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EDITORIAL

Editorial

Nigel Rooms

Sometimes remarkable things happen even to journal editors! Without even trying, a kind of informal Special Issue from Africa has emerged from recent submissions to the journal. Thus, all eight articles in this first Issue of 2026 are written by Africans, from West and South Africa, and taken together they represent wisdom, critical theological insight, and challenge not only to and for Africa, but much further afield as well. While we might only lament the lack of any female authors, there is a breadth of contribution from Catholic, mainstream Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions addressing a wide range of issues pertinent to the future of the local and universal Church in every place. Thus, we have critiques and theological reflection on "reverse mission", African informal saving schemes, burial and cemetery practices, missionary passion and suffering, local, parish-based ecclesiology and mission, plus the importance of grounding all this in the Eucharist.

The first two articles (and the last two) in this issue are providentially paired together, and I invite readers to study them alongside each other. Thus, we begin with critiques of the term "reverse mission" from two quite different denominational and theological perspectives, the Catholic and the Pentecostal. Both agree on the inadequacy of "reverse mission" as a term to describe what happens when Christians migrate from the global South and take their place in the churches and societies of the North. Such critiques are not that new in some circles, however, what is fresh here are Catholic and Pentecostal theological reflections on the question. **Januarius Asongu**, who is based for his work in both Cameroon and Sierra Leone, notes the *kairos* moment we find ourselves in, as mission and missionaries flow around the world in "missionary reciprocity". Evidence from the USA, Ireland, Germany, and Italy backs up the argument for a "polycentric Catholic Communion" characterized by a maturation in the worldwide Christian faith. **Solomon Kgatle**, from South Africa (and our Editorial Board), reframes reverse mission as "multidirectional mission", and thereby offers a nuanced lens for understanding global flows of Christianity, particularly in Pentecostal and diaspora contexts. The use of concrete examples (from the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Church of Pentecost, and the Apostolic Faith Mission) makes his framework tangible to readers of *Ecclesial Futures* coming from both the academy and the grass-roots of churches. The article also challenges

Eurocentric perspectives and highlights south-to-south mission dynamics, contributing to decolonizing mission studies and fostering comparative, cross-regional scholarship. Overall, both articles offer insights that are relevant for global mission studies, theological education, and the practice of world Christianity.

Kelebogile Thomas Resane brings into creative dialogue an African practice and a biblical notion in the next article. *Stokvel,* as described by Resane in his location in South Africa, is an informal credit union between a certain number of people, often women, as a way of alleviating poverty. Everyone contributes to a communal fund, and when a crisis or one's turn comes around, vital finance is made available. This practice is not restricted to South Africa, as I came across the exact same methodology in Tanzania, where I thought it was a simple yet elegant solution to how saving money and mutual accountability for that money could be ensured. Resane then critically engages *stokvel* with *koinonia,* particularly as it is found in Acts 2.42-47. This is a wonderful example of interdisciplinary practical theology and missiology from which there is much to learn. The two concepts mutually interpret one another in very creative ways, and I suspect the principles named here could be exported far beyond Africa to many other places. Solidarity, generosity, and unity are universal values that can strengthen society, Christian or otherwise, when it is threatened by poverty and want.

Kwaku Boamah presents, in my view, a unique article connecting funerary rites, church cemeteries, and the mission of God. Paying attention to death, one would have thought, would be of key concern to Christians, and Boamah shows how in the early centuries of the Church it was an occasion for public witness both during and after the burial. Why not then extend this reflection to Boamah's context in Ghana, where he conducts field research into the question of burial and the upkeep of church graveyards? The data presented gives us fascinating insight into what it means to be buried "among your people" as a practice of community. Moral weight is given to enacting burial properly and long-term care for the graveyard. This issue of the journal deals in several articles with the local, the "parish", and here again, we see that having the dead buried close by in an orderly and dignified fashion is another way of locating the church as the communion of saints between the living and the dead.

Felix Akintunde takes passion, in its ancient and contemporary senses, as the connecting bridge between the missionary activity of St Paul and that of Redeemed Christian Church of God missionaries in northern Nigeria, a region characterized by the violent insurgency of Boko Haram, which provides a constant and mortal threat to Christians. Passion, according to Akintunde, combines both serious and committed intent alongside the possibility of suffering, the difficulty of which is not to be underestimated. Akintunde presents a critical approach to both the Bible text and the small cohort of ten missionaries he interviews in the fieldwork for the article. What

we have here, as he points out, is the opposite of a "health and wealth" theology of blessing, rather a theology of endurance and resilience which looks suffering in the face and finds God within it, without any sense of the need to retaliate or fight back with equal force.

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke constructs for us a kinship ecclesiology, grounded in, and for the sake of, African Catholic rural parish ecclesiology and African Ubuntu sensibilities. Okpaleke's ecclesiological vision itself is significant, starting as it does not in the city, but in the rural. The family in the village – helpfully delineated and nuanced by the author as the rural extended family kinship network – provides a theological vision of the church bound together through sacrament, not blood. It envisions church as "kinship beyond consanguinity" and a eucharistic ethos that transcends confessional boundaries. This is a theological vision emerging from the wisdom of African Christianity that is for the whole of Christianity, and it offers a helpful critique of western ideas of the "nuclear family" and "individualization". So here we have a distinctively African theological lens – that of kinship ecclesiology rooted in rural communal identity – as a framework for meaningful reform in the local church. This model not only challenges the dominance of Euro-American ecclesial paradigms but also enriches global discourse by integrating African communal values like Ubuntu, familial solidarity, and baptismal belonging. In doing so, the article provides both theoretical depth and pastoral application, which makes it valuable for scholars and practitioners alike. Moreover, its tripartite model – comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration – offers concrete principles that are transferable across continents, particularly in parishes in Latin America, Asia, and parts of Europe facing challenges in community formation and ecclesial participation.

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa has been deeply influenced at local, synodical, and national levels by the so-called missional church movement in the past twenty-five years. The two articles that follow engage critically with this tradition and complement each other in suggestive ways, which is why I have laid them alongside each other here.

Dieter De Bruin, from within the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, offers a theologically grounded contribution to ongoing debates on missional ecclesiology, particularly within traditions grappling with post-Christendom realities and demographic change. Drawing on longstanding debates in England, De Bruin wishes to retrieve and reimagine the parochial model through a confessional Reformed lens. He therefore challenges network-oriented paradigms in a way that is both provocative and pastorally sensitive. By reasserting the theological significance of place and advocating for a renewed parochial imagination, De Bruin challenges readers – particularly church leaders, theologians, and practitioners within Reformed and post-establishment contexts – to reconsider inherited assumptions about mobility, choice, and ecclesial presence. The article encourages a deeper engagement with

the local as both theological locus *and* missional frontier, potentially reshaping how congregations understand their vocation in increasingly pluralistic and fragmented societies. This, it must be said, is not a call back to some golden age of Christendom, rather it looks to both the centrality of place and the possibility of God doing a new thing in and from that place.

Marthinus Havenga is aware that the idea at the heart of the missional church movement – that of the *missio Dei* – is meant to be a liberating one. Inviting congregations to participate in the prior work of the Triune God in the world ought to free them from frenetic activity, which they imagine will offer a bulwark for their church against the forces ranged against it. Yet such is the human propensity for corrupting something good that Havenga shows how the need to discover what God is up to in the world and join in can be equally as elusive and even exhausting. Utilizing a study of the Athol Fugard play *Boesman and Lena* in a truly creative and beautiful way, he calls us back to the Eucharist as the grounding of our missional work. The centrifugal force of sending has to be connected to an equal and opposite centripetal force focused on source. De Bruin helpfully quotes Pat Keifert's maxim that the church is called, gathered, centred, and sent. It is all four of these movements that are required in the missional church, and which are of course enacted in the regular celebration of Holy Communion.

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ARTICLE

The Kairos of Missionary Reciprocity: Beyond "Reverse Mission" Toward a Polycentric Catholicism

Januarius Asongu

Abstract

The global redistribution of Catholic missionary agency from the global South to historically missionary-sending regions represents one of the most significant ecclesiological developments of the twenty-first century. This article critically evaluates the widely used category of "reverse mission", arguing that although descriptively suggestive, it remains theologically inadequate because it presumes a normative missionary direction rooted in colonial history. Drawing on the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, Vatican II communion ecclesiology, contemporary missiological scholarship, migration theology, and postcolonial analysis, the article proposes missionary reciprocity as a more adequate interpretive paradigm. Through theological reflection and empirical examination of global clergy mobility – including African priests serving in American and Irish dioceses and Asian clergy ministering in Germany and Italy – the study argues that present developments represent not reversal but maturation within an increasingly polycentric Catholic communion. The contemporary moment, therefore, constitutes a kairos inviting the Church to develop structures, spiritual dispositions, and synodal practices capable of sustaining mutual missionary exchange.

Keywords: *Missio Dei*, Missionary reciprocity, Reverse mission, Global Christianity, Polycentric Catholicism, Migration theology, Synodality

Introduction: Mission in a Reconfigured Catholic World

The Catholic Church in the early twenty-first century finds itself within a profound reconfiguration of missionary agency. Clergy and religious from Africa, Asia, and Latin America now minister extensively in Europe and North America – regions historically identified as the primary centres of missionary sending. In dioceses across the United States, Ireland, Germany, and Italy, priests from Nigeria, India, Vietnam, and the Philippines increasingly sustain parish life, provide sacramental ministry, and

assume pastoral leadership (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] 2023; Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference 2023).

These developments reflect wider demographic transformations in global Christianity. Whereas nearly eighty per cent of Christians lived in Europe and North America at the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority now reside in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Jenkins 2011; Johnson & Zurlo 2023). Africa alone now contains more than 236 million Catholics, while many Western dioceses confront declining participation and reduced priestly vocations. In the United States, approximately one quarter of active priests are foreign-born (CARA 2023), and similar patterns appear across Western Europe.

The phenomenon is commonly described as "reverse mission". The phrase captures an observable historical contrast: communities once evangelized by Western missionaries now send clergy to the West. Yet the language of reversal raises theological questions. Does mission possess a proper geographical direction? Is the current moment best interpreted as crisis management, historical irony, or ecclesial maturation?

This article argues that the concept of reverse mission remains conceptually limited because it presupposes a directional norm shaped by colonial-era missionary history. Instead, contemporary developments are better understood through the paradigm of missionary reciprocity, which interprets global clergy mobility as mutual participation among local Churches in the one mission of God.

The argument proceeds in stages. First, the article situates the discussion within contemporary missiological debates. Second, it develops theological foundations grounded in the *missio Dei* and Trinitarian communion. Third, it traces historical genealogies of mission that challenge directional assumptions. Fourth, it critically assesses the reverse mission paradigm through postcolonial analysis. Fifth, it proposes missionary reciprocity as a constructive framework. Subsequent sections explore migration as a theological locus, empirical case studies, intercultural pastoral dynamics, the evolution of *fidei donum*, a theology and spirituality of receiving, and implications for polycentric Catholicism and synodal governance. The conclusion identifies the present moment as a kairos demanding conversion of ecclesial imagination.

Contemporary Missiological Debates and Global Christianity

Interpretation of contemporary missionary movements must be situated within ongoing scholarly debates concerning the transformation of global Christianity. Over recent decades, missiology has undergone a decisive shift away from Eurocentric

assumptions toward frameworks attentive to plurality, migration, and intercultural exchange.

David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* (2011) remains foundational in articulating mission as historically dynamic. Bosch argued that Christian mission continually passes through paradigm shifts shaped by changing historical circumstances. The modern missionary movement constituted one such paradigm, emerging within Enlightenment confidence and colonial expansion. Yet Bosch anticipated the need for new theological frameworks capable of addressing an increasingly global Church no longer defined by Western initiative alone.

Andrew Walls deepened this perspective through his "translation principle", emphasizing Christianity's remarkable capacity to take root within diverse cultures without permanent identification with any civilization (Walls 2002). Christianity repeatedly generates new centres of vitality. The demographic rise of African and Asian Christianity, therefore, represents continuity with historical patterns rather than deviation.

Lamin Sanneh highlighted vernacularization as central to Christian expansion. By entering local languages and cultures, the gospel decentralizes authority and empowers indigenous agency. Once local Churches mature, missionary initiative inevitably becomes multidirectional rather than unidirectional.

Recent scholarship further identifies migration as a decisive force shaping global Christianity. Jehu Hanciles (2021) argues that migration now functions as a primary mechanism of Christian expansion. Diasporic communities reinterpret mobility as vocation, transforming displacement into missionary opportunity. Afe Adogame's studies of African Christian diasporas likewise demonstrate that migrant communities frequently understand themselves as active agents of evangelization rather than passive recipients.

Within Catholic theology, these developments intersect with renewed attention to communion ecclesiology and synodality. Scholars describing Christianity as polycentric emphasize that contemporary mission unfolds through multiple interacting centres rather than a single dominant locus. Missionary reciprocity emerges precisely at this intersection of demographic transformation, migration, and theological reorientation.

Mission and the *Missio Dei*: Decentring Missionary Authority

Any theological interpretation of global clergy mobility must begin with the doctrine of the *missio Dei*. Mission originates not in ecclesial initiative but in the life of the Triune God. The Church participates in God's sending rather than possessing mission as its own project.

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Twentieth-century mission theology increasingly recognized that earlier missionary models often assumed Christianity flowed naturally from historically Christian societies outward to non-Christian regions. Although motivated by genuine evangelistic commitment, these models frequently intertwined with colonial expansion and cultural assumptions about Western centrality.

The *missio Dei* reorients mission fundamentally. As Bevans and Schroeder (2004) emphasize, mission flows from the Father sending the Son, the Father and Son sending the Spirit, and the Spirit sending the Church. Mission, therefore, cannot be permanently associated with any culture or geography.

Vatican II gave authoritative ecclesial expression to this vision. *Ad Gentes* teaches that the Church is missionary "by its very nature" because it arises from Trinitarian sending (§2). *Lumen Gentium* affirms that the universal Church exists "in and from" the communion of local Churches (§23). Once this ecclesiology is taken seriously, missionary authority cannot remain tethered to one historical region.

Contemporary missionary movements thus reflect not anomaly but participation in the Spirit's ongoing redistribution of ecclesial vitality.

Trinitarian Communion and Missionary Mutuality

The theological logic of missionary reciprocity becomes clearer when examined through Trinitarian theology. Christian tradition understands God as communion – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in mutual self-giving love. The doctrine of *perichoresis* describes divine relationality as dynamic exchange rather than isolated existence.

Within Trinitarian life, sending and receiving are inseparable. The Son receives the Father's mission without inferiority; reception becomes participation in communion. Likewise, the Spirit proceeds as the bond of relational unity, extending divine life outward toward creation.

Missionary reciprocity, therefore, mirrors divine relationality. When local Churches exchange pastoral leadership, spiritual gifts, and theological insight, they enact analogically the relational dynamism of the Trinity. No Church remains merely sender or receiver. All participate simultaneously in giving and receiving.

This Trinitarian grounding challenges ecclesiologies based on possession – of personnel, resources, or authority. Mission belongs to God alone. Polycentric Catholicism thus reflects not fragmentation but communion modelled upon divine life itself.

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Historical Genealogies of Catholic Mission

Contemporary assumptions about missionary direction emerge largely from modern history rather than the entirety of Christian experience. Early Christianity spread primarily through migration, trade networks, and relational witness rather than centralized missionary planning. Authority was dispersed, and missionary initiative emerged wherever communities embodied the gospel.

Medieval missions further complicate directional narratives. Irish monastic missionaries evangelized continental Europe, demonstrating that communities once evangelized quickly became evangelizers. Mission followed spiritual renewal rather than civilizational hierarchy.

The modern missionary era introduced a more centralized configuration tied to European expansion and missionary societies. While extraordinarily fruitful, this period fostered an imagination in which Europe functioned as missionary centre and other regions as permanent recipients.

Vatican II initiated a decisive reorientation by affirming the full ecclesial dignity of local Churches. Mission was reframed as communion rather than expansion. Contemporary global clergy mobility, therefore, appears less as reversal than as retrieval of Christianity's older pattern of circulating missionary vitality.

Rethinking "Reverse Mission": Conceptual Promise and Theological Limits

The phrase "reverse mission" has achieved wide circulation within contemporary missiology because it captures an undeniable historical contrast: Christians from regions once categorized as mission territories now evangelize and pastor within Europe and North America. The term's rhetorical clarity explains its popularity in both scholarly and ecclesial discourse (Adogame 2013; Kollman 2022). Yet conceptual usefulness does not guarantee theological adequacy.

Three interrelated limitations emerge when the phenomenon is examined through the framework established by the *missio Dei* and communion ecclesiology.

The Assumption of Normative Direction

The language of reversal presupposes an original norm. It implies that mission properly flows from historically Christian centres toward peripheral regions and that contemporary movements invert this pattern. Such an assumption inadvertently elevates a particular historical configuration – the modern Western missionary era – into a theological standard.

If mission originates in God rather than in civilization, however, no direction can claim normative status. Missionary agency follows the Spirit's activity rather than historical precedent. Contemporary South-to-North missionary movement,

therefore, does not reverse mission; it reveals that missionary direction has never been fixed.

Persistent West-Centred Interpretation

The reverse-mission framework also retains the West as interpretive reference point. Global South missionary activity becomes intelligible primarily as response to Western secularization. This framing risks portraying non-Western Churches as functional suppliers addressing Western deficits.

Yet many clergy serving abroad do not perceive their vocation in these terms. Their missionary identity emerges from local ecclesial vitality, vocational culture, and theological conviction independent of Western decline. Interpreting their ministry primarily through Western crisis, therefore, obscures the autonomy and maturity of sending Churches.

Reduction of Complex Mobility

The contemporary missionary movement is multidirectional. South-to-North exchanges occur alongside North-to-South collaboration, South-to-South partnerships, and intra-regional migration networks. Religious orders, diaspora communities, and global ecclesial relationships intersect to produce dense patterns of exchange (Hanciles 2021). The metaphor of reversal cannot adequately describe this complexity.

These limitations suggest that while “reverse mission” may function descriptively, it lacks the theological depth required to interpret contemporary Catholic mission.

Postcolonial Hermeneutics and the Language of Mission

The persistence of directional language within missiology reflects deeper historical dynamics. Postcolonial theology provides analytical tools for examining how missionary categories continue to shape ecclesial imagination.

Missionary discourse developed within colonial contexts frequently relied upon binaries: centre and periphery, teacher and learner, sender and receiver. Even when explicit colonial ideologies fade, these conceptual structures remain embedded within theological vocabulary.

The term *reverse mission* unintentionally reproduces this framework. By describing contemporary developments as inversion, it preserves the assumption that Western missionary expansion constituted the normative baseline. The global South becomes intelligible primarily in relation to Western history rather than as a bearer of independent missionary identity.

Postcolonial biblical scholars such as Sugirtharajah (2001) emphasize that theological interpretation must interrogate inherited categories shaped by power relations. Applied to Catholic mission, this insight encourages epistemic humility. The Church need not reject missionary history; rather, it must recognize that no cultural expression of Christianity exhausts the gospel's meaning.

Missionary reciprocity thus functions as a decolonizing theological concept. It reframes mission as shared participation rather than hierarchical transmission, allowing diverse ecclesial experiences to contribute equally to the Church's self-understanding.

Missionary Reciprocity as a Constructive Paradigm

Having identified the limits of reversal language, a constructive alternative becomes necessary. Missionary reciprocity names the multidirectional exchange through which local Churches share responsibility for the Church's universal mission.

Reciprocity begins from communion rather than contrast. It recognizes that every local Church exists simultaneously as giver and receiver. The historical fact that Western missionaries once evangelized large portions of the global South remains significant, but it does not define the permanent structure of mission.

Biblical Grammar of Mutuality

Paul's reflections in Romans 15 provide a helpful scriptural analogy. Gentile Churches share material resources with Jerusalem because they have received spiritual gifts. The relationship is reciprocal rather than hierarchical. Likewise, the Pauline image of the Church as one body (1 Cor. 12) emphasizes interdependence: no member can claim self-sufficiency.

Applied globally, catholicity implies circulation of gifts – persons, charisms, resources, and theological insight. Missionary reciprocity, therefore, expresses communion enacted through exchange.

Reciprocity and Ecclesial Maturity

Reciprocity also reframes Western secularization. Declining vocations in some regions coexist with dynamic growth elsewhere. These realities should not be interpreted as failure versus success but as complementary expressions of a global Church characterized by diverse historical trajectories.

Global South missionary activity represents ecclesial maturity: communities that have received the gospel deeply now assume responsibility for its proclamation. Mission becomes a shared vocation rather than a civilizational project.

Migration as a Locus Theologicus of Mission

Migration has emerged as one of the defining features of contemporary Christianity. Increasingly, theologians recognize migration itself as a *locus theologicus* – a privileged site for discerning God's action in history.

Biblical narratives repeatedly portray divine mission unfolding through displacement. Abraham's vocation begins with migration. Israel's identity forms through exodus and exile. The early Church expands through diaspora communities scattered across the Roman Empire. Pentecost gathers migrants speaking diverse languages, symbolizing a Church born in mobility.

These patterns suggest that Christian faith advances through movement rather than stability. Migration disrupts settled identities, compelling communities to rediscover dependence upon God. Contemporary global migration similarly redistributes Christian vitality, carrying living traditions into new contexts.

For many migrant clergy, relocation is interpreted spiritually rather than merely economically. Nigerian priests serving in American dioceses or Filipino clergy ministering in Europe frequently describe their presence as continuation of missionary vocation. Mobility becomes participation in God's sending rather than response to institutional necessity.

Understanding migration theologically reframes global clergy mobility. It becomes evidence of Spirit-led reconfiguration of the Church. Catholicism increasingly appears as a pilgrim communion continually reshaped through encounter across cultures.

Empirical Manifestations of Missionary Reciprocity: Global Clergy Mobility and Case Studies

The global circulation of Catholic clergy is among the most visible expressions of the Church's emerging polycentricity. Clergy mobility is driven by multiple factors: demographic shifts, vocational disparities, migration, ecclesial partnerships, and the pastoral needs of diaspora communities. The point here is not to reduce mission to migration or to treat priests as interchangeable units of labour. Rather, the goal is to interpret mobility theologically: as a sign that mission is increasingly experienced as shared responsibility across local Churches.

The United States: International Clergy and the Remaking of Parish Life

The United States offers one of the clearest windows into the structural integration of international clergy. CARA reports that roughly one quarter of active Catholic priests in the United States are foreign-born, with substantial numbers coming from India, Nigeria, Vietnam, and the Philippines (CARA 2023). This represents a significant

shift from earlier periods, when foreign-born clergy were more commonly European, especially Irish, German, and Italian.

The reasons are relatively clear: the Catholic population has grown and diversified through immigration and natural increase, while priestly vocations among US-born Catholics have not kept pace. Dioceses, therefore, rely on international clergy not only in large cities but also across suburban and rural parishes. Yet what matters theologically is what this reliance becomes in practice. When a parish receives a priest from Nigeria or India, it does not merely solve a scheduling problem. It enters an intercultural relationship that can reshape preaching, pastoral style, devotional life, and the community's understanding of catholicity.

