Corporate Partnerships and Strategic Alliances

Vision 3000's innovative approach to mission funding showcases the power of collaborative partnerships, demonstrating how strategic alliances with organizations revolutionize resource mobilization beyond conventional ecclesiastical methods. Rev. Dr. Sylvanus Amegashiti-Elorm, Secretary of Vision 3000, reported that "a large parachurch organization like OneHope financed vital evangelistic equipment and tricycle acquisition for rural pastors and Indigenous missionaries lacking transportation within the 5 years of Vision 3000 enrolment" (personal interview with Elorm, 2023). This collaboration yielded approximately 1.5 million Ghanaian Cedis in direct funding alongside material resources. Such partnerships suggest a shift in ecclesial funding imagination, where external organizations are not donors but co-architects of mission. This model repositions mission as a shared responsibility, not a handout economy.

The partnership with International Christian Ministries (ICM) further exemplifies what Bate (2001: 50) terms "collaborative mission funding". As Rev. Professor Frimpong-Manso highlighted, "ICM provided specialized architectural and structural engineering consultations to design optimized durable rural church sanctuaries, offering $10,000 grants to supplement construction costs for churches that could furnish land documentation" (personal interview with Frimpong-Manso, 2023). Short (2021: 3) observes that Protestant organizations effectively use investor capitalism language and tactics, presenting financial contributions as "investments" in the Kingdom of Christ.

4.4 Diaspora Network Mobilization

Vision 3000's leadership engagement with Ghanaian diaspora networks represented an innovative approach to transnational resource mobilization. Frimpong-Manso engaged in the "mobilization of some Ghanaian diaspora Assemblies of God churches

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across Europe, Canada, and America to contribute towards the Vision back home" (personal interview with Frimpong-Manso, 2023). Myers (2011: 130) identifies that leveraging global networks while maintaining local ownership and direction is an important rudiment for contemporary mission funding.

Ezemadu (2012: 12) notes that such diaspora networks provide not just financial resources but also valuable technical expertise and international connections. The initiative's digital platforms facilitated continuous diaspora engagement, enabling real-time project updates and immediate response to emerging needs. This relationship-based approach ensured sustained support while creating channels for knowledge transfer and professional networking.

After analysing the strategies utilized in Vision 3000's funding approaches, the next section will focus on the distribution of resources within these funding mechanisms.

5. Vision 3000's Funding and Resource Allocation

Vision 3000's funding approaches demonstrated both innovation and complexity in resource allocation for church planting initiatives across Ghana. The initiative employed multiple funding streams while attempting to maintain local church ownership and sustainable development. According to Bentil, Doe, and Elorm, "to steward the resources entrusted for the Vision 3000 missions project, a governing Missions Fund committee that worked with the Vision 3000 national committee scrutinized funding applications before disbursing monies to verified emerging churches or missionaries" (personal interview with Bentil, Doe and Elorm, 2023). Franklin and Niemandt (2015: 389) emphasize the importance of proper fund management in missions as a structured oversight mechanism. This practice affirms a growing maturity in African church financing governance. It moves beyond informal trust towards documented procedures, reflecting a broader ecclesial shift towards institutional credibility.

The initiative also revealed disparities between urban and rural resource allocation. Elorm and Doe noted that "OneHope contributed approximately 1.5 million Ghanaian Cedis in direct funding alongside material resources" (personal interview with Elorm, 2023), yet the distribution of such resources often favored urban areas, as noted by several anonymous participants in the study. This urban–rural divide echoed Mtukwa's (2014:98) concerns about equitable resource distribution in African church development. However, further analysis showed that ICM-US support and other grants eventually prioritized rural churches, reflecting a phased allocation strategy responding to infrastructure readiness.

Furthermore, Frimpong-Manso highlighted the "collaboration with International Christian Ministries (ICM), a US-based organization that provided specialized

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architectural and structural engineering consultations to design optimized durable rural church sanctuaries" (personal interview with Frimpong-Manso, 2023). Short (2021: 3) has shown that Protestant organizations effectively leverage investor capitalism language and tactics for kingdom advancement. Doe asserts that "the infrastructural buildings sponsored by ICM-US benefited more rural churches than urban churches. Thus, the ICM-US partnership was allocated to more rural churches" (personal interview, 2023).

After examining the allocation of resources within these funding mechanisms, the subsequent section will explore the accountability measures implemented in relation to the mission funding strategies of Vision 3000.

6. Accountability and Transparency Measures

The implementation of accountability and transparency mechanisms represents a fundamental component in the stewardship of missionary resources, particularly exemplified in initiatives like Vision 3000. Franklin and Niemandt (2015: 401) emphasize that extensive consultation and discernment processes are essential for the responsible management of mission funding. Their research examining the Wycliffe Global Alliance's approach demonstrates how structured oversight through representative committees can enhance financial accountability while preserving missionary agency.

The establishment of formal governance structures through mission fund committees serves multiple purposes in upholding financial integrity. This principle was practically demonstrated in Vision 3000's funding strategy, where a governing Missions Fund committee worked in conjunction with the Vision 3000 national committee to scrutinize funding applications before disbursing monies to verified emerging churches or missionaries (personal interview with Bentil, Doe and Elorm, 2023). Drawing from biblical principles of stewardship outlined by Hussein (1998: 14), such oversight bodies help ensure resources are utilized effectively for kingdom purposes while maintaining donor confidence. According to Doe (personal interview, 2023), "there were times we wrote a request letter for funds and the Governing Mission Fund reduced the amount we requested or denied it at that particular time, telling us to go and bring some documents before the funds were released."

The biblical foundation for such accountability measures stems from principles of faithful stewardship. Wright (2004: 147) articulates that resources are held in trust, requiring responsible administration and distribution. Wright's view provides the framework for developing practical accountability systems suited to African contexts while upholding universal standards of transparency and integrity in mission funding. Kunhiyop (2008: 183) argues that African churches must develop robust systems for managing resources as they take increasing ownership of mission initiatives.

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However, the sustainability of accountability mechanisms presents ongoing challenges, particularly in contexts with limited administrative infrastructure. While Vision 3000's initiative brought much-needed infrastructure to optimize future resource flows for maximized stewardship and impact (personal interview with Bentil, 2023), sustainability remained a persistent challenge. An anonymous participant (a mission officer) stated that "during our meetings, we asked questions about finance, but proper answers with accounts were never provided for us." Mtukwa (2014: 98) asserts that African churches must balance spontaneity and pragmatism with establishing enduring structures for missionary support.

Integration of local church governance with broader accountability structures remains vital. Johnson (2017: 52) emphasizes that the centrality of local churches in missionary endeavours needs proper channels of accountability. This helps prevent the development of parallel systems while strengthening indigenous ownership of both resources and accountability processes. As demonstrated by Vision 3000's approach and supported by Alawode's (2020: 4) research, the principles of accountability and transparency are not merely administrative requirements but fundamental components that ensure the responsible handling of financial resources in mission work.

This integrated approach to accountability in mission funding demonstrates how theoretical frameworks and practical implementation can work together to create effective oversight mechanisms while maintaining focus on the ultimate goal of supporting mission work effectively and responsibly.

Following an examination of the accountability and transparency measures in the stewardship of missionary resources by Vision 3000, a comprehensive discussion and analysis will ensue. This will include insights derived from the evaluation of Vision 3000's mission funding mechanisms, coupled with pertinent lessons learned and recommendations for future practices.

7. Discussion and Analysis

The Vision 3000 initiative by Assemblies of God Ghana represents a significant evolution in African mission funding approaches, demonstrating the successful integration of traditional church-giving mechanisms with modern technological solutions. This initiative's multi-faceted funding strategy underscores the necessity of balancing technological innovations with cultural authenticity in contemporary African contexts. Notably, the partnership with Airtel Ghana for mobile micro-giving exemplifies how traditional giving patterns can be enhanced rather than replaced by modern technology. However, initial resistance from some pastors and technological limitations among elderly members posed notable challenges.

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Furthermore, the initiative's approach to corporate partnerships and diaspora network mobilization highlights the potential for African churches to access broader resource networks while maintaining local ownership and direction. Nevertheless, the urban–rural disparity in resource allocation emerged as a significant challenge, with economically disadvantaged regions struggling to achieve long-term sustainability. This tension between rapid expansion and sustainable development remains a critical consideration for future mission funding initiatives.

The research indicates that successful mission funding in African contexts requires more than just financial mechanisms; it demands robust accountability structures and cultural sensitivity. Vision 3000's experience suggests that while technological solutions can enhance giving and transparency, they must be implemented with careful attention to local capabilities and cultural dynamics. The initiative's challenges with providing comprehensive financial reporting to all stakeholders indicate the ongoing need for improved accountability systems.

Looking forward, the Vision 3000 experience suggests that future mission funding initiatives in Africa would benefit from greater attention to rural sustainability mechanisms and more equitable resource distribution systems. A balanced approach that combines innovative funding tools with traditional giving practices, while maintaining strong local church ownership, appears most effective for sustainable mission funding in African contexts. Future initiatives should consider developing specialized support structures for economically disadvantaged regions while maintaining the technological advantages demonstrated through mobile giving platforms and corporate partnerships.

The findings indicate that mission funding strategies must evolve beyond simple financial transactions to encompass comprehensive approaches that consider spiritual, cultural, and practical dimensions of sustainability. This suggests the need for funding models that can adapt to varying economic contexts while maintaining consistent support for mission work across both urban and rural settings. Future mission funding initiatives would benefit from establishing more robust mechanisms for rural church sustainability while continuing to leverage technological innovations and global partnerships for resource mobilization.

8. Conclusion

Vision 3000's innovative funding approach demonstrates the potential for African churches to develop sustainable, locally-owned mission funding strategies while leveraging modern technology and global networks. The initiative's multi-faceted funding strategy, combining mobile micro-giving platforms, corporate partnerships, diaspora networks, and traditional church giving, provides a model for contemporary mission funding in Africa. However, the challenges encountered, particularly

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regarding urban-rural disparities and sustainability in economically disadvantaged regions, highlight the need for more nuanced approaches to resource allocation and long-term sustainability planning. This study's conclusions were drawn from a thematic analysis of 14 purposively sampled participants, enabling a nuanced exploration of context-driven funding strategy.

The initiative's experience emphasizes that successful mission funding requires more than just financial mechanisms; it demands robust accountability structures, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive technological solutions. The findings suggest that future mission funding initiatives would benefit from developing specialized support structures for economically disadvantaged regions while maintaining the technological advantages demonstrated through mobile giving platforms and corporate partnerships. Vision 3000's successes and challenges provide valuable insights for future mission funding initiatives, highlighting the importance of balancing multiple funding streams, maintaining strong accountability measures, and addressing sustainability challenges in diverse economic contexts. Future research could explore similar indigenous mission strategies in a post-colonial setting across Africa, identifying patterns in sustainable resource mobilization.

About the authors

Mishael Donkor Ampofo holds a PhD in Missiology from Stellenbosch University. His research interests include African Pentecostalism, Missiology and the intersection of social media studies and management from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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ARTICLE

"Bringing the Gospel to the City together": Interconfessional Cooperation in Missionary Church Development in Vienna

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Abstract

In the changing context of Western Europe, many churches and denominations aim to reach non-Christians with the gospel through new missionary ecclesial forms. From the perspective of missional theology the mission and unity of the Church are inherently connected. This raises the question how interconfessional unity might be expressed in the praxis of missionary church development. However, there has been very little research on this issue. Thus it remains unclear what ecumenism in missionary church development looks like in practice, what promotes and what hinders it. Therefore, an empirical investigation among seventeen Christian leaders from different confessions involved in missionary church development in Vienna was conducted. The study found that ecumenical cooperation is very limited, with some exceptions. This seems due to both theological factors, like diverging interpretations of mission and the gospel or different stances on issues of sexual ethics, and non-theological, like lack of time and resources. Building on these insights, the paper suggests the establishment of a regional ecumenical church planting hub and outlines possible steps toward its realization. This platform might foster relationships and exchange across confessional boundaries and thus help new forms of church in Vienna to express the ecumenical unity of the Church and to complement each other toward a faithful participation in the mission of God in the city.

Keywords: Missionary church development, Missional theology, Ecumenism, Regional cooperation, Urban church planting, Austria

1. Introduction

The socio-religious context of Western Europe has changed significantly due to processes of pluralization and secularization. In light of these dynamics, there has been a renewed interest in the missionary dimension of ecclesial life in the traditional churches (e.g. Elhaus and Kirchhof 2020). Consequently, various attempts are being

made in almost all confessions to find new ecclesial forms to reach non-Christians with the gospel through church planting, innovation or experimentation (Philipp 2020; Schlegel and Kleeman 2021). This article deals with ecumenical cooperation in missionary church development, for "there is a growing realization among churches and Christian mission organizations" that stronger interconfessional collaboration in mission "has become more important and urgent than ever before" (Kafwanka 2014: 154–5).

So far this topic has not received much scholarly attention, which is somewhat surprising for several reasons. Not only does the shared concern for missionary church development evoke the practical question if and how churches in Western Europe might cooperate in these efforts. There have also been important recent missiological developments towards the realization of what Bosch called an "ecumenical missionary paradigm" (Bosch 2011: 377). Thus, the twentieth-century rift between ecumenicals and evangelicals has largely been overcome. In fact, there are now "significant missiological convergences" between all Christian confessions (Keum 2014: 397), as evidenced by recent missiological documents from different traditions (cf. Bevans 2015).

Most centrally, this ecumenical missiological consensus includes the conviction that mission is primarily the act of a missionary God. The Church originates in this mission of God and is therefore missionary by its very nature (Franke 2020: 6). Moreover, God's mission and consequently the Church's as well is understood to be holistic, including but not limited to evangelism, discipleship, social engagement and creation care (Franke 2020: 27–30; Bevans 2015). According to Keum, general secretary of the Council for World Mission, the time is thus ready to "shift gears from convergence to cooperation" (2014: 398). Shouldn't this imply promising preconditions for interconfessional collaboration in missionary church development as well?

Furthermore, in the *missio Dei* paradigm the mission of the Church and the Church's unity are intrinsically connected. Because all churches originate from and participate in the one mission of God, the call to mission is always also a call to ecumenical unity (Bosch 2011: 474–5). Must research on missionary church development then not also ask how this unity can find expression in these efforts?

Some scholars have recognized this and accordingly appeal for an ecumenical extension of the mixed-economy concept (Herrmann 2020: 91) or for the formation of regional interconfessional networks in church development (Eiffler 2020: 496–7; Herbst and Pompe 2022). However, the discussion so far has not gone beyond these initial impulses and hardly any research has been done in actual church development practice. Current insights are limited and point toward a discrepancy between the missiological ideal of ecumenical missionary unity and lived church practice, so that the described missiological consensus has "little to do with what happens on the ground" (Währisch-Oblau 2016: 165). The reasons for this are not sufficiently

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researched, but both remaining significant theological differences (Franke 2020: 5) and more mundane aspects like lack of time and resources (Brinksma 2018: 196–201) might play a role.

It consequently remains unclear how ecumenical missionary unity happens in urban church development as well as what promotes and what hinders it. To answer these questions, this article reports an empirical study among practitioners in the Austrian capital Vienna.

This city offers a fitting research context, for here not only various free churches but also the traditional churches, most notably the Catholic Church, are highly active in church development. Over the last decade, the archdiocese of Vienna underwent a developmental process, in which all activity was to be "reoriented around the missionary nature of the church" (Schönborn 2015: 3), as part of which several church plants and revitalizations were started (Flachberger 2020: 25–62). These new forms of church are characterized by scholars as "charismatic-evangelical-catholic", because they often combine typical aspects of evangelical spirituality like personal conversion to Christ and discipleship with Catholic features like strong Marian devotion and high eucharistic spirituality (Sandler 2022: 160–3; Hinkelmann 2022: 200–9). Because of this they are on the one hand more easily compatible with evangelical[1] and Pentecostal free-churches. On the other hand, previous research has shown that cooperation in mission with Catholics still represents a challenge for many Austrian evangelicals (Miller 2010: 341–7). Thus, these new Catholic missionary forms of church inhabit "a confessional field of tension" (Hinkelmann 2022: 195) and demonstrate the complex conditions of lived ecumenical missionary cooperation in Austria.

In the rest of the article we will first describe the research design of the study, then present the key findings and finally discuss them in light of relevant literature.

2. Methodology

The empirical investigation aimed to contribute to a better understanding of interconfessional cooperation in missionary church development in the tension between theological ideal and lived ecclesial practice. As part of that "lived theology", the theological convictions informing said practice were of special interest (cf. Ward 2017: 62–7). Thus, we used an explorative research approach with qualitative empirical methods to explicate the "deep meanings about the nature, purpose and intentions of the actions and assumptions of particular individuals or communities" (Swinton and Mowat 2016: 22).

1 In Austria, "evangelical" refers not only to the cross-denominational evangelical movement, but also to one free-church denomination, the "association of evangelical churches" (BEG). To distinguish these, when referring to the denomination, this article uses the capitalized "Evangelical".

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2.1 Research Method

The objects of investigation were projects of missionary church development in Vienna. These could be church plants or revitalizations, fresh expressions, "Erprobungsräume," or church development processes. The selection criteria were purposely kept broad due to the explorative nature of the study.

To understand how and why cooperation does or does not take place between these projects, from February 2023 to February 2024 Kräuter conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews with project leaders from seven different confessions. Five Catholic priests and theologians, four Evangelical free church pastors, three Lutheran ministers, an Anglican minister, a Baptist pastor, a house-church pastor as well as one Pentecostal and one Reformed pastor. Most of them were directly involved in church planting or church development in Vienna, while three were guiding regional or national initiatives in their denominations. The interviewees were deliberately selected through theoretical sampling to include those most likely to provide insights relevant to the research questions. The final number was reached via data saturation.

The interview guide centered around two main topics: (1) the interviewees' conception and practical embodiment of mission and gospel as well as (2) their experiences with interconfessional collaboration. To make different emphases in missional practice apparent, we used the Anglican "five marks of mission" inspired by a recent study on the soteriology of Dutch pastors and church planters (Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze-Koning 2023). The five marks differentiate mission into evangelism, discipleship, loving service, societal transformation and creation care and can be considered as one of the most common explications of the ecumenical consensus on the integrality of mission discussed in the introduction.

2.2 Data Analysis and Reflexivity

All participants gave informed consent on their data being used for this study. The audio recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription. The transcripts were anonymized and sent to the participants for review. Once approved they were analysed using template analysis (King, Brooks and Tabari 2018), which organizes the relevant data sections in a hierarchical thematic template through subsequent rounds of coding.

The final template encompassed three overarching themes: "mission", "gospel" and "experience with missionary cooperation". These included several layers of subthemes and codes. For example the theme "mission" contained the subthemes "understanding of mission", "goal of mission", "strategies of mission" and "context of mission" (see table 1 for a list of themes, subthemes and codes). The template was then used as basis for data interpretation. The important themes were reflected according to the study's epistemological interest and connected to each other. Thus,

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for instance, different understandings of mission were linked with corresponding soteriological convictions.

The epistemological potential of this study was limited by both our personal situatedness and the research design. As our own evangelical convictions influenced the entire research process, this project can be seen as an evangelical reflection on the possibilities of missionary ecumenism in Western European church development, nevertheless aiming to serve the whole Church (cf. Franke 2020: 85). Furthermore, the research method and sample affected the results. The data is grounded only on the reflections of a single leader per project and thus includes neither other diverging perspectives nor directly observed lived practice. Also, the interviewees only included one Pentecostal pastor, no orthodox priests and no representatives of migrant churches.

Table 1 Sample List of Themes, Subthemes and Codes

Themes	Mission	Gospel	Experience with missionary cooperation
Subthemes	– understanding of mission – goal of mission – strategies of mission – context of mission	– what is the gospel – meaning of salvation – meaning of lostness – different understandings of gospel	– theological criteria for cooperation – motivations for cooperation – examples of cooperation – factors promoting cooperation – factors hindering cooperation
If necessary, more subthemes	in the subtheme "understanding of mission": – a disputed term – different dimensions		in the subtheme "factors hindering cooperation": – lack of resources – theological differences – bad experiences – ecumenical thinking underdeveloped
Codes	in the subtheme "a disputed term": – negative connotation – narrow and broad definitions – variously filled	in the subtheme "meaning of salvation": – fullness of life – reaching heaven – new earth – justification – access to kingdom – community with god	in the subtheme "factors promoting cooperation": – shared theological profiles – personal relations – trust – spiritual community – humility – generational differences

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3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Missionary Cooperation in Vienna: Pluriform and Limited

The main research question was how interconfessional cooperation happens in church development in Vienna. To do justice to the complexity of lived ecclesial practice, the terms "cooperation" and "collaboration" were only loosely defined to capture multiple forms of interaction as reported by the respondents, varying in intensity, duration and purpose.

One of the chief insights gained was that generally the closest missionary cooperation happens within the respective denominations. Thus, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Reformed, Catholic and Lutheran leaders connect in *inner*-confession regional or national networks for spiritual fellowship, strategic partnership, the sharing of resources and further training. At the local Viennese level, only the Catholic diocese entertains a cooperative network between its practitioners.

Additionally, there were also several instances of *inter*-confession cooperation observable. The Roman-Catholic archdiocese and its church development initiatives are most actively seeking ecumenical cooperation. They partner with the Anglican Church, especially its centers for church planting and multiplication as well as the HTB network[2] (Catholic theologian interview 16). Furthermore, priests and deacons are regularly sent on study trips or internships to Anglican or free-church church plants and representatives from other confessions are consulted as external experts (Catholic priests interviews 2, 4 and 17). Moreover, all interviewed Catholic leaders were well-acquainted with evangelical church planting literature and some recounted how they sought help from free churches in their start-up phase.

There were also a number of regional, national and international church planting networks between primarily evangelical and Pentecostal leaders from different denominations as well as international church development networks between leaders from the traditional churches. Most of the interviewees were attached to one or several of these. On the local level, ecumenical collaboration mostly remained limited to particular events organized together or sporadic networking meetings.

Altogether, with few exceptions, interconfessional cooperation in missionary church development in Vienna was quite sparse. Many even stated that they were hardly in contact with or completely unaware of any initiatives from other denominations (e.g. Reformed pastor interview 6, Lutheran minister interview 9, evangelical pastor interview 13).

2 Churches planted by the London Anglican church Holy Trinity Brompton and their plants.

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3.2 Three Kinds of Cooperation

Research participants identified three main aspects of cooperative praxis. The first and most widespread was mutual learning. In exchange with other practitioners, "we can show each other how to proclaim Jesus in our context", a Catholic priest noted (interview 4). Similarly, an Evangelical church planter stated that he wants "to learn from the experiences of others who previously planted churches here" (interview 1). In most cases, however, this exchange happens primarily within denominations or theological traditions.

At the same time, many of the respondents told of cross-denominational learning experiences. Several Catholic leaders explained how they gained a new appreciation for the cross and the Bible from their evangelical colleagues, as expressed for instance in expository sermon series through Bible books. On the other hand, some Evangelical leaders mentioned how they adopted liturgical elements from Catholics or were inspired by Pentecostal boldness and the house-church emphasis on communal discipleship. Still, there were significant differences in the respondents' readiness to learn. While some believed that they "could learn something from everyone" (Catholic theologian interview 12), one participant differentiated between "theological and logistic aspects of church planting" and stated that "theologically, I don't think I could or would want to learn from others" (Reformed pastor interview 6).

The second often-repeated kind of cooperation was support and aid. For some, this help took the form of collegial counselling, "where we can carry each other" (Catholic theologian interview 12) or "where we sit together, one recounts a situation and asks for insights. What would you do differently?" (Evangelical pastor interview 13). Others mentioned the sharing of tools and resources.

The third kind was spiritual fellowship with colleagues. Many noted how important it is to regularly have the opportunity to "open one's heart", pray for and encourage each other (Evangelical pastor interview 13).

3.3 Diverging Interpretations of "Mission" in Church Development in Vienna

Differences in the respondents' conceptions of mission became apparent. Concerning the five marks of mission, the majority of the participants professed a holistic understanding including "both word and deed" (Anglican priest interview 8) or both "proclaiming the gospel" and "co-shaping the world out of the gospel" (Catholic theologian interview 12). However, on closer inspection the relationship of these two aspects was assessed quite differently.

Most evangelical pastors clearly prioritized gospel proclamation in evangelism and discipleship in their missionary praxis. Referring to the Great Commission, they repeatedly argued that it was "the primary task" or "highest goal" of mission to preach the good news of Christ, so that people become his disciples. This did not

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at all mean that they disregarded the social responsibility of the Church. However, they considered these efforts a "pre-stage" to the "real" mission, namely evangelistic action (Evangelical church planter interview 13). Hence, the Reformed pastor recounted how they gave a Ukrainian refugee visiting their church money for food and housing, but also evangelistic tracts. "We told him 'We want to help you, but what you really need is not money, but something deeper'" (interview 6). Furthermore, marks four and five, the transformation of society and creation care, were not included in the mission interpretations of most interviewed evangelical leaders.

On the other hand, only one Baptist pastor prioritized acts of service, societal engagement and creation care over evangelism and discipleship. Her motto was, "you don't need to talk about your faith a lot, live so that people ask you" (interview 15). Similarly, a Lutheran minister remarked, "the people don't look where the finger points, but who the pointer is. Primarily it is about setting an example and not preaching" (Lutheran minister interview 9). These respondents further distanced themselves from the evangelical mission interpretation described, which would patronizingly perceive the world as mission objects.

These different conceptions of mission are vividly illustrated by the following example. Three projects described how they sent or handed out Christmas cards to locals. The card of one evangelical church plant included a QR code, which led to an evangelistic sermon where the pastor explained the meaning of Christmas. The two other initiatives instead invited passers-by to themselves write down a prayer or wish to the Christ Child. Their aim was not evangelistic but simply to "give somebody a treat, no strings attached" (Lutheran minister interview 9).

3.4 The Gospels of Personal Redemption and Complete Restoration

These diverging mission interpretations corresponded with different understandings of the gospel. Many leaders from different confessions emphasized the notion of "personal redemption" for sinners through the sacrificial death of Jesus in their gospel presentations. Everyone who trusts in Jesus gets saved from divine judgement. These included the majority of evangelical participants but also other leaders. Thus, a Catholic priest characterized redemption as "being freed from sin and eternal death. Christ tore down the dividing wall between God and us on the cross. Now we can freely access God through Jesus" (interview 4). Similarly, a Lutheran minister remarked that the gospel included "showing people that God loves them, but that we are separated from him because of our wrongdoings" as well as explaining that "because of Jesus' death and resurrection the way to God is open" (interview 5).

In contrast, others understood sin not so much as a transcendent personal problem warranting redemption, but rather highlighted its immanent and social dimensions, requiring restoration. In Jesus, God reconciled the world to himself.

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Therefore, the gospel enables us to "accept that humans are not perfect", because God loves us despite our mistakes (Catholic theologian interview 12). It "frees from the brokenness of sin and leads into freedom as a person and fullness of life" (Catholic priest interview 2). Furthermore, ultimately God will not judge, but instead completely restore creation from its brokenness. He will "fix everything" – a word-play made by a Lutheran minister (interview 9) on the German "richten" (meaning "judge" or "fix") of the Apostles' creed's article seven. Consequently, most representatives of this gospel of "complete restoration" also rejected the notion that non-Christians would be separated from God in hell. This was either seen as "too exclusivist" (Baptist Pastor interview 15) or "incomprehensible with the loving nature of God" (Catholic priest interview 2).

Generally, those advocating for the "personal redemption gospel" tended to give precedence to evangelism and discipleship in their mission interpretation and practice. On the other hand, the representatives of the "complete restoration gospel" either prioritized demonstrating the gospel by acts of service, societal engagement and creation care or practised their evangelism and discipleship in a decidedly less-confrontational manner. In addition, a minority of the respondents embraced a third "holistic" understanding of mission and gospel (described below).[3]

3.5 Factors Hindering Cooperation

The different soteriological and missiological convictions clearly negatively affected collaboration. For evangelicals, a shared gospel interpretation was a precondition for missionary cooperation. Still, the evangelical respondents assessed the other traditions differently. While one Evangelical church planter continuously differentiated between those "who have the gospel in the centre" and those who don't; in his view a local Catholic parish met these requirements, because "they really follow Jesus" (interview 1). For others, gospel agreement with Catholics signified an oxymoron.

That said, a key insight of this study is that interconfessional cooperation also remained limited in the presence of broad soteriological and missiological agreements. Although many spoke about the importance of "a kingdom perspective" or "bringing the gospel to the city together" (Catholic theologian interview 16) this was not reflected in much of the praxis. Often, projects with very similar concerns in close proximity didn't keep in touch or weren't even aware of each other. It thus seems that generally, "missionary ecumenical thinking is still underdeveloped" (Lutheran minister interview 3) in Vienna.

3 These types are simplified models highlighting important similarities and differences in the responses.

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A second inhibiting factor was reservation and distrust against other traditions. Evangelical and Pentecostal free churches still often deal with suspicion from mainline churches and thus "always first have to wait and see what others think about them" (Pentecostal pastor interview 11). While evangelicals are often suspected of fundamentalism, Pentecostals face allegations of spiritual abuse or manipulation. On the other hand, almost all Evangelical leaders spoke of a negative bias against Catholics in their denomination due to past experiences of discrimination and exclusion.

Thirdly, sexual ethics, particularly the evaluation of homosexual practice, are highly divisive. These "ethical sexual-moral topics currently are to ecumenism what baptism or the Lord's supper were before," a Baptist pastor opined (interview 15). In fact, the question of homosexuality seems to have reached almost confessional status. Four of the first five interviews raised the issue by themselves and multiple representatives on all sides of the debate stated that cooperation with those disagreeing was difficult to impossible for them.

Nevertheless, the fourth and by far most-repeated hindering aspect was simply a lack of time and resources. In the eyes of many leaders, interconfessional networking requires more resources than available besides other pastoral duties. Consequently, it is frequently perceived as an "additional burden that drains the energy of the local congregation" (Pentecostal pastor interview 11).

3.6 Factors Promoting Cooperation

Besides shared theological profiles, three other aspects promoting collaboration were discovered. The first can be described as "a theology of generosity" (Lutheran minister interview 3), "the ability to differentiate between foundational and secondary issues, paired with humility and readiness to learn" (house-church pastor interview 10).

Secondly, the age of practitioners also appears to play a role. According to an Evangelical pastor, "postmodern" young people "are well aware that there isn't always black and white, that there are grey areas and tensions in the bible that you can't resolve" (interview 14). Similarly, a Catholic respondent observed that "young people attend youth vigils at Heiligenkreuz abbey and then afterwards go to a worship night at ICF" (interview 16).[4]

Thirdly, ecumenical collaboration across theological differences seems to be more successful when grounded in personal relationships and spiritual community. For most interviewees, encounters or friendships with Christians from other confessions helped to overcome prejudices and initiate cooperation. "A short while ago, I

4 Heiligenkreuz is a local Cistercian monastery, ICF is a neo-charismatic free church.

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met the local Catholic priest and was astonished by seeing how he hurts that so many people don't know Jesus personally. That completely changed my outlook on Catholics", an Evangelical pastor explained (interview 7). Similarly, a Catholic participant remarked that ecumenism must happen "while we pray and do mission together" (interview 16).

4. Discussion and Theological Reflection

The interviews showed that interconfessional cooperation in missionary church development in Vienna happens diversely but only in a limited fashion. Moreover, it is set in a "confessional field of tension" (Hinkelmann 2022: 195), marked by different mission and gospel interpretations as well as diverging views on sexual ethics. Together with the described time constraints, it is easily understandable why close collaboration generally tends to stay within inner-confession or inner-tradition boundaries.

Nevertheless, from a missional perspective the question still remains how the unity of the whole Church can be expressed in church development in Vienna. The interviews showed that missionary ecumenism is often experienced as an additional burden for local practitioners. Therefore, in this section, we will discuss what form of interconfessional cooperation might avoid this and thus make sense in the context of Vienna.

4.1 The Power and Problem of Diversity in Cooperative Networks

A crucial element of practical theological research is incorporating insights from other relevant disciplines into the interpretation of observed practice (Osmer 2008: 93–4). For this study it makes sense to learn from research on cooperation in urban development and planning, for like church development the development of cities also happens in the midst of change processes and necessitates collaboration between various stakeholders sharing a similar concern in a region (Görgl, Döringer and Herburger 2020: 378–87).

In such cooperative networks "network power", the ability to achieve things together that are not possible alone, emerges when three factors are present (Booher and Innes 2002: 225–31). First, a diverse array of actors "consistent with the full range of interest and knowledge relevant to the issues at hand" jointly works on a common problem. Secondly, these agents are aware how they themselves can profit from what the others bring to the table - experiences, insights, resources or contacts. The third requirement is "authentic dialogue" about the shared concern, where all divergent perspectives are valued and maintained. Only then creative solutions and options for action in complex situations can be found. At the same time, too much diversity can harm cooperative networks. If the different perspectives

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prevent the development of common goals or a shared vision, a network becomes incapacitated (Payer 2008: 35).

Thus, in cooperative networking it is crucial to find the right amount of diversity that enables mutual benefit but does not thwart productive collaboration (Barentsen 2024). In missionary church development in Vienna it would not be reasonable to encourage leaders holding diverging mission and gospel interpretations to partner closely, as the diversity would be too high to set shared goals. Nevertheless, the different theological traditions and missionary approaches provide valuable insights from which the whole Church can benefit. In the words of Dutch missiologist Stefan Paas (2014: 188):

> *Unity in mission is extremely important, because the missionary challenge in Europe is so immensely complex. Co-operation, networking, and constant interaction are crucial to open up the hermeneutical space that we need for a better understanding of this challenge.*

It is a profound conviction of missional theology that every tradition has "something that can be shared with others" for mutual enrichment and the building up of the church to "the fulness of Christ" (Kim 2016: 263). Therefore, cooperation in missionary church development needs to enable both close collaboration with those of similar missiological and soteriological convictions as well as truly ecumenical exchange with practitioners from all traditions. As one church planter succinctly remarked: "I believe that you need a strong shared theological direction for cooperation in church planting. At the same time, we still need the big picture, to learn from one another, share synergies, and connect" (Evangelical church planter interview 7). In our opinion this necessitates complementing forms of cooperative networks. That way the missional demand for ecumenical unity can be met while remaining missiological, soteriological and ethical differences are also taken seriously.

Almost all of the interviewed practitioners already participate in regional or national cooperative networks within their respective traditions or confessions. Furthermore, existing international church planting networks connect similar traditions like evangelicals and Pentecostals. Still lacking, however, is a broader ecumenical regional Viennese network that connects diverse church development actors in the city. This vision matches Eiffler's proposal for an ecumenical network of all new forms of church in a place (2020: 460–1). Such "collaborative hubs" already exist elsewhere and facilitate "connection across a broader ecclesial ecology through partnership, education, and leadership development" (Benac 2022: 4.118). We will now further discuss the inception of such a network for Vienna, "The Vienna Church Planting Hub".

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4.2 The Vienna Church Planting Hub

The German theologians Herbst and Pompe try to flesh out the practical implications of the missiological togetherness of mission and ecumenical unity in their concept of "regio-local church development." They want to aid churches and new ecclesial expressions to see their action as part of a collective, cooperative practice, namely the mutual participation in the one mission of God in their context, instead of ignoring or competing with each other (Herbst and Pompe 2022: 10.31).

To that end, participants should realize their respective strengths (profiling), complement each other in their shared responsibility (complementing), coordinate common tasks and reciprocal duties (cooperation), and practically support each other (solidarity) (Herbst and Pompe 2022: 24).[5] These dimensions can be connected with the three aspects of cooperative praxis discovered in the interviews: support and aid, mutual learning, and spiritual community.

In terms of Herbst and Pompe's cooperation and solidarity: material, personal, or social resources could be shared and common projects undertaken (cf. Kim 2016). For complementing and profiling, contextual learning from and with each other could be fostered in learning communities, training events or visits. Moreover, church planter training could be contextualized for Vienna in cooperation with seminaries, mission organizations and church governance boards, encouraging students of theology to do internships in local initiatives.

Such initiatives would need to be embedded in spiritual community, a wish expressed by many leaders in church development in Vienna. The Church Planting Hub could support this community by enabling encouragement, comfort and intercessory prayer through periodic meetings for exchange, worship and prayer or a yearly conference.

What might concrete steps towards such cooperative networking in ecumenical plurality look like? First of all, network research points to the necessity of establishing trust between the diverse partners, which requires authentic dialogue about similarities and differences (Payer 2008: 35; Benac 2022: 110). In the Viennese context, the soteriological and missiological diversity of the potential partners needs to be addressed. One suitable theological framework for this exchange could be Tomlin's "Generous Orthodoxy". Based on the Nicene Creed, he attempts to lay down the essentials of orthodox Christian faith, while also pointing out how different traditions can learn from each other in their witness (Tomlin 2022: 125–70).

Moreover, Herbst and Pompe highlight the importance of reconciliation for ecclesial cooperation (2022: 20; cf. Avtzi 2013). The interviews revealed the enduring

5 It must be noted that this model has not been empirically tested and is situated in the German regional church context. Further research is needed to assess the practicability of our inferences.

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negative effect of past hurtful experiences as well as continuing prejudices in collaboration between different denominations. These need to be addressed, acknowledged and forgiven. If a cooperative network like the Vienna Church Planting Hub is to succeed, its beginning must be strongly rooted in the establishment of relationships and trust.

Secondly, the development of networks requires different roles (Payer 2008: 45–6; Zimmer 2017: 173–4). For instance, forerunners initiate networking by establishing first contacts and cooperations. Gatekeepers generate new impulses and partners through their social capital and providers support the network administratively, financially or logistically. Furthermore, existing research suggests that the establishment of collaboration depends on the initiatives of both church governance and individual local leaders (Eiffler 2020: 451; Zimmer 2017: 174; Benac 2022: 20–1, 93). Consequently, both local and regional Christian leaders in Vienna need to invest in relationships with representatives of other confessions. On the local level, forerunners could begin to meet for prayer with colleagues in their district and jointly invest in the neighbourhood. At the same time, church governances could aid interconfessional cooperation by providing resources and developing support structures. For instance, each confession could employ one suitable leader on a part-time basis to help develop the Church Planting Hub.

Thirdly, a network needs moderators. These lead the participants in the development of a shared vision and transparent decision-making processes. They also take steps to promote the relationships and trust needed for the network to properly function (Hucht 2017: 141–7). To avoid intergroup conflict, the diverse Vienna Church Planting Hub should be moderated by a team of leaders from different confessions and theological traditions. These moderators should be respected in their own denominations and share a commitment to missional ecumenism in the city. With their interactions they can then prototypically model interconfessional cooperation and exchange for the network participants.

4.3 The Theological Vision: Participating Faithfully in the Mission of God in Vienna

Pursuing ecumenical unity in missionary church development in Vienna through the Vienna Church Planting Hub will be challenging and require time, resources and dedication. However, it is worth the effort. To faithfully participate in the mission of God in the city, all churches and traditions are "in need of the witness of the other" for complementing and correction in their missional practice (Franke 2020: 165). In closing, this is briefly illustrated with the two dominant gospel interpretations and corresponding missionary paradigms observed in the interviews.

From the perspective of missional theology, the redemptive and restoring mission of God in which the Church participates needs to be understood as holistic. It brings

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about personal redemption as well as restoration for society and all creation (Wright 2006; Keller 2012: 267–71). However, it seems that many Viennese practitioners fail to maintain this integral vision.

Missional theology hence reminds those holding to a personal redemption gospel that human sin has societal, economic and ecological dimensions that manifest themselves in unjust structures, oppression or the destruction of creation. These immanent expressions of sin are addressed in the gospel just as much as its transcendent, spiritual effects and therefore require confrontation and transformation through the missionary church. At the same time, representatives of the complete restoration gospel must not miss the fact that the mission of God is at least as concerned with the transformation of the human heart. Because the horizontal consequences of sin are intrinsically connected with the disrupted vertical relationship with God, the Christian engagement for justice, peace and reconciliation ultimately cannot do without reconciliation to God through personal repentance and faith.[6]

The Vienna Church Planting Hub could be one important way to foster such ecumenical missional correction and complementation and thus help new forms of church to faithfully participate in the mission of God in the city.[7]

5. Conclusion

This article sought to contribute to a better understanding of interconfessional cooperation in urban missionary church development. To that end an empirical study with 17 practitioners from seven different denominations was conducted in the Austrian capital Vienna. The study showed that despite the ecumenically shared missionary concern, interconfessional cooperation as of yet remains rather limited. Only the Roman Catholic Church actively seeks to collaborate with and learn from the Anglican Church as well as from various free churches in its efforts to revitalize old and plant new churches.

Part of the reasons for the limited amount of ecumenical cooperation are theological differences, such as diverging mission and gospel interpretations or contrary positions on sexual ethics. However, the most mentioned factor simply was a lack of time and resources that often leads to ecumenical networking being seen as an additional burden.

6 In the interviews three participants, a Baptist pastor, a Catholic priest and an Anglican reverend (interviews 8, 10, 16) embodied this holistic gospel and mission interpretation.

7 James (2018), in his study on church plants in Seattle, shows much more extensively how this correction and complementation between different missionary ecclesial types can look like in ecclesial praxis.

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Based on these insights, we discussed what form of missionary ecumenism might be suitable in the observed tension between the missional mandate for unity and the contextual factors complicating that quest. Hence, we suggested the formation of a regional ecumenical network, the Vienna Church Planting Hub, complementing existing inner-denominational cooperative activities. This platform would deliberately bring together the diverse theological perspectives present in church development in Vienna to correct and complement each other in their joint participation in the mission of God in the city. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen in further research whether this theoretical proposal could work out in actual ecclesial practice.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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ARTICLE

Implementation of the Mixed Ecology in Church of England Diocesan Strategies

Andrew Dunlop

Abstract

The mixed ecology is a term that has come to denote both traditional and new forms of church mutually flourishing alongside one another. Since 2021 it has been part of the vision and strategy of the Church of England. The extent to which mixed ecology thinking permeates diocesan strategy varies. Strategies which originally flowed from the separate streams of church planting and fresh expressions of church now exhibit similar qualities. I argue that diocesan strategies were converging towards those that could be described as "mixed ecology" even before the national strategy was adopted, and suggest that these strategies and the national vision play a vital role in amplifying good practice and creating the active partnership between groups that the mixed ecology requires to thrive. This article is based on a survey of diocesan strategies, vision statements, and publicly available documentation in Church of England dioceses.

Keywords: Mixed ecology, Church of England, Strategy, Vision, Church planting, Fresh expressions

In 2021, a new vision for Church of England was adopted. It was to become *simpler* in governance and structure, *humbler* in working with others, and *bolder* in its outworking and proclamation of what God has done through Christ, all shaped by the five marks of mission. These were to be enacted through three strategic priorities: a church of missionary disciples, a church where the mixed ecology is the norm, and a church which is younger and more diverse (Cottrell 2021). The second of these was of particular interest to me as I have been following the development of fresh expressions of church and the mixed ecology throughout my ordained career – as curate, new-build pioneer, college lecturer, and now in a diocesan role. On the one hand, that the mixed ecology had become enshrined into Church of England vision was a declaration that this – and the variety of ecclesial forms that come with the

mixed ecology – was how the church should be. On the other hand, as this paper argues, it simply formalized in the vision what was happening in the dioceses anyway.

The language of "mixed ecology" is a development of the phrase "mixed economy", describing areas where new and traditional forms of church and other missional ventures work together in an area to form a varied ecclesial landscape. "Mixed economy" was first coined by Rowan Williams while he was Archbishop of Wales, but gained wider traction whilst he was Archbishop of Canterbury through its inclusion in the *Mission-shaped Church* report (Church of England 2004). The report promoted church planting and fresh expressions of church – defined as contextual forms of church intended for those who did not previously attend church. More recently, the preference has been for an ecological rather than economic metaphor.[1] Whilst the phrase "mixed ecology" hasn't been defined in detail, the work of recent writers all agree that a varied ecclesial landscape or ecosystem of new and traditional forms of church, fresh expressions, church plants, and missional activities is intended (Perrin and Olsworth-Peter 2021; Olsworth-Peter 2024; Foulger 2024).

In defining a mixed ecology, one could take a "lowest common denominator" approach which consists of different forms of church or missional communities simply co-existing near each other. This is not a good definition, and is arguably no different from how the church operated in any age. A preferable definition emphasizes a partnership (e.g. Church of England 2004: iv; Müller 2019: 252) between the new and traditional, for mutual learning, training, resourcing, networking, support, the sharing of good practice and ideas, and more.

Although the mixed ecology has attracted critique from some circles within the Church of England as undermining the parish system (Billings 2021; Milbank 2023), I contend, and argue elsewhere in a wider study of the mixed ecology in a local context (Dunlop 2025), that the mixed ecology at its best is a fulfilment of the parish system, not an undermining of it. There is no space to develop that here, so in this paper I argue that the convergence of diocesan visions towards the mixed ecology sets the landscape for an active partnership between the elements in the ecosystem to be created.

As part of this wider study, between 2018 and 2022 I undertook a survey of the vision and strategies of 40 of the 42 dioceses in the Church of England through their

1 The preference for ecological over economic reflects Jesus' use of metaphors and the sense of different aspects of an ecology existing together for the benefit of the whole, in contrast to fiscal/financial models. Those writing about the transition (e.g. Passmore 2020) usually fail to note the theological aspect to the word "economy" by writers that influenced Rowan Williams, such as Vladimir Lossky (1976).

website data and publicly available documentation.[2] I found that, despite a variety of language and approaches to mission and ministry, there was a general convergence towards strategies that could be described as mixed ecology with an intention to having a mutuality or active partnership between groups. This convergence highlights a complex relationship between diocesan and national vision, and the activity of practitioners on the ground. Money made available for mission and church planting ventures from the Church of England's Strategic Development Fund (SDF) and its successor the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board has undoubtedly enabled dioceses to be more proactive in setting an ecclesial landscape. In 2019, Sabrina Müller wrote:

> *The mixed economy has become one of the implicit ecclesiological self-understandings of the Church of England in the last 15 years. (Müller 2019: 252)*

I argue in this paper that with diocesan visions converging to mixed ecology ways of operating, this ecclesiological self-understanding has now become explicit and is beneficial for the establishment of mutual partnerships of different churches, missional ventures, and worshipping communities.

This study should be read in conjunction with Will Foulger's research from the Centre for Church Planting Theology in Durham, conducted after the national vision was announced (Foulger 2024). His consisted of reviewing the publicly facing material in 11 dioceses alongside interviews with one key person in each diocese. He found that the language of "mixed ecology" was "ubiquitous" across the dioceses and that all were reluctant to use the word "church" to describe the "new things" that were being started, although there was much variation in what language to use. For the bulk of this paper, I examine the language and strategy before 2021.

An overview of the direction of travel before 2021

Before the national strategy, diocesan strategies fell into three general categories: those which clearly articulated a vision for the mixed ecology/economy and used language that had arisen from the fresh expressions discussion, those whose vision is clearly something else, and those who are promoting a variety of strategic approaches.

The most clearly articulated visions for a mixed ecology came from the dioceses of Carlisle, Chelmsford, Ely, Leicester, Oxford, Southwell and Nottingham, St Albans,

2 Due to the nature of their geographies and their separation from the mainland, the dioceses of Europe and of Sodor and Man were discounted from this investigation.

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and Winchester. These dioceses unapologetically used language that emerged from the conversation around fresh expressions of church. There is not space to describe each in detail, so I limit this discussion to two. The first diocese to develop a mixed economy vision, including contextual forms of church, was Leicester, who began in 2005:

> *A central part of our calling as a Diocese is to see as many growing and maturing fresh expressions (new) churches in 2030 as we have continuing (parish) ones, led by a network of over 600 licensed Pioneers. (Diocese of Leicester 2018b)*

To this end, they appointed pioneer development workers for an initial five-year term (using an SDF grant) to promote and resource fresh expressions across the diocese, and to be deeply involved in one location. Further SDF funding of £5.34 million supported the development of six resource churches – larger churches or church plants intended to plant again (Diocese of Leicester 2018a).

The Diocese of Carlisle established a shared strategy with Methodist and United Reformed Churches to create intentional mission communities (Diocese of Carlisle et al., 2014). Every church was to be part of one of these clusters, which were to contain at least one fresh expression alongside a network youth church. Their visualization of such a community, discussed below, offers a practical outworking of mixed economy/ecology thinking.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Diocese of Chichester's vision for mission did not include the mixed ecology or relate to it explicitly. There is no mention of fresh expressions, church planting, mixed ecology, or resource churches. This is not to say no vision for mission exists, simply that the mixed ecology of traditional and new forms of church working alongside each other is not a stated goal. Instead, they focus on the inherited church being 'a Christian presence in every community' (Diocese of Chichester 2020), which is a received mantra commonly used about Church of England parishes.[3] References to 'reimagining ministry' in their strategy brochure and Bishop's Charge refer to encouraging lay ministry and developing 'confidence in clergy,' although, from the public documentation, it is ambiguous as to what this entails (Diocese of Chichester 2015; 'Diocesan Vision For Growth' 2016). They do, however, articulate the need for 'apostolic partnerships' in areas of new housing and deprivation, although little detail is given to the structure of these (Diocese of

3 'A Christian presence in every community' was at one time the main strapline on the Church of England website (see Foulger 2018, 12). It persists in recent years on websites, proposals, and academic articles (cf. Seeley 2019; Nye 2021; 'The Church: A Christian Presence in Every Community' n.d.; Diocese of Chelmsford n.d.).

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Chichester 2020). It is important to note that Chichester has a significant resource church in St Peter's, Brighton which itself has planted multiple times, and has received SDF money directed at outreach, evangelism, social justice, and training (Diocese of Chichester 2021; 'St Peter's Brighton – Bright City', n.d.). So, despite Chichester's vision and strategy being the least explicit in terms of articulating a mixed ecology, even theirs reveals a mixed approach to mission and ecclesiology within the diocese. Their strategy, therefore, might indicate a cautious response to the intentions and perceived ecclesiology of the churches in the diocese, rather than a rejection of missional ecclesiological ventures.

All the other dioceses had a vision which, to a greater or lesser extent, included aspects relating to the mixed ecology, even if the language wasn't employed. This could be through centrally funded creation of new worshipping communities, encouragement of parishes to innovate locally, or the planting of resource churches. The variety of language being used before 2021 gravitated towards 'mixed ecology' since then (see below). Only the diocese of Winchester still used language of the mixed economy in their vision statement as of 2023,[4] whilst Ely diocese used multiple terms including "blended"', "mixed ecology" and "mixed economy".[5] The language of fresh expressions was known and used in many dioceses, albeit recognizing that it could be difficult for some (Diocese of Birmingham, n.d.).

Demonstrating convergence to the mixed ecology

There is a sense that each diocese was using the language and strategy that reflected the existing direction of travel of the churches in that diocese and perhaps, therefore, had the greatest pragmatic chance of success.[6] It is discernible, however, that despite the multiplicity of approaches, a common convergence can be noted towards models that could be described as mixed ecology in some way. Although this convergence is ecclesiological in nature and may result in a landscape of ecclesial communities across parishes or deaneries that bear some similarities to one another, it would be unwise to call this *an ecclesiology* as it encompasses multiple local ecclesiologies

4 Their vision statement remained consistent from 2018 and was correct as of 7 August 2023 (Diocese of Winchester, n.d.). A few documents on their website did reference ecology in 2022 (Diocese of Winchester 2022a; 2022b) but these have since been removed. As of October 2024, there was no mention of either mixed economy or mixed ecology on their website. On the other hand, the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich has had a consistent vision since 2016, yet their website vision pages did not mention mixed economy' in 2020 but does in 2024 (Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich 2020; 2024).

5 See, for example, Diocese of Ely 2019a; 2019b; 2021.

6 The question of what constitutes success is a pertinent one and is something I deal with in my earlier work (Dunlop 2018).

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and there is often a lack of theological articulation.[7] The common convergence is most noticeable in pictorial representations that some dioceses have produced, but is also clear in proposals for some resourcing church projects, as discussed below.

Neither the Fresh Expressions organization nor the *Mission-Shaped Church* report offered a pictorial representation of what the mixed economy/ecology might look like. *Mission-shaped Church* simply summed up the mixed economy in the phrase:

> *…a variety of integrated missionary approaches is required. A mixed economy of parish church and network churches will be necessary, in an active partnership across a wider area, perhaps a deanery. (Church of England 2004, xi)*[8]

There is much variation in how this phrase has come to be understood and depicted in individual diocesan approaches. Carlisle Diocese's vision for mission communities indicated one possible outworking of mixed ecology thinking. Their proposal was ecumenical and operated across a deanery with several congregations existing alongside one another (see Fig. 1 for the fictionalized example of the Flockton Mission Community: Diocese of Carlisle, n.d.). Within this setup there were several established congregations of different denominations alongside new contextual church communities and missional ventures. Some of these are connected to the traditional congregations, whilst others operate across a network or wider area. However, all were encouraged to remain connected to other local churches for mutual benefit. A 2019 Church Army report into fresh expressions in Carlisle diocese stated:

> *While previously [fresh expressions of church] sought growing into 'three-self' responsibility, self-reproduction, self-financing and self-governing, a healthy interdependence is now encouraged, with traditional parish churches and fresh expressions of church learning from and supporting each other. (Church Army Research Unit 2019, 7)*

According to this report, based on quantitative research, this approach had some success in engaging with those who did not otherwise come to church, stating that one out of every four people who attend church in the diocese attend only a fresh expression of church (Church Army Research Unit 2019, 14).

7 Developing a single ecclesiology for the mixed ecology is unhelpful in an organisation such as the Church of England. In my doctoral work I proposed a framework of ecclesiological instincts, rather than an ecclesiology (Dunlop 2025). Discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

8 More recently, Olsworth-Peter produced a diagram of the mixed ecology set upon an axis from attractional to contextual groups (Olsworth-Peter 2024, 29).

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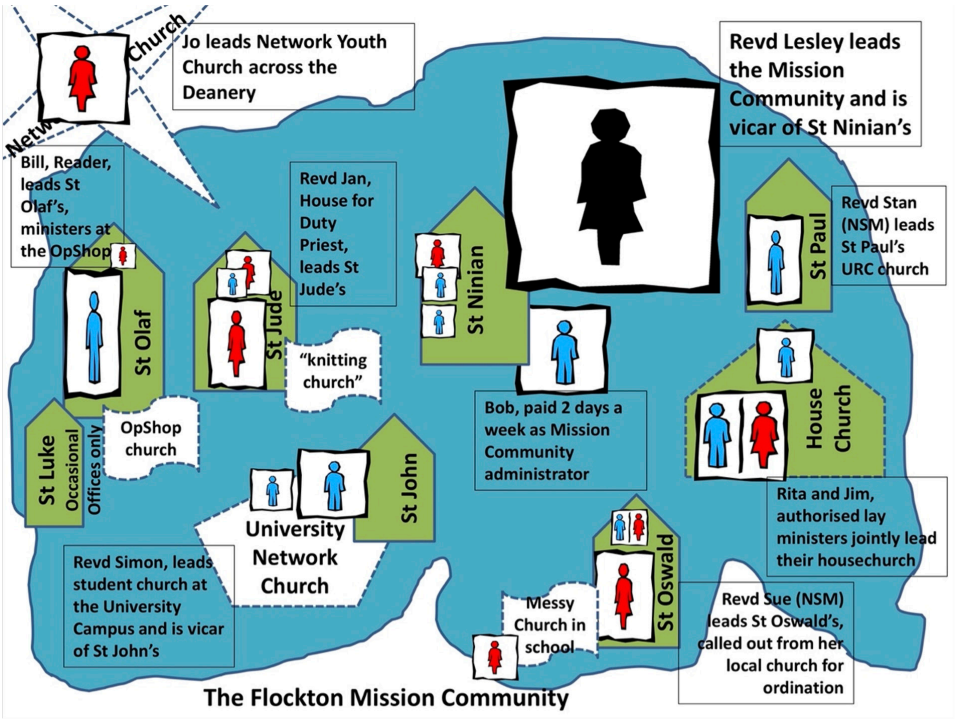

Figure 1 The Diocese of Carlisle example mission community (Diocese of Carlisle, n.d.)