In many parishes, international clergy bring pastoral instincts formed in contexts of high religious participation and strong communal belonging. Nigerian priests may come from communities where public expressions of faith, extended family networks, and vibrant parish cultures are ordinary. Indian clergy may bring experience shaped by religious pluralism and daily interfaith proximity. Filipino priests often come from deeply devotional Catholic cultures marked by popular piety and strong parish-based community life. The point is not to romanticize or essentialize these differences, but to recognize that receiving clergy entails receiving a real ecclesial history – a way of living faith. Such encounters can renew parishes that have become accustomed to a thinner, more privatized Catholic practice, though they can also generate tensions regarding expectations of authority, communication styles, and pastoral priorities.

The reciprocity question becomes concrete at the parish level: will the receiving community interpret the international priest primarily as a functional solution, or as a bearer of ecclesial gifts that call the community into deeper communion? When parishes choose the latter, reciprocity becomes a lived theology rather than a conceptual slogan.

Ireland: From Missionary Sender to Missionary Receiver

Ireland has long been a symbol of Catholic missionary sending. For generations, Irish priests and religious staffed schools, parishes, and seminaries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet Ireland's ecclesial landscape has changed profoundly in recent decades: secularization, vocational decline, and reduced religious participation have altered the pastoral reality of many dioceses. The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (2023) indicates that foreign-born clergy constitute an increasingly significant share of priests serving in Irish dioceses, and in many contexts, they are central to sustaining parish ministry.

Theologically, the Irish case is striking because it renders visible a transition in ecclesial self-understanding. A Church that imagined itself primarily as sender now must learn what it means to receive. That shift requires more than gratitude; it

requires a conversion of imagination. Priests formed in Nigeria or India do not arrive as extensions of an Irish ecclesial project. They arrive as ministers of the one Church, bearing gifts shaped by their own local Churches. For Irish parishes, the encounter can be challenging: differences in cultural expectations, liturgical sensibilities, and pastoral style can produce misunderstanding. Yet it can also be clarifying: Ireland is being invited to rediscover catholicity not as historical prestige but as shared dependence within communion.

This is where missionary reciprocity shows its interpretive strength. Rather than narrating Ireland's reception of international clergy as a humiliating reversal, reciprocity frames it as a kairos: a moment in which the Church is invited to embody the humility intrinsic to the gospel, learning again that receiving is not loss but communion.

Germany: Structured Partnerships and the Pragmatics of Reciprocity

Germany illustrates how reciprocity often operates through formal institutional arrangements. German dioceses have experienced sustained reductions in the number of active clergy (German Bishops' Conference 2022). In response, many dioceses have developed partnerships with dioceses in India, parts of Africa, and Eastern Europe. These partnerships frequently involve defined-term assignments in which priests serve in Germany while maintaining canonical ties to their home dioceses.

Here, the shape of reciprocity becomes clearer: it is not merely an informal movement of individuals but often a negotiated exchange between local Churches. Receiving dioceses gain pastoral leadership and sacramental coverage; sending dioceses may receive educational opportunities, financial support, pastoral formation experiences, or long-term relationships that benefit seminaries and local pastoral development. Such exchanges are not automatically equitable, and they can drift into transactional patterns if not shaped by ecclesial discernment. Yet at their best, they represent a lived form of communion: local Churches supporting one another's needs in a way that acknowledges mutual belonging rather than paternal dependency.

The German case also highlights an important dimension of reciprocity: it requires structures capable of protecting dignity. If sending Churches feel exploited or if receiving Churches treat international priests as "temporary fixes", reciprocity collapses into utilitarianism. Theologically, this is precisely why a spirituality and practice of receiving must accompany institutional arrangements. Without a theology of receiving, structures designed for exchange can become mechanisms of extraction.

Italy: Migration, Ministry and Catholicism at the "Centre"

Italy occupies a unique place in Catholic imagination as the historic heartland of Roman Catholicism. Yet Italy also manifests the same dynamics of demographic and ecclesial change. Immigration has introduced diverse Catholic communities from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and foreign-born clergy serve extensively within Italian dioceses – particularly in urban areas where immigrant pastoral care is an everyday reality. In this context, the relationship between migration and mission becomes especially visible. Migration carries the Church's life across borders; mission becomes entangled with pastoral integration, language, cultural belonging, and the rebuilding of community in diaspora.

The symbolic significance is hard to miss. Even within the Church's historic centre, pastoral leadership increasingly comes from places previously imagined as "mission territories". In Italy, the presence of international clergy and immigrant Catholic communities renders visible the collapse of centre–periphery assumptions. The Church's "centre" must now learn to receive in a new way – not only receiving priests, but receiving new forms of communal life, devotional practices, and understandings of belonging.

In each of these cases, missionary reciprocity is tested by real pastoral questions: How is authority negotiated across cultures? How do parishes balance local customs with new expressions of faith? How do dioceses ensure that international priests are supported, not isolated? These practical questions are not distractions from theology; they are the terrain where ecclesiology becomes concrete.

Intercultural Ministry and the Anthropology of Reciprocal Mission

Missionary reciprocity unfolds most concretely through human relationships. Parish communities become spaces where cultural expectations, theological assumptions, and spiritual practices encounter one another.

Differences in leadership style often emerge first. Clergy formed in communal societies may exercise relational authority grounded in visibility and pastoral closeness, while Western parishes often expect collaborative decision-making shaped by institutional norms. These differences require negotiation rather than assimilation.

Liturgical expression likewise becomes a site of mutual learning. Devotional intensity, preaching rhythms, and patterns of participation vary across cultures. Intercultural ministry invites communities to rediscover the richness of Catholic diversity.

International clergy also experience vulnerability. Language barriers, cultural displacement, and ambiguous identity can produce isolation. Reciprocity, therefore, demands pastoral accompaniment for those who serve abroad.

Receiving communities undergo transformation as well. Parishioners learn to recognize the Church as genuinely universal rather than culturally homogeneous. Intercultural ministry thus becomes a process of mutual conversion through which catholicity becomes visible in lived practice.

Fidei Donum Revisited: From Missionary Assistance to Mutual Exchange

An important institutional lens for interpreting contemporary missionary reciprocity lies in the evolution of the *fidei donum* tradition. Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Fidei Donum* (1957) originally encouraged European dioceses to send priests to regions then described as mission territories, particularly in Africa. The initiative reflected genuine ecclesial solidarity: Churches possessing abundant clergy temporarily shared personnel with those experiencing pastoral need.

Historically, however, *fidei donum* largely operated within a one-directional framework. Missionary movement flowed primarily from Europe toward the global South. Theological language emphasized generosity, sacrifice, and evangelization, reinforcing an implicit hierarchy between sender and receiver.

Contemporary practice increasingly transforms this structure. Dioceses in Africa, Asia, and Latin America now send priests to Europe and North America under arrangements closely resembling *fidei donum* patterns: temporary assignments, formal agreements, and continuing canonical ties to sending dioceses. Even where the term itself is not employed, similar mechanisms govern clergy exchange worldwide.

This development carries significant theological implications. First, it destabilizes inherited categories of missionary superiority. Structures originally designed for expansion now facilitate mutual support among local Churches. The same ecclesial mechanism operates in multiple directions, revealing that missionary agency cannot be permanently localized.

Second, the transformation exposes ethical tensions. When international clergy are recruited primarily to sustain sacramental infrastructure in declining contexts, exchange risks becoming functionalist. Reciprocity demands that receiving dioceses recognize international priests not as labor substitutes but as bearers of ecclesial gifts whose well-being requires sustained pastoral and cultural support.

Third, the evolution of *fidei donum* demonstrates institutional conversion. Missionary structures themselves participate in the Church's ongoing discernment. What once embodied assistance now becomes a vehicle of communion. Theological meaning emerges not from structure alone but from the spirit in which exchange occurs.

Thus, *fidei donum* offers a concrete example of how missionary reciprocity moves from theory to institutional practice.

Toward a Theology and Spirituality of Receiving

If missionary reciprocity names an emerging ecclesial reality, Catholic theology must articulate receiving as an essential dimension of mission. Historically, mission theology emphasized sending – a natural emphasis during centuries when Western Churches possessed abundant resources and personnel. The contemporary moment reveals that participation in the *missio Dei* equally involves reception.

Kenosis and Ecclesial Humility

The deepest foundation for receiving lies in Christology. The hymn of Philippians 2 presents Christ's mission through *kenosis*, self-emptying love. Divine power is revealed not through domination but through vulnerability and openness.

When historically dominant Churches receive pastoral leadership from other regions, they enact a kenotic posture. Reception becomes an act of faith, relinquishing assumptions of cultural centrality and acknowledging that God's gifts arise beyond familiar ecclesial forms.

Receiving, therefore, does not signify institutional decline. It expresses conformity to Christ's own missionary pattern.

Pneumatological Discernment

The Holy Spirit remains the primary agent of mission. The Acts of the Apostles repeatedly portrays the early Church surprised by new missionary directions requiring openness and adaptation. Gentile inclusion, geographic expansion, and cultural transformation occurred through Spirit-led interruption rather than strategic planning.

Contemporary global mobility may be interpreted similarly. Migration and reciprocal mission represent contexts through which the Spirit redistributes vitality within the Church. Reception becomes an act of discernment: recognizing unexpected gifts as signs of divine initiative.

Ecclesial Hospitality as Spiritual Practice

A theology of receiving must become spirituality. Christian tradition associates hospitality with encountering God in the stranger. Scriptural narratives – from Abraham's visitors to the Emmaus encounter – present reception as a privileged moment of grace.

Ecclesial hospitality involves vulnerability. Communities must allow themselves to be changed by those they receive. Intercultural ministry challenges assumptions about liturgy, authority, and pastoral practice, inviting deeper conversion.

The Eucharist offers a powerful analogy. In Eucharistic communion, believers simultaneously give and receive. No participant remains solely host or guest. Missionary reciprocity mirrors this Eucharistic dynamic: Churches discover unity through shared reception of divine gift.

Receiving thus becomes a spiritual discipline through which catholicity is lived rather than merely affirmed.

Polycentric Catholicism and Synodal Governance

Missionary reciprocity signals a structural transformation in global Catholicism – the emergence of **polycentric Catholicism**, a Church animated by multiple centres of missionary vitality.

Polycentric Ecclesiology

Demographic realities confirm that Catholic life now flourishes across diverse regions. Africa, Asia, and Latin America contain the majority of the world's Catholics (Johnson & Zurlo, 2023). Cities such as Lagos, Manila, São Paulo, and Kinshasa increasingly function as influential centres of ecclesial life.

Polycentricity does not negate unity. Rather, it reframes unity as communion among diverse centres. Pope Francis's image of the Church as a polyhedron captures this vision: unity preserving difference rather than eliminating it (*Evangelii Gaudium* §236).

Authority and Theological Voice

Polycentric Catholicism reshapes perceptions of theological authority. Historically, Western institutions exercised disproportionate influence in defining theological discourse. Today, theologians and pastoral leaders from across the global Church contribute to shaping Catholic thought.

Missionary reciprocity accelerates this process at the level of lived encounter. Clergy bring theological sensibilities shaped by contexts of growth, religious pluralism, poverty, migration, and communal resilience. Receiving these perspectives expands the Church's theological imagination.

Authority increasingly emerges through dialogue rather than geography.

Synodality as the Practice of Reciprocity

Synodality provides the ecclesial framework capable of sustaining polycentricity. The International Theological Commission describes synodality as constitutive of

the Church's life and mission (2019). Through mutual listening and discernment, the Church recognizes that the Spirit speaks through the entire People of God.

Reciprocity without synodality risks becoming managerial exchange. Synodality without reciprocity risks abstraction. Together, they embody communion as lived practice: Churches learning from one another while discerning mission collectively.

Formation and Governance in a Global Church

The redistribution of missionary agency requires renewed attention to formation and governance. Seminaries must prepare clergy for intercultural ministry rather than culturally homogeneous contexts. Episcopal collaboration across continents becomes increasingly essential as diocesan partnerships expand.

Leadership within a polycentric Church becomes relational, dialogical, and collaborative. Governance itself participates in missionary conversion.

Toward a Future Praxis of Reciprocal Mission

Recognizing missionary reciprocity as a defining feature of contemporary Catholicism raises practical questions concerning the future of mission.

First, priestly and theological formation must become explicitly global. Curricula addressing intercultural communication, migration theology, and world Christianity are no longer optional but essential.

Second, ethical guidelines for clergy mobility must be strengthened. Exchanges should foster mutual benefit rather than dependency. Sending Churches must not be deprived of pastoral leadership, and receiving Churches must provide genuine integration and support.

Third, theological exchange must accompany pastoral exchange. Academic collaboration, faculty mobility, and shared research initiatives can cultivate a genuinely global Catholic theology reflecting diverse ecclesial experiences.

Fourth, missionary formation itself must be reimagined. Future missionaries will increasingly serve within pluralistic societies rather than clearly defined mission territories. Mission will involve accompaniment, dialogue, and mutual learning as much as proclamation.

These developments suggest that missionary reciprocity is not a temporary adjustment but a permanent horizon for Catholic mission in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: Missionary Reciprocity as Kairos

The contemporary redistribution of Catholic missionary agency represents far more than demographic adaptation. It constitutes a **kairos** – a decisive moment inviting

the Church to reinterpret mission through the lens of communion rather than directional hierarchy.

The category of “reverse mission”, while rhetorically compelling, proves theologically insufficient because it assumes missionary initiative properly belongs to historically dominant Western Churches. Grounded in the *missio Dei*, Trinitarian communion, historical patterns of Christian expansion, migration theology, and Vatican II ecclesiology, contemporary developments appear instead as maturation of global catholicity.

Empirical realities – from parish renewal in the United States to ecclesial reorientation in Ireland, institutional partnerships in Germany, and symbolic transformation in Italy – demonstrate that mission now flows multidirectionally. The transformation of *fidei donum* structures and the emergence of intercultural ministry confirm that missionary exchange has become constitutive of Catholic life.

Missionary reciprocity ultimately calls for conversion of ecclesial imagination. The Church must learn not only how to send but how to receive, recognizing reception as a demanding form of participation in God’s mission.

In embracing this vocation, the Church discovers that catholicity is not possession of mission but participation in divine communion. The future of Catholic mission will therefore depend not upon restoring past centres but upon cultivating relationships through which the Spirit continues to send and gather the People of God across the whole world.

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ARTICLE

A Multidirectional Mission Approach, in Contrast to Reverse Mission in African Diaspora Pentecostalism

Mookgo Solomon Kgatle

Abstract

Reverse mission is a notion that describes the current resurgence of faith from the global South to the global North. This notion suggests that the mission itself is one-directional (global North to South); hence, efforts to spread the word from the global South into the global North are described in the reverse direction. Contrary to the popular notion of "reverse mission", this article proposes a multidirectional mission within the context of the African diaspora mission. This approach, which is closely related to the polycentric mission approach, is a mission that reaches everyone at any particular place. The multidirectional approach specifically suggests a mission paradigm that not only moves from south to north but also the south-to-south movement. This approach is biblical and supports the spread of the gospel to different parts of the world, hence the phrase "to the ends of the world". This is achieved by describing reverse mission in the current definition and identifying the research gaps within this paradigm. The multi-directional approach is introduced and applied to the African diaspora Pentecostalism. The objective of the article is to demonstrate that the African diaspora Pentecostalism can spread the gospel to the different parts of the world, hence it cannot be described as "reverse mission" when describing its South-to-North impact. Reverse mission inadequately captures South-to-South mission dynamics and the historically multidirectional expansion of Christianity.

Keywords: Reverse mission, African diaspora Pentecostalism, Multidirectional mission, Missiology, *Missio Dei*

Introduction

African Pentecostalism is a movement that has shown growth not only in the African continent but also in the global South and the rest of the world. However, the reviewed literature demonstrates that the impact of African Pentecostalism in

the global North is mainly described as a “reverse mission”. This suggests that true mission only moves from the global North into the global South, including Africa, and any movement to the contrary is in “reverse”. Contrary to this kind of description of the spread of the word from Africa to the global North, this article introduces what the writer describes as a “multidirectional mission”. A multidirectional mission approach is closely related to what scholars such as Escobar (2003), Nazir-Ali (2009), and Yeh (2016) refer to as a mission to everyone and everywhere. Nazi-Ali (2009) actually calls it a gospel “from everywhere to everywhere”. However, the author here chooses the “multidirectional mission” approach as an articulation of the spreading of the word not only from South to North but also from the South to the South. In other words, a multi-directional approach is used specifically in contrast to a one-dimensional reverse mission. This will be achieved by a discussion on the four main sections of the article. First, the article will explain what is meant by African diaspora Pentecostalism by giving examples of churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission International, the Church of Pentecost, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Second, the article defines reverse mission in the context of African diaspora Pentecostalism to identify the existing gaps. Third, a multidirectional mission is introduced as a different approach to diaspora mission and to illustrate that the mission is not in reverse gear but rather moves from everywhere to everywhere and from everyone to everyone. The last section of the article seeks to demonstrate that the gospel is expected to spread to the different parts of the world, not just from North to South or vice versa, as the reviewed literature suggests. This study is important in our understanding of the current growth of African Pentecostalism and the description of the kind of mission within the study of global Pentecostalism, evangelism, and world Christianity.

African Diaspora Pentecostalism: An Overview

African diaspora Pentecostalism can be described as the African Pentecostal movement whose mission activities are conducted outside the African continent. Kalu (2008) points out that by understanding how African Pentecostalism functions in the continent, we can easily understand African diaspora Pentecostalism. Wariboko (2017) concurs that African Pentecostals do not see themselves as being confined to the African continent, hence a burst of revival into the other parts of the world. Asamoah-Gyadu (2012) discusses the African-led Pentecostal churches that have been established in the diaspora, while maintaining the fundamental teachings of Pentecostalism in Africa. The very same characteristics of African Pentecostalism of lively and participatory liturgy, hermeneutics of experience, holistic salvation, Spirit baptism, and a realized eschatology are then exported into the diaspora mission in the quest to reach out to Africans in different parts of the world. African diaspora

Pentecostalism can be understood in the spread of Pentecostalism as a global movement, with Africa playing a major role. In his various works, Adogame (2007, 2010) has pointed to the expansion of African Pentecostalism from the continent into other parts of the world. This points to the fact that the impact of African Pentecostalism is not only felt in the continent of Africa but in the diaspora. The point made by Adogame is backed by the recent statistics on global Pentecostalism. Currently, African Pentecostalism has a fair share of the total number of 644 million Pentecostals in the whole world. Wariboko and Oliverio (2020: 327) estimate that African Pentecostalism has more than 200 million Pentecostals, which is a significant contribution to global Pentecostalism. This tremendous growth cannot be confined to the local impact of African Pentecostalism but also its footprints in the context of global Pentecostalism.

African diaspora Pentecostalism can also be understood in the context of the rising migration of Africans to other parts of the world due to economic, political, and educational reasons (Cazarin 2019; Ojo 2024; Onyinah 2013). Consequently, migrant churches have been planted by Africans, which in this current study are described as African diaspora Pentecostalism. According to Ojo (2024: 48), of the 1,000 migrant churches planted in Germany, almost 20% were planted by Africans. This is nearly the same in other countries, such as England, where there are migrant Pentecostal and charismatic churches planted by Africans. These are churches such as Kingsway International Christian Centre, founded in 1992 by Matthew Ashimolowo, the Apostolic Faith Mission, Church of Pentecost, Redeemed Christian Church of God, and many more. Ojo (2024: 48) continues to say that "In Kiev, Ukraine, the Embassy of God Church established in 1993 by the Nigerian, Sunday Adelaja, has grown in 2006 to about 25,000 members in Kiev, where 99% of the members were native Europeans". These are a few examples of how African Pentecostalism is thriving in the diaspora, with many migrant churches planted in different cities in Europe, America, Australia, and other parts of the world because of issues of migration and transnationalism. Therefore, an African Christian church is no longer known as a receiving church in terms of the efforts made by Western missionaries and mission activities, but has in the twenty-first century also become a sending Christian church. Onyinah (2013) points out, for example, that the Church of Pentecost started churches in the diaspora as informed by the movement of the members of the church into various parts of the world. In this way, the church of Pentecost has been known and described as a church that started in Ghana but has had an impact globally.

Therefore, it can be reiterated that migration and transnationalism are the driving factors in the establishment of these churches, as many of them seek to reach out to their members who have relocated from African countries to work, study, and start a business abroad. Many of these churches, such as the Apostolic Faith Mission International in the United Kingdom, were started by African Pentecostals who went

to the host countries either to study or to find work. It therefore becomes easy for the establishment of migrant churches, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, whose members come mainly from Nigeria but have relocated to find greener pastures in the diaspora. This is for the same reasons that African diaspora Pentecostalism emanating from the Nigerian Pentecostalism has dominated the African diaspora religious space and, to a certain extent, even the scholarship thereof (Sande and Chitando, 2024: 220). This is possible as many Nigerians leave Nigeria in pursuit of economic opportunities in different parts of the world. This is also exacerbated by the fact that Nigeria is already the most populous country in Africa. It suffices to say that there would then be many Nigerians in the diaspora, which results in the establishment of Nigerian Pentecostal migrant churches. Already, the churches I have highlighted thus far, such as Kingsway International Christian Centre and Redeemed Christian Church of God, are originally from Nigeria and were started by Nigerian pastors. We also cannot be ignorant of the many other migrant churches that have Nigerian roots, such as the Aladura churches, which are important to the discussions of migration and religion beyond Pentecostalism. Furthermore, while migration and transnationalism are the dominant factors for the establishment of African diaspora Pentecostalism, we cannot underestimate the ability of some of the African Pentecostal churches to send missionaries abroad for the primary reason of starting these migrant churches.

The ability of the African Pentecostal migrant churches in reaching out to the local people has been discussed by scholars as a challenge (Sande and Samushonga 2020; Sande and Chitando 2024). While some have been able to grow beyond the gathering of African migrants in the host countries, the majority of them struggle to reach out to the local or indigenous people. However, even with these challenges, the migrant Pentecostal churches continue to grow among migrants, given the factors of migration and transnationalism. Some of these African migrants are unfamiliar with the new contexts in the diaspora, and the migrant churches become a home for many as they find a sense of belonging. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015: 189) points out that these “churches have been defined in terms of their ethnic identities and their provision of religiosocial spaces as safety nets for foreigners in alien lands”. Van Dijk (1997:151) explains that the Pentecostal pastor is not only involved in receiving the migrant into the new host country but will continue to give counsel and advice to the migrant in familiarizing themselves with the new context. Sande and Chitando (2024: 219) continue to say that as new migrants struggle with how to understand their new home in various countries in Europe or even in the United States of America, African Pentecostal migrant churches come in to explain and to make the new contexts very familiar to the new migrants. These and other factors will cause these churches to grow to greater numbers in the twenty-first century in many regions of the world. These dynamics will remain since there are struggles in Africa causing migrations,

and since these migrants long for a sense of belonging, which they find in African diaspora Pentecostalism.

Moreover, these churches have been able to resuscitate and rejuvenate Christianity in times where secularism has dominated the religious space among Westerners. Sande and Samushonga (2020: 18) say that "the migration of people from the global South to the global North and the subsequent growth of the African Pentecostal church in United Kingdom in the last few decades has revived hope for a European mission field, the hope and expectation for the diaspora church". Sande and Chitando (2024: 222) point out that the "African diaspora Pentecostal churches are sparking Christian revival in Europe by demonstrating a passion for prayer, dynamic faith and vibrant spirituality". The fact that Europeans, Americans, or even Canadians are not joining these migrant churches does not stop the revival and resurgence of faith in those different contexts. This is one reason the African Pentecostal migrant churches will continue to grow in the coming decades. Chitando and Sande (2024: 219) predict that African diaspora Pentecostalism will continue to grow as many Africans are seeking opportunities outside of the continent. In addition, the African diaspora Pentecostalism will grow as the challenges of economic instability, political instability, and others continue to exist in many different parts of the continent. Therefore, inasmuch as some Africans may seek solutions on the continent, others opt for leaving the continent to explore opportunities elsewhere in the world. In the process, the global north, particularly Europe and America, will benefit in terms of the resurgence of faith. The assertions given above, in a way, make African Pentecostal migrant churches an alternative to the withering leaves of Christianity in the global north. African Pentecostal migrant churches become a source of hope in the midst of disaffiliation from forms of religion in countries such as Germany and France. As many of the mainline Christian churches in the global north decline in numbers, African Pentecostal migrant churches become a source of hope. However, the main research question remains as to how we understand the ability of African Pentecostalism in spreading the gospel to the global North. What kind of framework can be used to better understand this kind of mission? In the next section, the writer reviews literature on reverse mission as one of the approaches that has been used in the past to understand the African diaspora Pentecostalism.

Reverse Mission in the Context of African Diaspora Pentecostalism

In suggesting that the mission from Africa to the global North is in a reversal mode to the former mission efforts to the global South and Africa in particular, scholars have come up with the terminology of "Reverse mission" within mission studies. Reverse mission became an interesting topic in the last quarter of the twentieth century to

theologians and social scientists as they grappled with the spread of the gospel from the global South to the global North. The subject became even more popular at the beginning of the twenty-first century as more churches from the majority world were planted in the global North. Morier-Genoud (2018: 169) explains that the interest in reverse mission "was concerned with a perceived flow of missionaries coming to the global North from the global South when in the past, missionaries left Europe and the Americas to evangelize the South (known successively as the colonial world and the Third World)". This is because a popular movement is the spread of the gospel to the global South, coming from the global North. Reverse mission is understood in the context of migration, whereby it is defined in terms of European migrants who moved to Africa between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries (Hanciles 2008; Spencer 2008). Halls in Olofinjana (2020:56) speaks about how Europeans experienced this migration "from the end of the 15th century to the middle of the 20th century, moving into other parts of the world such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America". In this way, the movement of African migrants to Europe from the mid-20th century onwards is described in reverse mode and as a contributing factor to the reverse mission. This definition speaks directly to the issues raised in the preceding section of the intersections of migration and the African diaspora Pentecostalism. This means that reverse mission is connected to the notion of a reverse migration, where the spread of the gospel to the global North is discussed in conjunction with the migration to the global North. As Kim (2011: 64) puts it, "Global Migration serves missionary mobilization and the call for structural reform of the Church to grapple with the challenges of migration".

Reverse mission is understood in terms of both mission studies and geographical shifts in the spread of the gospel. Burgess (2011: 432) explains that reverse mission involves two elements: "a reversal in the geographical direction of mission and a reversal in the direction of 'colonization,' in other words an inversion of centre-periphery relations in Christianity, whereby the formerly colonized are now evangelizing the former colonizers". This definition describes the mission of God in terms of the geographical shifts in the resurgence of faith and confuses mission efforts of Westerners with colonization. Reverse mission is discussed in terms of mission studies, historical, and geographical directions. However, at times, there is a need to separate the mission efforts of Westerners from colonization. Not all Western missionaries had the mind of a colonizer, as many had a genuine call to bring the message of the gospel to the south and Africa in particular. Burgess (2011) continues to describe reverse mission as the need for the evangelization of Europe and the growing presence of African Pentecostal migrant churches in the global North. While I concur with this description and the need for a revival in the declining number of mainline Christianity in Europe, the challenge is labelling it a reverse mission. Burgess interviewed some pastors from churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of

God, who told him that Europeans once came to Africa to preach the gospel, and now Africans are going to Europe to spread the word. In this case, reverse mission is also described as giving back to the global North what they gave to Africa in the past. Reverse mission is described as the gratitude of Africans to those who brought the gospel to Africa by returning the favour in taking back the gospel to them. But is reverse mission a relevant terminology to describe this? In other words, as described by Burgess (2011), this kind of framing has the risks of reinscribing colonial binaries.

Reverse mission is also defined in terms of who is the sending church in the context of African diaspora Pentecostalism. While in the past it was European churches that sent the missionaries to Africa, the sending of African missionaries is described as a reverse mission. This is well articulated by Ojo in Olofinjana (2020: 56) where reverse mission is defined as the "The sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia, Latin America, which were at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions as mission fields from the sixteenth century to the late twentieth century". In this way, the African church, in general terms, is no longer just a receiving church but also a sending church, hence the concept of reverse mission. Kim (2011: 64) explains that the responsibilities of the sending church do not only lie in the spread of the gospel but also include financial provisions to be utilized in the receiving church. In the context of the African diaspora Pentecostalism, the receiver has been turned into a sender, hence the notion of a reverse mission. A church engaged in mission is expected to engage in mission activities beyond its halls. In the context of an African diaspora Pentecostalism, this means that the African church should not be confined to its continent but become a sending church to the other parts of the world. This relationship between the sending and receiving church is understood in the context of reverse mission by the proponents of this concept.

In summary, reverse mission is defined by looking at major contributing factors such as migration, geographical shifts, history, and missionary activities to describe a phenomenon whereby mission activities are no longer described in terms of global north to global south but also global South to global North, with Africa playing a major role. I have problems with the use of this terminology. For instance, any motor vehicle, whether a manual or automatic engine, has two main gears: the reverse gear and the forward gear. In describing the mission to the global North as a reverse mission, scholars quoted above are somehow suggesting that the mission from the global North is somehow forward thinking in a forward gear, while the mission to the global North is somehow in reverse gear. Can the mission of God really be described in forward and reverse gears? Can the mission of God be described as North to South, or South to North? Or is it a mission in all directions? Moreover, describing the mission of God by using reverse mission also means that everything that Westerners did in the global south and Africa needs to be reversed, which cannot be the correct approach

because not everything that the Western missionaries did in Africa was incorrect. On the contrary, so many Western missionary efforts were engaged in the building of schools, clinics, and even churches. Some of the mission efforts made in the global North have not been able to engage in projects such as these, meaning the building of schools, clinics, and churches in Europe, for example. Can we then continue to speak of a reverse mission, or should we rather construct new approaches in the description of these dynamics? In arguing against the reverse mission, this article introduces a multidirectional approach that can be used by scholars to describe the mission of God as a mission to the "ends of the world" in conjunction with a polycentric mission approach whose starting point can be everywhere, as opposed to a reverse mission that always defines mission as emanating from the global North. This kind of approach is introduced and outlined in the next section.

A Multidirectional Mission Approach: Contrasting Reverse Mission

A multidirectional mission approach is used in this study to explain that the mission of God to the world is a mission to the ends of the earth; it is multidirectional. This approach is connected to a polycentric mission approach that is understood as a mission beginning everywhere and ending everywhere. Scholars such as Bosch (1991), Newbigin (1995), Bevans and Schroeder (2004), and Walls and Ross (2008) have already emphasized that mission is not simply "West to the rest," but concerns the presence of the gospel in all cultural and societal contexts, including the largely secular West. For example, Newbigin's (1995) concept of the church as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the Kingdom underscores the inherently multidirectional nature of mission, independent of colonial or geographic history. Equally, Bosch (1991: 370) has alluded to the home base of the mission of God as being everywhere. While the writer concurs that there is a direct relationship between mission and migration, this does not immediately place the mission of African diaspora Pentecostalism in reverse. The proponents of reverse mission only trace the migration of Europeans to Africa in the fifteenth century, and then define the twentieth-century migration of Africans to Europe in reverse terms. However, there had been a migration of people even before the fifteenth century. Stenschke (2016: 141) speaks of the "Diaspora Jews from the Hellenistic cities of the Roman empire. The Christ-believers among them, who lived and moved as migrants, constituted the backbone of the proclamation of the Gospel in the first century". Stenschke continues to speak about diverse migrants who moved from different cities in the propagation of the gospel. Among these migrants in early Christian history is the Ethiopian eunuch who travelled to Jerusalem and was converted to Christianity through Phillip (Acts 8.26-40). Therefore, the notion that the migration of Africans to Europe in the late twentieth

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century and the beginning of the twenty-first is in reverse is not entirely representative of the historicity of the intersections of mission and migration. On the contrary, there is proof that an African, in the form of an Ethiopian Eunuch, received the gospel much earlier than many Europeans and Americans. Therefore, the correct approach is the multidirectional approach that will properly outline the migration of people from different parts of the world and how this relates to mission activities. This approach aligns with a polycentric mission approach, where mission activities are not limited to a one-dimensional approach, such as reverse mission. This approach is much more nuanced than a reverse mission approach, as the latter seeks to suggest that African diaspora Pentecostalism is directly responding to the earlier migration of Europeans to Africa. Whereas what we see now, done by African diaspora Pentecostalism in Europe and America, has been done before by others, including the Jewish communities in the first century.

Regarding the geographical shifts, there is also a challenge of where exactly the mission of God began for the African diaspora Pentecostalism mission efforts to be considered a reverse mission. The mission of God in the Christian tradition began with the sending of God's son, Jesus Christ, into the world to die for humanity's sins (John 3.16). This resulted in Christ being born, living, and dying on the cross of Calvary for the sins of the people. This mission continues when Jesus Christ sends his disciples into the world to spread the gospel (John 20.21). This mission activity does not have its origin in Europe or America to define an African diaspora Pentecostalism in the twenty-first century as a reverse mission. The mission of God is to reach all people in their different locations, including in the North, South, West, and East. The great commission in Matthew 28.19 is also clear that the gospel should be taught to all nations. The fact that at some point the mission of God was led by the missionaries from the global North does not mean the global North is the starting point or mission in a forward gear and others in reverse. In addition, this does not make the global North a positive or forward-thinking mission, and the global South initiatives reverse. Therefore, a multidirectional mission approach opens up an opportunity for the mission to start at any given point and to be taken to any given location. The multidirectional mission approach is also relevant for the tracing of the origin of the mission of God to the sending of the Son, rather than the Euro-American centralism of mission. This is very much related to what other scholars have articulated, that mission starts everywhere and ends everywhere; it can start with everyone and ends with everyone. Hence, the mission of God cannot be understood as movement from the global North to the global South but as moving from and to every direction.

Lastly, on the issue of the relationship between the sending and receiving church, an African diaspora Pentecostalism cannot be seen as a reverse mission. Long before the coming of the Western missionaries, Africans had already received the message of the gospel. The Ethiopian eunuch himself was a convert to Phillip, who, coming from

Jerusalem, went back to Ethiopia and preached the gospel to his own people (Acts 8.26-40). Therefore, the sending–receiving paradigm cannot be used to motivate for the reverse mission in the context of the African diaspora Pentecostalism. In fact, the Ethiopian eunuch case demonstrates that the mission of God moved in early Christian history from the Jewish community in Jerusalem to the African community. At some point, the Jewish community was a sending church, while the Ethiopian community was a receiving church. The current discourses of reverse mission exclude this dimension in the context of the intersections of mission and migration. This opens up to the idea of a multidirectional mission approach where there is an exchange between who becomes a sender and who becomes a receiver. In the context of a polycentric mission, anyone can be the sender, and anyone can be the receiver. This changes our thinking of always seeing the missionaries from the global North as senders and the people of the south as recipients. These exchanges should not be defined in forward and reverse terms but rather in their multidirectional dynamics. These exchanges also recognize the fact that God himself chooses who becomes a sender and who becomes a receiver, and therefore, it is incorrect to label mission efforts such as the ones made by African diaspora Pentecostalism as reverse.

The Global Reach of African Diaspora Pentecostalism: A Multidirectional Mission Approach

The mission efforts by African diaspora Pentecostalism have a global reach rather than confining it to the reverse mission. The African Pentecostal churches discussed in this current study, such as the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and the Church of Pentecost, have a global reach found in most countries of the world as opposed to the notion of reverse mission. In addition, these churches have footprints in the continent of Africa, existing in different countries in the east, west, south, and north of Africa. Therefore, the reverse mission discourse completely ignores the spreading of the gospel among Africans as being led by influential African Pentecostal churches. Furthermore, churches are coming from, for example, Asia, Latin America, into Africa within the context of the global South. The reverse mission discourse ignores, for example, the South-to-South spread of the gospel, as in the growth of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) of Pastor Edir Macedo from Brazil in Africa, for example. Therefore, African diaspora Pentecostalism cannot only be defined in terms of the global South to the global North at the expense of the African reach, but also in the South-to-South dimension of this mission. Therefore, the current study locates the African diaspora Pentecostalism within the context of the global mission efforts within a multidirectional mission paradigm. Similarly, a polycentric mission approach is very much global in its approach because it reaches everyone located everywhere. African diaspora

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Pentecostalism has that global reach into different parts of the world, including the continent itself. Therefore, the reverse mission paradigm does not entirely describe what is happening in the twenty-first century in complete terms. Hence, a proposition here of a multidirectional mission approach that will be able to consider all different directions from which the Spirit blows.

African Diaspora Pentecostalism, Multidirectional Mission Approach, and *Missio Dei*

The mission of God is a mission to the ends of the world. God can send anyone at any time, hence it is contended here that his mission cannot be confined to a reverse mission. This also means that even in the twenty-first century, anyone from the global North can be sent to minister the gospel in the African continent. In addition, this also means that African diaspora Pentecostalism should not only be motivated by a pursuit of better jobs and better education, but rather by the mission of God to the global north. African Pentecostal churches should not wait until someone moves into Europe because of employment and education, but intentionally send missionaries with adequate financial support to preach the gospel into different parts of the world in fulfillment of the mission of God and the great commission. The centre of doing mission should be the *missio Dei* and not necessarily personal missions of Africans who are weary of African problems and consequently migrate to Europe or America. This, in my view, is what happens when Western missionaries arrive in Africa; they are fully resourced and come directly for the purpose of doing mission. Therefore, for African diaspora Pentecostalism to truly make an impact in the global North, there is a need for missionaries who understand the mission of God and who are fully resourced. This calls for the African Pentecostal churches to invest in missions and engage in programmes equipping African missionaries in order to send them to the ends of the earth for the propagation of the gospel.

Conclusion

The study of African diaspora Pentecostalism is important as we endeavour to understand the growth of the movement and its impact on world Christianity. In the quest to understand the spread of the gospel from the global South as propagated by African Pentecostals into the global North, many scholars, as discovered in this study, have utilized concepts such as “reverse mission”. This kind of conceptualization is problematic as it suggests that mission is one-directional and any change to such a one-directional move is in “reverse” gear. This article introduced a “multidirectional mission” approach to propose a kind of mission that has a global reach in different parts of the world. It is similar to a polycentric mission approach but unique in its

direct contrast to the one-dimensional reverse mission. The article has found that, as opposed to the reverse mission, African diaspora Pentecostals not only spread the gospel to the global North but also engage in South-to-South mission. This necessitates a rethinking of the notion of reverse mission to articulate a mission approach that is multidirectional. This also changes how we have viewed the mission to the global South from Euro-American centrism to see a possibility of a mission that is African-initiated and independent of the forces from the global North. Furthermore, this study is important in looking at how the global South can do mission within itself with great impact on the other parts of the world. This is important in understanding the impact of African Pentecostalism in the continent, the global South, and the rest of the world. This study is also pivotal for the understanding of the growth of African Pentecostalism within the broader Pentecostal movement and world Christianity.

In summary, this study accurately summarizes the central argument that African diaspora Pentecostalism operates within multidirectional rather than reverse mission dynamics, including South-to-South movements. Further studies can explore this angle, particularly the theoretical and epistemological articulation of a multidirectional mission as a framework that overturns Euro-American mission paradigms. Similarly, the Ethiopian eunuch narrative (Acts 8) can be sufficiently theorized as a methodological analogue for modern migration-mission patterns by further studies.

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ARTICLE

Stokvel and *koinonia*: A Comparative Theological Study of Economic and Spiritual Communality in Acts 2.42–47

Kelebogile Thomas Resane

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show South African creativity regarding survival mechanisms in the face of economic deprivation, political marginalization, and social indifference. One way of overcoming this is through the *stokvel.* Through literature study, the two concepts of *stokvel* (secular) and *koinonia* (theological) are studied and compared. The research question is "How do *stokvel* and *koinonia* of Acts 2.42-47 contribute towards economic and spiritual communality?" The objectives of the article include demonstration of how *stokvel* concepts are the *koinonia* concept of Acts 2.42-47. It shows how *stokvel* builds a community, contributes towards poverty reduction, teaches the principle of sharing, helps people with finding identity, and enhances ethics of trust and accountability. In juxtaposition, *koinonia* provides mutual support systems, such as sharing resources. It is a platform to practise solidarity and generosity. It is partnership in ministry and demonstrates unity in diversity. This *koinonia* is a channel through which God distributes spiritual gifts. The article further discusses common features between a *stokvel* and *koinonia.* These include that both entities are voluntary associations. Both contribute towards poverty alleviation; and value coming together for mutual building of members' wholistic lives. In the world where unity is a great misnomer, *stokvel* and *koinonia* demonstrate the possibilities of unity in diversities, where trust and accountability are the ethos to be emulated. The conclusion is drawn that Christians can learn from *stokvels* and *koinonia* that unity is strength; and that human miseries, especially of poverty, can be addressed through generous sharing.

Keywords: *Stokvel, Koinonia,* Community, Sharing, Membership, Contribution

Introduction

Throughout the world, communities engage various forms of rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs). These associations are self-help money-pooling

schemes with participants committing to make regular contributions to a central fund for the benefit of participants on rotational basis (Ardener and Burman 1995). Here in South Africa, a common word is *stokvel.* It is a common practice in all African communities, whether in townships, villages, or even suburbs. Researchers agree that *stokvels* are formed mostly by black South Africans in the South African municipalities, cities, townships, and villages (African Response Research 2012; Matuku & Kaseke 2014). This article elaborates the concepts of a *stokvel* and *koinonia* as initiatives geared towards upliftment of morales, ethics, community building, and poverty reduction. Through a literature study*, stokvel* and *koinonia* are studied, analysed, and compared. The bottom line is that quality of life can be enhanced by *stokvels* and *koinonia,* as both demonstrate togetherness and cooperation. Acts 2.42-47 is used as a textual base for *koinonia* and its theological implications in South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid is still rampant.

Stokvel Defined

Stokvel is not an African term but is derived from the stock fairs, a colonial import from the nineteenth century when the Eastern Cape English settlers rotated cattle auctions. The concept evolved to become a common community-based saving group whereby each person puts a set amount regularly (Van Wyk 2017: 16) to distribute to members equitably or as per individual's contributions or dividends. It is better described by Iwara and Netshandama (2021:2): "*Stokvel* provides platforms where a network of community members with common goals agree to contribute a certain premium, which makes a lump sum to actualize their shared vision."

A common feature of *stokvel* is that it is an invitation-only club of a predetermined number of members serving as a rotating credit union or saving scheme. The membership is predetermined, and it can be for family, clan, neighbourhood, church members, friends, or colleagues who aim towards benefitting from the power of saving together towards a common goal. Bophela (2022: 459) points out that "*stokvels* are made up of individuals or members who have certain goals and ambitions that need to be fulfilled – and those are drivers for their individualistic motivation to be part of a *stokvel*." The goal can be for groceries, normally shared around festive season, or an event such as weddings, birthdays, funerals, etc. (Bophela and Khumalo 2022: 347). Each *stokvel* has its own goal, and depending on the goals, the members can use the collected funds for their own use, for payment or investment purposes, or for paying children's school fees. Other goals include building a house, buying a car, starting a new business, etc.

It is common on Saturday or Sunday afternoons to see a group of people seated under trees in the suburbs, gathering in the household or meeting in a school classroom or church building as a *stokvel* meeting. Around the festive season, one sees

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packages of groceries under trees where members come to collect prior to going home, usually to their homelands for Christmas festivities. There are reasons for these regular meetings, such as updates on the cash flow and a reminder of what each member will gain when his or her turn comes. Another reason is highlighted by Iwara, Adeola, and Netshandama (2021: 8): "Members meet to agree on norms and regulations that should govern their operations, such as a penalty for lateness and disciplinary measures for other forms of disorderliness." One needs to bear in mind that *stokvels* are voluntary organizations, associations, or charters.

Benefits of *Stokvels*

For years, *stokvels* have continued to contribute towards poverty reduction and economic inequality in communities. African communities, especially women, were historically and culturally denied participation in economic activities such as banking and saving. According to Van Wyk (2017:15), these women "share their fears, dreams, and challenges by venturing into *stokvels* as an economically empowering activity and to eradicate poverty in their respective communities." *Stokvels* play "a major role in addressing the poverty, inequality, and inclusive growth" (African Response Research 2012; Bophela and Khumalo 2019: 27). It is a means and a platform for people to save and invest their money in a collective and mutually beneficial way. *Stokvels* can indeed "make investments that would create a network infrastructure that can service their members and communities, thereby addressing widespread socio-economic problems" (Bophela 2022: 468).

Since *stokvels* are community-based initiatives, they play a role in social cohesion and psychological support in times of need. They enable their

> *… members to have insurance against adversity such as death, equipping them with the financial support to fund various other functions agreed upon by the stokvel group as a collective, extending loans to needy members (inter alia for education, towards physiological needs such as housing, grocery shopping and business endeavours). (African Response Research 2012: 2)*

Although *stokvels* are often anchored in income generation, their environments promote kinship ties amongst individuals and help towards a cohesive society. When people were economically marginalized, creativity kicked in for self-emancipation from the clutches of poverty. "According to early nineteenth century anecdotal sentiments on the part of elders, *stokvels* are very common as part of the daily social and economic activities in African communities" (Van Wyk 2017: 15). *Stokvels* indeed play a socializing role in the community. The regular gatherings of members

> *... help to promote the sharing of their problems as well as their hopes, dreams, and fears. In this way a sense of self and belonging develops, which acts as a form of social security. The group is always there for each member during times of trouble, such as when a family member passes away or money is needed for emergencies such as children's school fees. (Van Wyk 2017: 18).*

Stokvels enhance community bonding since they are built on trust between friends, colleagues, families, clans, etc. Members become intimate, knowing each other better and committing to the success of the group. There is a sense of community and support since members work together towards a common goal. *Stokvels* serve communities with opportunities to socialize and build cohesiveness in the community. This is also confirmed by Bophela and Khumalo (2022: 348), who write that the primary objectives of *stokvels* are "to save money, socialise and network and to loan funds to members". *Stokvels* possess the capacity to create social capital, moral support, and mutual assistance (Arko-Achemfuor 2012; Mashingo and Schoeman 2012; Matuku and Kaseke 2014; African Response Research 2012). In a similar vein, Van Wyk discovered that there is a "specific unique Afrocentric ubuntu issues such as trust, respect, honesty, and social support as the overarching identity of their s*tokvels* – all of which were virtues dear to their hearts and that form social 'glue'" (2017: 19). *Stokvels* create a sense of belonging and hope to people who experience economic marginalization and social discrimination.