Likewise, the diocese of Liverpool put together an ambitious strategy to revitalize the church in the industrial town of Wigan. *Transforming Wigan* hoped to see 20,000 people on the "journey" of faith by 2022, in both traditional and fresh expression congregations ('Strategy: About Transforming Wigan', n.d.). Twenty-nine parishes were reorganized to create seven new parish hubs, each with their own hub leader and associate, to support one another to plant five new worshipping communities each year (see churchwigan.org). The hubs were also connected to one another through the overarching project (see Fig. 2,[9] where the triangles represent different forms of gathering within the hubs). Clergy were authorized to exercise their specific ministry gifts across the whole team. This vision was a distinct departure from the traditional parish system, despite the forming of new super-parishes. A mixed ecology vision (although the diocese tended not to use this term) of traditional and new congregations working alongside one another is evident in this strategy. The

9 For the image source, see https://churchwigan.org/aboutTWIGstrategy.php.

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reorganization resulted in the creation of 63 new worshipping communities including 29 "significant expressions of church" (Hutton 2023: 28–30), involving somewhere between 750 (Hutton 2023: iv) and 1500 (Diocese of Liverpool, n.d.) new regular attendees. However, parish churches, impacted by the pandemic, continued to see a steep decline in attendance and finances, resulting in closures (Hutton 2023: 31–2). In her apologetic for the parish system, Alison Milbank decries the Transforming Wigan project and offers anecdotal stories about the disgruntlement of some local clergy, the disengagement of the laity, and added bureaucracy limiting face-to-face time (Milbank 2023, 40–41). Whilst it should be noted that the pandemic certainly affected numbers (cf. Perrin and Olsworth-Peter 2021: 46–50), the Transforming Wigan results perhaps indicate that it is vital to attend to the mixed ecology ideals of creating "active partnership" for mutual benefit in developing such a project.

Figure 2 Transforming Wigan Hubs

Some dioceses were pursuing strategies prioritizing the establishing of resource churches – a church plant or revitalization, inspired by the Holy Trinity, Brompton (HTB) model, intended to plant again and resource the area around it (see Thorpe 2021). Their visions also appeared to converge towards a mixed ecology of different church communities. During a training session with the Diocese of Sheffield, Thorpe presented a vision of what a traditional parish actively engaging with its community could look like (see Fig. 3; Thorpe 2018). Note that this is an image of what an engaged parish church could look like, not a resource church; but there are clear overtones of the mixed ecology in the variety of church communities in different places within the parish that are suggested. Such a church could become a resource church by having the distinct intention of planting and resourcing other parishes around it to do the same (see Fig. 4).

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There are many types of church plants – all are needed

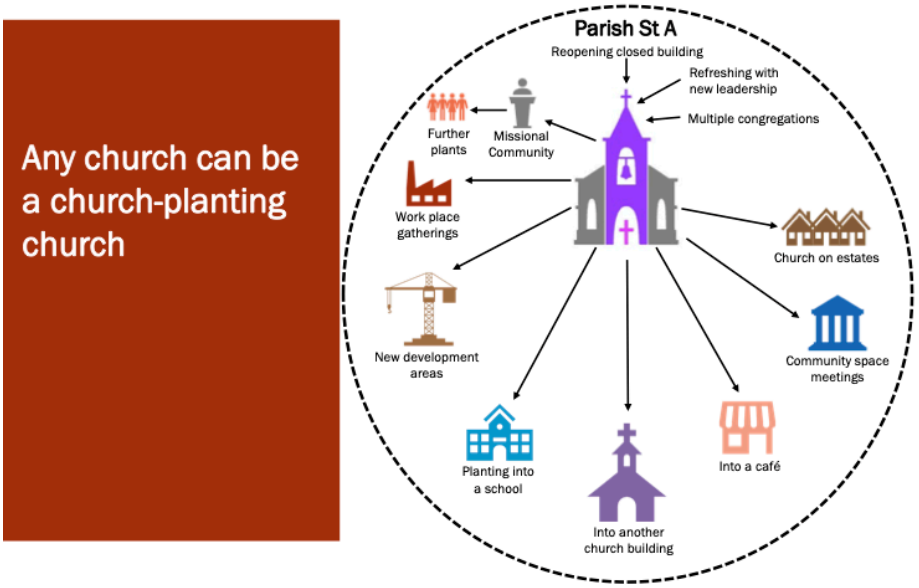

Figure 3 A church-planting church: slide from Ric Thorpe's presentation to the Diocese of Sheffield (Thorpe 2018)

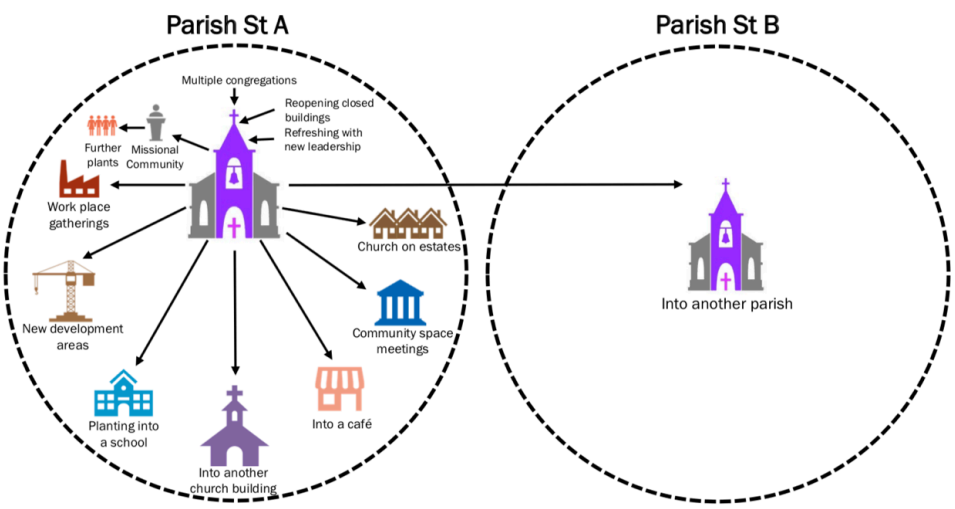

Figure 4 A resource church: slide from Ric Thorpe's presentation to the Diocese of Sheffield (Thorpe 2018)

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The implications of these images from Thorpe's presentation are threefold. First, they affirm the integrity and importance of the parish church to be the Anglican centre for all those that live within the parish. The vicar still maintains the cure of souls of those who live in her parish. However, second, there is no indication that one service of worship in the church building is sufficient. The parish church is to be a missional church, serving all sections of society that happen to exist within its boundaries. Therefore, chaplaincy, planting, and new worshipping communities based outside of the church building will be required, creating a mixed ecology. Whilst this is far reaching within the parish, a third implication is the assertion that mission within the parish alone is not sufficient. Churches that can reach beyond the parish boundary to resource, encourage, or revitalize mission work in another area should do so, although Thorpe adds that this should be done in partnership with dioceses, as part of their wider strategy (Thorpe 2021: 9–10). Here, a mixed ecology of active partnership between churches and groups is seen as beneficial to mission within the parish and, in partnership with the diocese, for enabling missional work elsewhere.

A specific outworking of this resource church strategy could be seen in the Diocese of Truro through the Transforming Mission strategy (Diocese of Truro n.d.; 2018). The diocese covers the English county of Cornwall which is rural and coastal. The most populated town, Falmouth, is home to only 22,000 people, with a further 5000 students based at nearby Penryn on the joint campus of Falmouth University and the University of Exeter.[10] The mission strategy of the diocese, Transforming Mission, was made possible through SDF money and aimed to see six or seven new resource churches planted or designated across Cornwall over five years. Resourced through a new vicar who led the project, a pioneer minister, a student worker, a café manager, a worship pastor, and operations support, they aimed to reach families and students and see new congregations planted in cafés and on the student campus. There were different styles of church community across the hub including two existing parish churches (one in the Anglo-Catholic tradition – www.allsaintschurchfalmouth.co.uk), a new church plant (www.newstreetchurch.org), a pre-existing church-café community, and further student outreach. By 2022, phase 2 was under way in Camborne, Truro, St Austell and Liskeard with similar aims (Diocese of Truro, n.d.). Again, the visualization of such a missional project leans towards a mixed ecology, with multiple churches, Christian communities and mission initiatives working together (see Fig. 5). Similar rural projects exist in other parts of the country, such as the Potting Shed resource church in the diocese of Southwell and Nottingham (https://www.thepottingshedchurch.org/about-us). In these cases, some expectations and forms

10 Data estimated in 2015 to exclude the outlying villages (Matthews 2017). University figures estimated from 2016 (https://www.fxplus.ac.uk/build).

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of ministries were identified in advance. In Truro, the café and student campus were key. Other aspects of the ministry could be discerned contextually by the planting team/pioneers after the project has begun, giving a clear direction but leaving space for ecclesial imagination and missional responsiveness.

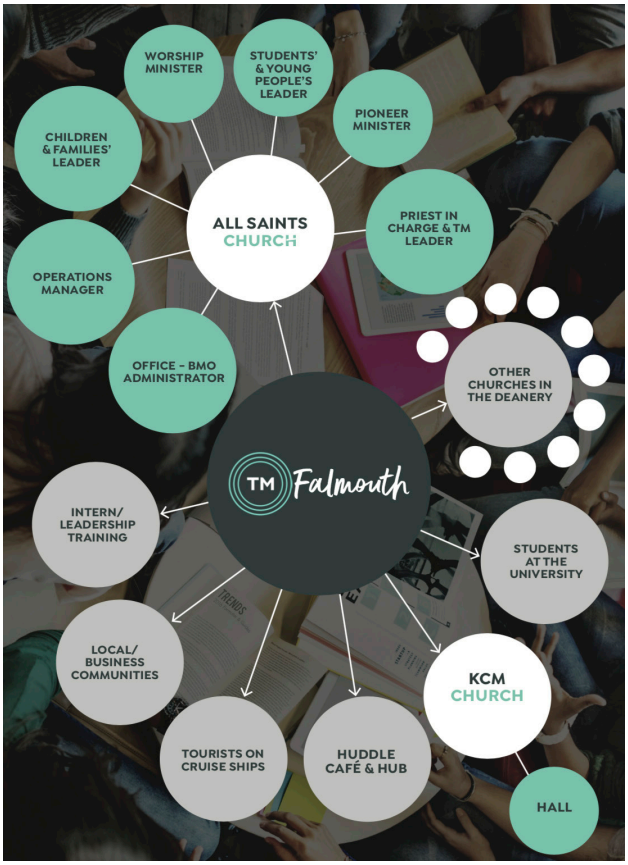

Figure 5 A visualization of the Transforming Mission Falmouth project (Diocese of Truro, 2018)

Convergence of pioneer and church planting approaches

Fresh expression thinking and traditional church planting, as evidenced in the HTB-style church plants or resource churches, are stereotypically understood to have different starting points. Fresh expressions are expected to arise from a context after a period of listening, through a process that is often referred to as the

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serving-first journey (Moynagh 2017: 45). Because worship arises from the context, styles can vary and are sometimes creative or innovative. Those that engage contextually to form fresh expressions of church are called pioneers. Traditional church plants, following what has been described as the worship-first journey (Moynagh 2012: 206), usually start with a larger number of existing Christians gathering for worship in a new area, often replicating the style of the sending church. In the case of HTB church plants, this is usually evangelical-charismatic. From this central service, momentum is built, and the congregation reaches out in mission to draw people into the church, and to faith. So, these demonstrate two seemingly different starting points to mission. I say "seemingly" here as there are clearly similarities between the two approaches too. Fresh expressions require a small group of committed Christians, usually with some links to what might be described as a "sending" church, to commit to engage contextually in an area. Likewise, although 'worship-first' church plants usually replicate a style of church, there are often contextual adaptations, particularly if these plants are in a differing socio-economic context to the sending church. Whilst describing the circumstances in which the models are used as "contrasting", Moynagh notes the nuances and the over-generalizations of using any models to describe reality (2012: 206).

Diocesan strategies indicate a convergence of both these approaches into something resembling a mixed ecology encompassing many different forms of worshipping community operating supportively across an area. it is clearly discernible that Thorpe's and Truro's models have developed from traditional church-planting methods, rather than fresh expressions thinking. It is also clear that contextual methodologies influenced them too, hence I have likened them to mixed ecology approaches. In each case there is a central church (the resource church) out of which imaginative and pioneering ministries emerge. This marks a difference between these resource church models and the mixed ecology approaches of, say, Leicester or Carlisle dioceses or Transforming Wigan which are more fluid across an area. In practice, however, Thorpe's resource church model does not deviate too far from the way in which most fresh expressions are started in relation to the missional ventures that happen within the parish. Only relatively few fresh expressions begin from diocesan initiatives external to the parish; most are started by a parish discerning a local need (Lings 2016: 191–2). Many fresh expressions continue to have a close relationship with the parish from which they sprang (Lings 2016: 101), some with the intention that they may never become entirely independent churches. Mixed ecology language is flexible enough to encompass the variety of missional activity and worshipping communities that spring out of a central church such as through resource church models, as well as to include fresh expressions and traditional churches that find themselves co-existing in an area after a more pioneering "ground-up" starting point. From both these starting points, the convergence towards mixed ecology thinking can be seen,

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and in many cases there is a central parish church that is either planted from or offers ongoing support to the new worshipping community.

What the national vision has done

Although there is clearly much more that can be said about the mixed ecology, I have limited myself in this article to demonstrating a convergence to a mixed ecology approaches over the last 10–15 years, before "mixed ecology" became part of the national Church of England strategy. To conclude, I will highlight three areas of relationship between the national vision, diocesan visions, and the general direction of travel, and why these are significant.

First, in terms of diocesan vision, Foulger points out that the language of 'mixed ecology' is now 'universally accepted' across the dioceses he surveyed, with the term being employed in the interviews he conducted (Foulger 2024: 34, 71). I am not going to contradict this, but I have found that the use of the phrase in vision statements, publicly facing documentation and websites is still relatively uncommon, even if the values or shape of the mixed ecology are clear. The phrase is being used more frequently, however, in descriptors of diocesan departments and in advertisements for key roles (e.g. Diocese of Carlisle 2024; Diocese of Oxford 2024). In this regard, the national vision has provided normative internal language for the dioceses in how they understand their visions and the direction of travel they are on, but, perhaps rightly, the language is not used in more public-facing material. In other words, the *values* of mixed ecology are becoming more pervasive due to the national vision.

Second, there has been a blurring of language and approach in terms of pioneer and planter. Pioneers, who started contextual fresh expressions, tended to be trained in contextual approaches (e.g. serving-first) locally or nationally through initiatives of the Fresh Expressions organization, or through lay or ordained pathways at theological colleges, whereas planters tended to be trained in the HTB planting style of "worship first". Whilst my statements here are over-generalizations, my intent is to emphasise the contrasting contextual starting points, and different networks of support that the two groups had. Now, there is less of a distinction between the two as pioneers and planters are trained in both contextual and planting methods, and networks such as CCX include those innovating church in a variety of ways. Foulger, drawing on an independent review of SDF money, notes that dioceses tended to focus on plants in their funding bids, rather than fresh expressions (Strategic Investment Board 2022: 33; Foulger 2024: 71). The report makes recommendations on increasing the diversity of projects funded (Strategic Investment Board 2022: 9). Foulger rightly claims that mixed ecology language can help hold together the need for larger resourced church plants, with smaller fresh expressions or worshipping communities that often emerge from the work of a parish. Its inclusion in the national vision

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emphasises the importance of a variety of new things to be started, including but not limited to large church plants. Both pioneers and planters fit into this as there is less distinction between the two ways of working.

My third aspect to note is that the relationship between the national, diocesan, and local visions and practice is and will always be complex. I have noted the direction of travel of the diocesan visions towards a mixed ecology way of thinking, but these visions would have been influenced by several factors. Innovative missional work by practitioners in the 1990s found its way into the *Mission-shaped Church* report, which further influenced national thinking, strategy, and structure through Bishop's Mission Orders and the funding of the Fresh Expressions organization. This organization, often supported by dioceses, amplified "fresh expressions" thinking by sharing stories, offering training, support, and points of connection to more would-be practitioners, thus affecting local practice. Local practice influenced national concern which in turn further affected practice. Similarly, the church-planting initiatives of a relative few, notably HTB, in the 1980s and 90s then became part of the strategy for the Diocese of London which then overflowed into other dioceses. The designation of national funding for dioceses for new missional ventures also brought diocesan strategy to the fore as it forced dioceses to ask missional questions of their strategy in order to be eligible for it. These strategies and funding then affected the ecclesial landscape on the ground. Moynagh rightly asserts that either top-down or bottom-up approaches alone would not have been sufficient for the mixed ecology to thrive. Diocesan intervention amplifies good practice, gives training and helps people see the possibility for local contextual missional ventures (Moynagh 2017: 99ff.).

The national mixed ecology vision also holds these things together; genuine contextual missional innovation still needs to come from the ground up, from those who know and work in their communities. The national vision and consequently diocesan visions and strategies for the mixed ecology must recognise this complexity in relationship and seek to unearth the missional energy for localities to find and support the best course of action for a context. This may be by funding something big and new, but equally should be simply through local connection and training of people together to engage appropriately with their context. In this way, the initiative rests with the local practitioners, with diocesan support, and can give rise to truly contextual missional ventures. Diocesan strategy can have a role in amplifying these voices which, in turn, may then influence future diocesan vision or funding bids.

In the above, I have described a convergence to a mixed ecology landscape in the vision and strategies of the dioceses, and through a convergence of language and approach between fresh expression and church planting methods. The convergence in the vision and strategies of dioceses was occurring even before the 2021 national vision was agreed by synod. These took various forms, arose from both pioneering and resource church planting initiatives, and have been called a wide variety of things, but the general sense of direction was clear.

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I suggest that this convergence of diocesan visions towards the mixed ecology accentuates and encourages the connections or 'active partnership' vital to making it thrive. A mixed ecclesial landscape, whatever one may call it, is necessary to the mission and ministry of the church in contemporary society, and the active partnership is vital for mutual learning, resourcing, supporting, and growth. Therefore, that dioceses are actively encouraging mixed ecology in a way that isn't the lowest common denominator of different groups co-existing, leans towards creating resourcing, support, and structures for local connection as well as opportunities for wider training, connection, sharing of stories and support. This is the amplification phase that Moynagh talks about in his innovation framework (Moynagh 2017: 112–13). As stories are shared, innovation and creativity are fostered in others which, with the right support, leads to new things. Although the ideas need to be local and contextual, the diocese plays a role in shaping the structures that foster imagination. Therefore, the convergence of diocesan vision is important to the development of the mixed ecology – it emphasizes the active part both between the diocese and the new thing, and between different expressions of church in an area.

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ARTICLE

Making Sense about Churches' Engagement with Technology: A Post-pandemic Reflection on Digital Ministry

Heidi A. Campbell and Meg Boone

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a pivotal moment for religious congregations, compelling them to navigate profound technological, theological and social disruptions. This article employs sensemaking theory to explore how congregational leaders interpreted and adapted to the challenges of digital ministry. Sensemaking theory offers a framework for understanding how people make sense and meaning out of complex situations, like to global COVID-19 pandemic. The article investigates church leaders' experiences as documented by the Tech in Churches During COVID-19 project, a three-year study of how Indiana churches utilized and integrated technology to sustain community and worship amidst the pandemic. Findings highlight shifts in leaders' attitudes toward technology, from seeing it as a peripheral tool pre-pandemic to an essential component of ministry afterwards. The study also reveals generational differences in technology adoption and decision-making, reflecting diverse approaches to maintaining theological and communal identities in a digital context. Despite technology offering unique opportunities for outreach and inclusivity, concerns about the sustainability, burnout and authenticity in tech ministry persist. This research calls for further exploration of equitable technological integration, intergenerational collaboration, and the relationship between faith and digital tools in post-pandemic reality.

Keywords: Congregations, Church, Covid-19, Pandemic, Sensemaking, Technology

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a critical moment for religious congregations, disrupting established liturgical patterns and practices and forcing rapid technological adaptation upon them. For many religious leaders, the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, requiring many congregations to reevaluate their roles, strategies and methods of engaging their community. Technology became an essential tool,

enabling connection online at a time of social isolation. This shift raised questions about the nature of worship, community, and identity in a digital age. This study uses sensemaking theory as a lens for understanding how and why religious leaders approached technology in distinct ways during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Derived from social and organizational psychology, this theory explains how individuals and groups interpret information and make sense of their experiences. It helps explain how individuals seek to logically make sense of new and challenging situations, especially when previous experience are not adequate resources to deal with present circumstances. We argue that religious leaders, tasked with maintaining continuity, engaged in a process of sensemaking in their technology decision-making related to ministry practices. Applying sensemaking theory helps to highlight issues congregations and leaders need to consider when seeking to prepare for future ecclesial disruptions.

Approaching churches' technological decision-making around the pandemic as a form of sensemaking highlights several issues leaders were forced to navigate. Pastors were thrust into a new cultural space, a technological environment where social and spiritual interactions became primarily mediated experiences. By engaging with sensemaking theory, this article explores three key research questions:

- How did congregational leaders "make sense" of the necessity of using technology during the pandemic?
- How do congregational leaders continue to "make sense" and justify using technology in their religious ministry/work?
- What questions and issues does technological and ministry sensemaking raise for the further study and support of congregational engagement with technology?

The article answers these questions by applying sensemaking theory to identify the rationale and responses behind church leaders' decisions about which tools and platforms to use, as well as to frame new patterns of practice. By drawing on data presented in Campbell, Osteen and Sparks 2023, this article uses sensemaking theory as a lens to help explain church leaders' technological decision-making processes in Indiana and describe the rapid response required of them to new technologies.

2. Studying the COVID-19 Pandemic, Congregations and Technology Engagement

While there is an extensive literature on the theological and practical use of technology in church congregations and worship settings, dating back to the early 2000s (e.g. Hipps, 2005; Soukup, 2008; Hutchings, 2017), this article specifically focuses on research regarding technology use and choices made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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This period significantly disrupted religious worship, prompting many scholars to investigate congregational adaptation to technology and the implications of their choices in more nuanced ways.

One scholarly concern was the implications of rapid digital adoption on religious communities, especially the impact on their buildings and relationships. Many scholars focused on the ways churches' experiences in virtual spaces influenced congregational understanding of what it means to be a faith community. For instance, Dein and Watts (2023) explored how online services reshaped interactions between congregants, creating tension between those who saw digital accessibility as positive and those who showed concerns about the perceived lack of "authentic" fellowship offered. Similarly, Makhutla (2021) emphasized that while social media, particularly Facebook, aided in maintaining congregational connections, some of these same churches voiced concerns about the long-term impact of livestreaming worship on their community relationship.

A second research theme was concerns about the "digital divide", illuminating disparities in many congregations regarding technology access and skills among congregants. Village and Francis (2020) explored the social fragility of rural churches, showing that limited resources hindered their ability to adopt digital solutions. Kühle and Larsen (2023) expanded on this theme, examining how inequities in internet access exacerbated challenges for smaller, rural congregations, forcing many to rely on minimal solutions such as recorded services uploaded to social media. I also (Campbell 2023) argued that the move to online worship revealed to many congregations for the first time that they were impacted by the digital divide, due to a lack of resources and expertise, which complicated their digital transition. These findings align with broader analyses of digital inequalities (Connolly, Costa-Font & Srivastava 2025), which explored systemic barriers to technology adoption during the pandemic across various sectors.

Third, scholars raised questions about the cultural and theological implications of digital gatherings and how they altered, or even threatened, established aspects of liturgical worship. While the theological challenges posed by digital worship to established ecclesiological models have been explored for more than a decade (e.g. Campbell and Garner 2016; Berger 2018; Kurlberg and Phillips 2020), scholarly attention increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Edelman et al. (2021) found that while digital rituals created inclusivity for individuals with disabilities or in remote locations, they often left participants feeling disconnected from sacred spaces and personal interactions integral in worship. Francis and Village (2022) explored how Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical clergy within the Church of England

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differed in their acceptance of digital tools, reflecting broader tensions between tradition and innovation. This suggests scholars must reflect on online worship calls for the rethinking of the nature of traditional missional and ecclesiological practices (Kurlberg and Phillips 2020).

Fourth and finally, sustainability and burnout in tech ministry emerged as a pressing concern. Benton and Girdley (2023) emphasized that both clergy and volunteers faced significant fatigue, exacerbated by the dual demands of doing digital and in-person ministry during the pandemic. Griffin's research (2021) reported many pastors contemplated transitioning to secular careers due to the pressures of ministry during the pandemic, highlighting the need for clergy training in managing conflict during times of high stress. Researchers have also highlighted concerns about the sustainability of digital ministry post-pandemic, especially as pastors and volunteers reported burnout (Johnston et al. 2022).

This literature underscores that the pandemic was a pivotal moment of both technology growth and stress for clergy and congregations. Collectively, these studies highlight the need to approach the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique period of forced transformation for faith communities who had to make dynamic changes to established systems and practices, often before they could fully reflect on the implications of those choices. To better understand what occurred, we offer sensemaking theory as a framework for analyzing how church leaders navigated technological adoption and negotiated the impact of their choices.

3. Sensemaking Theory as a Tool for Studying Churches' Response to Technology

This article argues that church leaders' responses to technology during the pandemic can be better understood through the lens of "sensemaking theory." Sensemaking theory originated within organizational psychology as an approach to studying how individuals and groups interpret and respond to ambiguous or complex situations. Karl Weick, a pioneer in this theory, defines sensemaking as the process of "retrospective interpretation" where individuals and organizations construct meaning from past experiences to make sense of the present and guide future actions. Central to this theory is the idea that individuals do not passively absorb information, but instead actively create narratives to explain what they encounter in their environment (Weick 1995). According to Weick, sensemaking is driven by a need to situate oneself in new social contexts and understand one's place and role in the emerging space of change.

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Sensemaking occurs when organizations face disruption or uncertainty – moments when old structures or ways of operating no longer work, which aptly describes the situation in which most religious leaders found themselves at the onset of the pandemic. People use their social interactions and existing knowledge to interpret the situation, derive meaning and make decisions. Weick's framework emphasizes that the environment itself is "enacted", meaning that people do not simply react to the environment but shape it through their actions and decisions. This notion that individuals and groups seek to create a sensible, understandable environment is critical in understanding how organizations adapt in times of crisis (Maitlis and Christianson 2014).

Over time, scholars have expanded the application of sensemaking theory to the fields of Communication, Information Science, and Human-Computer Interactions to study the social and interactive aspects of how individuals create shared meanings through communication. Instead of viewing sensemaking only as a retroactive practice, scholars have utilized it to explore dynamic meaning-making practices, examining how individuals conceptualize information seeking and use in active learning situations (Savolainen 1993; Ancona 2011). However, whether applied to active or past situations, sensemaking theory is fundamentally about studying how people create a plausible narrative about an event or social interaction to constrict a shared understanding of a situation that can be communicated to others (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015).