> *A stokvel member, therefore, acquires a particular social identity as a result of being at one with the stokvel group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. This "social identity" of stokvels is coined by scholars as the "DNA of township" – as a sense of belonging among black people toward a socially and economically just community. (Van Wyk 2017: 19)*

This same idea of *stokvel* as a platform of social identity is expressed by scholars such as Ramose (2002) and Mabovula (2011). They agree that *stokvels* promote accountability and trust. The smooth administration of the *stokvel* is based on trust in those who collect the money and manage it. Their accountability is measured by the members' fair share and fair distribution to beneficiaries. Members' and leaders' trustworthiness are marked by fewer defaults on contributions, good management of finances, and the reputation earned by keeping reliable financial records (Moodley 2008). The same notion is captured by various scholars, including Iwara and Netshandama (2021), who point out: "Trust is a prime factor in a *stokvel*, as this is required for its smooth running. Membership into a *stokvel* group is based on trust; in other words, all members would have undergone a background check to earn the trust." There is no expectation of defaulting, as this will tarnish the defaulter's integrity

in the community. "Members are also socialised into the qualities of trustworthiness and honesty by the *stokvels* since participation is voluntary" (Van Wyk 2017: 18; cf. Lukhele 1990; Moodley 2008; Norton 2000). Many researchers agree that the successes of *stokvels* are based on mutual trust and a sense of loyalty.

Koinonia in Acts 2.42-47

One common expression of Christian fellowship is a Greek word *koinonia.* It is defined as "a relationship between people who share something in common" (Flanagan 2011:45). The first appearance of *koinonia* in the New Testament appears in Acts 2.42. It is observed that the Apostle Paul uses *koinonia* differently in 2 Corinthians 9.13 where he states: "They will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution *(koinonia)* for them and for all others." To the church in Philippi, the Apostle used *koinonia,* saying "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share *(koinonia)* his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3.10).

Biblically, it carries a notion of some deep sense of connection and unity among believers, with a strong emphasis on shared faith and mutual support (Acts 2.42). It is a communion, a bond uniting Christians with each other with Jesus Christ as a uniting thread. Furthermore, *koinonia* speaks of group cohesiveness among the people of faith. According to Bromiley (1995: 751), *koinonia* carries the notion of common life in general as depicted in Acts 2.42, a communion between particular groups, the most remarkable instance of which was that between Jews and Gentiles, communion in the Body and Blood of Christ; and sharing in divine revelation and with God himself (1 Jn 1.1-7). *Koinonia* is a deep spiritual connection and mutual sharing, underscoring unity and interdependence within the body of Christ.

The concept of *koinonia* emphasizes the importance of shared faith practices and mutual support systems within the Christian community, as exemplified in Acts 2.42-47. It emphasizes both vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationships within the believing community (1 Jn 1.3). It is on this basis that the term "communion" arises, derived from Latin, *communio*, meaning sharing in common, hence *koinonia* compared with *stokvel* in this article.

A Christian *koinonia* is a community and is like a social club where society benefits either formally or informally as a fraternal organization. It is both a platform and an opportunity where Christians worship, pray, learn, cooperate, volunteer, socialize, and associate with each other on the basis of their shared Christian faith. Acts 2.42-47 reveals that *koinonia* was characterized by generosity and serving one another out of love.

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Koinonia was demonstrated in the early church through shared resources and communal living. Hence, *koinonia* embodies both divine intimacy and communal solidarity. This promoted spiritual growth, social equity, and community cohesion.

Benefits of *Koinonia*

There is no doubt that *koinonia* provides *mutual support systems*. The sharing of resources, encouragement, and burdens is expressive of theological imperative of love for one another by bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6.2). This was the ethos of the early church, whereby believers held all things in common *(panta koina)* and distributed aid based on need (Acts 4.32). This theological imperative is rooted in the Body of Christ metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12.12-27 where each member's welfare impacts the whole. These support systems are not just the charitable expressions, but also essential expressions of *ecclesial* unity and the divine love, where there is "sharing equally in the good things of the one people of God, 'life, love and truth'" (Lawler and Shanahan 1995:12; *Lumen Gentium* 9).

The second benefit of *koinonia* includes *sharing* and *generosity*. Acts 2.44-45 speaks of *koinonia*, a context of sharing and generosity exemplified through believers' community, who held all things in common. The principle seen here is the African philosophy of *ubuntu* or *botho*, which is what is yours is mine and what is mine is yours (Lephoko 2025:5), and it places an emphasis on being human through other people (Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013: 82; Mbiti 1969: 108, Manyonganise 2015). As a community, we are the common owners of possessions. This is the theological foundation emphasizing communal stewardship of resources, *agape* love par excellence, which is a core principle of Christian ethics. It becomes clear, then, that the *koinonia* is the community of interdependence where social equity and cohesion are mutually experienced. The prevailing culture of generosity in the early church reached both materials needs and strengthened spiritual bonds, incarnating the sacrificial love of Christ, displaying the demonstrative power of genuine Christian fellowship.

This sharing and generosity carry the third benefit of *koinonia*, which is caring. "Caring for others is a Christian characteristic expressed through charitable service to those in need; yet, it also needs to be expressed through mutual care between every believer" (Roeland, Breed and Denton 2025: 1). *Koinonia*, as interwoven relationships, observes and identifies members who are in need and provides mutual care by blessing them with material needs, and through words of encouragement (Heb. 10:24-25). *Koinonia,* as a family of God, provides care for each other through *diakonia* (service) to enhance the health of its members (Roeland, Breed, and Denton 2025: 2). In reality, mutual care facilitates restoration and healing through the interaction of koinonia and diakonia, where the family senses emotional intimacy and

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physical support. Furthermore, “Mutual care between members of a family is based on dependence, loyalty, love, compassion, and trust” (Roeland, Breed, and Denton 2024: 7). This mutual care should be visible within koinonia, reflecting love, care, and compassion to one another. It is a witness to the world, for “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

The fourth benefit of *koinonia* is that it offers *partnership in ministry*. One of the central axioms of *koinonia* is partnership in the Holy Spirit (Minear 1975: 138) and also with one another. This eliminates loneliness where a person struggles in life and ends in desolation. *Koinonia* is partnership characterized by mutual support, shared mission, and communal responsibility. *Koinonia* is partnership for effective ministry. That is why the Apostle Paul frequently acknowledges the indispensable role of co-workers, illustrating *koinonia* as essential for effective ministry for mutual support (Gal. 6.2), shared mission (1 Cor. 3.9) and communal responsibility (Rom. 15.1). Bromiley (1988: 447) explains *koinonia* as *koinos*, meaning ownership in a sense of what concerns all, such as monies, societies, problem resolutions etc. *Koinonia* in ministry underscores a collective endeavour grounded in theological and biblical foundations. The central message of partnership in ministry, as demonstrated by *koinonia,* is that “Together We Can.”

Fifthly, *koinonia* promotes and is manifested *as unity in diversity*. This is expressed by the metaphor of the Body of Christ, which is composed of many members with varying gifts and backgrounds, yet functions harmoniously, synergistically, and symbiotically to bring glory to God (1 Cor. 12.12-14). Members of *koinonia* are many, yet they form one body, unified in Christ. This is a theological principle that diversity is not merely tolerated but is essential for church’s missional mandate in the world that is proliferated with numerous ideologies, heresies, and doctrinal divergences. Though diverse in composition, *koinonia* continues to remain united in Christ with inspired sense of mission. Individual members contribute to the livelihood of *koinonia* in a unique way, therefore enriching the communal life and the missionality of the church. The beauty of unity in diversity is the reflection of *perichoretical* nature of God, the Trinitarian God who is one essence in three distinct persons, yet united as a community, the God who wills unity because “God is a *koinonia* of love, the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Flanagan 2011: 29). Therefore, *koinonia* fosters a collective identity that transcends individual differences, since it reflects the divine nature of the Trinity which includes unity, self-giving love and relational harmony.

Finally, *koinonia* is a platform for the distribution of *charismata. Charismata* (spiritual gifts) are “a unique capacity given by the Holy Spirit to each believer for service in connection with the church in order that the church may progress quantitatively, qualitatively, and organically” (Clinton 1975: 13). According to 1 Corinthians 12.4-7 these gifts serve as integral components in the practice of *koinonia*, facilitating the edification and mutual support among believers. They are diverse in nature yet

unified in purpose, which is for the glorification of God and the empowerment of the church, resulting in the spiritual growth and harmony within a *koinonia*. The gifts are the communal fabric of *koinonia*, demonstrating the reality of interdependence whereby members rely on each other's gifts, fostering mutual dependence (Rom. 12.7). Through *charismata*, members receive freedom, equality, and joy 'to perform activities in the fields of proclamation, liturgy, and diacony' (Ven 1996: 93).

Koinonia possesses a radical dialogical nature that transcends ordinary association and calls for sacrificial living and mutual support within the faith community. Nobody lives for himself as *koinonia* is characterized by "openness, equality, and reciprocity of the relations of the community and their extensiveness, closeness and depth" (Ven 1996: 93). Togetherness, coherence, unity, harmony, and cooperation are all expected noticeable characteristics *of koinonia.*

Common Features Between the *Stokvel* and *Koinonia*

African societies have traditionally been characterized by communitarian forms of social organization. They are gregarious, resilient, libertarian, and egalitarian. They seek creative ways to escape from eccentric circumstances. *Stokvel* is one of the ways of coping mechanisms in economically unwelcoming contexts. On the other hand, Christians as the community of hope are a *koinonia* that sustains itself amid hopelessness and adversities. They remain resilient and continue their mission regardless of hardships. *Stokvel* and *koinonia* are comrades in arms, and the two work as a symbiosis for community survival.

Both the *stokvel* and *koinonia* are the *voluntary affiliations*. Members are not coerced or constrained. People are invited to join and voluntarily do so. In a *stokvel,* stipulations on membership compositions are defined, just as much as in *koinonia,* faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a steppingstone towards membership. Members of a *stokvel* subject themselves voluntarily to their *stokvel's* constitution and bye-laws. In the same way, Christians voluntarily submit themselves to the apostles' doctrine or biblical teachings. People join a *stokvel* or a *koinonia* at their own risk and by their own volition.

Volunteerism carries the notion of trust and sense of community. It is interconnected with service out of goodwill, expecting nothing in return as a compensation. It is a dialectical process that involves both self and society. A volunteer contributes treasure, time, or talent for both self-benefit and community (those served) upliftment. In a s*tokvel*, it can be clearly discerned that a member receives emancipation from economic slavery by receiving dividends as per a *stokvel's* terms of agreement. The same applies to *koinonia,* where members contribute liberally or voluntarily as a way of investing in God's Kingdom, resulting in some indescribable manifolds of blessings. When it is said one must give and will be blessed, the form of blessing is never described or prescribed, but it comes in diverse ways that may not

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be recognizable. Sharing voluntarily is one of the ways *koinonia* worships the living God. This is echoed by Ryken (2001:70-71):

> *When Christians come together in a sacred assembly, when they are united together in their love for one another, when they are at one in their faith, and when they share their spiritual and material goods with one another, the God is worshipped in Spirit and in truth. The New Testament word koinonia encompasses all of this.*

Koinonia is, therefore, not just acts of charity but an experience of love through worship. The voluntary coming together is a platform for experiencing God's love and serving God's glory.

Secondly, both the *stokvel* and *koinonia* contribute towards *poverty reduction and economic inequalit*y in communities. Open membership in both associations is a common feature. Although *stokvel* may prescribe membership such as that of a family, clan, colleagues, etc., *koinonia's* open membership is open to anyone who exercises faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The *stokvel* brings the dividends into a basket to be shared equitably among the members, whilst in *koinonia* all believers meet and share with each other everything they have (Acts 2.44), and they share especially with those in need (Acts 2.45). In both associations, sharing for economic equity is a common practice, all testified to by the biblical injunction: *There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need* (Acts 4.34 NLT). Resane (2024: 180) highlights that "The profits from their property sales were distributed equally according to each person's needs." Well-managed *stokvels* reduce poverty as people enjoy the benefits of their partaking through regular contributions. In the early church, those with affluence knew that 'the lives of the saints stand out as a countercultural model of societal and planetary flourishing' (Augustine 2019: 21). They shared with those in need, so that there may not be hunger in the house of the Lord (Mal. 3.10). Aid for the needy is *koinonia's* expression of charity and it is life. Musoke (2018: 25) is correct that "Life is mutual aid". Through united cooperation, poverty becomes an easy target to tackle. This act of poverty reduction from within glued the community into a close-knit that, in their togetherness, fights the common enemy, which in their case was poverty.

Thirdly, both the *stokvel* and *koinonia* value *coming together*. The regular meetings create and develop strong bonds. Members become intimate with each other as they start to know each other better and see how to help each other. *Stokvels* meet regularly for reporting purposes and for fellowship. *Koinonia* sees that they are united, joined for the same purpose, task, and results. They are united in the same community and engaged in the same tasks. Regular meeting together is beneficial for strengthening each other, encouraging, and imparting knowledge or skills for life challenges. The inner cohesion and interaction mark *koinonia*, hence the work

of edification *(oikodomé*). According to Minear (1975: 164), “What edifies the church builds the church … Whatever edifies the brother does far more than improve his moral behaviour; it strengthens him in his position in this structured society.” Barnes (1979: 57) points to the fact that “they are united in feelings, in interests, in dangers, in conflicts, in opinions, and in the hope of a blessed immortality”. This is demonstrated when *stokvels* appear with their charitable acts of sharing during the times of bereavements or times of joys such as birthdays, dedication of the new house built by *stokvel* money, or celebrating a successful business venture that was kick-started by *stokvel* contributions. The same applies to *koinonia* as the fellowship that presents itself during the times of grief and celebrations of achievements, such as birthdays, graduations, or a new house dedication. Resane (2024: 173) supports this: “*Koinonia* is a fellowship, not just for togetherness *(homothumadon*), but includes eating together, which has become an essence of Christian life in the newly formed community.” As per Augustine (2019: 21), *koinonia* sees members through the eyes of the crucified Christ, which is

> *paying attention to the immediate, instant physicality of the suffering other – of his or her dehumanising poverty and ecological depravation, political oppression and marginalisation, crippling sickness, effacing loneliness, and frail mortality.*

Coming together gives *stokvels* and *koinonia* some sense of fulfilment. It is not just coming together but a platform for sharing and participation, as captured by Healey and Sybertz (2021: 129), that “Africans feel strongly that people are called especially to a life of community, participation, and sharing. God reveals himself in and through the community.”

Fourthly, both the *stokvel* and *koinonia* demonstrate the principle of *unity in diversity*. There is a strong element of cooperation, togetherness, and synergy in both entities. Members of a *stokvel* and of *koinonia* are humans who are different. They are widely diversified but can work together in unity. Their unity, though diversified, presents and promotes a lesson of tolerance, love, and loving confrontation. This aligns with “Together We Can”. This is attested by Resane (2023: 7): *koinonia* is a “community that coherently lives together with the trinitarian God, expressing its identity through doctrine, prayer, eucharist, sharing, and embracing each other indiscriminately.”

Finally, both a s*tokvel* and *koinonia* run based on *trust and accountability*. *Stokvel* office bearers, especially the treasurer is entrusted with members’ funds and is expected to be accountable, honest, and precise with money management. *Koinonia* is the reflection of stewardship. All members are expected to be accountable to any ministry allocated to them. They should be trustworthy and be transparent on their ministry tasks. Based on this, it is legitimate to run a *stokvel* out of the church as

another channel of human empowerment. Some *stokvels* are church-based or religiously inclined. Trust and accountability are theological ethics that enhance transparency and build confidence horizontally, i.e. between and among humans.

Contributions of *Stokvel* and *Koinonia*

This article is interdisciplinary since it engages sociology, history, and theology. It shows the invaluable role of community-initiated income-generating systems such as *stokvel.* This *stokvel* is compared with *koinonia,* which also plays a major role in poverty reduction and enhances the ethics of trust and accountability. The article fills an important reflective space between the academy on the ground and on-the-ground practice within the field of ecclesiology and economy, especially in the South African social context that continues to unshackle itself from the apartheid legacy. The contents of this article prove beyond any shadow of doubt that "it is possible to 'interface' the academia and the community without compromising academic sharpness" (Speckman 2007: 53). The *stokvel* as a social entity does not compromise *koinonia* as a spiritual dynamism. The two are in synergy for both vertical and horizontal relationships of humanity in cosmos (God–human–creation relationship). The community-based or community-driven initiatives do not always compromise the academic and spirit-driven goals. Speckman (2007: 53–54) is correct that "The *pro bono pro publica* principle means that the work must be of value to the public while at the same time, its academic *bona fides* are not to be doubted." In this case, "the work must be of value to the public" can refer to a *stokvel*, and academic *bona fides* is a spiritual application (*koinoni*a).

This work of value to the public (initiatives of self-supporting) was marginalized by the missionary churches in partnership with colonialists. The system encouraged a dependency syndrome where indigenous churches were robbed of self-sustenance and self- supporting initiatives. The education system used by missionaries was a tool of eradication of African values such as *botho/ubuntu*, *letsema* (collective efforts or community cooperation to uplift the underprivileged), etc. Nkomazana and Setume (2016: 48) bemoan this *status quo* promoted by missionary education:

> *It was used to spread western social, cultural and economic value systems. It favoured western values and completely rejected the African cultural environment and cultural values. It failed to appreciate any culture other than its own western culture, which was considered superior and of a higher level of civilisation.*

This indoctrination could not go further as Africans became resilient and creative in how to survive in the space where their values of togetherness and carrying each other's burdens were declared null and void. Economic initiatives from the

communities, such as *stokvel*, empowered by Christian *koinonia,* play a crucial role in closing that gap. This symbiotic approach yields some visible social progress indicators, such as changing social attitudes and improved social practices (Yamamori 1993: 130). The local churches, especially in the economically marginalized communities, are creatively becoming self-supporting through the *stokvels,* as they start to believe in themselves and that they can make their church life viable. This is expressed by Thiani (2016: 1104) that "Raising funds through locally accepted African ethics such as the ethics of *ubuntu* (fraternity) and of *harambee* (solidarity) could offer the African Church even greater financial stability." *Stokvels* are socially accepted as culturally relevant community-initiated means of raising funds, therefore, accepted by many churches. Through *stokvels*, these churches engage in what development theorists call "People Centred Development" which is defined by Korten (1990: 67) as "a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilise and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations".

This is loaded with notions of self-capabilities that emanate from below. It speaks of People Centred Development where communities or groups of people take initiatives for self-empowerment towards self-emancipation from dependency syndrome. There is an element of ownership, self-supporting, and the goal towards quality of life. Furthermore, one observes the presence of creative thinking, mobilisation of resources, production, sound management, and, of course, equitable distribution for the beneficiaries who are both the producers and consumers. All these are actualized in or through *stokvels* and *koinonia*. In both production and consumption occur, though for different purposes. With a *stokvel,* production is for economic sustainability in the present life, while for koinonia*,* production is for eschatological realisation by exercising faith in the Lord Jesus, not only for present life, also for eternal life. With a *stokvel*, consumption is at the end of the term when production (contribution) is done, while with *koinonia*, consumption is realised immediately after taking a step of faith. Life becomes new and quality of life experienced immediately as an ongoing joy (2 Cor. 5.17).

Koinonia can always be indigenized in order to become culturally relevant, so we can learn from the *stokvel,* and this can be a two-way learning process. A seasoned missionary to Africa, Wilbur O'Donovan (2000: 131) points to the importance of the African church reflecting the African community by stating that "The beauty of God's plan for the local church in Africa is that it fits the core values of community in Africa. Giving or working together as a community to accomplish a goal is popular even in the non-Christian African community." Here, one can see how the *stokvel* and the local church can cooperate, even if the *stokvel* may be regarded as secular or non-Christian and *koinonia* deemed spiritual. The two can enrich African Christianity

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if they synchronise their methodologies, strategies, and tasks. Planting and leading the church in South Africa will benefit enormously if the members' creativity is taken into consideration. A *stokvel* is not just a programme or a project. It is a people-driven creativity to reduce poverty. If its methods are employed in the church, there will be no poor church in South Africa.

Conclusion

Christians can learn from *stokvels* that unity is strength; and that human miseries, especially of poverty, can be addressed through generous sharing. It has been demonstrated in this article that s*tokvel* and *koinonia* are the two entities that contribute towards human empowerment in some significant ways. Both entities show that humans are creative to devise some survival mechanisms from devastating human perils. While one is secular *(stokvel),* the other is theological *(koinonia),* and the two can walk synergistically for better human development and survival. The two agencies draw a balance between vertical *(koinonia)* and horizontal *(stokvel)* relationships in agreement with Millar and Harold (2023: 2), where humanity functions in its unique design as the *Imago Dei*. The two in partnership contribute towards development of local skills without the help of external agencies, since they are culturally designed and directed, using creative skills from the communities themselves. People can interact, using *stokvel* and *koinonia* as platforms where dialogues can shape lives. Both the *stokvel* and *koinonia* are the living organisms, flourishing with vitality that makes life manageable. *Stokvels* are cultural traits and are here to stay. *Koinonia* is a spiritual reality living within a Christian culture. Both can dialogue and interact to address human miseries in an unfavourable economic climate. The two entities can cooperate to address poverty, enhance humanness *(botho/ubuntu),* learn deeper ethics of human relations, and demonstrate to the world that unity within diversity is possible. I conclude by echoing Thiani's (2016: 1104) allusion to Stan Chu's highlighting that "A person of *ubuntu* and *harambee*, therefore, is one who shares, participates, and who thinks of the well-being and growth of the community, and in this way, the spiritual community: the church." From this highlight, one sees the synergy between a *stokvel* and a *koinonia* – the two intertwine, working towards human development both economically and spiritually.

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ARTICLE

Burial Sites, Growing Flocks: Rethinking Cemetery Ministry for Church Growth

Kwaku Boamah

Abstract

For centuries, the need for accommodation has not just been a problem of the living but also the dead. This study examines how Christian burial practices and church-owned cemeteries in Ghana function not only as cultural rites but also as deliberate tools for mission and church growth. It is imperative to explore *how burial practices among Ghanaian Christians could contribute to church expansion, discipleship, and communal identity.* Employing historical analysis of early Christian funerary engagements and ethnographic data from selected Methodist Church Ghana cemeteries, the paper assesses how burial rites met African cultural hopes of being "buried among one's people" while concurrently strengthening Christian identity. Influenced by Reception Theory, Ritual Re-embedding, and Missional Ecclesiology, the study evaluates how inherited Christian burial practices can be re-explained within African philosophy to reach the church's mission. The study shows that well-managed church cemeteries could provide pastoral care, attract new members, or encourage the return of members. The paper concludes that burial ceremonies are not simply welfare services but a missiological touchpoint that nurtures community identity, discipleship, and sustainable church growth. Churches that deliberately include funerary care with pastoral care can transform mourning into mission, consolidating both faith and membership.

Keywords: Burial, Mission, Catacombs, Cemeteries, Church growth

Introduction

The question of accommodation is not confined to the living but also extends to the dead. Churches with dedicated cemeteries and well-structured funeral services, therefore, often appeal to some individuals seeking assurance of a more organized burial arrangement and a serene burial site. Consequently, burial rites can serve not only as a reflection of faith but also as a critical factor influencing church membership and fostering growth. In some indigenous contexts, like Ghana, Christian converts

often feel a strong need to undergo such indigenous rites to mark their transitions. In this light, the church in Ghana finds it equally necessary to design alternative rituals for its members to fill the vacuum and not be left out of these cultural practices, which are indeed symbols of identity. Christians in Ghana are very concerned about commemorating the various stages of their lives as a mark of their religious self-identity, which is difficult to overlook in their acceptance of the Christian faith. The church in Africa, therefore, in its bid to provide an alternative to these practices, has devised new ways of addressing this existential identity of African Christians without compromising the values of the Christian faith. Since one of life`s most important transitions is death and burial, the indigenous African has an expectation to be buried amongst his people upon his demise. This expectation seems to have found its way into Ghanaian Christianity, where the person who is dying expects to be buried (sleep) amongst Christians or, at the very least, given a Christian burial.

The Early Church gave attention to the dead and the bereaved family. *Scientific American* (1888) argues that although they did not even have places of worship, they had their secret places of burial, called catacombs, which they sometimes used as worship sites during the pre-Constantinian period. Stark (1997: 82) observed that Christianity, with its approach of care, significantly shifted them from a marginal sect to a dominant religious organization in the Roman Empire, writing, “Christians nursed the sick and buried the dead.” The first Christians handled the dead with utmost care, offering honourable burials which attracted non-Christians (Brown 1981: 5–6; Jensen 2005: 56–9). The Christians gained a lot of admiration from the public due to how well they prepared the corpse for burial, to the extent that, according to Wilken (2003), Pliny the Younger thought of Christianity as a funerary club and not a faith organization. The Christian attention to the dead and burial preparations won the hearts of many non-Christians in the Roman Empire to the Christian faith.

In some Ghanaian contexts, church cemeteries are seen as better managed than public ones, offering dignity and spiritual rest, due to regular communal care. Burial practices, notwithstanding, differ across denominations. While many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches do not conduct burials in their churches. Historic Mainline Churches[1] commonly hold funeral services in their chapels. Church-owned cemeteries are also more visible in rural contexts than in urban contexts. Therefore, this paper aims to contrast the African indigenous concept of the “hereafter”, which

1 Historic Mainline Churches is intentionally used here to emphasize theologically and historically rooted identity of older mission-established churches in Africa (e.g., Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Catholic). This conceptual distinction is supported by recent scholarship, which calls for African mainline churches to reclaim their historic theological identity and not be reduced to sociological labels (Mokhutso 2025). The modifier Historic signals the retrieval of theological depth and continuity within African mainline Christianity.

influences funeral and burial practices, with the Christian apocalypse philosophies. These worldviews and practices help explain why and how cemeteries serve as evangelistic tools, especially in indigenous cultures. The paper examines the example of the early church to demonstrate how its funerary and burial practices attracted non-Christians to the faith. Boamah (2022) has suggested that the Christian shift from *superstitio* to *religio* by the fourth century was driven by their focus on the dead, rooted in an apocalyptic theme linked to their belief in the church militant and triumphant. The examples from the Early Church underscore the historical importance of funerary and burial rites in making Christianity appealing to non-Christians. Additionally, the paper evaluates the role of cemeteries in the modern African church in evangelization and discipleship. For this, two cemeteries owned by the Methodist Church Ghana in the capital are assessed to understand their impact on the church. Qualitative data are collected and analysed to evaluate how effectively these cemeteries help draw members to the church and the extent to which they benefit the church overall. This paper uses historical-ethnographic approaches to explore the longue durée of Christian funerary rites and their modern reawakening in Ghanaian Christian ministry. Historical sources (primary archaeological and patristic accounts and secondary scholarship on catacombs and cemetery development) are examined to understand how the Early Church increased its membership through its care for the dead. Ethnographic fieldwork was done at two Methodist Church Ghana cemeteries in Accra using purposive sampling: semi-structured interviews with twelve key informants (funeral-committee members, clergy, and long-standing congregants with the approval of the church), participant observation of two funerary events, interviews, and a review of church records and cemetery management documents.[2] Data were thematically analysed across sources. Trustworthiness was sought through prolonged engagement, respondent validation of key themes, and transparent acknowledgment of limitations.

The study draws on Reception Theory, Ritual Re-embedding, and Missional Ecclesiology to evaluate how Christian burial rites demonstrate both historical continuity and modern innovation. Reception Theory allows exploration of how early Christian burial practices, influenced by Roman socio-religious experiences, are reinterpreted within African contexts. It helps examine how such rites have been recontextualized into contemporary Ghanaian Christianity (Jauss 1982: 21–2) and how they serve as

2 Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ghana, specifically from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology. Permission was also sought from the leadership of the respective churches from which participants were recruited. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. Furthermore, in the presentation of the paper, respondents' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

strategic expressions of Missional Ecclesiology, strengthening community bonds and fostering church growth (Bosch 1991: 373–6; Newbigin 1989: 222–5). As Brown (1981: 88–91) suggests, the past gains significance when it is reshaped by new communities based on their needs and contexts. This ritual re-embedding explores how rituals like funerals and burial rites are adapted to fit new cultural settings (Grimes, 2014: 119–21). In Ghana, Christian burial rites are integrated into communal frameworks that blend indigenous worldviews with Christian theological forms, making them tools for missional outreach. Magezi and Magezi (2023: 6–9), from a South African pastoral care perspective, emphasize that contextualized rituals play a vital role in faith transmission and identity building. The Missional Ecclesiology approach views the Church's daily practices as strategies aligned with God's mission (Bosch 1991: 373–6). Consequently, burial rites function not only as acts of care but also as missional opportunities for public theology, evangelism, and community engagement. Maluleke (2020: 52) affirms that African churches should leverage their cultural practices for witness within a multicultural environment. These three frameworks of Reception Theory, Ritual Re-embedding, and Missional Ecclesiology collectively provide a foundation for the study by analysing modern burial rites through the lens of early Christian funeral traditions and examining how these ceremonies operate as intentional missional strategies within Ghanaian church life. They affirm that burial rites in Ghanaian Christianity are more than ceremonial obligations – they are historically rooted, socially embedded, and theologically strategic tools for church growth and spiritual development.

The African Indigenous Concept of the Hereafter and Burial

Generally, the African indigenous worldview and many Christian traditions agree that life does not end at death (Mbiti 1969: 24–8, 151–60; Okwu 1979; Wright, 2003: 31–46, 129–206). Some indigenous Africans hold a perspective on the philosophy of life that views life as cyclical, rather than linear, where the spiritual and physical planes of reality are fundamentally two sides of the same coin. For example, the soul, also known as "the seed of the creator" (Okwu 1979: 22), is thus thought to exist in conscious, physical, and integrated connection with the material body during human life on earth. Dancy and Davis (2006) maintain that the African understanding of death is a bodily separation of the person from other individuals. They observe that to highlight this lasting separation, funeral customs and rituals are performed with great care to ensure that no disrespect is shown to the deceased.

In the primal African worldview, death is the final rite of passage that every person must experience. Ancestral reverence or "ancestor worship" (Dancy and Davis 2006: 192) is motivated by the concept that there is a spiritual plane of existence that is unobserved, unexplored, and unreachable to humans. The members

of the supernatural realm are seen as essential components of the material world. According to Mbiti (1969: 25), even the terminology used to discuss death and dying in different parts of the continent frequently suggests a kind of homegoing for the deceased. This is also supported by several traditions and rituals that are observed during funerals. Mbiti unequivocally insists, "the departed are not dead; they are alive". For instance, the Akans and Yorubas historically place personal or household items with the deceased as symbols of continuity beyond death (Mbiti 1969: 151–4). Mbiti (1969: 36) suggested that "death is death and the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from mankind to spirithood" and placed a stress on the cyclical nature of life, which involves birth, puberty, marriage, reproduction, old age, death, and then rebirth, seeing the ancestors as deceased progenitors. Ekore and Lanre-Abass (2016) agree that becoming an ancestor after death is a desire shared by all people, and it is thought that this cannot be accomplished if a person did not live a meaningful life or if his or her life was cut short, as in the case of an accident or an unnatural death. Dovlo (1993: 50) wrote that

> *Salvation also consists of joining the ancestors after death. The ancestors form a community and inclusion in that community implies salvation. In this ancestral community, individual human identity is not fully lost but through becoming part of the community, one's identity is, in a sense, preserved.*

The African worldview holds that ancestors have lived through various experiences and have now become examples for the living. At death, they take on a different role as intermediaries between the living and the deities or even the Supreme Being. They make ethical proposals that become standards for living. Like the divinities, the ancestors have the power to punish or reward. Not just anyone can be an ancestor; the person should have lived a good and exemplary life, had children, died a good death, and been buried properly. Richard Werbner (2004: 139) noted that "ancestors become key players that influence the living".

Ancestors as Living

A basic notion for the Ga and Akan tribes of Ghana is that funerals are important. Like many other African tribes, there is the belief that you should be buried amongst his/her people. There is a Ga adage that says: "*Shikpɔŋ kwaaa gbonyo*"; that `the earth does not reject a corpse`, while the Akans also maintain "*Asaase nkye funu*", suggesting that no land will reject a corpse. The two adages argue that one can be buried anywhere since Mother Earth does not discriminate when it comes to dead bodies. That notwithstanding, the Akans have an adage that implies "when birds die, their feathers are not buried in space", indicating that no matter where a person is, when he/she dies, the corpse must be brought "home" to lie with his /her ancestors. This is why people can

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live in other cities or countries for decades, yet when they die, regardless of cost, their family members will yearn to carry their bodies back to their homeland for burial. A biblical example of this trend was that when Joseph was about to die, he made his children swear to him that they would carry his bones with them when they went to the promised land. So as the children of Israel moved across the desert, they carried the bones of Joseph along with them and laid them to final rest in the Promised Land.

Among some cultures, even if the body cannot be brought back, they shave the hair, cut the nails, and carry it in a matchbox (because it looks like a casket). The hair and nails are brought to the hometown of the deceased, where some burial rites are performed as though it were the whole body. The belief is that as the hair and nails are brought back, the spirit is laid to rest amongst his/her people. According to oral tradition, as also captured by Rattray (1927: 189–90) of the Ashantis, Okomfo Anokye, the powerful priest, shaved the hair and nails of notable royals and used them in rituals to incorporate the spirits of the chiefs into the Golden Stool, thereby uniting the Ashanti groups under one polity.

Early Christianity as a Funerary Club

Brown (1981) argues in the early imperial period, cremation was a common Roman funerary practice, in which the body of the dead was burnt to ashes and deposited in a desired place. However, Yeomans (2008) suggests that around the mid-second century, the idea of burying the dead was already developing. It must be stressed that the Jews normally buried their dead, and these burial sites were normally at the outskirts of the town. These sites for burial became known as catacombs in the Roman Empire around this time. Yeomans (2008: 56) argues that the word "catacomb" was from the Greek *kata kymbas,* which means "by the hallows", which other scholars like BaheyEldin (2021) and Nicolai (2019) suggest refers to removing stones in a quarry to make it a hallowed pit. In later years, the Jews and Christians gave it a new meaning to imply a subterranean burial structure.

The Christian practice of funeral activities and burials dates back to when it emerged in the Roman environment. Given their care for those in need and desperate situations, the Christians seized every opportunity to show care to the general public, particularly in times of crisis and the death of a person. The way the Christians made time for the deceased and bereaved influenced Pliny the Younger to describe the Christians as a funerary club that gave their attention to the dead, according to Wilken (2003). Stark (1997) observed that Christians gave a great deal of attention to the dead, preparing the corpses even when their family members deserted them. Tlučková (2022) further shows that not only did the Christians show concern, but also supported the organization of the funeral and burial obligations for the dead. The show of concern was even felt in times of pandemics. Stark (1997: 82) maintained

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that at the time of the Antonina Plague, when many were dying, and hope was lost, Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, who was in exile, observed that the Christians "were infested by others with the diseases, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many in bursting and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead." This shows the height of Christian care for the sick to the extent of taking over the death of the sick. This then invariably provided evangelistic results where the families of such persons were receptive to the faith, influenced by the level of care offered to their relatives in dire moments. Stark (1997: 83) wrote that in comparison to the non-Christians, Dionysius remarked that "the heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them onto the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease." The Christians would not allow the corpse of a deceased to rot, but the non-Christians would leave the body unburied, thereby making the Christians attract the admiration of the general public to be part of this group of persons who believe in Christ.

In terms of burial, Nicolai (2019) and Beard, North, and Price (1998) argue that the Christians and Jews simply adopted what Gruen (2019: 201) described as an "inhumation" form of burial, which had just started in the mid-second century. It must be noted, however, that catacombs were not started originally by Christians or even the Jews, given that during the second century, the Romans themselves had started establishing some underground burial chambers which can be described as catacombs. Jews also used catacombs, and scholars today have identified about seven Jewish catacombs. Dunn (2015) argues that persecutions and martyrdoms built early Christian communal identity, including the adoption of secret burial spaces that established their identity and solidarity during times of marginalization. In an earlier work compiled by Antonio Bosio, Dunn (2015) identified about thirty subterranean galleries of Christian catacombs, and it is argued that over the years, forty more Christian catacombs have been found, showing the widespread nature and prominence of catacombs to Christian developments. Dunn (2015) argues that by the fourth century, the Christians had about a thousand-kilometre corridor of catacombs with space for about six million corpses.

> *To the casual observer, the Christian community in the cities of the Roman Empire appeared remarkably similar to religious associations such as the one described above or to a burial society such as the one at Lanuvium...To call Christianity a burial association was not a negative judgment. Indeed, such a characterisation helped people to place the Christian group within a familiar frame of reference and gave outsiders a sense of what went on in its meetings and what one could expect if one were to join. (Wilken 2003: 44–5)*

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This remark essentially emphasizes the character of early Christianity as an organization that gave attention to the dead and showed great levels of care for the needs of the destitute. Yeomans (2008) even argues that there may be other Christian catacombs that are undercovered because the Christians largely buried the martyrs in church places and hence gave attention to these places. The development of these catacombs was not widely known because other scholars, such as BaheyEldin (2021) and Beard, North, and Price (1998), maintain that some Christians developed such places, possibly in their homes, as secret places only known to them.

Four of these major catacombs, as observed by BaheyEldin (2021), Gruen (2019), and Nicolai (2019), have become places of tourist visitation in Rome, including San Sebastiano, San Callisto, the Catacomb of Domitilla, and the Catacomb of Priscilla. The development of these catacombs was before the edict of Milan by Emperor Constantine, which tolerated Christian presence in the Roman Empire; hence, the catacombs were in secret places before Constantine. However, from the period of the toleration of the Christians when it became a Roman religion into the fourth century, the Christians stopped using the catacombs and instead buried their members around the church compounds. However, Jensen (2013: 317) notes that "burial in the Roman catacombs continued well into the sixth century, long after Christianity had gained imperial acceptance". Yeomans (2008) contends that Christians started developing cemeteries and, around the twelfth century, are argued to have forgotten about the catacombs. The development of Christian involvement in funerals and burials has therefore been a developing part of Christian evolution from its inception.

The early church showed much care for the dead, sometimes at the peril of their own lives, through the development of catacombs to the establishment of cemeteries. The church today, therefore, should build on these developments. Given the African worldview on the dead and the hereafter, the church today must give considerable attention to funerals and burials of members. The story should not just end here, but the church must develop comprehensive and impactful structures to nurture members in faith, like the early church examples.

Mainline Churches and Burial

In terms of funerals and caring for the dead, the Historic Mainline Churches, for example, Presbyterians, have well-structured and laid-down regulations on how to handle such members. Upon the death of a member, the family of the deceased contacts the church for a suitable date, and the church becomes a major stakeholder in preparation for the burial.

Two examples illustrate some of the tensions around burial practices in Ghana today from the interviews. As a first example, the mother of a popular Ghanaian international charismatic preacher relayed during the interview his mother's request,

“Let me be buried by a Presbyterian minister.”[3] A request like this affirms her worldview. This is crucial because, ideally, her son would like to do it in his church, but her stern request could be due to the liturgy and practices of the Presbyterians, which are different from the charismatics. The other possibility is that she was a Presbyterian but later joined her son’s church. Therefore, seeking a Presbyterian to officiate at her funeral is “going back home”. She was a Presbyterian but had joined her son’s church yet did not want to disconnect from her Presbyterian Church, owing to her love for the Presbyterian hymns. Now she wanted to be buried by a Presbyterian minister. In another example, a dying mother told her children, “by all means and at all costs, make sure I am buried by the church when I die because a church burial is very important for my transition”.[4] This is interesting because she considered that for her to be safely transitioned to the underworld, she must be buried by the church. The instructions are from a woman who was a queen mother, and who, before her enstoolment, was a leader in the Presbyterian Church.[5] She was not sure if the church would agree to bury her, and that as she was a member of the traditional authority, the church might be sidelined in her burial. She wanted the church involved because, perhaps, the church burial is more organized, orderly, and soothing to pave the way for a soul in transit. His son argues that she wanted to be buried also at the church’s cemetery because of the clean and spacious ambience. The traditional authority, however, could not allow that because she was the queen mother and could not be allowed to “sleep” in a place not among her ancestors, who equally sat on her stool.

These examples exemplify the significance many African Christians attach to funeral and burial rites as a show of dignity, identity, and belonging, even in death. Therefore, it is significant who officiates the funeral and where the deceased is put to rest. These worldviews are influenced by indigenous attachments that also influence Christian practice. Consequently, the church is expected to be more conscious of members’ transitional expectations, even at death, and to understand that burial places build communal attachments. From the interviews, therefore, many Ghanaian Christians like burial by the Historical Mainline Churches and cemeteries managed by churches. The Christian funeral ministry is not only of pastoral importance but also disciple-making.

3 Salome A.B., Interview 2, April 2025.
4 Mary R., Interview 1, April 2025.
5 Nana P. O., Interview 3, June 2025.

Cemeteries and Interviews with Church Members

It looks as if the Ghanaian Christians, specifically, and African Christians generally, have in their approach to Christianity drawn on the notion of being buried properly and among their people. Based on the Christian doctrine that Christians who die are going to be with the Lord, Ghanaians who have converted to Christianity say they take this very seriously because they want to be buried in a "Christian cemetery". Based on the examples of the Presbyterian women from the interviews, consciously or unconsciously, when there is a proper burial in which the deceased is laid to rest by the church and at the church cemetery, the souls of the departed are believed to rest well. This perception explains the spike in the return of many people who had left the church for decades due to the inception of Pentecostalism. Furthermore, it also explains why many people who are very old and have grown up in the church insist, even when they have joined charismatic churches, that a Minister of the Historic Mainline church should bury them, which is why some of them want to have their membership or tithe cards to prove they are members.

In some cases, Ministers have denied certain families the opportunity to bring their dead or deceased relatives to the church for a church funeral. The reasons given are that such deceased persons had not been part of the church for a while, hence the ceremony could be done in nearby fields or parks. On many occasions, the deceased or sometimes their families have insisted that the dead should be brought to church and certain hymns should be sung for their souls to be at peace. From African philosophical thinking, death is a communal and moral transition where Ghanaian Christians desire funerary rituals, marked by singing, scripture, preaching, and prayer, as the definition of a befitting burial (Mbiti 1969; Gyekye 1996).

Quite unlike the charismatic churches, except for a few Pentecostal Churches, it is visibly observed in Ghana that the Historic Mainline Churches are very concerned about acquiring land for cemeteries as part of their presence in a community. Apart from getting plots of land to build chapels and educational infrastructure, they usually get a separate site on the outskirts of the community to be used as a cemetery. In an interaction with a member of a funeral and burial committee on why there is a need for church cemeteries, he remarked that it is essential for churches to have such facilities. He remarked that at the community cemetery where members of the community are buried, given the fact that it is managed by the traditional authority, sometimes some rituals take place there in cemeteries that are not Christian. The traditional authority poured libations, served mashed yams with eggs in a pot for the gods, and did other things that the Christian faith frowns on in their cemeteries. Therefore, having their members buried at such places affects the level of peaceful rest. Furthermore, the community cemeteries are usually unkempt and not well managed, but the Christian place is usually well kept in terms of the arrangements and weeding of the place, making it very serene and comfortable, not only for

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the dead but also for the family members to easily locate the tomb of their beloved members.

Asked about how they acquired such plots of land, given the size and the location, a respondent from the interview explained that the traditional authority offered it to them for free upon request.[6] In most cases, the custodians of the lands, which are the traditional authorities, give such lands because they believe it is community members who will be buried there, and so they offer it freely to the churches to meet their needs. The churches then have to show appreciation for the benevolent gesture as a seal to the gift by paying a token. This token is not in payment for the donation but as a show of appreciation. The churches then have committees that manage their cemeteries and everything around them in the interest of the church. The funeral and burial committee then regulates the assets and reports every happening to the leadership of the church. The few members of such committees in different churches who interacted with us on this research affirm that the cemetery is seen as a property of the whole church; therefore, any member of the church anywhere desirous to be buried there could be allowed if all conditions are fulfilled.

In using the cemetery as an evangelistic touchpoint, members of the funeral and cemetery committee from the interview suggested that members of the church include people from various walks of life across the social strata.[7] They affirmed that members are very excited about the fact that the churches have these cemeteries. When asked if members would prefer to be buried in the church cemeteries or the community cemeteries, one of the respondents quickly retorded "ah, the church cemeteries are neat, serene, peaceful and organized".[8] It was further noted that in some cases, the cemetery has been used as a disciplinary tool. There was a case recounted by one of the funeral and burial committee members from the interview that a member of the church was engaged in behaviours noted as non-Christian. The member was cautioned (or told) that if he did not change, he would not be buried in the church's cemetery. This was the case of a recalcitrant member, but after the caution (or threat) by the church in this regard, he quickly amended his ways of doing things with the hope that he would not miss the pleasure of having his mortal remains at the Christian cemetery. On the other hand, however, some members of the church, recounted by the funeral committee in the interview, also expressed challenges with the happenings of the management of the cemeteries.[9] Such members have had to stop attending the churches because they feel unfairly

6 Gbawe, Focus Group, May 2025.
7 Nungua, Focus Group, May 2025.
8 Abraham A., Focus Group, May 2025.
9 Manfred S.B., Interview 6, April 2025; Sandra A. A., Interview 5, April 2025; Alfred R. E., Interview 4, April 2025.

treated. A member complained that she stopped, but for some reason had to come back to the church.[10] Her case was due to the unpreparedness of the funeral and burial committee of the church to locate the place of burial of her late father, and the attitude of the committee in general. Some of the committee members accepted that they had heard rumours of some members of the church having some misgivings relative to the management of the cemeteries.