Both Deborah Ancona from Information Science and Karl Weick from Organizational Studies have contributed to the development of sensemaking theory. While they highlight different characteristics of the theory, they overlap in three areas. This includes (1) seeing sensemaking as both an individual and communal enactment, (2) drawing together experience and perspective to construct a shared meaning or mental map, and (3) actively creating a plausible conceptual environment to contextualize the current situation and aid in both instrumental functioning and comprehending times of change. We argue that enacting sensemaking strategies was crucial for many groups, including religious organizations, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides a way to understand and explain how religious communities, especially congregations, interpreted and responded to the many external disruptions and forced changes they faced regarding technology adoption. For instance, when churches were forced to close their doors during the pandemic, leaders quickly turned to digital platforms to maintain community and continuity in worship. This rapid shift can be understood as an example of sensemaking in action, as church leaders extracted cues from their environment, such as the need to keep worshippers connected and the limitations of in-person gatherings, and enacted new

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solutions. Many churches relied on platforms like Zoom and Facebook to continue worship, but this digital transition was not without its challenges. Church leaders had to reinterpret what it meant to gather and worship communally. By conceptually constructing new spaces for spiritual engagement leaders attempted to create meaning in a time of uncertainty.

Moreover, the role of identity construction in religious sensemaking cannot be overstated. Religious groups, deeply tied to collective identity and shared values, often interpret and navigate change through theological frameworks. As Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) highlight, sensemaking in organizations is not just about finding plausible solutions but also about maintaining consistency with existing identities. In this way, the transition to digital worship was not merely a technical decision, but a redefinition of religious practices that required building links to theological and communal values.

In this article, we employ sensemaking theory as a means to reflect on and explain how religious leaders and congregations respond to change, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. The theory's emphasis on identity, social interaction, and collaborative interpretation helps to explain not only how religious leaders and congregants navigated ambiguity and uncertainty during the pandemic but also how religious congregations continue to reflect on and make technology decisions in ways that maintain their community and theological identities in the digital age of post-pandemic reality.

4. Technological Decision-Making in the Tech in Churches Project

This article centres around the findings of the Tech in Churches During the COVID-19 Pandemic project (see https://www.techinchurches.org/). This three-year research study took place between 2020 and 2023, seeking to understand how Indiana churches integrated digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic and its broader implications for congregational life. Funded by the Lilly Endowment and in partnership with the Center for Congregations' "Connect Through Tech" (CTT) grant programme, this study tracked the impact the move towards online worship made on 2,700 religious congregations in Indiana in the USA. Each received a technology grant of up to $5,000 to help them purchase equipment, Wi-Fi, or platform subscriptions, enabling them to transition from traditional in-person worship to online worship in early 2020. The project sought to investigate the practical, social and theological choices made by these congregations and their leadership. Central questions included how churches utilized grant funds, how technology shaped pastors'

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and congregants' perceptions of ministry and community, and what challenges and opportunities arose from the adoption of digital tools.

The research was conducted in three stages to address its objectives comprehensively. The first stage focused on how church leaders navigated decisions about technology during the pandemic's early days. The second explored how churches perceived and articulated the relationship between faith and technology. The final stage examined the long-term impacts of these technological changes on pastors, congregations and church practices. Data collection methods included qualitative analysis of notes and transcripts from "Tech Talk Sessions" involving 478 church leaders, a discourse analysis of the grant application and reports submitted by grant recipients, and a survey of 246 leaders in congregations involved in this project. The transcripts of the Tech Talk sessions, grant applications, and final grant reports were provided to the research team by the Center for Congregations, which initially collected this information. These were treated as anonymized secondary texts, which were thematically analysed. Survey data was collected directly by the research team. The survey instrument, data collection and informed consent process were all reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University, where this research took place. The study produced three major reports and five "Tech Trend" papers, which collectively documented findings from 2020 to 2023.

The research revealed several key insights. In the first report, findings highlighted the immense pressure on pastors, who often became de facto technology coordinators, taking on additional responsibilities without shedding existing ones. Churches aimed to recreate a digitally mediated "Sunday morning feeling" but faced challenges such as volunteer burnout and difficulties engaging elderly members in the online transition (Campbell and Osteen 2021). Despite these struggles, the shift opened new opportunities for outreach and engagement, allowing churches to connect with geographically distant individuals and previously unreached groups. The second report explored how pastors used CTT grant funds to rapidly build online worship capabilities (Campbell, Daly, Osteen and Wallace 2023). Technology was often described as a "needed blessing", enabling churches to sustain their mission and reach new audiences. The report also noted that small and rural churches, which received the majority of grants, often depended on these funds to overcome significant technological barriers. By the third report, the study shifted focus to the post-pandemic era, examining how churches' attitudes and practices toward technology had evolved. Many congregations reported increased acceptance of digital tools, though differences in adaptation emerged based on church size and the age of leaders (Campbell, Osteen and Sparks 2023). While technology helped churches

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innovate and sustain their missions during the pandemic, the shift also raised questions about the nature of authentic community in a digital space.

Overall, the project emphasized the transformative potential of technology for churches, as well as its capacity to foster innovation and the challenges it poses to traditional conceptions of worship and community. By documenting these experiences, the research contributes valuable insights into how faith communities navigate the interplay between digital tools and religious practice. In this article, we focus on the findings from the final report of this research project and what it reveals about how church leaders made sense of the numerous decisions, changes, and new skills they had to adopt during the pandemic.

5. Making Sense of Technology Engagement During COVID-19

Campbell, Osteen and Sparks 2023 provides insights into how Indiana church leaders navigated integrating technology over three years during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following two sections, we highlight specific practical and conceptual shifts made by church leaders and congregations in their use and thinking about technology. All quotes and information shared in the remainder of this article were taken from this report and/or the research data collection related to the survey findings. In this section, we address the first research question of how congregational leaders made sense of the necessity of using technology during the pandemic.

5.1 Pandemic and Technology as Agents of Forced Change

In this study, leaders highlighted technology as a factor leading to significant changes in their congregation. However, it is important to note that the prime cause for technology adoption was not the technology itself, but rather the pandemic crisis that brought these initial disruptions. Technology, instead, was a solution adopted by many churches to solve the problem of the forced closure of congregations. Some leaders and congregations seemed to initially blame technology for challenges encountered during moves to digital worship. This was because for most churches, adoption of digital technology was not a gradual process, but a sudden necessity. However, this blame-shifting could be seen as a coping mechanism for the stress that adopting technology caused. As one pastor from Greencastle, Indiana, summed it up succinctly: "COVID made us start using technology. We did not have a choice." Anxiety about technology could also be tied to the fact that most congregations in this study were not technology outsiders; pre-pandemic, only 25% of churches in the study reported using digital media in their services. However, by December 2021, 71% of the studied churches had embraced live streaming and other online tools.

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Churches with smaller congregations, especially those in rural areas, often faced more struggles with technology, as they reported they often lacked even basic technology resources (lack of computer or Wi-Fi in the church) and so experienced a steeper learning curve. This highlights that technology was often, at least initially, viewed in a critical light by some as a way to draw attention away from the continued instability and uncertainty caused by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2 Technology Applauded as Ministry Game-Changer

Despite the concerns and stress that technology caused for congregational leaders, many reported that it also presented unprecedented opportunities for expanding their community and ministry into new local and global contexts. Many congregations leveraged Facebook, with usage skyrocketing from "a little" (30%) pre-pandemic to "a lot" (63%) post-pandemic. One church shared that uploading recorded services to Facebook became a critical method of communication.

Livestreaming services became a game-changer for many churches, opening their service to a broader online audience and ways to connect with previous members. This enables them to see online church services as a form of outreach, rather than a member-focused gathering. Many pastors reported that technology enhanced accessibility for members in ways they had not previously considered. Online services now offer people access to live transcription and the ability to control the volume of music and preaching. This contributed to some leaders shifting their view about online services from being a temporary stop-gap solution to a potential for expanded ministry. A church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with a congregation of 75, shared that "Live Streaming is allowing us to reach those we otherwise would not be able to." These shifts were not merely about maintaining connections during the pandemic; they also enabled churches to expand their ministries in ways previously unimaginable, reaching shut-ins, elderly members and geographically distant individuals. What technology disrupted was established systems, practices and expectations of what a church gathering is. What technology offered was an innovative glimpse into what the church could look like.

5.3 Congregations Stretched As Technology Decision-Making By-Passes Established Processes

The technological decision-making processes religious leaders had to undergo during the pandemic challenged previous church systems and protocols. Leaders commented that pre-pandemic, congregational decision-making processes were often structured, lengthy affairs. It often involved multiple stages of information gathering, introduction of change to a select group, discussion and debate, proposal evaluation, and members' feedback. It could also raise issues of practicality and

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resources alongside considerations about church tradition (such as liturgy, theological praxis). One pastor reported having to make immediate decisions about technology within the first few weeks of the pandemic, which disrupted this normal process and increased anxiety for leaders and members. In order to ease these tensions, pastors often presented technology as a temporary or practical measure to members or church leadership, a pragmatic solution to an immediate problem. This helped alleviate or subvert some congregational concerns, as long-term use was not part of the decision-making conversation. Another pastor is focused on the instrumental nature of what technology allows them to do, to mitigate debates about the potential impact of technology choices. Others, however, found themselves having to follow pre-established decision-making protocols, which often slowed down the implementation of tech solutions and seemed to increase rather than lessen anxiety about technology. Technology implementation also created anxiety because few churches in this study used technology in their services, and only 3% of churches pre-pandemic considered it an integral part of their ministry. However, based on the 2023 survey during the post-pandemic period, this number had increased to 17%, reflecting a profound shift in attitudes.

Church leaders, however, learned that framing technology as a pragmatic decision made under pressure often impacted their congregations and budgets, leading to the purchase of tools based on immediacy and necessity. Some leaders expressed regret for buying more than they needed, in terms of numbers or device capacity, or purchasing platform subscriptions they did not need, or acquiring second-hand items that were not system-compatible. They reported that these purchases might have been avoided if they had even briefly considered a long-term technology strategy or undertaken a more thorough review process.

5.4 Technology Choices Influenced By Generational Associations

By far, the most common technology adopted by churches in this study to stream services was Facebook. Its usage skyrocketed amongst congregations from being used “a little” (30%) pre-pandemic, to “a lot” (63%) post-pandemic. Many churches reported that uploading recorded services to Facebook and creating a congregational Facebook page became a critical method of communication between leaders and members during the pandemic. This study showed that a preference for using Facebook is not surprising, as leadership dynamics and generational affiliation seemed to correlate with technology decisions directly. The age of church leaders directly shaped technology platforms chosen by congregations, as the primary age range for pastors in the study was 50-70. The study found younger leaders favoured platforms like Instagram and Twitter for church communication and livestreaming, while older leaders heavily relied on Facebook. For example, 83% of leaders aged

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60–70 used Facebook extensively compared to 58% of those aged 20–30. Notably, this generational difference in social media platform preference – adults over 50 primarily use Facebook while youth under 30 use Instagram most – mirrors research findings in other studies correlating digital media preference to specific age groups (Pew Research Center 2024). Leaders reported that when considering what technology their church should adopt during the pandemic, they often went with what was familiar or most comfortable to them and other church leaders. Selecting a digital platform that was familiar or already used by the church seemed to alleviate some stress around technology choices for both members and leaders. It also highlights the importance of paying attention to generational differences in technology use and familiarity when making technology decisions that serve the whole congregation. Such consideration may also help mitigate congregations' stress related to change and technology.

6. Making Sense of Continued Technology Engagement in Post-Pandemic Churches

This study also highlights that conversations about technology decision-making are not yet done for churches, even though the COVID-19 crisis is over. This section addresses the second research question of how church leaders continue to make sense of their use of technology post-pandemic. Specifically, this study found that leaders still require negotiation and justification of technology adoption and use with their congregations in two areas.

6.1 The Digital Divide is Still Present, Impacting Many Congregations

Despite churches adding new digital resources to their ministry toolboxes, many leaders realized they are still behind the digital curve. Leaders reported making progress in learning about and using digital media. However, the "digital divide" remains a significant concern, particularly for smaller and rural congregations. The study found larger churches had a tech advantage, in terms of resources and pre-existing infrastructure, with 59% of those with over 500 attendees already utilizing technology before the pandemic. In contrast, only 22% of smaller churches with under 100 members had done so. This disparity meant that smaller congregations had to make more drastic adjustments during the initial stages of the pandemic, with 63% implementing technology for the first time. Many relied on basic tools like recording and uploading videos, as shared by a church in West Lafayette, Indiana, which used Facebook for weekly sermon discussions. These smaller churches often struggled with funding and expertise, and the CTT grants played a crucial role in bridging this gap. However, challenges persist, as many congregations still lack the resources

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to integrate digital tools into their ministries fully. The resistance and technological hesitancy exposed underlying theological concerns related to digital justice, as limited access impacted congregations' ability to connect. The study suggests that embracing digital tools could foster inclusivity and bridge generational divides in religious communities, reinforcing the need to shift how churches perceive and integrate digital media into worship.

6.2 Long-term Congregational Technology Integration Requires Continued Evaluation and Learning

As many churches continue to incorporate facets of technology into their worship, pastors face ongoing concerns about balancing technology use with traditional forms of ministry. Burnout among leaders is a recurring theme, as the demands of managing both in-person and digital platforms take a toll on them. A Kokomo church noted the importance of congregational support during their pastoral transition and the pandemic, which helped them navigate these challenges. For many, livestreaming remains central, not only for worship but also for expanding discipleship initiatives. A church in Marion, Indiana, shared that they used grant-funded equipment to create a curriculum for their discipleship pathway, illustrating how technology can be leveraged for long-term ministry goals. However, leaders continue to wrestle with questions about fostering authentic community in a hybrid model. While many respondents expressed optimism about technology's role, they acknowledged that it cannot fully replace the interpersonal connections that define congregational life.

7. Technological and Cultural Sensemaking in Post-Pandemic Churches

This section examines how sensemaking influences church leaders' decisions regarding technology for their congregations in 2023 and beyond. Specifically, we highlight two ways in which the construction of specific narratives, emerging from leaders and congregational use of technology, framed post-pandemic views of digital media in ministry and worship.

7.1 Congregational Shifts in Views of Technology

A key category in the study is the shift in attitudes towards technology before and after the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, many church leaders viewed technology as a peripheral tool rather than an essential part of their ministry. However, the pandemic forced many churches to adapt to online worship formats, and post-pandemic church leaders rapidly showed a much more positive or neutral attitude towards technology. This shift could be analysed using the concept of "enacted environments" from sensemaking theory. Sensemaking theory posits that organizations

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enact their environments, meaning that the actions taken by church leaders, such as implementing live streaming and social media outreach, were not just responses to the pandemic but also a way of constructing new digital environments for their ministries. For instance, the transition from negative to neutral or positive attitudes towards technology, especially the increased use of platforms like Facebook, can be analyzed as a process of identity construction and sensemaking where church leaders sought to adapt their theological and community identities to a new digital context. By applying sensemaking theory as an interpretive lens, researchers can explore how church leaders, facing forced changes, constructed new narratives around digital technology, ultimately shaping the direction of technological use in the post-pandemic period.

7.2 Generational Differences in Technological Decision-Making

A second way the use of sensemaking impacted congregations' views of technology was seen in notable generational differences in response to technology within churches. According to the study, younger leaders (under 40 years old) tended to embrace social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. In comparison, older leaders (in their 60s and 70s) leaned more towards using Facebook for communication and outreach. This provides a rich context for applying sensemaking theory's focus on the social aspects of decision-making, where generational identity plays a crucial role in interpreting and responding to the crisis.

These generational differences were not simply about technological competence, but also about how different age groups constructed their identity about technology. For example, older leaders who may have initially resisted adopting digital tools could have gradually come to see technology as a necessary part of maintaining their religious mission. This change can be understood as a process of sensemaking in which these leaders redefined their role within their congregations and adapted their practices to ensure continuity of worship and community. The study finds that church leaders aged 60+ were more likely to use Facebook as their primary platform, supporting this interpretation, as it reflects the leaders' process of incorporating technology in ways that aligned with their personal and communal identities. Sensemaking theory helps to explain the generational identity differences that influenced not just technology adoption but also how leaders made sense of their evolving role within the church community and how these decisions impacted the congregation's engagement with digital platforms. This strategy highlights the dynamic, ongoing nature of sensemaking, where each generational group actively negotiates their responses to the pandemic's disruptions.

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8. Lessons Learned by Leaders on Navigating Times of Change

By returning to the three areas highlighted in the literature review on key traits of sensemaking – individual and communal enactment, construction of an experience of shared meaning making, and situating the event in a new environment where functional and conceptual resources exist – we can see how church leaders enacted the process of sensemaking. We also suggest it points to a process leaders can enact to prepare for future times of unexpected change.

When churches were faced with the sudden disruption of in-person services, this required both leaders and their congregations to engage in personal and corporate sensemaking. This required leaders to recognize the urgency of responding to the situation thrust upon them, and realize a technology-driven ministry was their best, and often only, solution. A pastor from Greencastle, Indiana, stated, "When COVID made us [start using technology]," highlighting the reactive nature of this decision (Campbell et al., 2023). Church leaders had to adapt quickly, often learning on the fly, with pastors shouldering the burden of setting up and operating new systems, which added a new layer of responsibility to their roles. However, this was more than a pragmatic decision, and leaders had to recognize that technology adoption and adaptation brought with it liturgical, ecclesiological and theological challenges. This meant leaders had to present and "sell" the idea of digital worship to congregations, who had mixed pragmatic and theological concerns. Evidence from this study suggests that pastors who engage leadership teams and/or congregational members in discussion and buy-in about technology adoption before it is implemented find greater long-term acceptance of digital ministry. Also, for those in technologically hesitant or resistant congregations, framing the technology transition not as a choice, but as a necessity, or the only solution to social-distancing restrictions, seemed to help leaders and members accept a move to online worship. This shows the importance of corporate sensemaking in the initial adoption of a digital ministry solution and the need for communal engagement in naming and implementing change solutions.

The next trait of sensemaking highlighted is creating a space and attaching meaning to the new experience in ways that connect with the already established identity of the group. This demonstrates how leaders have transitioned in their views and framing of digital media over time. In this study, we observed congregational leaders shifting, often subtly, from a pragmatic framing of technology to a more missional focus. While many leaders presented technology as the only viable option to continue services at the onset of the pandemic, by late 2020 to early 2021, many leaders in this study began to stress the realized opportunities online worship offered.

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Leaders justified the continued use of technology by emphasizing how it offered expanded reach to new audiences and even new opportunities for established church members with different limitations. One leader from Richmond, Indiana, proudly shared, "People appreciated the livestreams", especially those who had to continue social distancing due to health issues (Campbell et al., 2023). Leaders noticeably adapted their narratives to highlight the positive aspects of online worship, like allowing former or long-distance members to reconnect with the church or offering an accessibility alternative for older members who had challenges accessing areas of the physical church building. By highlighting how technology served to enhance the church community and ministry, it presented digital tools as strategic assets for their old members and new online visitors. Many pastors describe online worship as allowing them to reflect on their faith community and how it could function. Seeing and describing the church "enhanced" or "reimagined" by technology presents an image of Church 2.0 or a Digital Church that could offer new forms of church outreach, better maintain social connections, and engage with a broader, more diverse audience.

Finally, by presenting digital worship as a new experience, but one that extended their established goals and mission, played an important role in congregational buy-in to technology. Leaders noted that once members were able to get over their initial fears about technology and adjust to the technological learning curve, seeing digital worship as extending what they had already been doing helped the congregations become more comfortable with this new way of doing church. This also proved important as leaders began to justify continued technology use post-pandemic, emphasizing its ability to reach broader audiences and support new forms of community engagement. Sensemaking helped congregations reframe new practices as part of their evolving identity in response to external change. While the context in which the worship service was new, leaders sought to conceptually stress the ways the services had often not been changed. Instead, they remained connected to their historical and liturgical tradition. Highlighting the area in which congregational worship remained constant was an important part of the leaders' sensemaking process. Leaders also encourage congregations to see technology as a tool to empower them to adapt practices for a specific moment and challenge, rather than as a replacement. This helped congregations not only accept the digital tools but also begin to see them as a new but potentially integral part of church ministry in the twenty-first century.

Sensemaking happened as leaders saw technology adoption as a communal negotiation, creating a new experience of church for people, as technology required a shift in worship practices. However, the also enable them to maintain their connections and

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mission during this uncertain time not just to try and understand this new world, but as a way to process their mistakes and victories into teachable moments, enabling them to keep moving forward with the constant ebbs and flows of change brought on by the pandemic. Overall, these three aspects of sensemaking played a crucial role in helping leaders adapt to the technological and social changes brought on by the pandemic and responses to change. Churches, like other organizations, had to adopt new patterns of communication and collaboration to make this transition and establish new practices. As outlined by Maitlis and Christianson (2014), sensemaking is social, with decisions often being made collectively in response to external pressures. This is particularly important in religious organizations, where decision-making involves negotiation among clergy, leadership teams, and congregants. The collaborative nature of this process can be seen in how congregational leaders in the Tech in Churches project reported seeking input from their communities regarding if, when, and how to implement digital worship. Spadaro (2014), suggests the digital revolution requires church members and leaders to critically reflect on how they think about and practice Christianity, and may be an uncomfortable process for some. This points to a need for ongoing dialogue about how congregations can maintain the authenticity and integrity of religious practice in the face of forced technological adaptation and change.

9. The Future Study of Congregational Technological Sensemaking around Digital Ministry

The findings from this research *point to several areas that require further study regarding the ongoing* and evolving relationship between churches and technology. This section addresses the study's third research question, about what issues the technological and ministry sensemaking process highlights for further study and support of congregational engagement with technology.

One issue for exploration is how churches can balance integrating digital tools with maintaining the communal and spiritual experiences central to congregational life. Many leaders noted a shift in their views of technology, from a peripheral tool pre-pandemic to an integral resource post-pandemic. Future research could explore the long-term theological and social implications of this change. Another important question concerns the sustainability of technological innovations. With many churches reporting burnout among staff and volunteers, how can congregations develop models for digital ministry that are both effective and sustainable? Furthermore, the findings highlight disparities in technological adoption across church sizes and demographics, suggesting more attention is needed to consider how smaller and rural congregations can overcome resource limitations and bridge the digital

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divide. Finally, the generational differences in technology use among leaders suggest that investigating how intergenerational collaboration can shape future technology decisions in congregations is warranted.

Building on these questions, researchers and religious leaders concerned about the future of religious congregations' engagement with technology should delve deeper into the sociological and theological implications of technology use in churches. Themes such as how digital platforms redefine congregational understanding of what it means to be a faith community and how liturgical worship should (or should not) be modified to accommodate technological affordances warrant further study. This is particularly true as hybrid and online worship formats are becoming normalized in churches.

We also suggest researchers should further investigate how digital tools influence perceptions of religious authority and leadership, especially as congregants increasingly consume sermons and other content remotely. The role of social media in shaping congregational identity and outreach presents another avenue for exploration, particularly given its increased use during the pandemic. Moreover, future studies should examine the impact of digital technology on inclusivity within congregations, such as its role in engaging marginalized or elderly members. In addition many churches grappling with resource disparities, researchers should prioritize studies that explore strategies for equitable access to technology and training. This would ensure that congregations of all sizes can effectively integrate digital tools into their ministry. These investigations could provide vital insights for faith communities navigating the intersection of tradition and innovation in an increasingly digital world.

Finally, this research suggests that sensemaking theory offers scholars and theologians a valuable framework for understanding how church leaders navigate technological disruptions and frame their decision-making. It draws attention to narratives leaders may create to justify technology innovation, while stressing this engagement does not threaten their communal or theological identity. It also demonstrates that key characteristics of sensemaking offer religious leaders a template for preparing new processes of communal reflection and adaptation during moments of unplanned change.

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ARTICLE

Relational Authenticity in Community: A Key for Support on the Spiritual Journey?

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Abstract

As God leads his people in this current age, the church, ever-changing and growing, has responded with new expressions of independent community churches. Jesus' mandate for the church to care for its people has not changed. How then, are independent community churches supporting the spiritual journeys of their congregants? This article presents a case study of The Big Table, an independent community church in South Perth, Western Australia. It uses interviews and participant observations to examine how spiritual support is provided beyond traditional church models. It draws from and extends, a theoretical framework of relational authenticity proposed by Lynne Taylor (2017), emphasizing its role in nurturing faith during seasons of doubt, crisis and transition. This has theoretical relevance as it extends Taylor's research from recent converts to believers through faith transitions. The study shows how the deeply valued practices of community engagement, worship, Scripture exploration and relational leadership sustain spiritual formation and faith continuity, whilst highlighting the importance of relational authenticity as central to supporting believers across faith transitions. The article also has ministry relevance for understanding the journeys of believers who depart existing expressions of church, whilst retaining faith in God. It also holds practical relevance for church leaders exploring new expressions of church, offering insights into fostering meaningful spiritual engagement and support outside traditional frameworks.

Keywords: Relational authenticity, Spiritual formation journey, Independent community church

1. Introduction

Through all stages of the spiritual journey, the church is mandated to care for its congregants. In Jn 21.15-17, Jesus instructed the church to nourish, teach and love God's children, and Peter in his first letter later urged the church to mature in their faith (1 Pet. 2.2). Scholars agree that spiritual formation and support of congregants' relationships with God through all stages of their growth and development is a vital role for the church.

With church numbers in decline, partly due to a lack of support on the spiritual journey, multiple independent community churches, understood to be non-traditional, non-denominational church communities, have arisen in response. Often structured with values and practices that respond to the postmodern world and community in which it finds itself, independent community churches express themselves in innovative ways to meet the needs of people in a changing cultural landscape. There has been minimal study, though, at the intersection of the spiritual formation journey and how independent community churches are best supporting their congregants.

This article posits that relational authenticity, understood as the ongoing journey toward authentic expression of persons in their relationships with God, self and others, is a crucial practice in independent community churches that support Christians through and beyond seasons of the spiritual journey, including doubt and crisis. The article does this by further defining and unpacking relational authenticity and its relationship to the spiritual formation journey. Then, by drawing upon a case study of one independent community church, it presents the role of relational authenticity in the lived experiences of churchgoers. Next, it reflects upon the significance of relational authenticity, in contrast to just relationships, through the spiritual practices of community, worship, Scripture exploration and relational leadership. Finally, it considers the implications of this for ministry relevance to church departers as well as leaders who are pioneering new and diverse expressions of church.

2. Relational Authenticity and the Spiritual Journey

Lynne Taylor's work on atonement and relational authenticity asserts that atonement facilitates the restoration of relationships across all dimensions: personal, social and cosmological. Building upon Charles Guignon's (2004) definition of authenticity, Taylor defines relational authenticity as "The project of becoming the person you are: imaging the relational God" (Taylor 2017: 37). Atonement is the beginning of an ongoing movement toward relational authenticity and the becoming of a person's authentic self and all they were created to be (36–7). Having been made in the image of God, wholeness and relational authenticity are found in the created beings imaging God through loving relationships (31). The act of atonement positions

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the Christian in right relationship with God, but the process of becoming relationally authentic, with God, self and others is a journey. Relational authenticity can be understood differently to just relationships, in that it is a part of the journey of the Christian from the starting point of a right relationship with God, that enables the imaging of God, in love, toward being one's true, whole and authentic self.

For the Christian, the spiritual formation journey is an ongoing and fundamental lifetime expedition, with circular movements and undulations of crescents and valleys. It is informed organically by one's relationship with God and responses to events that naturally occur throughout life (Hagberg and Guelich 2005). Faith struggles through doubt and crisis, are a crucial aspect of the spiritual journey intrinsic to the Christian's existence. The spiritual formation journey is the act of moving toward relational authenticity, set upon by, atonement.

Unfortunately, many churches are ill-equipped to facilitate spiritual formation effectively through all stages of the spiritual journey (Barton et al. 2014). Jamieson's (2002) research on the faith journeys of church departers from evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal institutional church models posits that churches often struggle to address queries around faith. Congregants have left the church, but their faith has remained intact. Not looking to leave the faith, people are exploring new ways of being the church and expressing their spirituality. In the changing cultural landscape where a subjective understanding of truth is more commonly accepted than an imposed metanarrative, people everywhere, including Christians, have a longing for "more God and less church, more faith and less religion" (Martin 2002: 9). People are searching for safe spaces where they can be truly authentic in relationships with others.

A call to church renewal at the turn of the last century has seen the church respond with new and inventive expressions of faith and the establishment of multiple, diverse small congregations of believers primarily concerned with Jesus and authentic relationships with one another. Independent community churches, understood to be non-traditional, non-denominational church models with common overlapping hallmarks such as informal and non-conventional locations for meetings, like cafes and pubs, and a declericalized leadership structure have arisen across the globe. Callahan's (2000) work on small community churches observed a growing trend toward small, strong congregations, arguing that people were looking for communities that embraced relationships over busy church programmes.

Gibbs and Bolger's (2006) investigation on the nature of emerging churches and movements emphasizes that supportive and effective churches meet the spiritual needs of congregants in a changing culture with the main concern being congregants' holisitic growth through rich encounters with God (Gibbs & Bolger 2006: 234). Viola (2009) asserts that mutual edification through community gatherings without pretence and a hands-on approach in its meetings will accelerate Christian spiritual growth. In the missional church space, Beard, through his study on spiritual formation practices

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in the missional movement, suggests that spiritual formation through missional discipleship takes place via the organic flow of living life together (Beard 2015: 181).

In these new expressions of church though, the question arises of which practices best support their congregants on their spiritual journey? Liesch (2001), on the importance of worship in church today, emphasizes the need for mutual edification in community for worship to be effective, whilst TenElshof suggests the (universal) Church needs to provide good listening and responding skills to allow for sharing honestly and authentically and for the Holy Spirit to bring holistic spiritual growth (Barton et al. 2014: 300). Breedt and Niemandt's (2013) research on relational leadership and the missional church posits that, in a time where honesty, truthfulness, integrity and relationships are highly prized, for leaders to lead effectively, it is necessary for authentic relationships to be cultivated among those whom the leaders lead. In each of these practices, relational authenticity is at their centre.

The case study below showcases an independent community church and the significance of relational authenticity in the lived experiences of its congregants as they move along the spiritual journey. Before I develop my method and share my findings, let me briefly introduce the case study.

3. The Big Table South Perth Case Study

The Big Table South Perth (henceforth referred to as TBTSP), is one in a network of small churches in Perth, Western Australia. With a belief that the Church is primarily a who and not a what, they "gather together in a bunch of different contexts to worship God, deepen relationship with Jesus, live out faith together, be shaped by his Word and share the good news of Jesus through living their ordinary lives together in community" (The Big Table 2010).

The Big Table network has an emphasis on small numbers for the cultivation of authentic and vulnerable relationships. As the lead pastor Simon stated, "At The Big Table, there is an opportunity for flourishing intimacy that is not easily conceived in larger groups" (The Big Table 2021). The missing component of relationships over programs for flourishing churches as argued by Callahan (2000), Viola (2009) and Beard (2015) is foundational to The Big Table model.

The vision of TBTSP is to be a "church-planting church" (The Big Table 2010). It is a community of people centred around Jesus Christ seeking to love and support one another in daily life and share this love with the greater communities in which the church finds itself. This occurs by "bringing the Kingdom of God into daily contexts through (as examples) participation in running clubs and community gardens" (The Big Table 2010).

Upon arrival at the family home where the Sunday morning service is held, I was immediately taken by its informal atmosphere. Children ate toast in the open

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kitchen living area, and two musicians in the lounge corner acoustically practised worship songs for the service. The pastor made coffee while small groups of people conversed in the backyard around a long, big table. Whilst TBTSP has never defined itself by its venue, it is aptly named because everyone who gathers at the table is considered equal, welcome and valued. With societal status stripped away, each person has a place and is seen.

During the worship block, a small child spontaneously asked to share his week's reflection on faith, before assisting with the morning's preparation of a community service initiative, a Bread Run, where bread is delivered to the homes of people in need. This is just one expression of the diverse rhythms adopted by the community, which include formal and informal gatherings of brunches, retreats, formal church services and shared meals.

TBTSP is an independent community church that displays characteristics necessary for relevance today. The church gathers in non-institutional contexts, primarily a home, but also finds itself in cafes, by the river and in the garden. There is a recognition that worship extends beyond the music block, with various styles having been explored. The church structure prioritizes community accountability with a relational leadership model, drawing inspiration from the book of Acts.

This community of Jesus-followers seeks to embody his mission to the greater community through love for one another. They come from diverse denominational backgrounds, engage with contemporary culture and emphasize personal choice and the individual's responsibility for participation in the community. The church has inadvertently addressed the spiritual needs of a community navigating a shifting cultural landscape.

3.1 Case Study Design

The case study used a phenomenological design to inform the data collection and analysis. To answer the central question of which practises best support congregants on their spiritual journey, a thorough study of The Big Table website, and phenomenological methods of participant observations and semi-structured interviews were undertaken.

For the research, Hagberg and Guelich's (2005) *Critical Journey* model was utilized for mapping the progress and development of the individual participants' spiritual journeys. Their six-stage development model integrates biblical principles and historical perspectives offering a flexible framework, where individuals progress through the journey in a spiral-like fashion. According to Hagberg and Guelich, the critical (spiritual) journey is the "response to faith in God and the resulting life changes" (Hagberg and Guelich 2005: xv).

Hagberg and Guelich's spiritual journey model stages are described as follows: (Demarest 2008: 160)

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1. The Beginning of a Converted Life, where God is discovered and recognized.
2. The Life of Learning and Discipleship: where exploration and practice of the new belief system takes place.
3. The Productive Life: where one consciously serves God using their spiritual gifts.
4. The Journey Inwards: a period where beliefs and paradigms are challenged in what is commonly a disconcerting experience, aptly named The Wall. The Wall defines a time where the journeyer questions, explores doubts and entertains possibilities that were once easily dismissed as incongruent with their belief system, and which often appear as a failing faith in the eyes of those in Stages One to Three. Coming through to Stage Five normally comes with a letting go and acceptance that doubt can be congruent with faith.
5. The Journey Outward: where the journeyer is recentered, surrendering self to God, unafraid of the consequences and aware of God's love for the believer. This stage can appear as weakness, impracticality and inefficiency to those at earlier stages.
6. The Life of Love: where God's love is demonstrated through the person, who is now able to love more compassionately and consistently.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants gathered their insights on faith, the spiritual journey and supportive church practices. An open-ended approach was utilized by incorporating structured and direct questions but allowing flexibility for the participant and interviewer to explore topics that arose organically. The questions were specifically themed to locate where each participant considered themselves on their spiritual journey and identify if they had experienced a season of doubt and crisis. The Big Table values and specific church practices were then mapped against this placement and explored to determine how they may have supported the participants on their journey through the various stages.

Interviews were recorded and analysed by coding the collected data. The multiple participants' interviews helped to achieve data triangulation, enabling a broader, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Four themes were explored during the interviews:[1]

1. Understanding of Definitions and Location on the Critical Journey model.
2. Identification of resonance with church values.
3. Open-ended questions on spiritual formation practices.
4. Explicit questions on Scripture, worship, church structure and leadership.

1 Examples of interview questions for each section include: 1.) How would you describe where you're at on your spiritual journey of faith in God? 2.) Of your church values, which resonate most strongly with you for faith support? 3.) In the church community, what opportunities have you had to explore questions that might reveal doubt or unsurety around Christian faith, identity and ways of being? 4.) How does community inform your faith development? Examples?

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Concerning the Critical Journey model, participants were informed about the model and stages, philosophical underpinnings, and offered a diagram to consider and reflect upon. They were asked if they resonated with the model, and if so, where they might locate themselves. They were also asked if they had experienced The Wall, and if that occurred during their time at TBTSP. Further questions were asked to draw out descriptions of their experience and church support during the time.

During both participant-observations as a researcher, I recorded the events and behaviours of the congregants in a journal: the events of the service, how congregants responded as a whole group, individual behavior that stood out as unique, and discernment of the church's atmosphere. The specific practices of worship, Scripture exploration and expression of gifts were also observed closely. The greatest limitation of the study was the sample size affecting generalizability to the greater population. As the researcher and an indirect pastor in the greater Big Table network, there was potential for bias, which was overcome through a common phenomenological research practice called bracketing. This process involves creating an epoché, wherein I suspended my own bias, opinions and feelings for the purpose and duration of the study. To achieve this, I made note of any instances where my personal thoughts and perspectives could potentially influence the data collection or analysis. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the congregants I was researching their responses for the study and with no agenda for TBTSP itself.

4. The Results

This section will discuss the results of the case study: the participants' journey location, their resonance with church values and spiritual practices, and relational authenticity in community, through worship, Scripture exploration and relational leadership. It can be noted here that the results show God works in and through relationships on the spiritual journey.

4.1 The Perceived Journey Location

Table 1 reflects where the six participants located themselves on their spiritual journey, with five of the six participants indicating they were past questioning the basic tenets of their faith. They expressed that regardless of whatever may eventuate in life, they would be unlikely to reject God. Each indicated they were at a place of surrender in life, aware there may be mystery and tension, but God remains the same and they were content to be led by their faith and for God's purposes. This surrendering to God affirms what Taylor (2017) describes as reconciliation with God and self.

When presented with the Critical Journey model, each participant resonated with it. Renee commented, "The oscillation back and forth between stages is a relatable

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experience" (Renee 2023). Five participants identified as being at Stage Five of the journey and described journeying through The Wall in the past, mostly before coming to TBTSP. Gabriel identified as fluctuating between Stages Three and Four. She is exploring the Productive Life but recognizes that a lot of life right now is spent on the Journey Inward.

Taylor's (2017) work on atonement is positioned in Stage One: The Beginning of a Converted Life, whilst the case study shows participants placing themselves between Stages Three and Five, making this study beneficial in better understanding relational authenticity in later faith transitions of the Christian.

Table 1 Participants' present stage on the Critical Journey (including The Wall experience)

1. Beginning					
2. Discipleship					
3. Productive Life	Gabriel				
4. Journey Inward	Gabriel				
4a. Wall Experience prior to TBTSP	Daphne	Tricia	Gregory		
4b. Wall Experience during TBTSP	Jill	Renee			
5. Journey Outward	Jill	Renee	Daphne	Tricia	Gregory
6. Love					

Renee and Jill both mentioned experiencing The Wall during their time at TBTSP. Renee discussed how the stressful period of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 triggered a wall experience for her, causing oscillation between the Journey Inward of Stage Four and repeatedly hitting The Wall. Through the support of various friends in the community praying for her and offering prophetic words of encouragement in a timely manner, she learned to "stop letting my brain overthink things and simply surrender" (Renee 2023).

Renee's response prompts reflection on Jamieson's research and the large number of church departers who felt they didn't have space in their churches to explore questions of doubt that often exist during The Wall experience. When asked, all participants agreed they had the opportunity to discuss doubt at TBTSP, but not on a Sunday morning. When challenging questions are raised, Renee explained that individuals are graciously invited to discuss their questions in smaller groups where such questions are addressed with love and authenticity.

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The self-assessed stage of the spiritual journey for participants in this study places them much further along than the initial conversion stage (Stages Three to Five in comparison to Stage One), which is the focus of Taylor's (2017) work. However, the participants' advanced progression on the journey shows that Christians can and do move towards and experience the relational authenticity Taylor proposed.

4.2 Church Values and Spiritual Practices

An important aspect of TBTSP is its values.[2] The study revealed that the community's core values are commitment to Jesus, intentional relationships and authentic, meaningful connects with others. This can be viewed in Table 2 below. This highlights how relational authenticity play a crucial role in spiritual practices that best support growth along one's spiritual journey.

Table 2 Participants' resonance with church values

Value	Number of participants					
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
Jesus-centredness						
Gospel-directed						
Open-handed						
Missionally faithful						
Justice seekers						
Relationally intentional						
Authenticity						
Gratitude						
Love of planting churches						
Everyone's on mission						
Shaped by the Bible						
Theologically considerate						

As seen in Table 3, the study found worship, Scripture exploration and gift expression to be key practices impacting congregants' spiritual journeys. The relational

2 The Big Table values can be viewed at www.thebigtable.org.au

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leadership model plays a key structural role in practice effectiveness and will also be discussed as significant. The interpretive key, however, is that the practices are most effective when exercised through the most important values. Commitment to Jesus and relational authenticity in community undergird each of these practices. It can be noted at this point that relational authenticity itself begins at the starting position of relationship with God through Jesus (Taylor 2017). Without this relationship first, loving relationships within the community matter little towards authenticity. Experiencing God's love enables believers to love one another towards relational authenticity.

Table 3 Participants' esteem of practices for spiritual journey support

Spiritual practice	Number of Participants					
Worship						
Scripture exploration						
Gift expression						
Prayer						
Missional presence in the community						
50-50 Giving model						

4.3 Relational Authenticity and Community

God's mission is for us to be in community. Though not an assessed practice, TBTSP's community focus through ecclesiology and structures proves essential to all its spiritual practices. Relational authenticity in community with genuine Jesus-followers is foundational for this cultivation of community as highlighted in the commonly held values observed above. The results show God works in and through relationships on the spiritual journey.

Dining Tables (groups of six to eight people meeting fortnightly for a meal), Coffee Tables (groups of two to three people meeting for a time of sharing and relationship building) and other informal gatherings organically create varying vulnerability within relationships. Dining Tables offer space to explore faith and doubt through diverse Scripture interpretations, whilst Coffee Tables offer intimacy for exploring personal issues. Gregory emphasized the role of others in challenging ideas and notions, commenting, "Hearing what other people think, regardless of whether I agree or disagree, causes me to question my own opinion and this informs my faith" (Gregory 2023).

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TBTSP's structure seems to accomplish this and hence affirms its role to support spiritual growth amongst its congregants. It is important to note, however, the willingness of the participants to engage with one another in relational authenticity. As people commune organically and intentionally, relational authenticity is cultivated, encouraging acceptance and reconciliation between God, self and others. This supports people as they move through the different stages of the spiritual journey.

For Tricia, "being in community is the most significant thing to support for the spiritual journey" (Tricia 2023). Tricia reflected that a relationally intentional community is highly important to spiritual growth because disagreements and differences are highlighted, providing an opportunity to truly pursue love and reconciliation. This has forced Tricia to learn healthy strategies for dealing with relationships, struggles and problems and has progressed her along her spiritual journey. Gibbs and Bolger (2006) note the challenge of building relationships on a deeper foundation in a culture where contractual and casual relationships prevail. Yet, they assert that the family of God, when expressing itself through relationships rather than weekly meetings and events, can do this. "Emerging church people commit to one another, and God, and that commitment is deep and lasting" (Gibbs and Bolger 2006: 97). This is the case for the participants of this study.

Renee expressed longing for solitude with God during seasons of hardship, but stated, "I don't think that's God's design. I think God wants us to grow together and be a community of love and you can't do that by yourself" (Renee 2023). When reflecting upon previous big church experiences, where relationships were not intentionally cultivated, Renee said, "People claimed to be your friend, but they didn't show up when you needed it most" (Renee 2023). Given that Renee journeyed through The Wall during her time at TBTSP, these comments reveal how important community has been to her.

4.4 Relational Authenticity and Worship

Worship was identified by all six participants as key to supporting their spiritual journeys. The participants described worship as a way of living, but recognized the service's worship block, as an opportunity to connect in community as they intentionally seek God through music and song. Participants highly rated meditating on the truths of God's love in a safe space where everyone is together as important for faith building. For Gabriel, "I look forward to worshipping the most. It's the being together and singing to God I find moving. Being so isolated from key people in my life is overcome by a strong sense of connectedness with my church community and God together" (Gabriel 2023).

While all churches worship together, participants felt that worshipping together in a community where the congregation is connected through relational authenticity was a unique dimension of TBTSP. It is reminiscent of Gibbs and Bolger's

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description of worship in the emerging church as a "shared event that binds people together" (Gibbs and Bolger 2006: 93). Callahan (2000) asserted that dynamic, corporate worship with a strong sense of belonging and community was essential for an effective church. Liesch (2001) goes further and points out that Colossians 3.16 and Ephesians 5.21 instruct the Church to sing to God and one another, teaching and admonishing one another. For Liesch (2001), worshipping together in community is an instruction for spiritual growth and the church should embrace this. TBTSP aligns with Liesch's scriptural interpretation and its impact upon the congregation is evident.

Participants acknowledged that the worship block is always saturated with prayer by both the worship ministers and the congregation. Open space and encouragement for the sharing of Scripture and prayer make sure that worship is underpinned by relational authenticity, as Jill illustrated. She recalled a time she wrote a song to God, heavily founded on Scripture, called "Rest". Jill, along with Simon and the worship team, collaborated to finish the song, and she felt it was a special expression linked to the particular people at TBTSP. After recording it, they presented it at church and Simon delivered a sermon that day connected to the lyrics of the song. Jill articulated how encouraging this was to her; that it was not only her expression of faith toward God, but it had become everyone's.

4.5 Relational Authenticity and Leadership

Relational leadership refers to the paradigm that effective leadership involves the leader's capacity to participate in and cultivate positive relationships within an organization (Beard 2015: 175). Like a servant leadership model, its emphasis, however, is on relationships, rather than just serving. A relational leadership church model is well-fitting in a relationship-based church because it reflects God's Triune relationship and God's relationship with the Church. This model encourages mutual submission and accountability between all. In a time where honesty, truthfulness, integrity and relationships are highly prized, for leaders to lead effectively it is necessary that authentic relationships are cultivated among those whom the leaders lead (Breedt and Niemandt 2013). TenElshof affirmed that this emphasis on relationship is necessary and posited that congregants must see and experience a level of authenticity and brokenness from leadership for spiritual formation to occur (Barton et al. 2014: 304). TBTSP's relational leadership model underpinned by values of relational authenticity created opportunity for this.

At TBTSP, the relational leadership model was most evident in the way it undergirded other spiritual practices. Tricia emphasized there is not a hierarchy in the leadership style and structures that do exist. Every member was encouraged, if God was leading them, to share a word or pray for one another. Permission to speak into one another's lives was encouraged and practised. From my participant

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observations, this was obvious in the way every member was encouraged to share during the worship block; this extended even to a young child who shared a reflection on their faith. Others spoke out Scripture, words of encouragement and prayer for the congregation.

The value of the relational leadership model was also highly evident in the glowing descriptions participants gave of the opportunities they had to express their spiritual gifts. This model leans into Paul's body theology (in Rom. 12.4-8 and 1 Cor. 12.12-27) that every member has a part to play, and Jesus is the Head of the people. Daphne described the community as bolstering the value of its congregants and including them in everything. "Everyone gets a chance. You don't have to audition for anything or be the best. You just need to have a willing heart and that's what counts the most" (Daphne 2023). Jill iterated that this nature of leadership provided a lot of space for people to flourish in their gifts and move into positions of organic leadership amongst the body, commenting that, "as long as people are mature, this generally works out quite okay" (Jill 2023). This reflected the good leadership Cole (2010) speaks of, leadership not only about casting vision, but empowering others to find their own vision and release it.

4.6 Relational Authenticity and Scripture

At TBTSP, Scripture is regarded as God's revealed Word to humanity. For Tricia, being shaped by the Bible is a key value. She believed it was extremely important to not get caught up in traditions or expectations, but to simply remain faithful to Scripture. A part of this value was the way in which teaching and interpreting Scripture was practised at TBTSP, with a strong emphasis on conversation. Sunday mornings generally offer a sermon, and Scripture also features in worship through lyrics as well as general proclamation amongst the congregants. The church organized regular panels and interviews with congregants to explore Scripture and personal testimonies. The Dining Tables were also places for Scripture study and discussion. Tricia commented that it was through the relational aspects of TBTSP that Scripture often became alive to her. "A word is spoken in season, by someone I am in relationship with, becoming a part of who I am" (Tricia 2023).

Jill highlighted how congregants are encouraged to come to their own conclusions on what Scripture is saying and how to apply it to life, rather than adopt a dogmatic view. Renee expressed a similar theme and highlighted how TBTSP does not shy away from difficult portions of Scripture that congregants may have different perspectives on. "I really appreciate that in our church you're allowed to have your own view on certain things, but we do have key tenets of faith that keep us all connected and on the same page" (Renee 2023).

As a pastor at TBTSP, Simon expressed his willingness to engage in open conversation when confronted with opposing interpretations of Scripture, seeking dialogue

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rather than giving a dismissive response. Gregory recalled a conversation with another congregant where they disagreed over a particular interpretation of Scripture. Through conversation they recognized their misalignment, but acknowledged they still loved and valued one another as members of the family of God. It is here we see commitment to relational authenticity. The congregants chose to be open and honest in their dialogue, even beyond comfort for the purpose of relational authenticity. To continue successfully in this way for thirteen years is commendable, something Gabriel believed was due to the maturity of the congregants. "There's not an expectation that everyone would interpret things the same according to a set doctrine. That could get a little bit muddy, but it seems to work in our context because people are quite mature in their faith" (Gabriel 2023). TBTSP's acknowledgment that the core tenets of faith were non-negotiable, but minor doctrine was open to interpretation affirmed the central importance of this notion in relation to the success of this model.

5. Implications for the Church Moving Forward

For church leaders seeking to establish new expressions of church that support congregants on their spiritual journeys, there are some implications found through this case study. Developing an ecclesiology that focuses on the Church being a people formed in Christ, together with an emphasis on providing safe spaces for people to develop relational authenticity with each other, will organically support people during various stages of their spiritual journey, especially through seasons of doubt and crisis. This in turn will support people in becoming their authentic selves. Wholeness through restoration in relationship with God, self and others will be more closely achieved and the Church's mandate more closely fulfilled.

Leaders recognizing that relational authenticity in shared life (Beard 2015), is beneficial throughout the spiritual journey is key to fulfilling God's mission of reconciliation and wholeness. Participants' reflections, particularly during The Wall experience, highlight the importance of authentic relationships through faith transitions. My findings show the congregants identified as being between Stages Three and Five further along than those in Taylor's (2017) work on atonement. This underscores the ongoing role relational authenticity has in supporting Christians in their spiritual formation. Leaning into Taylor's work reminds us of the crucial role being authentic in relationships with others is, for both pre-converts and more mature believers.

For church communities, this will look like a commitment to cultivating relational authenticity through open conversation and dialogue and being respectful of others' views, whilst holding common tenets of faith. This will come with a recognition that Jesus is the head of the church, and leadership functions best in open,

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honest, authentic relationships, which allows for brokenness – even from leadership themselves.

To practically cultivate relational authenticity, church leaders should encourage diverse spaces for community to congregate and for the organic cultivation of intimate, authentic relationships. TBTSP is a community centred around Jesus, concerned with creating authentic relationships, characteristics Viola (2009) asserts are necessary for flourishing. It is a "body of believers who are committed to one another in community and centered around Jesus" (The Big Table, 2010) where growth can take place in transparent, non-judgmental spaces.

In line with Callahan's (2000) suggestions, TBTSP emphasizes small, strong congregations. This community is less about busy church programmes, but the cultivation of church family to live faith fully in their daily lives, demonstrated through communal meals, Scripture sharing, prayers and reliance on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Scholars like Barton and TenElshof have suggested the church support its congregants' spiritual journeys by providing wise and loving structures (Barton et al. 2014: 292–311); structures that are demonstrated at TBTSP through its Dining and Coffee Tables along with other organic meeting groups.

One suggestion by Bass and Copeland (2010) for effective church support today, is to revisit ancient practices in fresh inventive ways. This is practised by TBTSP through their dialogical approach to Scripture and open worship with space for all to participate. This mutual accountability and love at TBTSP has provided a safe community to discuss grey areas of faith and to live authentically enabling them to grow in their relationship with Christ and progress along the spiritual journey together.

A further implication for the church is for church departers. This study affirms that safe, loving, authentic church communities do exist and that, whilst the Church may have its imperfections, it is continually held and led by Jesus, the author and finisher of the Christian's faith. It can be a place of refreshment and nourishing. Churches who hold space for congregants on all stages of their journeys, even when their faith is challenged and doubts prevail, are communities Christians can become their authentic selves, knowing they are loved and belong. This will ultimately keep them in fellowship – a place they are encouraged to remain.

6. In Conclusion

In a time of fake news and AI, where the line between false and real is thwarted by obscurity and ambiguity, authenticity is longed for. Relational authenticity is a movement toward becoming one's authentic self through loving relationships, which flow from the source who is love, namely God. This case study helps the church, God's family, to understand and appreciate that the journey toward wholeness and authenticity is found in open and honest relationships, cultivated in safe spaces,

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where God's children can truly be themselves with one another; regardless of their stage on the spiritual formation journey through and beyond seasons of doubt and crisis. Relational authenticity, in community, worship, Scripture exploration, and relational leadership is key to supporting one another on our spiritual formation journeys. Not falsely or by imitation, but as our true selves and through loving relationships with God and each other.

Approval for this research was granted by the University of Divinity, by following its ethics review and approval procedures. Before commencing the research, I secured site permission and obtained informed consent from all participants. Each participant was informed that they could raise any questions or concerns with the researcher at any point and were provided with the contact details for the Human Research Ethics Committee. Additionally, all research participants were entitled to keep a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form associated with this research project. These are available from the researcher upon request.

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ARTICLE

The Indigenous Provenance of *Missio Spiritus* and the Expansion of African Pentecostalism

Mookgo Solomon Kgatle

Abstract

Missio spiritus has been theorized and conceptualized as part of the broader mission of the triune God but not emphasized as an indigenous force within the context of African Pentecostalism. This article aims to accentuate the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* in the growth of African Pentecostalism. This is achieved by highlighting the indigenous provenance, defined as accounting for Indigenous people, their culture and communities when studying the work of the Holy Spirit, in each aspect of *missio spiritus* such as the Spirit of witness, the Spirit of redemption, the Spirit of life, and the Spirit of creation. The accentuation of the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* contributes toward the broader understanding of the expansion of African Pentecostalism.

Keywords: *Indigenous provenance*, *Missio spiritus*, Holy Spirit, Pentecostalism, Indigenous knowledge system, World Christianity, Pentecostal missiology, Creation

1. Introduction

Pentecostalism is the movement that emphasizes the direct relationship with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Hence, Pentecostals across the world believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit with other pneumatic experiences such as speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing. The theology of the Holy Spirit has become the main hallmark of the Pentecostal movement. It is for the same reasons that Pentecostals in Africa and elsewhere in the world are known as people of the Spirit. The Pentecostal movement continues to grow in the African continent with Pentecostal churches in their different strands planted in most African cities, towns and villages. It is no longer a debate that Pentecostalism is one of the fastest-growing Christian traditions in the world Christianity with a great shift of this growth from the global North to the global South, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first (Bediako 1995; Anderson 2013; Kalu 2013). The African continent is playing a major role in this shift within the context of missions

and world Christianity. Recent statistics put African Pentecostalism at more than 200 million believers and followers which is more than 10% of the 1.4 billion population in the continent (Wariboko 2017). Predictions indicate that these numbers will continue to increase given the rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement in the twenty-first century in Africa. All these developments require a proper inquisition into the rationale behind the growth of African Pentecostalism. What could be the reasons behind this rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement in Africa? How do we reflect on these dynamics as missiologists within African Christianity or even world Christianity? This is a valid research question that I seek to answer in this article.