In light of these responses, it is very clear that members of the church are exceedingly happy about the hosting of cemeteries by the churches. However, there are concerns about the application and usage of the cemeteries. It is also clear that when applied very well, it has evangelistic capacity. However, it can also be a bane to the church if mismanaged. Given the pleasure of the members about the cemeteries, it is imperative that, like the case of the early church and given the indigenous worldview, the church in Africa leverage the acquisition of cemeteries, to win and disciple its members.

Jindra and Noret (2011) observed that in Africa, the events surrounding death are often described as the key cultural events of a locality and the context. They argue that "funerals are among the most significant public events in African societies" (Jindra and Noret 2011: 1). Entire neighbourhoods and villages come together with family members and friends who may have travelled to other localities and countries, and are expected to come back. In the context of funerals, for the typical African, many resources are pooled together for an elaborate ceremony. This is because it is believed that funerals and commemorations of deaths are a celebration of life, therefor in Ghana, when a prominent person or an elderly person dies, the obituary poster notes 'life well lived' or 'celebration of Life'. As such, it tends to be the largest and most expensive cultural event, which brings together multitudes of people from various locations, locally or from the diaspora.

Conclusion

This study reveals that African funeral celebrations afford an important missional opportunity for the church's engagement with the community. Funerals entice large crowds, providing a significant avenue for witnessing. Nevertheless, an effective mission must go beyond evangelistic presence. Those who are won through funerals and cemetery practices must be intentionally discipled, following Jesus' model by attending to both spiritual and material needs of such converts.

Based on empirical data and interactions with historical reconstruction and ethnographic study, the study exposes a historical pattern in which Christian funerary care

10 Sandra A. A., Interview 5, April 2025.

has functioned as social witness. When church cemetery management is deliberately combined with pastoral care, it becomes an avenue of both quantitative and qualitative growth. This affirms Bosch's (1991) and Newbigin's (1989) vision of the church as intrinsically missional, while echoing Brown's (1981) positioning that funerary care in early Christianity embodied public theological witness. Furthermore, Grimes (2014) and Magezi and Magezi (2023) show that rituals re-embedded within local contexts become authoritative sites of identity formation and pastoral engagement, a reality echoed in Maluleke's (2020) call for culturally grounded African ecclesiology.

Attracting new members through burial services is, therefore, only the beginning. When burial practices are treated not merely as welfare services but as strategic pastoral and missional engagements, they become vital instruments of sustainable growth. By intentionally investing in discipleship and holistic care, churches can indeed turn mourning into mission, fostering enduring growth in both faith and community.

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ARTICLE

Mission with Passion: An Exegesis of Acts 20.22-24 in the Context of the Redeemed Christian Church of God Missionaries, Borno State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The research explores the passionate mission work of Apostle Paul as depicted in Acts 20.22-24, analysing its relevance to the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) missionaries in Borno State, Nigeria. Paul's significant contributions to the spread of Christianity beyond Jerusalem and his relentless pursuit of evangelism, despite suffering and persecution, highlight his unwavering dedication to the gospel. His missionary journeys were characterized by a deep commitment to reaching Gentiles and establishing churches, even while facing hardships, dangers, and imprisonment. In Borno State, the RCCG missionaries exemplify a similar passion for their mission, undeterred by threats from the insurgent group Boko Haram. Findings indicate that these missionaries embrace the challenges of their work, reflecting Paul's resolve in the face of adversity. Their willingness to endure significant risks and hardships reveals a profound dedication to their calling, resonating with Paul's example. This study ultimately underscores the enduring nature of missionary passion, illustrating that true commitment to Christ's mission transcends personal comfort and safety, reflecting the deep-rooted conviction seen in both Paul and RCCG missionaries. Therefore, it is recommended that missionaries sent by the church to any mission field should be sure of their calling and be passionate about the work to enable them to endure any suffering they may encounter on the mission field.

Keywords: Passion; mission; Apostle Paul; Book of Acts; Redeemed Christian Church of God; Nigeria

Introduction

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is a Pentecostal megachurch founded in Nigeria in 1952, known for its vigorous evangelism and extensive global missionary

network. Its theology emphasises holiness, the practicality of faith, and a mandate to spread the gospel, making it a salient case study for missionary passion. This study focuses on its missionaries in Borno State, Northern Nigeria, a region predominantly consisting of Kanuri Muslims. This region has been the epicentre of the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency since 2009, a conflict that has resulted in the death of tens of thousands and the displacement of millions. Christian communities and missionaries have been specific targets of violence, making mission work in this area exceptionally perilous. This context of persistent threat provides a powerful modern analogue to the "imprisonments and hardships" Paul anticipated (Acts 20.23).

The Apostle Paul's missionary endeavours contributed immensely to the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to the Gentile world. Bruce rightly observes that "the spread of Christianity cannot be imagined apart from Paul's work" (Bruce 1990). In the book of Acts, three missionary journeys of Paul are recorded, and each of these journeys was undertaken with passion, attracting him to various forms of persecution and suffering. He even suffered several traumatic experiences, including personal dangers and imprisonments, some of which are not recorded in the book of Acts. No doubt, his passion for the gospel of Christ made him encounter so much trouble that he regards suffering as an essential and regular characteristic of apostolic service, not just an occasional experience of his apostleship, as Furnish observes (Furnish 1984: 283). He could look at his life and say, "I die every day!" (1 Cor. 15.31; Hafemann, 1993: 919). More importantly, Paul's writings depict his positive attitude toward missionary sufferings because he sees them as evidence of his contributions to the gospel and an integral part of his ministry, for his calling is inextricably linked to suffering (Acts 9.15-16). This research, therefore, examines Paul's passion for his mission work as showcased in Acts 20.22-24 in the context of the Redeemed Christian Church of God missionaries, Borno State, Nigeria.

Methodology

The study employed a contextual approach to examine how Apostle Paul's passion for his mission was understood and appropriated by missionaries in the Redeemed Christian Church of God. The historical-critical exegetical method was utilized to interpret the selected biblical passage, alongside a descriptive research design aimed at explaining Paul's passion for mission and its application within the Redeemed Christian Church of God. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select RCCG missionaries from Borno Province. Ten missionaries (8 male, 2 female) were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was guided by a protocol of ten core questions designed to explore their understanding of mission, their personal calling, their experiences of suffering, and their theological sources of resilience (e.g., "How do you understand

the purpose of your mission here?"; "Can you describe a time when you felt your life was in danger?" "What biblical figures or passages sustain you?"). The interviews were conducted in English.

The gathered data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which involved transcribing the interviews, coding the data, and identifying predominant themes that captured the participants' experiences and perspectives on passion and suffering in mission. Participants were provided with adequate information about the study, ensuring a clear understanding of its purpose and objectives. Besides, the participants' names are real, and their participation was entirely voluntary, without coercion or undue pressure. Consent was sought through the head of the RCCG Mission Board to interview these RCCG missionaries.

The Concept of Mission

The definition of "mission" has been a subject of scholarly debate, often centring on its scope. Douglas presents a broad definition, arguing that mission "is concerned with every assignment the church is sent to do", thus encompassing a wide range of activities beyond evangelism (Douglas 1975: 22–24). This expansive view is narrowed by scholars like Kostenberger, who defines mission more specifically as "a conscious, intentional, organised and extensive effort to convert others to one's religion by way of evangelisation" (Kostenberger 2000: 665–67). Moreau offers a mediating perspective, arguing that while the purpose can be broad or narrow, the key is the intentional dispatch to complete an assignment, which can include evangelism, social justice, and transformation (Moreau 2000: 636–38). This study aligns with Moreau's integrative view, as the passion driving Paul and the RCCG missionaries is not limited to verbal proclamation but extends to enduring suffering as an integral part of completing their God-given assignment.

However, this expansive view must be critiqued through cultural encounter. Sanneh (1989: 1–5) argues that translating the gospel empowers local cultures, decolonizing faith and transforming mission from a one-way dissemination into a dynamic, two-way process, challenging simplistic readings of mission as mere "expansion". Further critiquing the Western missionary model, Dube's postcolonial feminist interpretation urges a reading of missionary texts that is conscious of imperialist and patriarchal underpinnings (Dube 2000). She asks whose voices are centred and whose are marginalized in traditional mission narratives. While Paul's passion is central to this study, Dube's framework reminds us to be mindful of the often-unheard voices of the communities being evangelized, a crucial consideration for the RCCG's work in Northern Nigeria. Okure (1988), focusing on the Johannine model, emphasizes mission as a transformative encounter rooted in dialogue and service, as exemplified by Jesus with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4.1-42). This model

complements the Pauline focus on passion with a necessary emphasis on receptive engagement with the “other”.

The Concept of Passion

The word “passion” comes from the Latin word *passio* meaning “suffering”; passionate people are prone to suffering because their passion seems to dictate and dominate them; hence, they are enslaved by their passion (Vallerand and Houlfort, 2019: 5). Passion can be described as the vehicle that drives the wheel of any great success and achievement in life. This is evident in the life of the Apostle Paul, who once said, “Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel ...I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9.16, 22). Paul’s achievements in his missionary enterprise were a result of his passion to spread the gospel of Christ to any length, even to places where the name of Christ had not been mentioned. His passion undoubtedly made him unstoppable and unrelentless in seeing that he covered some places in all three missionary journeys. A modern definition of passion that is universal, as put forward by Vallerand, is to have “a strong liking for an activity, object, or concept”. He argued further that passion could go beyond a mere love for something but “a high valuation of the activity and important commitment toward it” (Vallerand 2015: 7).

Solomon (1993) identifies three classes of passion, which include emotions, moods, and desires, noting that all share a power to give circumstances significance. He argues that religious passion is more an attitude than an emotion (Solomon 1993: 70–71). The passion of Paul was, therefore, not just an emotion that could fade away easily, but an attitude, for he was determined to see the world in his time saved by accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. So, he gave all of his life to his mission and was ready to spend and be spent for the gospel expansion.

The Mission of the Apostle Paul

Paul went out on three notable missionary journeys (Acts 13.2–14.28; 15.40–18.23), planting new churches and strengthening the existing ones. According to Chom, Paul was not only planting churches but also advancing the kingdom of God by taking the kingdom messages to places where it was not known (Chom 2015: 168). Supporting this view, Ugo opines that, in each of Paul’s missionary journeys, he travelled through the Mediterranean world preaching the gospel and establishing new churches. Hence, Paul saw every city as a natural place to preach the Gospel and spread it to the surrounding areas. Therefore, Apostle Paul passionately embarked on all three missionary journeys to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was ready to do anything for the sake of the gospel. And of course, this mission exposed him to many dangers, sufferings, and afflictions as he highlighted in 2 Cor. 11.23-33, though

he was not discouraged by any of them because of his passion for the work (Ugo 2012: 1–15).

Waltman notes that Paul planned and organized his mission to spread the gospel. He possessed the attributes, knowledge, and skills to be the most capable person of bringing the message of salvation to the Gentiles because of his awareness of Greco-Roman culture, customs, education, commerce, and laws (Waltman 2010: x-xv). Supporting this view, Allen observes that while Paul's first journey was strategic, his second was notably directed by the Spirit's prohibitions (e.g., being forbidden to preach in Asia and Bithynia), leading him to Macedonia. His third journey, however, returned to a more planned approach (Allen 2016: 1-5, 18–20).

Backgrounds to Paul's Passion for Mission

Paul lived in two worlds – the Greco-Roman and the Jewish – and was influenced by them. His writings show a tremendous knowledge of these two worlds, as well as his conversion experience. Paul was known to be a Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, which he handled passionately with a boast. Beyond the Jewish culture and faith, Paul entered into different cultural environments and interfaith relationships to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. He organizes various intercultural outreaches to win as many Gentiles as possible for the Lord Jesus Christ (Young 1997). Young further asserts that "Paul's mission to the Gentiles is deeply rooted in his Jewish way of thinking". No wonder he said in 1 Corinthians 9.19-23, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more … I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Paul understood clearly the mandate given to him by Jesus Christ to be his mouthpiece to the Gentiles about the gospel message. Hence, he took the assignment with passion. No wonder the prologue of his letters includes this conviction with the phrase "called to be an apostle" or "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" (cf. Rom. 1.1; 1 Cor. 1.1; Gal. 1.1; Eph. 1.1; etc.). It can, therefore, be concluded that his conviction about his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles motivated his passion for the work. As a rabbi who studied the Torah and the oral tradition of the Pharisees, he was unmatched among his contemporaries in his fervent adherence to the Jewish religious heritage that he dedicated his life to eliminating a newly formed fringe faction of Judaism: the disciples of Jesus. Paul's passion for Moses, his abhorrence of Gentiles' impact on the Jewish faith, and his resentment of Jesus drove him to the brink of acting violently against the church. He describes his zeal for the Jewish faith and disregard for the church, particularly in Gal. 1.13-14, Phil. 3.4-6 and 1 Tim. 1.13. However, when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, he exchanged the law of Moses for faith in Christ, and hatred of non-Jews for love of the church (Pate 2013).

Referring to his past in Philippians 3.6, he speaks of his love and dedication to the Law of Moses, "as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless" (RSV); therefore, it was believed that his persecution of the church was an essential part of his zeal for the Jewish laws and customs. His statements in Galatians 1.13-14 give the impression that he is a zealot for fathers' customs (Setzer 1994: 10–11). Perhaps, as Setzer observes, "the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah," among other things, must have infuriated Paul and flamed his fire of persecution against the early disciples (Setzer 1994: 10-11; Porter 2008: 42).

The wellspring of Paul's pre-conversion zeal is a critical point of analysis. Sanders (2015) challenges a common assumption, arguing that Paul's persecution of the church was "not dictated by his Pharisaic status", but was rather an act of "extraordinary passion" that was unusual even among Pharisees (Sanders, 2015: 78). This view helpfully distinguishes Pharisaic orthodoxy from violent zealotry. It is further illuminated by Setzer, who suggests that the specific theological claim of Jesus as Messiah was likely a primary catalyst that "infuriated Paul and flamed his fire of persecution" (Setzer 1994: 10-11). Thus, Sanders' "extraordinary passion" may have been ignited by the specific theological threat posed by the early Christians, as Setzer proposes. This pre-conversion pattern is crucial, as it establishes that Paul's character was inherently passionate; his conversion did not create a new passion but re-channelled its object from the Law of Moses to the Gospel of Christ (Segal 1990: 125).

The same passion he has for the Law in Judaism was carried over to Christianity. As he was passionate about defending the Law and the traditions of the fathers, so also, he was to defend the gospel of Christ and cause many to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. As Segal rightly notes, "Paul does not forget his Jewish past; rather, he inverts the values of his past in a way that is consonant with his new commitments" (Segal 1990: 125). His goal was to win mankind over to Christ at whatever cost. He became all things to all men so that he could win some people for Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 9.19-22). More so, Apostle Paul, out of passion for Christ, was ready to preach the gospel where the name of Christ was not yet mentioned so that he would not appear to be building on another man's foundation (cf. Rom. 15.20; Barrett 2003: 56). Bird asserted that "Paul defines his ministry and identity as that of a bond-slave of Jesus Christ with a resolute commitment to the call and cause of the gospel. To venerate Paul is to denigrate the Saviour whom he so passionately serves" (Bird 2014). Sanders refers to Paul as "the passionate man who was obsessed with his cause" (Sanders 2015: xix).

Exegesis of Acts 20.22-24

Paul's passion to see his mission of preaching the Gospel of Christ fulfilled was very exceptional to the extent that he was not ashamed to suffer and even die for it. He

desired to see Christ being magnified in his body always (Phil. 1.20). In his farewell address in Acts 20.17-24, he reminds the Ephesian elders about his integrity all the time he had been with them and his sufferings from the Jewish opponents (Acts 20.17b-19). Then, he claims to face the future ministry in Jerusalem, which is going to be with great trials, imprisonments, and hardships as the Spirit of God told him, while every attempt of the brethren to discourage him proved abortive because of his passion (Venkataraman, 2016: 222-23). The apostle's willingness or passion to suffer for the cause of the Gospel was clearly stated by him:

Καὶ νῦν ἰδοὺ, (*kai nun idou*) "and now, behold," is a Septuagint expression (cf. 13.11) which points to an uncertain present that Paul was anticipating in his speech (Conzelmann 1972: 174). The Greek words δεδεμένος ἐγὼ τῷ πνεύματι (*dedemenos egō tō pneumati*) "bound in the Spirit," may imply that Paul felt constrained in his mind or that he was in captivity to the Holy Spirit to follow God's leading (Guy 1979: 123). The phrase δεδεμένος ἐγὼ τῷ πνεύματι ("bound in the spirit") is a pivotal and debated phrase that encapsulates Paul's drive. Conzelmann argues for a sense of supernatural constraint, stating Paul was "under the constraint of the Spirit to travel to Jerusalem" (Conzelmann 1972: 174), a view supported by Bromiley's (1985: 148) etymological analysis of the root verb *deō* (to bind, imprison). However, Lovett presents a dissenting grammatical argument, contending that the absence of the adjective "Holy" (Ἅγιος) differentiates the "spirit" in v. 22 from the "Holy Spirit" (Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον) explicitly mentioned in v. 23 (Lovett 1972: 334). While Lovett's grammatical observation is valid, the immediate context of divine guidance and the strong, binding force of the verb *deō* make Conzelmann's interpretation more compelling. The concept of being "bound by the Spirit" fits the overarching narrative of Acts, where the Spirit directs missionary movement (e.g., Acts 16.6-7), and powerfully describes the internal compulsion that both Paul and the RCCG missionaries describe.

πορεύομαι εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ (*poreuomai eis Ierousalēm*) "going to Jerusalem." There is a reference to this journey in Romans 15.25, Acts 19.21, and 1 Cor. 16.4 (Bruce 1990: 432). It has already been established that Paul was under the constraint of the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, but it was a journey of uncertainty, for he did not know yet what would happen to him there. Apart from being constrained by the Spirit of God to undertake the journey, even after he was warned later by the brethren through the same Spirit (Acts 21.4, 10-14), he refused to listen to them because he was being consumed by his passion to get his mission of preaching the gospel accomplished, as he rightly said in verse 24. Hence, it is a journey of necessity and uncertainty because Paul was constrained by the Spirit to undertake it (Marshall 2014: 371). Venkataraman asserts that it would be a journey of no return for Paul (Venkataraman 2016: 222-23). However, as Horton rightly observes, "the witness of the Spirit was not intended to stop Paul from going" (Horton 1981: 238). Dunn draws an analogy between Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem as noted in the Gospels and Paul's journey to Jerusalem,

in which, in both cases, Jerusalem stands as their place of destiny where they would experience rejection and great suffering and thus fulfil the purpose of God for their lives. He also notes that in both cases, Jesus and Paul expressed a sense of divine compulsion on them to head towards Jerusalem, and they both pointed out a prophetic anticipation of suffering (Dunn 1996: 265).

μὴ εἰδώς (*mē eidō*s) "not knowing." Though Paul does not know what will happen to him in Jerusalem, he can understand by the Spirit that whatever city he visits, he will face imprisonment and tribulations (vs. 23; Marshall 1981: 331). In support of this opinion, Barrett asserts that Paul professes ignorance of what exactly would happen to him in Jerusalem; he has only limited information from the Spirit (Barrett 2002: 314). The phrase τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον κατὰ πόλιν διαμαρτύρεταί μοι – "the Holy Spirit testifies to me that in every city" could imply the Spirit speaking to Paul through prophets and disciples in various churches, as in the case of disciples in Acts 21.4 and prophet Agabus in Acts 21.10-13 (Bruce 1990: 432). In this regard, Dunn observes that "the mission of Paul, which began with such clear signs of the Spirit's direction (Acts 13.2; 16.6-7) ends on a similar note of conviction" (Dunn 1996: 272). On this note, Conzelmann rightly asserts that both the life of Paul and his willingness to suffer for the gospel were guided by God (Conzelmann 1972: 174). δεσμὰ καὶ θλίψεις με μένουσιν – "bonds and afflictions are awaiting me" could mean that he could not escape sufferings in the course of spreading the gospel. Going by the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 21.11, it is stated clearly that the Jews at Jerusalem would persecute Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles. This alludes to his loss of freedom but has nothing to say about his death because God assures him later in Acts 23.11 that he would not die in Jerusalem (Witherington III 1998: 618).

The word δεσμὰ (*desma*) means "to bind, to fasten with chains, or to throw into chains" (Thayer 2007: 131). While θλίψεις (*thlipseis*) as used in LXX means "distress, trouble, oppression, tribulation," etc. It is used figuratively in the New Testament to denote unavoidable afflictions that believers and apostles undergo for Christ's sake (Bromiley, 1985: 334). With these facts, it is observed that Paul would unavoidably suffer some afflictions and tribulations in Jerusalem, but it is not going to lead to his death as God assures him in Acts 23.11, even though he was ready to be bound and also die for the name of Jesus at Jerusalem (Acts 21.13). One thing is certain here: when one is consumed by one's passion, nothing can discourage him/her.

In verse 24, Paul says; ἀλλ' οὐδενὸς λόγου ποιοῦμαι τὴν ψυχὴν τιμίαν ἐμαυτῷ, "of no account do I make my life valuable to myself" (Douglas, 1975: 495). Bruce translates it to mean "I reckon my life of no account, as (though it were) precious to myself" (Bruce 1990: 432). Barrett notes that life has no worth to Paul than the fulfilment of his calling (Barrett 2002: 314). This statement implies that Paul is passionate about his mission to the Gentiles and thus willing to suffer for the gospel, even to die for Christ, for many of his letters attest to this fact (cf. 2 Cor. 4.7-12; 6.4-10; Phil. 1.20-21;

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2.17; Col. 1.24) (Polhill 1992: 425). Therefore, what matters most to Paul was "to finish the course and the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus" (τελειῶσαι τὸν δρόμον μου καὶ τὴν διακονίαν ἣν ἔλαβον παρὰ τοῦ Κυρίου'Ιησοῦ). The phrase "to finish the course", τελειῶσαι τὸν δρόμον, is an allusion to the athletic metaphor that Paul often uses in his letters to denote his preaching ministry, which the Lord Jesus gave him (cf. 1 Cor. 9.24; Phil. 3.14 (Witherington III 1998: 620-22). And the ministry (διακονίαν) here denotes his "testimony to the gospel of God's grace (Polhill 1992: 425), for the grace of God through Christ is the central focus of the gospel (cf. v. 32) as Bruce rightly observes (Bruce 1990: 432).