In a quest to understand the rationale behind this growth, this article explores the significant role of the Spirit in African Pentecostalism through the *missio spiritus* as a theoretical framework. The main contribution is the emphasis on the Indigenous forms of *missio spiritus* as a driving force behind the growth of African Pentecostalism. The article is divided into five main sections. In the first section, I seek to introduce Pentecostalism as the mission of the Spirit since its early inception. The second section is a discussion on *missio spiritus* as a theoretical framework including its different aspects such as the witness of the Spirit, the redemptive Spirit, the Spirit of life, and the Spirit of creation. In this section, I will demonstrate the research gaps in these aspects, particularly the Indigenous provenance of the *missio spiritus*. In the third section, I define the term indigenous provenance in the context the Pentecostal movement in Africa, to account for indigenous people, their culture and communities in studying the work of the Holy Spirit and point to its connection to *missio spiritus*. The same is used to formulate the framework of the indigenous province of *missio spiritus*. In the fourth section, the significant role of the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* in the growth of the Pentecostal movement in Africa will be highlighted. The last section explains how this role changes how Pentecostal missiologists understand missions and world Christianity. The section also seeks to highlight how the accentuation of the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* contributes to the broader understanding of the growth of African Pentecostalism in the present and for the future as well. The next section introduces Pentecostalism as the mission of the Spirit.

2. Pentecostalism as the mission of the Spirit

The Pentecostal movement is known as the mission of the Spirit. The theology of the Spirit has been at the centre of the Pentecostal movement since its inception (Yong 2005). In addition, the theology of the Spirit is the fundamental teaching in the Pentecostal movement. The same theology of the Spirit plays a role in the Pentecostal mission in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Both the biblical and the contemporary accounts of the Pentecostal movement are characterized by the works of the Spirit. In the biblical account, the Lukan-Acts Pentecost narrative demonstrates the

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role of the Spirit in mission and its expansion from one region to the other (Menzies 1989). However, within African Pentecostalism, there is a need to emphasize this role, particularly its indigenous provenance. Acts 1.8 and Acts 2.1–4 show that the beginning of the Pentecostal mission was activated by the Holy Spirit when believers were baptized and empowered by the same Spirit. The focus here is not just on speaking in tongues but on the power to witness to others. This baptism and empowerment of the Spirit gave the believers the ability to be witnesses in their locality and to other regions of the world. Hence, the early church of the Apostles grew to many thousands of believers because the empowerment of the Holy Spirit made it possible for the expansion of the mission work. As believers of the early church were filled with the Holy Spirit, they saw a need to minister the word to others and reach out to many people. Therefore, the Holy Spirit in the early church became the driving force for the expansion of the mission. This expansion was mainly because the Apostles of the early church were able to minister relevantly to the different contexts through the work of the Spirit. In other words, they were able to apply the mission of the Spirit in the local contexts. I will later demonstrate that the same work of the Holy Spirit empowers believers in Africa for the expansion of the Pentecostal movement on the continent.

In the contemporary Pentecostal movement, particularly looking at the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, United States of America, the revival was characterized by pneumatic experiences such as Spirit baptism, speaking in tongues and other miraculous manifestations (Hollenweger & MacRobert 1988; Menzies & Menzies 2000; Althouse 2003). The manifestations of the Spirit at Azusa Street resulted in thousands of new Christians worldwide between 1906 and 1916 (Hayford & Moore 2006). The Azusa Street revival followed the same path of the biblical Pentecost narrative that was characterzsed by pneumatic experiences that expanded the Pentecostal mission (Robeck 2017). These attracted people from all regions of the world to camp at Azusa to experience the revival that grew to become one of the most important and influential revivals in the history of the Pentecostal movement (Anderson 2006). However, with the expansion of this revival, I would still contend that it relied upon the ability of Pentecostals from around the world to apply the mission of the Spirit in their local contexts. Similarly the ability of African Pentecostals to reach out to people in the local context because of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit needs to be emphasized.

In the South African context, the Pentecostal movement has connections with the Azusa Street revival in two ways. First, its pioneer, John G. Lake had been part of the Azusa Street revival through his meeting with William Seymour (Anderson 2006: 107). John G. Lake arrived in South Africa together with Thomas Hezmalhalch after having experienced the Spirit baptism from Azusa Street revival. The role of the Spirit was applied relevantly to the South African context and churches like the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa with more than 1 million members continue to grow in the twenty-first century. Second, the same experiences that happened in

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the Azusa Street revival also happened in South Africa with the likes of John G. Lake at the forefront of these experiences. This means that the same pneumatic experiences that occurred in the Azusa Street revival also happened in the Bree Street revival in Johannesburg, South Africa (Kgatle 2016). Many people could move from different provinces in South Africa to gather at Bree Street Revival for healing, and other pneumatic experiences. From Bree Street, the Pentecostal movement began to spread to other cities in South Africa attracting many followers and planting many churches. Moreover, many other Pentecostal churches were started by African pioneers in many provinces of South Africa. But the role of the Holy Spirit has indigenous elements in every context where Pentecostalism finds itself. These elements need to be highlighted in the context of missions and world Christianity. In the next section, I discuss the *missio spiritus* as the relevant framework in demonstrating the role of the Holy Spirit in the expansion of African Pentecostalism. But in doing so, I will also demonstrate the gaps in the indigenous elements of this framework.

3. Framing a *missio spiritus* approach in the context of Pentecostalism

Missio spiritus, which means the mission of the Spirit, is a relevant framework for this article in investigating the role of the Spirit in the growth of African Pentecostalism. Thinane (2021:4) says that "*Missio Spiritus* can be described as a Latin theological expression referring to the total participation of God the Spirit in the fulfilment of the purpose of *Missio Dei*." However, I would argue that such participation depends solely on the application of the *missio spiritus* in a specific local context, thus recognizing the indigenous provenance of the same. The mission of the Spirit refers to the work done by the Spirit within the different roles in the trinitarian mission. In other words, as much as there is the mission of God and the mission of Christ, there is also the mission of the Spirit. All these missions are important in the mission of the church in the twwenty-first century. Bosch (1991) also referred to the role of the Holy Spirit in mission. Other scholars such as McQuilkin (1997) walked in his footsteps in demonstrating the role of the Holy Spirit in mission. However, they have not demonstrated the indigenous provenance of this role particularly in the expansion of African Pentecostalism. By indigenous provenance I refer to taking cognizance of the indigenous or even native people, their culture and indigenous communities when studying the work of the Holy Spirit (Weaver 2001; Coates & Coates 2004; Sissons 2005). Wonsuk Ma (2017) and Julie Ma (2015) have also published extensively on the role of the Holy Spirit in mission particularly in the Pentecostal movement. However, I would still contend that a gap exists in demonstrating how this role functions in the expansion of African Pentecostalism. In other words, how can the *missio spiritus* be understood in terms of its Indigenous provenance in the expansion of Pentecostalism is a research area that deserves exploration in missions and world Christianity?

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Allan Anderson (2005) does not call this a *missio spiritus* but uses the concept of a pneumatocentric mission as part of the aspects of the Pentecostal mission. By a pneumatocentric mission, Anderson refers to conducting a mission as having been directed or sent by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit plays an important role in instructing the people engaged in missions through dreams or visions. It is only after receiving such an instruction that a Pentecostal missionary will begin to conduct the mission. This element according to Anderson is what differentiates the mission of the Spirit from other missions. The mission of the Spirit is very much focused on pneumatology, that is, the work of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that was released on the day of the Pentecost as recorded in Luke-Acts as the "missional Spirit" in the sense that the Spirit activates the believers to begin the work of missions. Elsewhere in his works, Anderson (1991) cf Anderson (2018) has emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in doing a mission that connects to the mission of the Spirit. In these works, Anderson also pointed out that Africans are people of the Spirit, hence the mission of the Spirit is common among African Pentecostals. Therefore, Anderson comes very close to what I want to achieve in this current study. However, since Anderson did not speak directly about *missio spiritus* and its link with the expansion of African Pentecostalism, the current study remains worthwhile.

Speaking of *missio spiritus* and its link to Pentecostalism, Yong (2011) theorized *missio spiritus* in three acts, meaning, the Spirit of creation as the first act, the Spirit of redemption as the second act, and the Spirit of the eschaton as the third act. The research gap remains in working with each act to illustrate its indigenous provenance in the expansion of African Pentecostalism. Mæland expanded on these by listing at least four aspects of the *missio spiritus*, namely the Spirit of creation, the Spirit of life, the Spirit of redemption and the Spirit of witness, pointing out that

> *As to the Spirit of mission, what is highlighted in the document is namely the Spirit in creation, the Creator Spirit, and to a lesser extent the Spiritus of redemption/re-creation and consummation/eschaton. It is the spirit of life, the breath of life, the Ruach Elohim, hovering over the primordial chaos, being the breath of human beings, who are placed center stage. (Maeland 2013: 142)*

All these four aspects are discussed here within the theoretical framework of a *missio spiritus*. There might be other aspects of the *missio spiritus* such as the Spirit of the eschaton as highlighted by Yong but the focus in this article shall be on the four that are highlighted by Mæland. In each aspect of the *missio spiritus*, I seek to demonstrate the gaps to highlight the value of the indigenous provenance of this framework.

First, *missio spiritus* refers to the Spirit of creation, which means that the mission involves not only human beings but also the creation and its creatures (Yong 2019).

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In the creation narrative in Genesis, there is already evidence of the Spirit hovering upon the face of the waters. This demonstrates that the Spirit was always involved in the creation and environmental experience from the beginning (Yong 2015). This aspect of the Spirit of creation reminds us that God himself is not only the God of heaven but also the God of nature and the environment. Padilla (2016) explains that this is one aspect of the mission and world of Christianity that we cannot ignore, that is, the role of the Holy Spirit in giving power to life and the environment. Therefore, a call to embrace the Spirit of creation is a call to embrace care for God's creation and people. The Pentecost narrative gives evidence of the Spirit taking part in the affairs of the people and also how people began to relate with one another after receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is calling all creation to himself for the redemption and restoration of all. Even in this aspect, it is still very important to demonstrate the Indigenous value of the Spirit of creation and the elements of indigenous knowledge in the *missio spiritus* help us understand the Spirit of creation. Many African Pentecostal churches have begun a journey of not only evangelizing to non-believers but also taking part in the development of their nations, as in the building of schools, universities and clinics in countries like Nigeria and Ghana, which I suggest is the reason for the expansion of the Pentecostal movement in the continent.

The second aspect of *missio spiritus* is the Spirit of life whereby the Holy Spirit is defined as the one who gives life to the believer. Right from Genesis, it was the Spirit that gave life to the human being when the same was just the dust of the earth. God breathed into the human and the human became a living soul. The Pentecost narrative also demonstrates that the Spirit's baptism brings life into the believer through the Holy Spirit. According to Kaunda (2017), the mission of the Spirit is a relevant approach to the transformation of lives. God sent his son Jesus Christ into the world for the transformation of the lives of the people. Similarly, God sends his Spirit into the believer so that they might receive life and transformation. In John 6.63 Jesus told his disciples "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." This means that when the Spirit of God is upon the life of the disciple, they can receive life and transformation as opposed to life in the flesh (Gal. 5). The contribution I seek to make in this current study is the role of the Spirit of life in transforming lives in different contexts. Life transformation as emanating from the Spirit of life cannot be generalized but rather applied to a specific context. By life transformation here one refers to the changes that can be seen in the life of the believer through the same Spirit empowerment. In addition, the Spirit of life refers to how believers through the Holy Spirit play a role in socio-economic issues and socio-political issues. Thus, in framing the *missio spiritus*, there is a great need to contextualize the transformation of believers in missions and world Christianity. Again, this is the strength of the Pentecostal movement in Africa

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where spiritual service including the songs and sermons are meant to bring transformation to both believers and unbelievers in attendance, thus, contributing to the growth of Pentecostalism.

The third aspect of the *missio spiritus* is the Spirit of redemption, which means that the Holy Spirit plays a major role in the redemption of the people of the world. The Spirit has a role to play in the salvation of the lost people in the world. Redemption is not only defined as the work of Christ but also as the work of the Holy Spirit. As much as it is Christ who died on the cross of Calvary, the Holy Spirit has a role to play in the fulfilment of the same redemption. In addition, the Holy Spirit plays an important role in redemption because as much as the Spirit of God hovered upon the waters, humanity lost that connection with God with the fall of humanity. Yong (2011: 358) showed how the redemption of humanity does not only involve the salvation of the soul but the connection with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Spirit plays an important role in the reconciliation between humanity and their God as much as the mission of Christ does. Similarly, the Pentecost narrative should be understood in the same way as an event that happened in the quest to connect humanity back to God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jennings (2017) discusses the same point of how the Holy Spirit forms intimacy or communion between God and humanity and amongst humanity. However, there is a need to expand knowledge in understanding the role of the Spirit of redemption in helping people in different contexts. This expansion includes exploring how the Spirit of redemption functions not only for the salvation of the soul but also in healing and deliverance in the African context. This is similar to Green's (2014) holistic salvation which includes biblical liberative paradigms. For me, this is the indigenous provenance of the Spirit of redemption within the framework of *missio spiritus*. In other words, African Pentecostals do not define redemption as a process of being free from sin alone. Rather, redemption brings healing and deliverance, becoming very practical in the daily challenges that Africans face in their lives.

The last aspect of *missio spiritus* is the Spirit of witness, also known as the Spirit of evangelization, which means that the Holy Spirit plays a role in witnessing or evangelizing those who need the gospel. Although Lesslie Newbigin (1995) demonstrated how the Holy Spirit takes part in the mission activity of announcing the good news to the people about the work that Christ has done on the cross of Calvary, he does not demonstrate how that is achieved in local contexts. In Acts 1.8, the purpose of the power that believers receive from the Holy Spirit is for the believers to become witnesses. In addition, in becoming witnesses to others, believers need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Believers are involved in the praxis of evangelisation through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is possible when the Holy Spirit works relevantly in the specific local context in which the gospel is witnessed. In Acts 10.38, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and … he went around

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doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him." This means that even the work of evangelization that Christ did was also possible because the Holy Spirit was upon him. It follows that whenever the Holy Spirit is upon the believers, they can do the work of mission. But even here the work of the Spirit of witness is relevant to the situational needs of the people that Jesus ministered to and healed. It is important to point out that in African Pentecostalism, the Spirit-empowered and the anointed does not refer only to the clergy. Anyone who is filled with the Holy Spirit can become a witness, including women and children. This contributes toward the expansion of African Pentecostalism, turning any believer into a witness because of spirit empowerment.

4. Indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus*

African Pentecostalism has deep foundational roots in the African Christian experience. This is seen in the ability of African Pentecostalism to incorporate African cultural practices into their African Christian experience (Kalu 2008). In its practices, Pentecostalism does not always borrow from the Western forms of Christianity but from the African cultural heritage (Meyer 2004). Bediako (1995) spoke of Pentecostals in Africa who do not even know about the Azusa Street revival but embrace the fundamental teachings of Pentecostalism such as Spirit baptism. Asamoah-Gyadu (2002) explained that this indigenous provenance is what made African Pentecostalism able to bring transformation in people's lives. Anderson (2011) adds that this is possible through the working of the Holy Spirit among believers in African Pentecostalism. Therefore, in Africa, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit are what bring transformation in the lives of the people (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014). In addition, African Pentecostalism can familiarise itself with the local context in which it finds itself. Therefore, African Pentecostalism has been able to express itself relevantly in many African local contexts as opposed to Western forms of Christianity. Anderson and Tang (2005: 588) point out that "one of the main reasons for the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism in the past century has been its remarkable ability to adapt itself to different cultural contexts and give authentically contextualized expressions to Christianity." While Western forms of Christianity have failed to acknowledge the indigenous knowledge including cultural practices, African Pentecostalism has been able to acknowledge the same without compromising the Christian message.

The indigenous provenance of Pentecostalism is used in this study to formulate what I call an indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus*. This framework is developed here to specifically explore the role of the Holy Spirit in the expansion of African Pentecostalism. This means that the four aspects of the *missio spiritus* as discussed above should be understood in the context of the indigenous force of African Pentecostalism. This opens up a possibility of understanding firstly the

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indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* is relevant in the understanding of the use of the indigenous knowledge system on creation to propagate the gospel. Secondly, the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* is a framework for the life-giving Spirit whereby, as Asamoah-Gyadu and Anderson pointed out earlier, the lives of African people are transformed and restored through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* affords us an opportunity to the able to understand the Spirit of redemption beyond the confessional salvation to the salvation that touches the various aspects of life in African contexts. Lastly, the Spirit of witness informs the presenting of the gospel in forms relevant to the African people. This means that the Spirit of witness in the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* is the Spirit that enables gospel ministers or even missionaries in Africa to minister a contextualized gospel rather than Westernized forms of the gospel. Through the same Holy Spirit, the gospel minister in Africa can express the gospel in an indigenized way. The next section explains how the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* is relevant for understanding the expansion of African Pentecostalism.

5. Indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* and the growth of African Pentecostalism

Most African Pentecostal churches have not yet pronounced on issues related to the creation and the environment. Scholars such as Golo (2014) and Maseno (2017) indicate that Pentecostals in Africa have shown little concern for the environmental crisis and issues related to climate change in the twenty-first century. Werner (2020: 51) adds that in "many African (as well as other) churches the seriousness of the environmental challenges has not yet received attention." In the South African context, churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, the Full Gospel Church, and Assemblies of God have not yet pronounced on issues related to the creation and the environment. In Western Africa, churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Church of Pentecost and many others are involved in various projects concerning development but not directly spoken about issues of environmental crisis and global warming. This is surprising since Pentecostals in Africa believe in the Spirit of witness, the Spirit of redemption and the Spirit of life. What about the Spirit of creation? Some of the reasons for lack of engagement in environmental issues could include the influence of early classical Pentecostalism in anthropocentric salvation rather than the salvation that includes both humans and non-humans. Another reason could be the influence of classical Pentecostalism focusing more on the imminent second coming of Christ and evangelism than taking care of the environment. The Pentecostal movement in Africa can grow further if the issues related to the creation and the role of the Spirit of creation in the same can be taken seriously. In this

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way, the Spirit of creation within the framework of indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* can also add value to the growth of the Pentecostal churches in Africa.

The African Pentecostals are also strong on preaching that the Holy Spirit is the one that gives life to the believer. African Pentecostal preachers emphasize social transformation and development, particularly in presenting the Spirit as life-giving (Freeman 2012). The Holy Spirit is not only introduced as the part of the Trinity and divine but also as the life-giving Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only the supernatural power of God but also the one who transforms human beings. Transformation here is defined as Spirit empowerment able to change attitudes, behaviours, spiritual and other circumstances. In addition, African Pentecostals preach personal and social development because they believe that Spirit empowerment is able to bring Spirit's work into one's financial circumstances. Hence, African Pentecostals emphasise the message of transformation. When the believer is transformed, they can transform the next person in their church or community. Consequently, this transformation moves into the whole society which explains the impact of the African Pentecostal mission. This means that the work of the Holy Spirit translates into the social aspects of the life of the believer. They believe that any Spirit baptised person should see change in their lives after receiving the Holy Spirit. This message of the transformation through the Holy Spirit also plays a role in popularizing the Pentecostal churches in Africa. People believe that once they join such churches, their lives will change for the better because of being Spirit-filled. Therefore, the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* is relevant in understanding the role of the Spirit of life as being able to transform the lives of Africans in many African contexts. In African Pentecostalism, the church is not only a place for fellowship but also a place of social transformation based on the work of the Holy Spirit.

African Pentecostals are also strong on the aspect of redemption which also includes the ministry of healing and deliverance. The evil spirits in African Pentecostalism are confronted by the same Spirit of redemption (Onyinah 2002). This affords African Pentecostalism the ability to respond to various challenges in life like misfortune, barrenness, witchcraft, bad luck, spells and others. They believe that these problems are caused by some spirits in the spirit realm and therefore the Holy Spirit becomes that force that is used to confront the same powers of evil in the spirit realm (Anderson 2018). Hence, Anderson says that the Pentecostal movement in Africa should not only be seen in the continuity of the popular religion but in the confrontation of the same through the Spirit of redemption. Among many African Pentecostals, it is believed that the Spirit of redemption carries divine power to confront sickness, diseases and other problems. Consequently, there is an emphasis on the ministry of healing and deliverance as part of redemption to confront the same problems being caused by evil spirits in the spirit realm. Many Africans do not have medical aid because of the failure of public health care in many African states.

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So the Pentecostal churches have become an alternative to the government's failures. It is for this reason that Pentecostal churches are growing to larger numbers and bigger churches in many African cities. For example in many African countries, rather than queuing at hospitals, they would go to a deliverance minister in pursuit of healing and deliverance. Some do not go because they are sick but believe that the Pentecostal message of healing can keep them healthy or give longevity.

African Pentecostals are very strong on expressing the gospel relevantly to the African people as inspired by the Spirit of witness. African Pentecostalism is known for its focus on reaching out to lost souls in every corner of their cities to preach the gospel to those who need it. The main aim of Pentecostal evangelism is to plant churches around and in cities as inspired by the Spirit of witness. One of the classical Pentecostal churches, the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa, has adopted this model where they see themselves as existing in every city. Thus, church planting according to Anderson (2005: 37) is "a central feature of all Pentecostal mission activity." The point I am making here is that this is informed by the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* as discussed above. Church and mission among African Pentecostals are not separate entities but exist together because a well-established church should be engaged in the work of mission. Hence, it is the task of these Pentecostal churches to give birth to other churches in other cities in Africa. They no longer depend on Western missionaries for the planting of churches in Africa but have become church planters on their own. Similarly, many other Pentecostal churches in sub-Saharan Africa believe in turning every follower into a witness to the world to minister the gospel in an indigenous way. Therefore, the aspect of preaching to the world is not only for the clergy but for every believer who becomes a witness to the gospel of Christ expressed in the African contexts. This aspect of witnessing to others has caused the Pentecostal mission to grow in Africa. This growth is informed by the way Africans have embraced the mission of the Spirit in reaching out to lost souls.

6. Indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus*: rethinking missions and World Christianity

Indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* in the Pentecostal mission changes the way we understand the missions and world of Christianity. Mission should not only be understood in the context of the mission of God and the mission of Christ but also the *missio spiritus*. Yong (2011: 361) puts it this way: "The Spirit who empowered the Son, and who was poured out upon and filled the apostles, is the same Spirit who continues to accomplish the redemptive work of God in Christ, and through the post-apostolic church." The mission of the Spirit has a role to play in the fulfilment of the mission of God and the mission of Christ. It is for this reason that the mission of the Spirit should not be ignored in missions and world Christianity. Thinane

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(2021: 10) says that the *missio spiritus* becomes that bridge that helps us understand other missions. It is an approach in which the mission of God, the mission of Christ, the mission of the church, and others can be articulated. However, scholars such as Thinane, Yong and Bosch have not articulated the role of the indigenous provenance of the *missio spiritus*. My contribution here not only recognizes the mission of Spirit in the missions and world Christianity but also its indigenous contribution. The indigenous provenance of the mission of Spirit deserves attention in demonstrating its role in the expansion of African Pentecostalism.

7. Conclusion

This article explored the role of the Spirit in the expansion of African Pentecostalism using the *missio spiritus* as a theoretical framework. The various aspects of the *missio spiritus* such as the Spirit of creation, the Spirit of life, the redemptive Spirit, and the witness of the Spirit, were discussed in the context of African Pentecostalism. However, the indigenous provenance of these aspects has not been explored in previous studies. Therefore, the contribution of this article is the framing of the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* and its role in the expansion of African Pentecostalism. Therefore as emanating from an indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus*, the findings are: that African Pentecostals are strong in ministering life, preaching redemption, and witnessing to other people. However, Pentecostals in Africa have yet to pronounce on issues related to creation. Nonetheless, I argue that the Spirit of life, the Spirit of redemption, and Spirit of witness make African Pentecostalism grow in numbers. Therefore, the indigenous provenance of *missio spiritus* remains the rationale behind the growth of the Pentecostal movement in Africa. This is important for mission research in understanding missions and world Christianity in the twenty-first century. Moreover, this is important in understanding the broader expansion of African Pentecostalism in present and future studies.

About the Author

Mookgo Solomon Kgatle holds a PhD in Theology and is a Professor of Missiology at the College of Human Sciences, UNISA. He is interested in the history, mission, and theology of African Pentecostalism. He has published several peer-reviewed articles and books in the field. He is the founder and president of the Southern African Society of Pentecostal Studies. He is an NRF-rated scholar and appeared in the 2024 Scopus list of the Top 2% of Scientists worldwide. He received visiting scholarships to the University of Birmingham and Oxford University (2020–23). He won several other awards including the Unisa Principal Award for excellence in research (2024). Contact: kgatls@unisa.ac.za

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ARTICLE

Unity and Diversity among Ghana's new Prophetic Churches: A Comparative Study of Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry and Believers Worship Centre

Eric Manu

Abstract

Neo-prophetism has gained significant visibility in contemporary Ghanaian Christianity. It is a dominant Pentecostal strand, giving birth to several composite ministries in the country. Given this multiplicity, it has become challenging to understand the underlying complexities of these prophetic churches. The article compares two prominent, neo-prophetic churches in Ghana – the Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry (VBPM) and Believers Worship Center (BWC) – to identify their unity and diversity. The paper draws on VBPM and BWC's teachings, recorded sermons and members' experiences. This shows both a consensus in the beliefs and practices of the ministries yet also variations in activities shaped by selected ministries. The paper highlights how the shared yet diverse characteristics of prophetic churches not only strengthen religion but also provide members with varied feelings and experiences regarding their neo-prophetic faith.

Keywords: Prophetism, Unity and diversity, Prophetic church, Pentecostal mission, Comparative study, Ghana

1. Introduction

The themes of unity and diversity in Christianity have received considerable scholarly attention. Thompson (1963) and Gifford (2015) have highlighted the tendency to assume that all aspects of Christianity are already known, an assumption challenged by numerous studies. For instance, a *History of Christian Sects and Denominations* observes that the Nestorian Church (or Church of the East) shares the Episcopal governance, doctrines and use of the Nicene Creed common to other Oriental churches (Evans 2023: 244). This same assumption extends to Pentecostal Christianity, prompting Gifford's 2015 examination of the Pentecostal Christianities of Olukoya and Oyedepo in Nigeria – a concern that similarly motivates the present study.

The term "unity" refers to the state of oneness, being whole or joined together, whereas "diversity" signifies discord or multiplicity. Although these concepts are contrasting, they are not necessarily oppositional. In this article, the phrase "unity and diversity" refers to the coexistence of shared elements and distinct differences within a group. It describes how different prophetic churches can maintain their uniqueness while contributing to a common whole. This duality forms the basis for examining how individual expressions contribute to a collective identity without undermining their uniqueness. Considering this, speculation about the specific nature and influence of contemporary African Prophetic movements is precarious. Studies that engage in such speculation lack a complete understanding of the complexities of play. As Gifford argues, "Many simply assume we all know what we are dealing with [when talking about Ghanaian and African Pentecostalism], and move immediately to speculate on political effects, social roles, statistical trends" (Gifford 2015: 115). Considering that such conjectures often misinterpret the beliefs of African Pentecostals, we should clarify their actual principles. To achieve this, I compare the spirituality, religious teachings and rituals of Ghana's neo-prophets, focusing on Vida Mensah's Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry (VBPM) and Stephen Adom Kyei-Duah's Believers Worship Center (BWC), to identify their points of unity and diversity. This comparison is necessary for understanding that different prophetic churches can retain their unique identities while collectively contributing to a unified whole – especially in beliefs, doctrinal emphasis and spiritual practices – as a lens for understanding the global Pentecostal faith.

The prophetic church is a branch of African Pentecostal Christianity that emphasizes the prophetic aspect of neo-Pentecostal theology. It places particular emphasis on a ministry grounded in God's voice and interpreting his message. This distinct focus sets it apart from other conventional Pentecostal groups (White & Pondani 2022; Tsekpoe 2019). In Ghana, this strand of Christianity has existed for over two decades. Prophetic churches are recognized for their prophetic healing and deliverance, problem diagnosis, spiritual warfare and guidance, religious products and consultations (Kgatle 2023: 2; Manu 2023; Aryeh 2019; Olukoya 2014; Omenyo & Atiemo 2006; Goll 2004). Believers use religious products that are accessible during church services and consultations to support spiritual warfare and guidance. What sets this strand apart, beyond its vitality and media appropriation, is the founders' adoption of the label "prophet" as part of their self-identity.