Paul's heartbeat, therefore, was to accomplish the ministry given to him by the Lord Jesus to the Gentiles. Nothing was more important to him than that, not even his own life. Venkataraman observes that "the ultimate value of Paul's life was necessarily bound up with his ultimate purpose in life," and that purpose was to proclaim the gospel of God's grace (Venkataraman 2016: 222–3). This, of course, denotes the demonstration of his deeper love for Christ and the unequalled value of eternal life with Christ in the coming world. This also made him refuse to claim his right to financial support from churches he planted (1 Cor. 9.15-23; Hafemann, 2015: 139–41). Interestingly, Jervis observes that "affliction is a companion of the gospel in Paul's time and so accompanies those who preach and live the gospel"; hence, this might have influenced his conviction to endure any suffering for the gospel to fulfil his ministry (Jervis 2007: 26).

Indeed, the central claim of the entire argument is that Paul referred to himself as a prisoner of Christ rather than a prisoner of Emperor Nero when he was later imprisoned and listed on the death row of Emperor Nero in Rome. Seeing the circumstance as a necessary aspect of suffering for the sake of God's Kingdom, he was unconcerned. In the face of such difficulty, he never tried or thought of denying Christ or turning away from the gospel to gain his freedom; instead, he decided to die for the sake of Christ's gospel (Swindoll 2014: 176). Kuhatschek notes that because Paul understands that the cross and the gospel are inseparable, and for people to hear the gospel and be saved, he was willing to suffer hardship, imprisonment, stoning, and even death so that the gospel might reach the lost world (Kuhatschek 2010: 57). Passion made him take the risk. What a passion for the mission of Christ!

Paul's Passion and the Contemporary Missionary Context

The exegesis of Acts 20:22-24 reveals a multifaceted paradigm of Pauline passion. This is not merely a historical account but provides a theological framework comprising several key characteristics:

1. A sense of being divinely compelled or constrained (δεδεμένος ἐγὼ τῷ πνεύματι) to pursue the mission, even against external advice.
2. A conscious acceptance of unknown and impending suffering (μὴ εἰδώς τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ συναντήσοντά μοι) as an inherent part of the calling.
3. A radical devaluation of personal safety and life (οὐδενὸς λόγου ποιοῦμαι τὴν ψυχὴν τιμίαν ἐμαυτῷ) when weighed against the imperative of the mission.
4. A singular, unwavering focus on completing the specific ministry received from Christ (τελειῶσαι τὸν δρόμον μου καὶ τὴν διακονίαν).

This framework offers more than a simple analogy; it provides a hermeneutical lens through which to analyse contemporary missionary experiences. The succeeding segment examines the qualitative data from RCCG missionaries in Borno State not merely as a catalogue of hardships, but through the specific structure of this Pauline paradigm. The question is not simply if they suffer, but how their experiences (their sense of calling, their response to threat, and their understanding of sacrifice) resonate with the architectural elements of passion defined by Paul. This moves the analysis from thematic similarity to structured theological comparison, demonstrating the enduring and translatable nature of this missionary passion across centuries and cultures.

RCCG Missionaries and their Passion

A passion for the mission is not a common attribute among many ministers of the gospel in contemporary society, as it may involve unpleasant experiences, as seen in the case of the Apostle Paul. However, he did not allow these experiences to deter him from fulfilling his ministry. In contrast, in this world of "wealth and health" gospel, many gospel ministers are unwilling to sacrifice their comfort and pleasure to endure the stress and hardship associated with missionary work.

Findings in this study from the Redeemed Christian Church of God's missionaries in Borno State, Northern Nigeria, revealed that no one could do missionary work without experiencing suffering. The question is: "Who can endure the suffering associated with missionary work?" This work answers this question using the lives of RCCG missionaries. It is understood that the encounter Paul had with Jesus Christ produced in him a spiritual, intellectual, and ethical revolution to forsake all comforts and pleasures of life to pursue Christ and spread his gospel relentlessly in the Mediterranean world despite all the persecutions, oppositions, and sufferings he encountered.

Besides, it is discovered that Paul was ready to face bonds and afflictions awaiting him in every city where he would visit to preach the gospel, as warned by the Holy Spirit, because of his strong determination to fulfil the ministry Christ had given him.

How many ministers of the gospel today would hear that bond and affliction are awaiting them in a place, city, or region and would still be willing to forge ahead to preach the gospel there? However, RCCG missionaries in Borno State under study proved to be exceptional in this regard. They demonstrated passion for the gospel of Christ despite their understanding that they were working in dangerous zones. Interview respondents (Austin Igwara, Ibrahim Dauda, Sadi Wabba) described daily threats from Boko Haram, including nearby chants of 'Allahu Akbar', rocket shootings, and fleeing for their lives into the jungle for days at a time. According to them, the insurgency has resulted in the death of many of them in the past, yet they persisted in forging ahead, remaining in those mission fields to preach the gospel of Christ, because they were passionate about the mission of Christ entrusted to their hands.

Much like Paul, these missionaries were unfazed by the dangers and did not consider their lives as precious. Borno State in Northern Nigeria has been a perilous region for missionaries in recent years due to the Boko Haram insurgency, which has claimed many lives and destroyed property, especially targeting Christian missionaries. The missionaries there could not sleep peacefully because of the constant attacks by Boko Haram militants. The insurgency also disrupted church services in those mission fields. Ohre Mark (interview respondent) shared his experience of spending days in the forest with others fleeing Boko Haram. He had already told his church members that whenever they saw him as their pastor, that was when the church service would be held, whether mid-week or on Sunday. In other words, there is no fixed schedule for church services.

These missionaries are working passionately, endangering their lives daily, but not for material or financial gains, because they experience hunger and thirst.[1] Femi Alaba (interview respondent) attested to hiding in the bush for days without food, surviving on raw groundnuts, with water being a rare find. This experience of hunger is related to Apostle Paul's experience. Therefore, RCCG missionaries have taken mission work as a do-or-die affair. Umoren (2017) characterizes Nigerian Christianity as a "theology of endurance", forged through political and religious strife. Thus, the missionaries' passion is a fusion of Pauline dedication and this distinctively Nigerian fortitude.

This suggests that these RCCG missionaries in Borno State were passionate about their calling, and their conviction was very strong, enabling them to withstand suffering. Their approach, while passionate, can be reflexively examined through

1 The ethical complexity of mission in conflict zones, including the potential risk to local communities, is acknowledged here. The missionaries interviewed stated that their strategy is strictly non-coercive and focused on service and presence, often at the explicit invitation of vulnerable local communities. Nevertheless, this remains a paramount consideration for missiology in such contexts.

the lens of Dube (2000) and Sanneh (1989). Their testimony shows a passion for Christ and a commitment to their community that aligns with Okure's (1988) model of service. However, the complex postcolonial context of Northern Nigeria demands a continued critical awareness of the power dynamics inherent in any missionary activity, even that undertaken by a global South church. The RCCG's mission, therefore, exists at the intersection of Pauline passion, a Nigerian theology of endurance, and the ongoing global conversation about decolonized and contextual missiology.

The sufferings Paul endured in his missionary activities were all motivated by his love for Christ, for he said, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Rom. 8.35). As RCCG missionaries respond in line with Paul's perspective here, they see suffering as part of the mission; hence, it should be embraced with the love of God in every circumstance. The endurance of RCCG missionaries is, therefore, highly commendable, akin to Paul's. Despite all that they face in the mission fields, they refuse to be discouraged. It is evident that they are amidst dangers, yet they do not relent in their missionary activities, maintaining a singular focus that the Gospel of Christ must be preached, thereby saving souls for God's Kingdom. This is fuelled by their passion for the mission of Christ.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that the Pauline model of passion, which was defined by divine constraint, the acceptance of suffering, the devaluation of personal safety, and a focus on completing one's course, provides a strong theological framework for understanding contemporary missionary resilience. The experiences of RCCG missionaries in Borno State are not just random acts of bravery but are revealed, through this framework, as a direct continuation of the missionary passion exemplified in Acts.

The central finding is that the suffering experienced by Apostle Paul is not merely analogous to, but structurally consistent with, the realities faced by missionaries in conflict zones today. While the first-century context involved Jewish opposition and Roman imprisonment and the twenty-first-century context involves terrorist insurgency, the underlying architecture of passion that enables endurance remains unchanged. This insight significantly contributes to missiology by providing a biblical hermeneutic for interpreting and validating the experiences of modern missionaries.

Therefore, based on this study, it is recommended that:

1. Missionary training programmes within the church should incorporate the exegesis of passages like Acts 20.22-24 to theologically prepare candidates for the realities of suffering, framing it not as a failure of strategy but as a potential marker of authentic, passionate calling.

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2. Sending churches and mission boards must do everything in their power to provide robust logistical, financialand psychological support to missionaries in the field. This practical encouragement is essential to sustain the passion identified in this study and prevent discouragement.
3. Future research should explore this Pauline paradigm in other denominational and geographical contexts to test its broader applicability and to develop further a theology of missionary suffering and passion.

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ARTICLE

Kinship, Rurality, and Reform: Towards an African Ecclesiology for the Local Church

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke

Abstract

A top-down approach to ecclesial reform inhibits reception at the local level. This is evident from pastoral realities in dealing with changes in the church. To ignore the dynamics of a local or rural church community is a recipe for failed reforms, which may negatively impact the community. Where ecclesial authorities have the good intention of building a healthy, vibrant faith community, then the process must involve a co-constructive model that takes into account the obligations of the Magisterium and the dynamics of the rural community, both of which are operating fields of the Holy Spirit that vivifies the church. This article argues that to arrive at such a co-constructive approach, there is need to propose an ecclesiological model of the rural church, one that could be found in the African kinship ecclesiology. The article, therefore, explores the concept of African kinship ecclesiology, with its tripartite dimensions of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration. It further demonstrates how this ecclesiology could foster a multi-dimensional reform of the rural church.

Keywords: Rurality, Kinship ecclesiology, Family of God, Local church, Comprehensiveness, Compassion, Celebration, Solidarity, Parish

Introduction: Rurality and the Construction of a Local Church

Most theological conversations on rural theology emerge from Anglican practical or pastoral theology (Church of England 1985; ACORA 1990; Bowden 2003). However, in constructing a Catholic kinship ecclesiology, a Catholic rural theology should serve as a starting point. Given the limited sources on this subject, George H. Speltz's 1963 article, "Theology of Rural Life: A Catholic Perspective" provides some useful perspectives. Speltz essentially analyses papal social teachings within the context of an agrarian understanding of rurality (1963: 33–49). He argues that the true piety of the rural dwelling is rooted in agriculture, which preserves a profound connection

between the farmer and the land, plants, and animals. By the same token, any attempt at recreating rurality as mini extensions of industrialized urban is detrimental to the life, spirituality, and even the theology of the rural (1963: 37–38).

Defining rurality from the perspective of agriculture has always been challenged as a single narrative (Ellis 2000; Siwale 2013) despite the support it enjoys among many scholars (Cloke 2003; Shubin 2006; Woods 2010; Madu 2010). Juliana Siwale, for instance, argues that in Zambia, rurality is rather characterized by "low population densities, an abundance of land, poverty and an environment in which barter and self-sufficiency from peasant farming is common" (Siwale 2013: 16). Of course, there are suggestions that rurality is a "subjective and socially constructed" reality. In Africa, the material instruments of such social constructions are often traced to oppressive arrangements of coloniality. Historically, two closely related broad foundations are implicated here, namely the structures of isolation of the colonial era and the post-colonial discriminatory policies that exclude rural areas from the sphere of governance. The colonial "enclavement" of many African communities was justified by an argument that Africans are by nature "rural" (Mandela 1994: 2). Such a pejorative vocabularization has, over time, reduced rurality to a place of isolation and confinement. Unlike the Western representation of rurality as idyllic countryside that evokes serenity, innocence, communion with nature, and "an escape from modernity" (Siwale 2013: 24), the rural area in most African communities remains demonized. Such a negative characterization was a product of sustained impoverishing of rural communities that rendered their inhabitants economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged.

Nonetheless, there are also instances in Africa where the rural space provides the "positive escape" from the noise, aggression, and stress of the cities. Home is not characterized by urbanity but is defined by rurality, a rallying point for the entire extended family. This function of rurality implies an epistemological and/or existential disposition that serves both the urban and rural spaces, including the understanding of the church and church life in both. In all, the rural area is characterized by low population, an organic lifestyle, and a communal sensitivity that contrasts the anonymity of urban dwelling. My focus is not to probe the complexities of rurality but to explore the complexities of rurality as a space for the emergence of a cohesive ecclesiology that uncovers the understanding of the church by/in such an organic community. Such a cohesive ecclesiology designates the rural area as a place of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration.

Central to such ecclesiology is the structure of the parish community, which is not only a liturgical space but a social symbol, a communal home or house. In the Pauline letters, there are references to the small communities (or domestic churches) as "house" (cf. Rom.16.3-5; 1 Cor.16.19-20; Phil. 4.22), and this presents us with "a foretaste of the birth of the first 'parishes'" (Congregation for the Clergy 2020:

Instruction §6). In fact, the original idea of parish that emerged from the context of rurality designates it as "a house among houses" in response to "the logic of Incarnation" within the community (*Instruction* §7). More broadly, Pope Francis describes the parish as "a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach" (Francis 2013: §28). For a rural community, the parish is the house of the community; the *community* of the community that transcends denominational boundaries. Such a cohesive and intense understanding of the parish is fast depreciating, especially in the urban and modern settings. Today, "the Parish finds itself in a context whereby the territorial affiliation is increasingly less evident, where places of association are multiplied and where interpersonal relationships risk being dissolved into a virtual world without any commitment or responsibility towards one's neighbour" (*Instruction* §9). This sad reality reinforces the need to rediscover a rural ecclesiology for the purposes of building the church from the ground up. It provides the ground for affirming the parish as a theological starting point, defined not only by the structures but by the lived experiences of the members.

Historically, the original designation of a local church is the rural parish, which is primarily a representation of a true community before being considered as a constitutive part of a local or *particular* church, namely a diocese. The prioritization of the organic nature of a rural faith community signals an ecclesiology that expresses the intensity of the relationship among the members with all the sociological attributes of a cohesive small group. This sociological characterization parallels the ecclesiological understanding of Family of God (*Familia Dei*) together with the elements of common discernment, co-participation, and co-responsibility that flow from a locus of true belonging or ownership. This ecclesiology is most evident in African kinship.

Developing Kinship Ecclesiology and the African Paradigm of *Familia Dei*

The Second Vatican Council provided the church with an opportunity to reconstruct its ecclesiology with attention to the communal nature of early Christianity. It was a rural ecclesiology of some sort when historically considered from the intense relationality that defined that community from the time they flocked around Christ, during the pre-Pentecost wait, and in the season of persecution that followed Pentecost. The New Testament community was a close-knit circle that provided a sanctuary for the spiritual, moral, social, and even economic needs of the members (Acts 4.32). As noted by the American Evangelical theologian, Joseph H. Hellerman, "the expansion of early Christianity owed much to the social cohesiveness of the local churches" and this "has driven researchers to attempt to define more precisely the nature of these communities in light of the social environment in which they were

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situated" (Hellerman 2001: 3). Accordingly, kinship concepts like "fictive family" and "surrogate family" have been deployed in making such anthropological analysis. In fact, Hellerman would later describe early Christianity as possessing a "collectivist mind-set" (Hellerman 2009: 32) that puts the group ahead of the individual, a culture that is characteristic of the Mediterranean and the African world. Describing the intensity of such mind-set, he argues that "the social solidarity that the early Christians enjoyed as a result of living out their strong-group family values ultimately brought a whole pagan empire to its knees" (Hellerman 2009: 33). The rurality of the early ecclesia which frittered away in course of the church's rise to political power following the Edict of Milan by Constantine in AD 313 is once again recaptured in Vatican II's understanding of the church as a mystery of communion (*Lumen Gentium* §9), thus underscoring its nature as an "organic reality" (*Nota Explicativa* §2).

In interpreting and appropriating the idea of church as communion, the church in Africa reaches back to its understanding of what a most organic reality of communion is, namely, the family. As such, the ecclesiology of the church, the Family of God, was adopted at the 1994 African Synod. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (1995: 35) remarks that "[w]hat was obvious at the synod was that the concept of family in Africa constitutes an inexhaustible mine of values, ideals, images and symbols which can be effectively utilized to express the model of the church-as-family." He outlines some of these values as including "unity, solidarity, participation and co-responsibility; family-based and centered education, fecundity; the family as a place where life is welcomed, nurtured and revered; shared in common with the living and the living-dead (ancestors); understanding, living and being together, fraternity, mutual aid, trust, reconciliation through rites; non-gender based respect for age, tradition and authority; and hospitality" (1995: 35–36). Rurality emerges in this ecclesiology in two forms. The first is that the expansive nature of the African family is a product of the rural communal setting, with the boundaries of consanguinity marked by the kindred, and so it is not limited or closed like the nuclear family system. While this has a positive value, it has also been criticized as barely transcending "the confines of tribal, clannish and ethnic affiliation" (1995: 36) in some cases. Yet its expansive nature also implies that it is capable of accommodating a Christian interpretation, in which the waters (of baptism) become as thick as the blood (of consanguinity), two elements that are present in the Eucharist. The second is linked to the disintegrative nature of urbanity, in the sense that urban migration weakens the relationship among family members, disintegrating bonds, and stretching the distance between blood relations. Urbanity's favoring of individualism and artificially constructed social bonds already implies the incapacity to construct an organic bond, unlike the rural environment.

In transitioning from the proposal of the church as a Family of God to developing the theological justification of such an ecclesiological model, a few things need to be

pointed out. The first is that the model cannot be considered sufficient in accounting for the ecclesiology of the church. The objective of this essay is to see how this model can easily advance authentic reform and renewal in the local church. The second point is that the model is not entirely new (1995: 37). There are other images of the church that are suggestive of the family. Nevertheless, the African church has created an awareness of the profound value of this model, while at the same time challenging itself by it. The third is that theology of the church as Family of God, like any other interpretation of the church as communion, is rooted in the Trinity. The Trinitarian God is a family of three persons, whose self-communication brings into being the human family and whose self-communion defines the nature of the human family. Through the Incarnation, the triune God gathers the scattered human family to Godself, around the Eucharist, to participate in communion as a Family of God. The fundamental theological ground expressed here is critical for a deeper understanding of this ecclesiology. Part of my goal is to stretch the understanding of the rural nature of this ecclesiology by exploring the dimensions of the African kinship ecclesiology upon which the African Family of God ecclesiology rests. This involves exploring the threefold characteristics of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration that define African kinship ecclesiology.

On the Tripartite Dimensions of African Kinship Ecclesiology

In constructing an ecclesiology with the attributes of rurality, the "Family of God" model ought to mirror, *par métaphore*, the extended family rather than the more exclusive nuclear family typology. In that context, it should be able to recapture broadly the values of "care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (John Paul II 1995: §63). This means integrating communio ecclesiology with an African Christian anthropology that extends beyond the boundaries of blood relations. Concerning the specific understanding of communio, the Kampala Document by the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM 2019) underscores that "The Church-Family of God in Africa implies both communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters, Christians, called to a communion of life, love, and truth of action, faithfulness, and of witnessing. The Church is Family of interconnected persons. Love, acceptance, forgiveness, commitment, and intimacy constitute its very fabric; as well as the celebration of faith, pardon, joy, and sharing. It is a community in which justice, peace and mutual love are realized and lived." Baptism is the means of belonging to the family, which becomes as it were a "real participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, … the foundation of our oneness or unity in Christ" (§81) Regarding the pneumatology of this communion the document states that it is "the Holy Spirit

[that] puts Christian communities and the baptized in a network of faithfulness to Christ and interpersonal Christian relations" (§83) The sense of communion within the church as the Family of God is ontological. It is neither defined by ecclesial structure nor does it consist of a psychological reality. Simply put, "[t]he Church is not merely the place where people feel they are in the Family of God, but also where they become in reality and ontologically a family" (§84).

Concerning the anthropological dimension, one observes that in the African ecclesiology of the Family of God, a certain intersubjectivity emerges that accounts not only for communion within the intra-ecclesial relationship but also beyond. In the context of synodality, Stan Chu Ilo (2023) describes this intersubjectivity as "samaritization of the process". He explains that the average Christian is invited to be the Good Samaritan who perceives in the other, particularly those in need, a representation of "nwanne m" (Igbo: "my brother or sister" – the one who belongs to the same Family of God with me), the one whose existence is entangled with mine, and so deserves my love and compassion. From an African worldview, Ilo further argues:

> *Samaritanizing the synodal process invites the church and its members to a renewal of inter-subjectivity in the church that begins from within the hearts of all persons as an inner grace and interior logic of love. From this interior desire, arises a movement in which the human person seeks the connection with the other in what the African ancestors captured as ubuntu, that is the wisdom that says that the recognition of the other makes me human or rather that in affirming the humanity of the other, I affirm my own humanity. (Ilo, 2023)*

Extending the conversation, Ilo insists that this ecclesiological model provides "a space for a polylogue" within the synodal process "where everyone shares their stories, lamentations, hopes and dreams". The idea is to facilitate an African Christian imagination of a kinship of faith where Christ is the head of a diverse faith family.

The implications of the proposed kinship ecclesiology are threefold, and these correspond to the key characteristics of such an ecclesiology.

- **Kinship ecclesiology is *comprehensive***. It accounts for both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of communion that emphasize the family vocabulary of the Trinity ("Father"', "Son"', "generation", and "filiation") as well as the "maternal" and "fraternal" images of the church (Congar 1970: 26). Comprehensiveness also points to the relationality between the universal and the local, the local churches with each other, and the denominations among themselves. Here, kinship is marked by baptism as highlighted by the Kampala document (SECAM 2019: §81) and sustained by the Eucharist: "Baptism incorporates all into the body that the risen Lord builds up and keeps alive through the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the

creative and uniting force and source of life of members of the Church, because it unites each one of them with Christ himself." (§84) Recapturing this kinship sets the stage for a double reform. The first is based on the internal reconciliation with God and with one another, where injuries caused by sexual, spiritual, and power abuses are confronted and addressed as injuries caused to the Family of God. This interior, self-reflexive conversion does not simply separate the victim from the perpetrator since both belong to the same family, whereby the abuse of any member of the church is the abuse of the Family of God that is the church. The second reform is focused on becoming a better family where everyone cares for everyone in a co-responsible and co-participative way. By extension, this connects with an ecumenical dimension where the elasticity of baptism equally reflects the elasticity of the sanguinity of kinship. In that way, there is also a double healing, first of the memory of historical divisions and injury caused to one another, and second of contemporary rivalry and campaigns of calumny against one another. The remembering, healing, and metanoia open the path to sustainable solidarity, which is constitutive of the proposed African kinship ecclesiology.