One such ministry is the Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry, located in Aprade in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Founded in the 1990s by Prophetess Mrs Vida Osei Mensah, this ministry offers a valuable case for exploring how individuality and collective identity coexist within the broader neo-prophetic movement. A second notable ministry is the Believers Worship Center, which traces its beginnings to the founder's missionary work in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, in 1988. Prophet Kyei-Duah

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then decided to organize a small group of believers to form the Believers Ministry (BM). The prophet relocated to Adansi Obuasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, where he established the BWC. In 2010, the church was inaugurated in Kumasi Anwomaso, where it had its religious services for two years. In March 2012, the church moved to its first building at Kenyase-Adwumam, which is currently its headquarters. This ministry, like VBPM, presents a distinct expression of neo-prophetism while contributing to the shared ethos of the movement.

VBPM and BWC are neo-prophetic denominations. Their categorization suggests that they should have similar practices, beliefs, roles and effects, which rule out variations between them. They have extensive following and inimitable prophetic practices that influence both their followers and the Ghanaian Christian community. Today, they attract public interest and dominate religious contexts in Ghana. With the advent of COVID-19, the influence of VBPM and BWC has expanded widely through media production, specifically television, Facebook and YouTube.

While ministries share some elements, they also display peculiar traits and influences, particularly through their teachings and prophecy. This underscores the need to explore the unity and diversity of Christian denominations. Although denominational differences can at times be divisive, they have the potential to enrich the church's mission by encouraging diversity, broadening its reach and promoting inter-denominational collaboration.

Given the controversies surrounding gender roles in traditional Christian leadership, the choice between prophetess and prophet-led ministries are important. Significant differences exist between females and males in terms of religious and social experiences, psychology and biology. Female-led ministries constitute a minority of Ghana's prophetic movements and are generally under-discussed in Global Pentecostal scholarship. These reasons make the selection of the VBPM and BWC important.

Unlike other Pentecostal groups, Mensah and Kyei-Duah do not like writing spiritual messages in books. This is typical of prophetic church leaders in Ghana. However, many of their sermons and teachings are recorded and put on social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, probably for reachability. Therefore, these platforms, among other sources, serve as the basis for the subsequent discussion. Information gathered about the churches commenced in 2020 in the heat of the COVID-19 lockdown when I followed them in the media; several visits were made to the ministries afterwards.

This study employed a qualitative research approach through the use of a case study method. Data was collected from key church leaders and ordinary members of VBPM and BWC in Kumasi through face-to-face interviews and participant observation, conducted between February 2022 and August 2022. Formal verbal consent was obtained from research participants to uphold their right to make informed

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decisions, a clear and practical method of consent in this situation where literacy issues made written consent impractical.

The paper outlines the distinctive characteristics, religious services, practices and teachings of the VBPM and BWC, providing a basis for exploring the unity and diversity between the two ministries.

2. Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry

According to Vida Mensah, VBPM began as a prayer camp to address "spiritual problems" such as illness, poverty, divorce and spiritual marriages believed to be caused by evil spirits. The church was named "Bethel", meaning "House of God", to reflect God's miraculous presence at VBPM, drawing inspiration from the biblical city's spiritual significance (cf. Brodsky 1990; Rainey 2006). It upholds orthodox Christian beliefs in the Trinity –God the Father as Creator, Jesus as God's only Son, and the Holy Spirit as the source of all spiritual gifts (*charisma*) sustaining the church.

The core religious practices of the VBPM include the administration of anointing oil and holy water for healing, exorcism and prosperity. Mensah teaches that evil spiritual forces directly influence human life. Like other contemporary prophets, the prophetess also appears to present a microcosmic view of the world by focusing on the familial origin of her followers' problems. Believers often become aware of these harmful influences through deliverance and counselling sessions. Prophecy is one of the pillars of the ministry that the founder believes has ensured its survival. Individual counselling sessions attract many people to join and participate in the ministry.

2.1 Specific characteristics

The VBPM shares several characteristics that set it within and outside the prophetic church enclave in Ghana today. VBPM has as its motto: *gyedie mu ahoɔden*, which literally means "strong in faith" (as described by Paul in Romans 4.20 about Abraham's faith in God). This motto urges a believer to remain strong (faithful to God) amid life's challenges. The church has as its symbol a globe, a cross, and a dove flying over a Bible. This logo is explained by the Prophetess as signifying God's words, the salvation of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the power of the Spirit of God for the salvation of the world. A significant feature of the church is its focus on the will of God, which the prophetess believes is divinely revealed to her.

Another specific trait of VBPM is its mission. The mission of the church is to change the lives of people worldwide. The Church has a vision to ensure that all people hear the word of God and gain an understanding of God's love, promises and salvation. The global nature of the mission and vision of the VBPM has ensured that leaders

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(apostles and pastors) of the Church function as the wheel (the vehicle or primary instrument) for God's love and salvation to the world.

Unlike some prophetic churches, the VBPM does not sell (religious) items such as holy water, anointing oil, spiritual cream, spiritual handkerchief, pen and mirror to church members. They are acquired during counselling and church services from nearby shops. Other members may also bring items from their homes. Aside from the items that church members acquire during counselling (spiritual direction), no other items are sold to members by the prophetess. This sets VBPM apart from other existing prophetic Pentecostal/Charismatic churches that appear to engage in the "commercialization of religion" (Shi & Pande 2023; Andrew 2021). The figure below illustrates the common items obtained and used by church attendees.

Figure 1 Photo of religious items acquired during counselling by members of VBPM.

An additional feature of VBPM is its single-storey accommodation facility located on the church premises, 30m from the church. This facility hosts church members whom the Prophetess, after counselling, directs to pray at the church for a few days. This is to say that church members/clients who lodge in the facility do so according to the instructions of the prophetess. Some church members lodged in the facility for three days, others for one week, and a few for a month. They lodge in the facility without making any payments. While there, morning and evening prayers are organized for them apart from their private prayers.

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2.2 Church services

The church organized three services per week. They hold these religious services on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. In addition to these services, other online events aim to spread God's word and salvation through Jesus to all, regardless of nationality, faith or location. The Church transmits a significant proportion of its services on Paradise TV, a channel that it owns. Thus, they evangelize church members at home and, simultaneously project the church's presence in the public sphere through electronic media. In this category were "Grace Hour" and "Word and Prayer Time". All church services encourage active participation, but in this section, special emphasis is placed on the Thursday Counselling and Prayer Service, which is the largest and most significant among all the religious gatherings at VBPM due to its prophetic nature.

The Thursday service, which is in two parts, begins with a counselling session that starts at 6:00 am and usually closes at 11:00 am. However, the session may conclude earlier or later depending on the number of church members present. Similar to other prophetic churches, counselling is an important feature of VBPM. This attracts many people to church. At the church on Thursdays, all persons – young, old, sick, healthy, mentally challenged, pregnant and unemployed graduates – are seen coming for counselling. The Prophetess sits in a designated room on the left side of the altar, listens to the problems of the counsellee, and provides a spiritual direction or guidance (*akwankyerɛ*). Spiritual direction is a neo-Pentecostal religious practice, which involves the interpretation and remediation of a spiritual problem by a person perceived to have stronger spiritual power.

As the counsellee enters the room, he/she drops an offering in a bowl on the right side of the seat to which he/she sits. The counsellee's seat is located directly opposite the Prophetess. The counsellee is welcomed by the Prophetess. As part of the greeting (welcome), the Prophetess discloses God's purpose for the believer's life in the coming days. This is followed by asking about the purpose for which the client has come to see the Prophetess. After the narration of the purpose (which is usually a spiritual or physical problem), the Prophetess directs the believer on what to do to receive a breakthrough using common items such as toffee, oil, water, salt, naphthalene balls, shea butter and lemons. The items were purchased from the church. The counsellee receives a chit as proof of payment. The item is given to counsellees close to the Thursday service.

The second part of the Thursday service is the healing and deliverance prayer. This service reflects the strong prophetic character of the VBPM. This is because it showcases the experience of divine power through Prophetess Mrs Vida Mensah for a vast number of attendees. As in other services of the church, the sermon is an important segment of the Thursday service. It is accompanied by prayer points that specifically touch on the spiritual needs and requests of church members. The prayer appears to take a significant portion of the entire sermon and church services

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in general. Owing to intermittent prayer, the sermon lasts for approximately two hours. During this time, many prophetic directions are given, and healing and deliverance are believed to be experienced by church members.

Immediately following the sermon is "harvest time". During this time, church members are directed to "sow a seed" for a breakthrough, a practice prevalent in many contemporary Ghanaian churches, particularly neo-pentecostal ones. This practice, which can trigger spiritual and physical benefits, is encouraged due to its connection to believers' prosperity. Seed sowing amounts range from GH¢50 ($3.13) to GH¢300 ($18.75) as of October 2024. The harvest is then followed by a testimony, an important segment of the healing and deliverance prayer service. The testimony represents thanksgiving and appreciation for God's work, allowing the power to perform more of his grace and giving hope to others awaiting breakthroughs. This segment takes a considerable amount of time due to the number of church members involved. Thursday service ends with blessings of items brought by church members, as instructed by the Prophetess, including food, non-food items, paraphernalia and money.

The foregoing highlights VBPM's prophetic identity, shaped by its spiritual focus which is evident in the activities, teachings and practices of the church. These elements together underscore how the church significantly embodies the mission of God within Ghanaian Pentecostal Christianity.

3. Believers Worship Centre

Now that we have explored VBPM, we turn our attention to Kyei-Duah's Believers Worship Centre. Kyei-Duah describes the BWC as the "Philadelphia movement" (Rev. 3.7–13), representing holy nationals of the biblical city of Philadelphia in present-day Turkey.

The BWC professes belief in the Trinity and, as a prophetic church, highlights healing and deliverance through Holy Spirit-inspired miracles. Kyei-Duah's sermons focus on God, Satan, bewitchment, humanity's link to evil and liberation. His teachings trace God's origin to three spiritual powerful beings who came together to form the Trinity: God the Father, God the Word, and God the Holy Spirit – three divine persons in one God. The first being's power was in wind, the second's in water, and the third's in fire. Their union caused these elements to merge, producing a great explosion known as a thunderstorm. This doctrine diverges markedly from the conventional biblical conception of God, giving rise to contentious debates within Ghana's Christian community.

Kyei-Duah teaches that Satan is the source of evil, a thief who steals human "glory" to corrupt lives. Those who make pacts with evil for wealth lose their souls to him, which are then used for demonic purposes. He adds that witches and other

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non-Christian spirits continually attack believers' prosperity. The indicators of being bewitched include any hindrance to fulfilling your divine destiny, such as always being "almost there" but never arriving (Gifford 2015: 116). In Ghana, witchcraft is a deeply rooted belief system due to the community's ability to provide a public space where witchcraft is essentially recognized and, at the same time, effectively dealt with using ritual techniques (Gifford 2001: 324). This has both cultural and spiritual significance. Kyei-Duah teaches that bewitchment is real and believers must engage in prayer, deliverance, and the use of religious items for protection. He emphasizes staying "under his care" by displaying his image, which symbolizes spiritual covering—a practice now common among both BWC members and non-members. Below is a commonly used image of the Prophet by his followers:

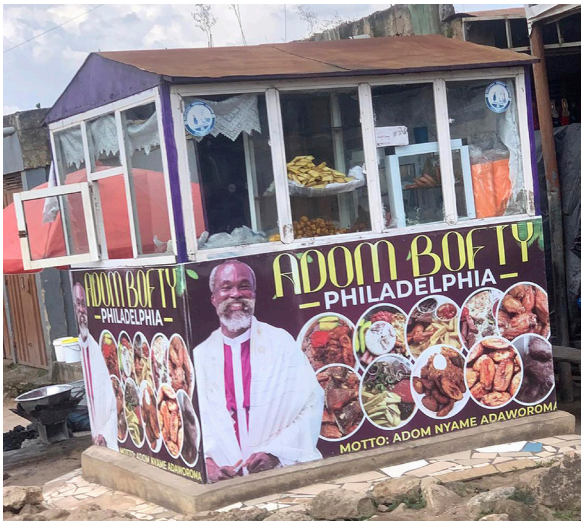

Figure 2 Image of Prophet Kyei-Duah used by a local food vendor in Kumasi.

3.1 Specific characteristics

This section examines six specific characteristics of BWC – its motto, mission, vision, dress style, offertory practice and religious products – highlighted for their significance among many other features.

The Believers Worship Center has as its motto "justice, mercy, honesty". According to the tenets of the Believers Worship Center, the church is the final manifestation of God's church/kingdom through his Prophet, Stephen Adom Kyei-Duah. The church has as its emblem a globe, Bible and dove with green leaves in the beak. The mission of the church is to empower believers to take complete control of their lives through direct worship and communication with the Lord Jesus Christ. This

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mission has ensured that the church supervises both the spiritual and physical lives of its members aiming to make them worthy of being children of God and promoting self-dependence. According to Kyei-Duah, the church has a priority to eliminate its members' over-dependence on religious leaders for solutions to problems that have impoverished many Christians through extortion as they seek deliverance. Related to the mission is the vision of attaining "true worship of God, which is in truth and in spirit with a mind absolutely free of association of life occurrences to witches and supernatural beings, and losing focus of God is eliminated from people's mind". This purpose significantly sets BWC apart from other churches.

Another trait that sets members of the BWC from their prophetic counterparts is their dress codes. The Church's foundation on piety and love of God has ensured that members put on dresses that befit a child of God. The church prohibits wearing indecent clothes (short and transparent) that instigate lust and sexual immorality among attendees. Women within BWC are not exposed to hair. They cover their heads as prescribed by Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.2–16. Again, they do not wear makeup or artificial and polished nails. As a model for church members, the prophet is often depicted wearing a long robe and a tallit (prayer shawl), which he typically covers his head with. Men ware not expected to wear female clothing. They adopt a dress code that goes far beyond worldly pleasure. The purpose is to portray Jesus Christ, their leader and mentor. In addition, brothers (pastors) wear white robes, similar to a cassock. They remain pure and dedicated to the church's course. This has become paradigmatic for some young prophets and prophetic churches, contributing to BWC's success in Ghana.

Beyond the believers' mode of dressing, a notable aspect of the Church is that the offertory is discretionary. Members give to God based on what he has done. Offering boxes are placed at different places on the church premises, where members willingly deposit their offerings. This happens after church service. Unlike the VBPM and several others, the BWC does not designate a specific day for counselling sessions for its members; instead, this is conducted privately.

The final distinguishing feature is the church's range of religious products. Whereas religious items in Mensah's ministry are typically self-sourced and organic, a distinguishing characteristic of BWC is its widely recognized, distinctive, processed, well-packaged and church-branded religious items. The church sells these religious items, including "Grace Water", "Grace Soap", "Grace Oil", "Grace Powder", "Grace Cream", "Second Chance (*yesu mogya* – Blood of Jesus)," and "Grace Sobolo". The *yesu mogya* (Blood of Jesus) is a mixture of natural herbs in a transparent plastic sachet that is to be applied to the body or taken after mixing it with water or food. This indicates that the content of the *yesu mogya* is not the actual blood of Jesus but a representation of it. The Prophet explained that all items work based on faith and righteousness. The prices of these items range from GH¢10 to GH¢30 ($0.63 –$1.88).

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Figure 3 Photo of religious items purchased by members of BWC.

The above items were purchased by the church members of the BWC. These religious items are used for spiritual and physical purposes. For instance, "Grace Sobolo", which is typically sold during and after a church service, is used for healing purposes. Many people purchase it due to testimonies of healing from diseases such as diabetes, stroke, hepatitis and cancer. The "Grace Soap", "Grace Powder" and "Grace Cream" are used during and after bathing for cleansing and spiritual protection. Moreover, the "Grace water" is used for blessing.

These religious items have an enormous impact on the people who purchase them. These effects are often seen during testimonies given by persons who have used any of these religious items. All the items in Figure 3 are recommended by the leaders of the church for whatever needs are brought by church members. However, a church member can decide whether to buy any of them.

3.2 Church services

The Believers Worship Center offers a range of church services and activities. On Sundays, the most crowded Anointing and Breakthrough Service is at 10:00 am; the Healing, Deliverance and Prayer Service is held on Wednesdays; and the Second Chance and Prayer Service is on Fridays. There is also a special healing and deliverance service on the last Wednesday to Friday of each month. Most of the church's religious activities are transmitted through Second Chance Television (SCTV) and radio which the BWC owns. On BWC's media platforms are two important services, the Sunday Live Service and and the Prayer Hour. These services are broadcast (sometimes live) on Second Chance TV, YouTube, and Facebook. The Wednesday service is emphasized in this section of the paper due to its significance among BWC's religious services and its notable standing within the Ghanaian prophetic community.

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The Wednesday service is a prayer, healing, and deliverance service in a church that begins with prayers and worship led by a brother. Believers bring religious items, which are not intended to cure diseases or spiritual problems alone but to assist in praying for success and protection. The service lasts approximately 30 minutes, followed by a period of songs of praise that lasts 15–25 minutes.

The most extended session of the Wednesday service is the sermons, where the Prophet raises prayer points to remind believers of regular prophecies. The sermon then transitions into a healing and deliverance service, where the Prophet remains on his altar to cast out demons and illnesses. Kyei-Duah, an eighth-generation prophet with a close relationship with God, often refers to heaven as his home of origin and uses extra-biblical accounts to explain known passages.

The prophecy in the BWC mandates that church members purchase specific religious products for daily life protection and spiritual accomplishments. At times, the Prophet instructs believers to smear or spray themselves with a purchased religious item for renewal and deliverance from spiritual bondages. Ushers pass through the congregation with these tems. The session concludes with a prayer led by the Prophet, followed by congregants reciting the Lord's Prayer, and the service comes to a close. Moreover, members are taught to give offerings based on what God has done for them, much as in Sunday services.

This discussion of the BWC highlights its engagement in diverse religious teachings and practices that embody the contextual expression of God's mission within the Ghanaian prophetic movement. Its prophetic character, among other aspects as observed above, reflects the contextual adaptation of God's mission within the Ghanaian prophetic landscape.

4. Unity and Variation in Ghana's Prophetic Churches

In the foregoing discussions, we have seen how events in both Mensah and Kyei-Duah's ministries reveal several traits characteristic of neo-prophetism. This section attempts to compare the principles of these ministries, drawing attention to their unity and diversity. The comparison here centres on the ministries' beliefs in the doctrine of the Trinity, the existence of Satan and demonic entities, and their practices of prophecy, healing, deliverance and the use of media.

In the previous discussions, we observed how both ministries hold that God is the unity of three persons. They believe and teach that God the Father is the creator of the universe and all humanity possesses power over all things, and that he saves the world through his son, whom the Virgin Mary conceived, died, rose on the third day and offered salvation through him alone. The doctrine of the Trinity not only serves as a central Christian affirmation of God in the VBPM and BWC. Instead, its position echoes Udnes' (2023: 65) argument that there may be a meaningful connection

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between the doctrine of the Trinity and present-day Pentecostal ecclesial practices. A critical engagement with the doctrine of the Trinity presents current Pentecostals with an opportunity to shift their attention momentarily from traditional spokespersons, suggesting that an understanding of the Trinity as both ontologically and functionally relational in VBPM and BWC supports the promotion of cohesion among congregants.

Furthermore, teachings on the presence of Satan or evil/demonic entities reflect both the VBPM and BWC's awareness of cosmic battles in which believers are continually involved. The sermons of the founders of both ministries not only highlight how demonic entities such as witches/wizards, marine agents, and other non-Christian spirits such as family deities can seize believers' destinies and livelihoods, but also offer their followers strategies to break free from these forces. Methods such as the use of religious items, deliverances, prayers, and spiritual guidance were employed within the ministries. From the teachings, we see the way neo-prophetics interpret victory and freedom in God in terms of the subversion of evil and suffering in the hope of transforming believers' destinies (Quayesi-Amakye 2015: 64). The concept of evil and liberation in neo-prophetism is not new to followers and founders of Ghanaian new prophetic churches, since it originates from (Akan) primal cosmology, which stresses the spiritual roots of problems.

Related to the awareness of cosmic battles, the themes of prophecy, healing, and deliverance feature regularly in both Mensah and Kyei-Duah's ministries. They cover a sizeable portion of the ministries' religious services. The churches share teachings on combating evil entities by employing rituals, such as deliverance and prayer, to guide followers toward spiritual liberation. To reiterate, in VBPM and BWC, prophecy plays a crucial role in the liberation, sustenance and overall physical and spiritual protection of attendees. That the prophetess and prophet are regarded as the ones who foretell the future, acting as a bridge between attendees and the divine realm is widely recognized. Prophecies in both ministries mandate that church members purchase specific religious products.

Further, the purchase of religious items is a common practice in Ghana's prophetism often tied to seeking miraculous solutions (cf. Omenyo & Atiemo 2006; Baëta 1962: 3). However, there is a distinction in the religious products purchased by members of the ministries. While the products in BWC are church-branded and sold exclusively by the church, VBPM often instructs its members to obtain the items from external sources, and they are not branded. The main aim of the items in the ministries was protection and well-being. Breaking free from the shackles of satanic entities and familial spirits, therefore, necessitated the acquisition of different religious products. Despite this distinction, the religious products illustrate the pentecostal message and facilitate the mission of the church which centres on evangelism, fellowship, discipleship and community service as expressions of God's mission that

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extends beyond the church to all areas of life (Manu 2025, 107; Aarde 2016: 285; Niemandt 2015; Bassham 1980: 57). According to Niemandt (2015: 2–3), the missional nature of the church provides an important clue to the relationship between a missional church and society.

It also emerged that the media is a powerful tool utilized by prophetic churches for their religious services and activities. Different religious services and activities are broadcast on modern and traditional media platforms owned by the ministries: Second-chance television and Paradise television stations. A significant feature of neo-Prophetism in Ghana is the use of media, often described in addition to other factors as a reason behind the popularity of many churches today (Manu, Sarfo & Antwi 2023; Ibrahim 2023; Asamoah-Gyadu 2015). Both traditional and social media platforms feature numerous advertisements by these prophets, inviting people to attend their programs and church services (Quayesi-Amakye 2013). The challenge, however, is that in seeking public recognition, some prophets actively pursue strategies to maintain a constant personal presence in the public eye. Meanwhile, this pursuit of self-visibility often comes at the expense of God's mission, which is intended to challenge society with the truth. This may underscore the need to reorient the prophetic church leader toward the *missio Dei* through a renewed missional imagination.

Despite the above, one of the interesting aspects of the use of contemporary media by BWC and VBPM is that its impact extends far beyond the confines of Pentecostal Christianity. A key observation is that the missions of VBPM and BWC align in their efforts to transform followers through the media. Both ministries actively utilise media to expand their influence, employing television and social platforms to popularize prophetic Christianity. Thus, the use of the platforms to broadcast religious activities has become a major tool in the rise and popularity of VBPM and BWC. Today, Ghana's prophetic mission has become a familiar aspect of Christian culture that permeates non-Christian homes, mainly due to the influence of the media (de Witte 2018; de Witte 2012; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). The increasing mediation that has occurred in Ghana's prophetic arena has played a significant missional role by serving as a vital tool in expanding God's kingdom and fulfilling the church's mission. In the wake of this growth, it is also inappropriate to overlook contentions that ensue during mass mediation forms in the Ghanaian neo-prophetic religious scene. These paradoxical dynamics have shaped Ghana's neo-Pentecostal Christianity and the practice of mass mediation, which play a central role in designing the religious public sphere (Benyah 2018; Meyer 2005: 294; Hackett 1998). A crucial insight is that prophetic church-media relations support the church's primary mission as outlined in the Great Commission. Through media engagement, these churches similarly extend their reach and reinforce their spiritual influence.

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5. Conclusion

This article has examined the unity and diversity among one of Africa's strands of Pentecostal Christianity: prophetic churches. It has discussed the beliefs, teachings, practices, and organizational structures of the Vida Bethel Prayer Ministry and the Believers Worship Centre, highlighting the unity and diversity between them.

The paper's exploration of unity and diversity holds significance not only for Ghana but also for global Pentecostal Christianity. Within Ghanaian Pentecostalism, such comparisons help illuminate the unique characteristics of each prophetic church by highlighting both their oneness and differences. This leads to a deeper understanding of the faith, reveals emerging trends, encourages engagement with diverse Pentecostal perspectives, and fosters coexistence. Similarly, comparing the prophetic churches in the global Pentecostal context helps appreciate the diversity of tradition, worship style, doctrines and governance. Given that the Christian Church, unified by the core belief in Jesus Christ and deeply divided along denominational lines (cf. Youvan 2024: 1), comparing VBPM and BWC is essential for global theological insight, encouraging growth, and understanding how the gospel is lived out across contexts.

Notably, the study demonstrates that grouping VBPM and BWC under the category of prophetic highlights a sense of oneness. At the same time, a key contribution of the research lies in its exploration of gender leadership within Ghana's prophetic Christianity, where female-led ministries remain relatively few. While traditionally male-dominated, contemporary prophetic churches are witnessing women's emergence as pastors and prophetesses, often pioneering new ministries and engaging in community service. Nevertheless, challenges remain in attaining full gender equality within church structures. This gender disparity highlights an important yet often overlooked dimension of prophetic Christianity that this paper has examined.

Beyond gender disparity, their internal organizational structures also reveal important oneness. Both churches operate within hierarchical frameworks led by their founders, with BWC additionally incorporating roles such as secretaries and treasurers. While prophetic churches share core elements, they also exhibit notable diversity in practice and organizational structure, challenging the assumption of uniformity within the movement. Diversity also exists in members varied experiences and expressions of a shared core belief. This supports the view that distinct Ghanaian prophetic churches preserve their unique identities while simultaneously contributing to the broader Pentecostal movement. This reflects the view that, within major religions, different denominations function in a complementary relationship (Kalin 2011: 473).

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Note

"Sobolo" is the name of a local juice made from dried hibiscus plant.

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BOOK REVIEW

Edwards, Korie L., and Rebecca Y. Kim. 2024. Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World

Oxford: Oxford University Press
ISBN: 9780197638309

Reviewed by James Butler

The thing which drew me to this book was the language of "pioneer". This is language I'm familiar with because it is used in a Church of England context to describe those who feel a sense of calling beyond the traditional spheres of the church to connect with people who are beyond the normal reach of churches. Given that one of the critiques of this language is that it is inappropriate because of its colonial connotations and connections, it was interesting to find it used as the language to describe those who sense a call to lead racially diverse churches, or multiracial churches, in the terms favoured in the book. Not only that, but having heard Korie Little Edwards speak, I was aware that these "pioneers" that she and Rebecca Kim had identified had experiences in common with the pioneers I work with, particularly around the ways they saw themselves following an unusual calling, leading to them feeling misunderstood by those around them within their churches and wider denominational structures.

Estranged Pioneers is a detailed look at the experience of leaders of racially diverse churches in the United States. Edwards and Kim are both sociologists, and the book takes a sociology of religion approach in its methods and in its theoretical analysis. Reading sociology of religion as someone based in practical theology is interesting – on the one hand, there is so much which feels in common with my field around the close attention to data and the experience of those living this out in the day-to-day, and yet it always feels one step removed from the kinds of questions I want to be asking. This is not to say it is not a good read; in fact, it is highly readable, and I was drawn in to the accounts, the stories and the reflections which came around race, congregations, leadership and so on. I would recommend the book on that basis alone; it draws the reader into the experience of these pastors and raises important

questions about the challenges they face and what that reveals about Christianity and the racial landscape of the United States.

The book is laid out in five chapters, building from the experience of pastors towards wider questions of race and diversity and the particular challenges for churches and experience of leading racially diverse churches. It starts by describing the different ways pastors found themselves leading multiracial churches (Chapter 1) before turning to focus more specifically on the experience of pastors of colour in Chapter 2. Having begun to point towards the challenges faced, these are made more explicit and explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Given that so much of the pastors' experience seems challenging and difficult, Edwards and Kim then turn to ask whether there are advantages (Chapter 4) before exploring the wider racial dynamics of "white pastor privilege" in Chapter 5.

What I found particularly powerful were the stories of pastors of colour who had a sense of calling towards leading multiracial churches. In reality, they found themselves disadvantaged in comparison to their white colleagues, with barriers to overcome in the ways they were perceived by white members of congregations and predominantly white denominations, and at the same time felt cut off from some of the support structures which would come from their own churches, be that Black, Hispanic, or Asian. Much of the book focused on the ways in which identity played out in their roles as pastors, and the ways in which they navigated those dynamics.

My frustrations with the book, suggested at the beginning of this review, are around the lack of engagement with theological categories. On the one hand this is understandable given that the work is located in the discipline of sociology of religion, and has a focus on the experience of church leadership within the wider racial landscape of the United States. But at the same time, I felt that important interpretative tools were missing from the work. For example, it was interesting to me that the language of "call" was so prominent within the book, and yet there is very little inquisitiveness about what "call" means to those pastors. It is not really dealt with as a theological category and is seen in quite secular terms in ways which I believe would be alien to the pastors themselves. Given that the participants emphasised a sense of calling, it would seem helpful to explore what this sense of call actually was, rather than trying to make sense of it in terms of sociological advantages. Similarly, there were interesting points of exploration around racial justice, but little account was given of the pastors' motivations for pursuing racial justice coming directly from their own faith. For me, this raises important inter-disciplinary questions about how sociological and practical theology research might engage together. It would be interesting to explore how practical theological work on these issues could complement and further illuminate the work done here. My worry with the sociological analysis is that the recommendations can easily be based in assumptions about churches and faith which are not shared with the pastors who have participated. I feel that the

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recommendations to churches about next steps and implications need to be considered in theological terms to help surface the assumptions which are held by sociology.

All that being said, in terms of my own reflection, this has been a really helpful and stimulating book. This is the case not just regarding the pertinent questions of racial justice, multiracial church and leadership on which the book focuses, but also the bigger questions around the experience of following a calling which takes you away from one's peers, resulting in the experience of pioneering something new while feeling estranged from all you knew. It would be great to explore the overlaps between the "estranged pioneers" of this context, with the pioneers working in the Church of England and other denominations in a UK context. Overall, I recommend the book; it is an engaging and absorbing read, and one which can stimulate important theological questions, even if it is not interested in them itself.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Mobsby, Ian. 2025. The Seeking Heart: A Contemplative Approach to Mission and Pioneering

London: SCM Press
ISBN: 978-0-334-06585-2

Reviewed by Nigel Rooms

I have followed, at a distance, Ian Mobsby's journey as an experimenter in ecclesial new things for many years, since his book *Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church* was published in 2008 and his involvement with the Moot Community in London. Therefore, I looked forward to reading this book, which connects several of my interests, not least the relationships between silence, contemplation and Christian mission.

The Seeking Heart is a development of Mobsby's doctoral research, though I suspect it is largely an edited version of the original thesis. The book overall is a real mixture of insight and thoughtfulness, while at the same time missing opportunities for a deeper engagement with the apophatic, contemplative tradition in Christianity.

What is most instructive, and a good reason for buying the book, is Mobsby's field work amongst 32 "SBNR" people based in London – that is the so-called "Spiritual but not Religious". He charts the rise of the SBNR category in a "post-secular" society (Chapter 1), reviews other research in this field, as well as SBNR literature (Chapter 2). Thankfully he does complexify the notion of the false binary contained within the term SBNR, since spirituality and religiosity are not that easily separated (28), concluding that the SBNR are "a credible grouping, even if they are logically inconsistent" (40). Following that beginning, Mobsby conducts a thorough qualitative research project amongst the SBNR (Chapter 3), and the analysis of the data is helpful in delineating various categories that emerge from within the group. He discovers, perhaps surprisingly, that they are largely happy to speak of God (40), and I was struck, perhaps less surprisingly, how many of them were variously de-churched, having had very unhelpful, even traumatic experiences of Christians and Church institutions.

The second part of the book develops a "contemplative theology and a model of mission" from a large number and a wide range of interlocutors. Mobsby's

contemplative theology is written up in Chapter 4 and begins with Owen Barfield's "evolution of [human] consciousness" and Mark Vernon's development of that in a Christian direction. As I read it, this approach is a way of understanding such movements as the pre-modern, modern and post-modern stages of Western thought – which can also be discerned elsewhere such as in biblical history, and which spiral around themselves in a cyclical fashion (see 80 for the five stages). The conclusion of this section, which leads to a participatory understanding of relationship with God, is helpful since it allows for the possibility of *theosis*. However, along the way it seems we must discard indigenous knowledge from "original participation" as "severely limited" (80) and the benefits of science for life today which arise from "withdrawal from participation" (86). I find Iain McGilchrist's work on left and right brain ways of attention much more helpful on these questions as a way in to recovering the importance of silence in prayer and apophatic theology. Mobsby is able, however to argue for the activity of God in the spiritual seeker, moving them from Kathryn Tanner's "weak participation" to a strong one; "God is seeking to awaken the seeker through a deep connection with God, even if they are unaware of this" (95).

The next chapter (Chapter 5, God's Kenosis, Our Theosis) is even more complex and I am not sure I can do it justice in this short review. What Mobsby works on here is a model for tracking the journeys of his research participants towards or away from the Trinitarian God of the Christian faith. He employs variously Hiebert's set theory, the three-fold spiritual path of purgation, illumination and union overlaid on Barfield's approach to consciousness alongside the work of several other contemporary theologians. Overall, for me as a reader, this model (see 131) is simply too complex a schema to be useful, though I can see how it works in the doctoral thesis. On further reflection, it is also perhaps not complex enough – it is too neat, a tying up of every loose end in the author's mind which leads to something solid rather than fluid, and messy like most of life and spiritual journeys.

The final four chapters map the possibility for a "Christian Contemplative Missional Journey" through four spiritual stages of awakening, purgation, illumination and union which are given a chapter each. Some practical ways of accompanying seekers are offered for each stage, which are useful pointers, though apart from one example subject from the Moot Community it seems no-one else made the journey to a Christian faith (though of course this was not the aim of the research). I have several problems with what is happening in these chapters which I do think need to be aired in a critical review.

Most serious is the use of the Christian spiritual tradition in this work. Mobsby himself speaks against "de-traditionalization" (10) as an effect of pluralism and consumerism. But then he would appear to do that very thing when engaging with the "dark night of the soul" from St John of the Cross in an entirely superficial way (98, 164). He misquotes Elaine Heath's work and is seemingly unaware (as, in fact Heath

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is) of the four nights of the active and passive senses and the active and passive spirit in St John's spiritual journey which would seriously impact his model. Not to have read, in a thesis of this nature, the primary texts of the Christian tradition is a serious omission.

This leads us onto his treatment of the goal of the spiritual journey in union (Chapter 9). For Mobsby this seems to be synonymous with conversion and possible baptism when the subject is incorporated into Christ, which is true, but hardly the end of the journey. The Ascent of Mount Carmel would just be beginning at this stage for St John of the Cross. And there is no reference in the book to Eucharist, which I found puzzling. Surely the whole process simply begins again now, following Barfield's schema?

Some other quibbles are around the place of what Mobsby calls the "outer journey" (108–10, 127) which for me is not given enough importance; contemplation and [public] action go together for the Christian as two sides of the same coin. Non-duality (34, 158) and, with it, Buddhism (197) is rather dismissed as even dangerous; this would seem to negate decades of Christian Buddhist dialogue and miss the possibility of seeking a distinctively Christian non-duality following the work of Cynthia Bourgeault and others from the apophatic tradition.

In conclusion, this work is a courageous attempt at engaging with a serious segment of Western society, the SBNR, in Christian mission and is to be commended. We learn a great deal about these people from the research and I am grateful for that. I am less convinced about the proposals set out here, but I know that Mobsby will continue to work with silence and seekers in his new location in Canada and I bless him for that.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Mong, Ambrose. 2025. Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Portrayal of Priests in Fact and Fiction

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books
ISBN: 9798385215751

Reviewed by Andre Joseph Theng

Mong's latest volume examines the figure of the Catholic priest. Being a priest himself working in Hong Kong, it is no surprise that Mong is afforded a personal and deep understanding of the priesthood, including their foibles, imperfections, but also of their heroism and sanctity. Roman Catholic priests all around the world are united firstly by their promises (or in the case of religious priests, vows) of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Their distinctive way of life renders them a fascinating subject both in fact and fiction – Mong's volume thus examines seven cases, basically equally divided into real-life examples and ones in literary texts.

It is certainly a timely intervention, and Mong's introduction provides insight into his motivations, namely, the negative press surrounding Catholic priests in recent years due to sexual or financial misconduct. Mong writes: "While we cannot ignore these evil deeds, we must remember that these wayward clerics do not represent the entire priesthood" (xii). He seeks to complexify the person of the priest beyond one-dimensional stereotypes associated with wrongdoing and irrelevance. The theme of complex figures certainly shines through in each of the chapters, much to Mong's credit. Each of these stories will prove to be particularly interesting for readers learning about them for the first time, but certainly also the juxtaposition of these characters in a single volume will provide food for thought on how they might relate to each other, and what they tell us about priests more generally.

The first chapter examines two Chinese bishops, Ignatius Kung and Aloysius Jin Luxian, who lived in similar times but whose differing responses to persecution by Communist authorities proved controversial. Both Kung and Jin were arrested in 1955; Kung refused to lead the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and was a staunch critic of the Communist regime, retaining a hardline stance throughout his life. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and was held in solitary confinement

for many years. In contrast, Jin chose a more conciliatory position and engaged with Communist authorities to "keep Catholicism alive in China" (12). His cooperation with Communist leaders following his 1982 release from prison allowed him success in reestablishing the church in Shanghai. These differing choices towards engaging with anti-Christian civil leaders remain a much relevant question in the present day, both in China and elsewhere. In the Chinese context, the controversial 2018 Vatican–China "deal", or provisional agreement, has proved contentious; its implementation might well have impacted Cardinal Pietro Parolin's papacy chances at the 2025 conclave as he is widely thought to be the architect of the deal.

The second and third chapters examine Pedro Arrupe, SJ, and Oscar Romero respectively. Arrupe was a long-time Superior General of the Society of Jesus who steered the Jesuits through the changes of Vatican II. The chapter largely focuses on the person of Arrupe, and how his experience in his youth and in Japan during the Second World War and the atomic explosion in Hiroshima shaped his leadership later in life. Mong highlights how Arrupe's focus on the poor and marginalized influenced Francis' papacy, which was characterized by a great concern for social justice and issues. Especially moving is Mong's reflections on the final years of Arrupe's life, when a stroke rendered him paralysed but during which time also "displayed an indomitable spirit" (35). Today there is an active cause for his canonization, and in November 2024 the case was formally moved to the Vatican marking a step closer towards Beatification.

Chapter 3's examination of Oscar Romero bears comparison to those in the preceding two chapters, with Romero, an El Salvadoran bishop who was gunned down whilst saying mass, displaying shades of the stories of the Bishops in China and of Arrupe. Like Jin and Kung, Romero worked amidst a difficult political context marked by state repression and civil war, and like Arrupe, displayed a close affinity for the marginalized. Especially insightful is the highlighting of Romero's own transformation as he was initially considered a moderate figure keen to "maintain good relations with the government than to serve the needs of the people" (41). Yet his experience as bishop caused him to actively speak up for the sufferings of the people, defending activist priests and he courageously accompanied his flock. Romero's life demonstrates a response to poverty not just of the material kind, but also how "the root of poverty is injustice, which is the refusal to love" (38).

The volume comes to life in the next four chapters, each featuring figures of priests from works of fiction, who are all complex characters in their own right. Prior to becoming a priest, Mong studied English Literature to a postgraduate level and worked as a secondary school teacher, and his careful literary analysis shines through in these chapters filled with pedagogical clarity and analytical insight. His affinity with these characters causes us to consider them alongside the historical figures earlier discussed, and indeed, their complexity renders such comparison

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worthwhile. These chapters remind me of other texts which stand at the intersection of literature and theology, for example, the work of Luke Bell OSB, monk of Quarr Abbey, who, like Mong, was also a student and teacher of English literature. In 2024, Pope Francis wrote a letter on the role of literature on priestly formation (Francis 2024), where he recalled his experience as a literature teacher at a Jesuit school in Santa Fe. Francis wrote: "literature is thus a 'path' to helping shepherds of souls enter into a fruitful dialogue with the culture of their time" whilst highlighting the many benefits of reading widely. "This approach to literature, which makes us sensitive to the mystery of other persons, teaches us how to touch their hearts."

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* respectively. Cather's characters Jean Latour and Joseph Valliant are closely based on the historical Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the first archbishop of Santa Fe, and his vicar general, Joseph Machebeuf. We immediately see here the relationship between "fact" and "fiction", as works of fiction draw from historical figures. The ambivalence of Cather's Latour is illustrated by his hard work in evangelizing in a missional context but who also sought to leave a legacy of his own in a not altogether selfless way, building a Romanesque Cathedral that he hoped would become his legacy long after his death. His struggles as a priest are further illustrated by the depression and doubt he experienced as a result of a feeling of the ineffectiveness of his apostolate. Yet in other instances, such as a carefree motorcycle ride with a friend, we see how the priest comes to terms with his person and his life. A pattern of an increased openness to Grace is observed, as well as an openness to a greater generosity in interpreting doctrine in his ministry.

An increased openness is similarly observed in the "Whisky Priest" in Greene's *The Power and Glory*. Also set in Mexico, Greene's characters were distinctly imperfect and flawed, and the "whisky priest" is no exception: often drunk, he is lazy and had fathered a child. Yet Greene emphasizes the office of the priest, where the ontological nature of ordination renders his sacraments effective regardless of his personal failings: *ex opere operato*. Greene finds merit in the flawed characters, complexifying figures who would otherwise be easily dismissed as "bad priests". The "whisky priest", who has an allegorical quality due to being unnamed, is keenly aware and guilty of his own shortcomings and remains faithful to his ministry.

Finally, Chapter 7's discussion of Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, since made into a 2016 film by Martin Scorsese, narrates the life of a Portuguese Jesuit, Father Sebastian Rodrigues, who ministers in Japan amidst Christian persecution in the mid-seventeenth century. Christians were forced to apostatize by stepping on a bronze figure of Christ known as a *fumie*. It is here that Mong brings fresh insight to understanding the dilemma associated with such an act, radically suggesting that stepping on the figure is in fact an affirmation of faith, comparing Rodrigues to the apostle Peter – "Like Peter, the priest understands the teachings of Jesus more deeply after his denial" (126). Mong

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suggests: "Rodrigues's stepping on the *fumie* is an affirmation of faith in a forgiving God", arguing that there is a nuance to the momentary "misstep" of the priest, and that a more generous interpretation would in fact point to God's mercy and grace, despite his silence. Mong explores this theme more fully in a separate article (Mong 2025), in the process also making a distinction between masculine and feminine faces of Christ.

In his conclusion, Mong writes about a dear former superior whom he looked up to greatly, the late Father Bonifacio Garcia Solis OP, four-term superior of the Rosary Province of the Order of Preachers. The heroic qualities with which Mong associates Solis will not be unfamiliar to most people who have known priests themselves, especially in a personal capacity. In parts of the world where there are so few priests ministering to large congregations, it can be difficult to develop a nuanced view of the person of the priest especially when viewed only from afar, or in the context of ministry or sacraments. Yet some of us who have had the privilege of knowing priests more personally will immediately identify with the ambivalent qualities that Mong consistently describes in this book, priests who are deeply faithful but who are also often imperfect, disagreeable, and who struggle greatly. This will be true even in peacetime, let alone the many challenging contexts that the protagonists of these chapters feature in. This volume is thus in essence, a loving ode to the Catholic priest, priests whom we know ("our" priests), and is movingly personal and reflective. One point I would have liked to have seen better explored is a more explicit and consistent comparison of the different characters studied here, especially between the historical and fictitious examples. At the same time, Pope Francis in his letter describes an experience of literature as a "training in discernment", sensitizing us to "the relationship between forms of expression and meaning". It is perhaps left to us to make these links for ourselves. Finally, the volume leaves us to pray for and give thanks for the priests who work tirelessly in the vineyard of the Lord for the salvation of souls, giving wholly of themselves, "warts and all".

About the Reviewer

Andre Joseph Theng completed his PhD at the University of Edinburgh, writing about Catholic social media from a sociolinguistic perspective. He is interested in media representations of Catholicism, especially in digital contexts.
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BOOK REVIEW

Olsworth-Peter, Ed. 2024. Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church

London: SPCK
ISBN: 978-0-281-08938-3

Reviewed by Jack Barentsen

For many churches and city networks, denominational structures no longer offer the life-sustaining support necessary for congregational vitality. Instead, churches and their leaders find themselves in an increasingly complex world of churches, communities, organizations and networks. This comprises different denominational churches, different forms and styles of church, various forms of chaplaincy, and Christian activism. The ecosystem has changed.

Olsworth-Peter guides us in a practical overview of this new ecosystem, visualizing it with a dozen or more helpful graphs. Tellingly, the author was ordained in the Anglican church precisely in 2004, the year of this church's famous *Mission-Shaped Church* report. Thus, he started his ministry journey at a time when traditional forms of church were already under stress, and widespread experiments started with what was at first called "Fresh Expressions" and has since blossomed into a wide variety of initiatives. His book presents a living picture of what is now called a "mixed ecology of church".

The term "ecology" denotes natural systems of symbiosis, and has become a metaphor for other worlds. The introduction reflects on the two piers of Brighton, the one rusting away with rarely a special occasion, the other flourishing with shops, entertainment and tourism. Neither pier fulfils its original purpose in the fishing and shipping industries, but each has adapted more or less successfully to the ever changing ecosystem, where connectivity is the key to life and flourishing.

In five chapters, Olsworth-Peter extends this metaphor to church contexts. The first chapter explores the "why" of a mixed ecology. Earlier metaphors were more functional, "blended church" and "mixed economy", while "mixed ecology" points to a diversity of life forms, where the key is connectivity and exchange of nutrients and protection. An ecosystem supports many species that could not survive without it.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the growth of these ecclesial ecosystems. Already the early church manifested such an ecology, with liminal communities, simple structures and adaptive leadership. This parallels contemporary developments, with new forms of church appearing next to traditional forms. Hence, Olsworth-Peter distinguishes between church planting as attractional, and pioneering as contextual. He works out a theological basis with five guest authors, and consists of five themes: reconciliation, community, difference, creation and self-giving.

The co-existence of all these forms, communities and organizations is the topic of Chapter 2. An ecosystem houses producers and consumers. There is biodiversity and interdependence to maintain balance, absorb waste and nourish life. Participating in a mixed ecology is like a journey, which the author describes in six phases: noticing the other, offering oneself, gathering with others, seriously connecting, collaborating and co-creating.

Although this journey is easily depicted as a continuing cycle, different inhabitants of an ecosystem are at different points in their journey and move at different speeds. The author describes various patterns of collaboration and co-creation, each featuring its own network within the larger ecosystem.

Chapter 3 then outlines what it takes to inhabit a mixed ecology, distinguishing seven sacred spaces or "habitats" that help understand how churches relate to their environment: cell, chapel, chapter, cloister, garden, refectory and library – words that are perhaps familiar in an Anglican context, but may need more explanation for other contexts. This picture of inhabiting is further elaborated by analysing different starting points (incomer or citizen) and dwelling patterns (resident or commuter), and different postures (abiding, innovating, enabling). Each step is graphically illustrated, which is helpful when using the book as a practical handbook, but might otherwise be quite overwhelming.

Chapter 3 continues with the practice of enabling other leaders as a vital quality of ministry. Such leaders develop an attitude of openness and awareness within themselves and in others, creating spaces to collaborate with potential and emerging leaders. This practice, Olsworth-Peter believes, facilitates a move from "multi-church" to "inter-church" where entitlement and power are replaced by "humility, sacrifice, grace, and so forth" (101).

Leading a mixed ecology then becomes the focus of Chapter 4. The typical questions of leadership are explored, why (goals), what (forms), how (methods), and where (places) – but now with elements from the above descriptions of mixed ecology. This produces the recognition that there are many leadership charisms for a mixed ecology. Familiar ones are the parish priest, lay pioneer, and contextual chaplain. Others include the founding starter, community entrepreneur, advocate and innovator.

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This results in a mixed ecology of leadership, which in turn requires reflection on the structures and focus of ministry training, which Olsworth-Peter himself worked with in various training sessions. The ultimate goals is a sense of co-creative leadership, combining duplication and collaboration to see growth.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on how to shape a mixed ecology, interpreting the needs of the ecosystem in terms of vision: how to cast it, support it, embed it, implement it, and how to nourish and protect it.

Every chapter includes "talking points" along the way and "discussion questions" at the end. The book presents itself as an explorative and practical handbook of mixed ecologies of church. Such ecclesial ecosystems can be mutually enriching with good levels of biodiversity and a variety of leaders. The author shares his rich experience in coaching, educating and training with a broader audience. Much of this ecosystem seems to take place with the institutional support, the larger umbrella of the Church of England, although it is broader. Yet, that kind of denominational support is surely helpful to nourish and shape these ecologies.

This represents a significant challenge for many churches and city networks across Europe, where often there is no single denominational system that is capable of providing this umbrella. This will require churches, workers and visionaries of many kinds to move away from competitive to more collaborative modes of serving our cities. It requires a generous ecumenism where we move beyond tolerating each other, or cooperating pragmatically, to acknowledging God's work through the Spirit in the other – the other who is recognized as gift to ourselves (and we to them), to learn and grow into greater Christlikeness as we serve our cities.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Root, Andrew 2025. Evangelism in an Age of Despair: Hope beyond the Failed Promise of Happiness

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic
ISBN: 9781540968715

Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

In his new book on evangelism, Lutheran theologian Andrew Root presents an original and inspiring concept. Under the headline "Read before Using (Don't Skip!)" he lays out his basic idea of his book: "Evangelism and discipleship are fused. Evangelism is the invitation to receive consolation, to receive ministry. Evangelism is the reception of care that places a person on a path of encounter with the divine. Evangelism is the invitation to lean into one's sorrows to find the sacramental presence of the living God changing one's deaths into life" (2). The first chapter sketches the idea of the book and its basic assumptions and rationales. This is, that the church is called to "participate in the life of God through the work of the Spirit" (21). Christians are followers of Christ, because "the Spirit leads us to hear the voice of the living Christ calling us to follow. This following takes us into sacramental participation as the concrete invitation to join another's sorrow" (21–2).

Root criticizes an approach to evangelism that views evangelism as a task to keep the church alive (Chapter 2). His criticism is mainly a theological one: A church that avoids dying underestimates the godly dynamic of bringing new life through and out of death: "Therein lies the church's conformity to the body of Jesus Christ. Therein lies the sacramental logic of the infinite entering into the finite, finding union in opposites. When Christianity faces death, it lives" (49). Consequently, Root states,"Evangelism is central to Christianity, but only if it wears these marks of a sacramental dying for the sake of others" (50).

This idea of evangelism is rooted into the Lutheran theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) and Root links it with the human condition of having to pilgrim through life from goodbye to goodbye until the ultimate farewell – one's own death: "We are the creatures who are dying and tempted to deny all our sorrow. But it's inside this sorrow, and by wrestling with this temptation, that we find ourselves in the real

presence of Jesus Christ" (250). Thus, evangelism is potentially relevant to every human being, because everybody sooner or later faces losses and goodbyes. This not only means to lose some loved one, but also to pass a dream, a goal or a plan. The experience of farewell is even true for the good things, because e.g. to marry means to say goodbye to a lifestyle of independence. This basic human condition offers the chance to encounter God, who reveals himself in the very depths of sorrow, grief and losses. So, evangelism is primary consolation – a comfort that is experienced when people meet God and are held, solaced, healed and saved by him.

To outline this Lutheran-shaped understanding of evangelism, Root dives deep into the history of philosophy and theology with an emphasis on the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age. He enriches the historical quest with ideas and thoughts from people like Macrina and her brother Gregory of Nyssa, Jean Gerson, Johann von Staupitz and Martin Luther as well as René Descartes and Blaise Pascal (Chapters 6 to 9). This approach also aims to understand our present times, which Root describes as sad times: "Ultimately, and ironically, we are in sad times in the early twenty-first century because we're a society obsessed with happiness. We are sad because we've made happiness our highest aim and goal" (27). Root connects the current "sad times" with the modern idea of the free self (Chapters 3 to 5), which he traces back to "Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), who, through his extremely popular essays, invented the self as a free person who seeks happiness" (28). Root concludes: "A world like ours – filled with sad happiness-seekers in misery who are stuck in their self-imposed châteaus of fragile authenticity – needs evangelism and ministry not as polemics but as consolation, not as arguments but as visions of how sorrow itself is shared by God and brings peace and mercy. What is needed is a theology of consolation as the pastoral shape of evangelism" (273).

Every chapter opens and ends with a continuous story of different people, whose lives are interwoven and who minister each other as everyday evangelists in accompaniment, support and consolation. By this, Root illustrates his theological thoughts and rationales. This attempt is quite convincing, because it serves his argumentation and helps to make his case.

Root's book on evangelism is a refreshing approach to this very topic and offers a rich philosophical as well as theological encounter with some surprising connections and ideas. His interaction with the named thinkers of different centuries is thorough and profound, but sometimes maybe a bit too detailed to keep track of his main theme. Although, his description of our times as sad times is persuasive, it is also a bit one-sided and focuses mostly on the downsides of individualism, which are evident. This, however, hides the positive aspects of individual access to and expressions of faith in Jesus Christ, which is also an achievement of the Lutheran reformation. Furthermore, one could criticize that Root's description of evangelism is focused primarily on the edges of life, the losses, sorrows and deficits. This leaves

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the reader with some questions: What does the gospel have to tell those, who are well off (even though this might only be a temporary state)? Is the gospel only relevant for the sad and grieving ones? Is loss in Root's theology maybe somehow a precondition to encounter God?

Nevertheless, however, the kind of evangelism Root describes is stimulating, because he links the Gospel message of God incarnate with a basic human experience: to lose, to say goodbye, to pass and to be sad. The consolation that is offered by evangelism is a kind of Christian empowerment (see Domsgen 2025: 12–20), because it equips a person to lean into one's own sorrow and sadness instead fleeing from it. By this, to be evangelized means to encounter God, means to be consoled, means to be able to be confronted with the dark sides of life, means to be resilient and well suited for the small, medium and big farewells of life. And this leads finally to divine hope and deep happiness. This recontextualization of the theology of the cross in terms of evangelism under current (mostly Western) societal and cultural circumstances is inspiring and seems to be a fruitful approach to the topic of evangelism.

Root's approach to evangelism offers an enhancing perspective to the approach of "*Frohbotschaften*" (messaging the good news), which was lately introduced into the debate by David Reißmann in a German academic handbook on evangelism (see Herbst et al. 2025: 431–83; van Driel 2025: 77–83). *Frohbotschaften* is linked to Isaiah 61/Luke 4 and describes the role of a messenger of the gospel, "to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4.18–19). Therefore, it is not that people are to be evangelized, but that the Good News is to be messaged – out of the specific joy of the church and ultimately for that joy – in words and deeds of proclamation, liberation, recovery and worship. Root adds to this approach the invitation into one's own and other's sadness in order to encounter God and thus find delight.

About the Reviewer

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We are an international and ecumenical journal with an interdisciplinary understanding of our approach to theological research and reflection; the core disciplines being theology, missiology, and ecclesiology. Other social science and theological disciplines may be helpful in supporting the holistic nature of any research, e.g., anthropology and ethnography, sociology, statistical research, biblical studies, leadership studies, and adult learning.

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.

The audience for the journal is truly global wherever the local church and the systems that support them exist. We expect to generate interest from readers in church judicatory bodies, theological seminaries, university theology departments, and in local churches from all God's people and the leaders amongst them.

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