- **Kinship ecclesiology is that it is *compassionate***. It flows from the cross of Christ. Thus, it recognizes that "the griefs and anxieties" (Gaudium et spes) of one's ecclesial community are inextricably entangled with the conditions of others, particularly those with whom we share the same waters of baptism. Whatever affects one, invariably affects all, both the negative and positive. A compassionate kinship ecclesiology is a lived expression of radical solidarity within and outside the ecclesial community. It is not evasive or dismissive of differences, whether of race, colour, sex, status, or class, but engages with these diversities together with the tensions and conflicts that emerge therefrom. It is not a *sanitized* community that is pretentious of the existential challenges and difficulties, but thrives in an openness and sensitivity that interprets suffering as a participation in the cross of Christ and in the tribulations of one another. Furthermore, this kinship ecclesiology is marked by the blood of martyrdom and suffering. While martyrdom expresses the extreme form of suffering on account of one's faith, the suffering caused by poverty, hunger, exclusion, and deprivation is shared by everyone. Martyrdom in this case is also defined by the radicality of love, the consequence of which is death, both in the figurative and literal sense. Love leads to death, yet the resurrection faith teaches us that death is not the end of love. The rural setting provides the setting for the attentiveness of love with all the practical implications. It offers a space for mutual accompaniment through the challenges of life, unlike urbanity that is characterized by the scarcity of time and attention. There is also an ecumenical extension in this case, where solidarity and dialogue constitute the appropriate response of the rural church community.

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The goal of constructing an ecclesiological behaviour that overcomes ecumenical apathy with a view to advance social transformation of the society (Okpaleke 2022: 390) begins with the rural setting and its conditions of martyrdom.

- **Kinship ecclesiology is *celebratory***. This is because the "Family of God" in Christ is a joyful invitation to a common life of thanksgiving. Community life of the rural area is centered around the Eucharist in its multiple senses of communion, memorial, sacrament, and particularly as real presence. Characteristically, 'the real' of the presence is active rather than passive, interactive rather than isolated. This is because life in the rural setting is defined by an availability that is not only limited to the body and space but marked by a certain form of vivacity that is enhanced by an in-depth knowledge of one another. Experiences of sharing, fellowship, and communication that take place in the daily lives of the people define rural life. The rural, local church reflects a complete understanding of the threefold real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, namely "his presence in the gathered community, his presence in the word proclaimed, and his presence in the food shared" (Lash 1967: 179). Celebration is at the heart of African kinship, whether in sharing common meals, festivals, marriages, or in the act of hospitality towards both familiar and unfamiliar guests. In that sense, the eucharistic presence of the rural kinship ecclesiology possesses an elastic boundary that reaches out in the service of the world, beginning with the ecumenical neighbours. The ecumenical dimension chimes with the convergences in the *Synthesis Report* of the First Session of the Synod on Synodality concerning ecumenical gestures and intermarriages, the consideration of "Eucharistic hospitality", as well as the proposal for common celebration. Within this context, one could also refer to the idea of inter-/trans-denominationality as a space for ecumenical co-celebration, the possibility of which is raised by African kinship. In this case, each common celebration is "eucharistic" so long as a) it reflects some sort of communion among the baptized as some sort of sharing in the joy of the redemption by Christ, and b) it is oriented towards the ultimate "communion in sacred things" (*communicatio in sacris*), marked by the same Eucharistic table. To ignore opportunities for these symbolic "eucharistic" celebratory communions is to diminish the *vital energy* of the kinship of African Christianity (Ilo 2013: 138). Nonetheless, the issue goes beyond the ecumenical space to all forms of relationships that we can ever have, all of which are in constant yearning for the eucharistic experience. As Nicholas Lash puts it, even if our eucharistic fellowship could be expressed and deepened in a certain direction (intra-Catholic and ecumenical), it is important to remark that "our relationships with other people are by no means limited to our relationships with our fellow-Catholics, or even our fellow-Christians." Thus, "if we really believe in the universality of the redemption event in Christ, then *all* our

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relationships, every form of human community cries out for eucharistic expression" (Lash 180).

Having outlined the threefold characteristics of the African kinship ecclesiology, it is important to turn to praxis. The task is to explore how such an ecclesiology could be deployed in the reform of the local church.

Exploring the Possibilities of Reform in the Local Church

How can a Family of God-inspired kinship ecclesiology that is comprehensive, compassionate, and celebratory become an asset for the renewal or reform of the local church? How does a kinship ecclesiology mobilize the faithful towards an intense communion in a fragmented and fragmenting church? To ask these questions in the context of the canonical understanding of a local church is to depart from the focus on the parish. However, to address the parish without distinguishing the rural from the urban raises yet another question of whether the rural ecclesiology can be appropriated for the urban parish setting. The problem is therefore to question whether urbanity is not to be considered as a theological object for a kinship ecclesiology. My argument in this case is that the urban area has its own dynamic, which is not the primary concern of this article. But then the understanding of a kinship ecclesiology is not geographically fixed, although the best qualities of a typical rural setting are appropriated in constructing an ecclesiology that is both intense in its expression of solidarity and dynamic in its radical inclusivity. While rurality is the context for the determination of its attributes, it is essentially a kinship ecclesiology, which in a way universalizes its application beyond the rural. Hence, there is the possibility of practising a rural ecclesiology in an urban setting, although this might require a condition of being a small group. The ethnographic study carried out by Candler School of Theology's Susan Bigelow Reynolds at the center of Boston's Egleston Square suggests this. According to Reynolds (2023: 4), the "quirky parish" of St Mary of the Angels distinguishes itself "by making solidarity with its neighborhood and among parishioners central to its way of being". The community's *way of being* coincides with a particular *way of doing* that recognizes "family" in the other.

Reynolds posits that often the ecclesiological model of communion is invoked as an ideology to smother differences, thereby creating ecclesial communities that are plastic in their interiority. She proposes a rediscovery of the Vatican II notion of solidarity, as a means to organically transverse "the intimate, immediate borderlines" within local church communities. According to her, "[s]olidarity centers human difference as a good; lifts up the agency, authority, and practices of grassroots communities; reaches toward a vision of the common good; makes demands of those with

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power; and, with eyes open to the pain of reality, maintains, against all odds, a fierce determination in the power and possibility of love" (2023: 11).

Vatican II's self-reflexive solidarity recaptures the original idea of a parish as a local church community that is closer to the New Testament understanding. Pope Francis's programme of dialogue and synodality is an example of the theological reception of the Council's teaching on solidarity. It focuses on rebuilding organic faith communities that thrive despite existential tensions, bearing witness to both the Spirit's gift of diversity and the radical charity of the gospel. Reynolds argues that the parish communities had already received the Council's unfinished project of interior solidarity because for many of the baptized "it was in the parish that the council's softening of borderlines had the most immediate effect" (2023: 43). She further contends that the "[p]opular reception of the people-of-God ecclesiology disclosed a desire for the transformation of power relationships and ministerial roles within parishes" such that contrary to being perceived as "a static arbiter of salvation, dispenser of sacramental grace, and insular refuge from the threats of the modern world, the parish was now seen as a historically and contextually situated community of pilgrims on a shared journey" (2023: 43). For the Council, the objective is not to introduce democracy within the structures of parish governance, but to initiate the spirit of dialogue and ecclesial co-participation that rests on the common priesthood of the faithful (*Lumen Gentium* §10).

Reclaiming an African-inspired kinship ecclesiology that is marked by the values of rurality, therefore, has consequences for reform and renewal of the church, particularly at the local church. I shall indicate two areas of concern, namely a) synodal governance, and b) solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

From Synodality to Synodal Governance

The reform programme of Pope Francis, which is captured by the notion of synodality, finds so much bearing with the kinship ecclesiology at two levels. The first is that synodality is rooted in the ecclesiology of communion that is captured by the notion of kinship or extended family, where the People of God journey together as one Family of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The second is that the elements present in the idea of synodality are captured by the values of the family. In the family, the identity of the family is a value in itself, such that, just as any member of the family can bring fame and fortune to the entire family, in the same measure, any evil action of one member could injure the prestige of all. In a similar way, within the Family of God, the praxes of co-responsibility, mutual accountability, and co-participation serve as means of exercising joint commitment to the integrity of the Family of God by all baptized.

Still on practical areas of reform and renewal, we need to move from the general understanding of synodality to the idea of synodal governance in the church in

exploring the impact of kinship ecclesiology. The purpose of the synod is not to produce documents but to stimulate trust, heal wounds, build relationships, revive a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a positive vision that enlightens minds, warms hearts, and restores strength. A synodal reform of the parish requires that we apply the three characteristics of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration in living out the structures of governance within the parish. The relationship between the parish priest and other pastoral agents (parochial vicar, lay, and religious), even when defined within existing administrative structures, must be infused with this synodal spirit of kinship. Collaborations within the pastoral council structures must be focused on building the Family of God, where nobody is left out in the mission of salvation. To realize this challenge, we must consider the need for inclusive listening to give voice to those often forgotten or marginalized: young people, women, aged, the poor, people with disabilities, etc. Since the agency of every member of the parish is of value, the next point is to ensure that their gifts and abilities are respected in a 'shared decision-making' process. The final document of the *Synod of Bishops* (2024) refers to this as "differentiated co-responsibility" (§89), where all the faithful share a sense of belonging and commitment in the church.

Synodal governance is not so much interested in power as it is in the quality of service, which distinguishes the church from secular politics. Hence, the document emphasizes that "decision-making does not conclude the discernment process" rather "it must be accompanied and followed by practices of accountability and evaluation undertaken in the spirit of transparency inspired by evangelical criteria" (§95). Indeed, the practice of transparency, accountability, and evaluation "safeguards the trust and credibility needed by a synodal Church that is attentive to relationships" (§97). Coming from the bruises of sexual abuse, transparency and accountability are non-negotiables in a church reform that aims to deepen relationships. Comprehensiveness implies that nothing is kept behind closed doors, solidarity means that everyone is there for everyone, and true celebration can only happen in a context of trust and pure joy. Not being limited to ecclesial legalism, synodal governance aligns with the central tenets of kinship ecclesiology in creating a community of the baptized that is inclusive, respectful of each other's gifts, and joyful.

Redefining Ecclesial Identity through Solidarity with the Poor

Kinship ecclesiology creates an inclusive space where the dignity of the poor is safeguarded, and the marginalized find recognition and acceptance. Often, the idea of diversity is deployed to explain the non-homogeneous nature of the church, but often in a manner that only emphasizes differences of charism, ministry, and gender. Even where the diversity of status is considered, the poor is reduced to an object of pity and charity rather than an equal member of the Family of God. In this case, the image of the biblical Lazarus (Lk.16.19-31) is used in a deconstructive way, in which

the poor finally receives attention, but remains the stranger, the beggar, and never part of the family. However, the fact is that the common denominator is the Family of God to which everyone belongs, irrespective of status, race, gender, sexuality, or age. No matter the popular opinion within the family, those who fall outside what is considered normative for most people are still embraced as family. Thus, since rurality is associated with poverty, the poor do not feel out of place within such a community, yet from a theological perspective, kinship ecclesiology satisfies the conditions for the construction of a church of the poor.

Within the context of what he considered as an 'ecclesiology of vulnerable mission', Ilo (2014: 241) considers the present vocation of the church today as an invitation "to become a poor church, for the poor of the Lord." This represents an invitation to enter into solidarity with the poor, not as outsiders, but to become a poor church that is only interested in giving, sharing, and uplifting the other rather than accumulating and living lavishly as Pope Francis advocates (2013: §198), and preannounced in the writings of liberation theologians, particularly Gustavo Gutiérrez (Nickoloff 1993). Such an ecclesiology is characterized, according to Ilo, by the three factors of peregrination, incarnation, and transformation, since it unsettles the church, takes it on a journey that leads towards a transformation into the image of the kenotic Christ. He further argues that a church of the poor embraces, on the one hand, a positive material poverty that is expressed in detachment from wealth while creating a new consciousness that transcends the trappings of wealth, and on the other hand, a positive spiritual poverty that is lived out in total humility and absolute trust in God.

The result is a renewed self-understanding of the church that could be practically lived out in a local church marked by rurality. Ilo (2014: 235) posits that such "[a] renewed Catholic ecclesiology, grounded in a Trinitarian image and a sacramental ecclesiology of communion and friendship, could become a strong cultural and spiritual influence in the church's search for a praxis for realizing her preferential option for the poor" (see Francis 2013: §§198–201). This is of primary necessity in the world today as the church responds to the divine invitation "to walk and work with the poor in finding answers to the challenges of poverty, diseases, abuse of the rights of the powerless and those on the margins, migration and human dislocation, ethnic and religious conflicts, radical Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, all forms of discriminations against minorities, wars, political and economic problems, the effects of climate change, and natural disasters" (Francis 2013).

Conclusion

African kinship ecclesiology conceptualizes ecclesial bond within a larger framework of social bond that is rooted in an extended relationship of sanguinity, the family. It

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is an ecclesiology that relies heavily on the positive characteristics of rurality in terms of cohesiveness, serenity, withdrawal, interrelationship, and organic understanding of the other. Its approach is socio-theological since it combines the baptismal initiation with a traditional understanding of what makes one a member of a family. The understanding of the church as a Family of God does not begin and end with the baptism together with its Trinitarian implications, but also considers the interpretation of the lived reality of family in a people's pilgrimage with God. Of course, there are many bad examples of what family should be, and the negative understanding of kinship and rurality today, but these are not normative for kinship ecclesiology. Of course, I do not advocate a selective idealization of family or kinship as if it were in all cases a perfect unit. Not at all. Rather, the normative framework of the family is what makes inclusion, reconciliation, solidarity, and hospitality possible. Why? Because it is family.

In the proposed kinship ecclesiology, the church opens itself to the radicality of tripartite values of comprehensiveness, solidarity, and celebration, which align with the ideals of the Gospel. To realize these ideals, the kinship ecclesiology is best realized in the local church since both bear the attributes of rurality. In its small group set-up, the parish, which is an ideal local church, emerges as an ideal extended Family of God, a kinship of the baptized, where members bring together their individual charisms within the pool of a communal interrelationship. Relationship at this level generates reform and transformation, as I demonstrated in two examples. First is in the instance of an ecclesial lifestyle of synodality, where nobody is left behind in the governance of the church, and where trust and integrity are built on the parameters of transparency and accountability. The second is in a radical solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Also implicated in all of these is an extra-ecclesial relationality whereby ecumenical and interfaith dialogues are approached from a new perspective of extended kinship.

Finally, members of the local church must be ready for the confrontational dimension of the kinship ecclesiology where conflicts are not avoided but faced headlong (Francis 2013: §226). Contrary to this is a certain interpretation of the communio ecclesiology that "ultimately underwrites ecclesial colorblindness, a vision of church unity predicated upon an impossible unseeing of difference" (Reynolds 54). The truth is that some conflicts can never be solved, but the tension that they create can be resolved when frankly addressed from the perspective of the gospel and the love for one another in the one Family of God. Ultimately, the reality of interrelationship in kinship ecclesiology means that each one and everyone is affected by any (in)action that either improves or diminishes life in the church.

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ARTICLE

Putting the Dutch Reformed Church in its Place: A Suggestion for Being a Parochial Missional Church

Dieter de Bruin

Abstract

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa faces challenges due to rapid demographic shifts that reduce the proportion of traditional Afrikaner members and threaten the financial viability of its ministries. Historically, the DRC has relied on geographical congregational boundaries to define membership. However, recent policies have shifted towards individual choice and non-geographical affiliations. This study investigates whether rediscovering congregational boundaries can empower the DRC to fulfil its missional calling in a diversifying South Africa, emphasizing parochial ecclesiology grounded in the Word and Sacrament. Employing autoethnography, this research integrates personal reflections from the author's experience as a student minister with theological analysis, drawing on postfoundational practical theology, missional theology and confessional writings. The study finds that the DRC's move away from geographical boundaries prioritizes individual choice over communal responsibility. A parochial approach, emphasizing local congregations as sacred spaces for all within a defined area, could realign the DRC with its missional identity by reimagining church buildings as central to sacramental ministry and welcoming diverse populations as neighbours. Re-embracing geographical boundaries presents a pathway for the DRC to fulfil its missional calling by fostering inclusive sacramental communities and challenging the church to address historical divisions and pursue practical sacramental unity. Future studies should investigate how such a model can be effectively implemented in South Africa's complex sociohistorical context.

Keywords: Missional theology, Parish, Dutch Reformed Church, Theology of Place, Liturgical theology

Introduction

These reflections are inspired by a few occasions. The first draft of this paper was written as a memorandum for my colleagues to reflect on a specific ministry situation in the church. Second, it was delivered as a paper at a conference that reflected on the 200-year commemoration of the first synod held by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Kruger and Van Der Merwe, 2017, p.1). The conference reflected on the past, present, and future of the Church in South Africa. As such, this article bears something of a dual nature: on the one hand, it is a historical draft as it reflects on how to be a specific Dutch Reformed Church in the South African context, but on the other hand, it also wants to contribute to how Dutch Reformed Church congregations might be churches in the South African future.

The research question guiding this reflection is: Could the rediscovery of congregational boundaries be a way for the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to live out its missional calling in South Africa?

Describing the Background

The kernel of this research question was born when I was a student minister or chaplain of the Dutch Reformed Church at a tertiary institution in the early 2000s, during a period of rapid demographic shift among students. Within a decade, the number of white Afrikaner students (and thus potential Dutch Reformed Church members) dwindled to a marginal level. As a minister, together with the structures that oversaw this ministry, I was faced with a practical theological (and, of course, financial!) decision. Will this ministry continue or cease to exist? If so, how would it do so? It continued under the guise of what would initially be called a multicultural ministry and later simply an English ministry. The institution and its residents are spread across a wide area of the city. While worship services were initially held on the main campus, they were later moved to a church (where I was called a minister) that was relatively close to some residences but not within walking distance. Students who were not close to the church were transported (at a considerable expense) to the English service. This service was held concurrently with another service in Afrikaans.

This short vignette does not delve into the intricacies and nuances of ministry. Even here, in outline form, it can evoke – and indeed did evoke – critical questions, such as: Why have separate Afrikaans and English services? Why could the students be transported to a central worship gathering when decentralized worship gatherings could be held? Why bother establishing a ministry among students who would not traditionally associate with the mainline church when many other churches also minister on campus(es)? Perhaps the question I most often heard was, “Why minister at great expense to people who are not our members?”

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At the end of 2024, when the *Kerkwees 200* (Being Church 200) conference, celebrating and reflecting on the two hundredth anniversary of the first synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, was held, South Africa's demographic change progressed rapidly. Most Dutch Reformed Churches find themselves in a position where demographic changes have resulted in the fact that within their boundaries, people of "Nether Dutch" (the literal translation of the "Nederduits" in the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk) descent are dwindling, and as a result, their membership and the financial viability of their ministries in those areas are decreasing.

Methodology

From the personal reflections that this article opens with, it can be surmised that this research was conducted within the register of autoethnography (Ellis 2006). However, I also strive to bring my story reflections into conversation with as much theological rigor as possible (Grant 2023). I also draw on Müller's postfoundational practical theology book (Müller 2004, 2005, 2009, 2011), from which I believe that research and practice emerge from a particular context and theological perspective, yet point to other contexts. I shared my contextual and personal involvement with the research questions. I will now briefly share my theological convictions and axioms that I will bring to this research question.

We will take as the departure point the DRC's own self-understanding of its missional calling as encapsulated in Article 53 of its church order (Dutch Reformed Church 2019):

The mission of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is to grant life and fullness to the world, and the church is in service of God's mission.

Through the Word and Spirit, God gathers a congregation to Himself. Through this congregation,

- God causes his Word to be proclaimed,
- God constitutes communion of the saints out of all nations
- God causes ministry to the world in need,
- God causes his command to protect the creation and life of being visibly expressed and
- God's justice and reconciliation. Thus, he causes his kingdom to arrive.
- The missional church ministers the gospel in all its dimensions to people who are ignorant of it or are alienated from it.
- Every congregation is a missional congregation, and every member of the congregation is a missionary.

I am in accordance with the calling expressed by the Church in many ways. First, I consider the liturgical assembly a privileged site for such reflections. (Lathrop 2007; Rienstra 2019; De Bruin 2024b). Second, as the DRC affirmed, it is an insoluble unity

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of Word and Sacrament (NG Kerk 2023: 237). Related to this supposition is the fact that a real analogical extension of this liturgy is possible, where practices related to the celebration of the sacramental assembly are not celebrations of the sacraments as such, but rather part of the "Liturgy after the Liturgy" (Bria 1996; Mikoski 2009: 265–72). In addition, where liturgical assemblies of words and sacraments exist, an ordained ministry must exist. (De Bruin 2024a). Thirdly, I will take it as axiomatic that, to be truly inclusive, the DRC must take as its point of departure that "Only pure geography encompasses all without exception" (Milbank 2008: 124). And perhaps the most controversial in our denomination, that

> *The real, universal Church is found paradoxically in one place, within one circumscribed boundary and in one sacred, consecrated building, for very good theological reasons: only in one specific place can one erect a building which, as Maximus the Confessor taught, images at once the cosmos, the human person, and the transition of human history from old to new covenant through to the eschaton. (Milbank 2008: 125)*

I also proceed with the four helpful movements of Browning's *Fundamental Practical Theology* (1996). The introduction and background of these reflections include a brief exercise in "Descriptive Theology". In the following sections and in the spirit of Browning's "Historical Theology", I provide a brief historical overview of the Dutch Reformed Church's thinking and practices regarding congregational boundaries and membership In line with Browning's "Systematic Theology", I briefly reflect on the Dutch Reformed Church's Missional Theology and the development of place within this theology. In the "Strategic Practical Theology" section, I briefly suggest how parochial ecclesiology can help the Dutch Reformed Church fulfil its missional calling in South Africa.

A Brief History of Congregational Boundaries and Membership in the Dutch Reformed Church

According to Cilliers (2006: 45), the Dutch Reformed Church has taken congregational boundaries as an objective measure to determine membership in congregations.

In 1994 (NG Kerk 1994: 288–90), the system changed insofar as, even though geographical boundaries still indicate the primary area of the ministry, it was possible for members of one church, who for *bona fide* reasons would like to become a member of another congregation, to do so after both church councils of the congregation that the member will be leaving and the congregation that the member will join have conducted a formal investigation and approved the fact. Exceptions would be possible, but discretion is not left to the members' arbitrary will.

In 2002 (NG Kerk 2002: 307–8), the policy regarding congregational boundaries was still geographical, insofar as the geographical area is understood as the area

where the congregation accepts the institutional responsibility to promote the kingdom of God in every sphere. The choice of which congregation to join is primarily the member's responsibility.

Regarding what exactly is meant by membership, the General Synod (NG Kerk 2002: 311) provides the following conceptual explanation: the term church member or member indicates a specific bond between a congregation and an individual, whereby the congregation of Jesus Christ accepts the individual as part of that congregation's covenantal relationship with the Triune God, and whereby the individual participates in the service of the congregation to God, fellow human beings, and creation.

When a report on the missional nature of the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk 2013: 210) was approved, non-geographical church planting was strongly advocated. It avers that church planting among people whose lives are determined more by this network culture than by their geographical location has become an urgent necessity. Thus, the Dutch Reformed Church must reconsider this matter, extending beyond the boundaries of congregations, circuits and synods. The existence of congregational boundaries has been abolished for all practical purposes; the General Synod should now also *adopt this as a policy stance.* This could lead to new energy sources and a new workforce. The importance of church planting and theological reflection should also be addressed appropriately in theological education.

The matter of circuits and regional synods *was* eventually reconsidered, and in 2023 (NG Kerk 2023: 10–11), it was confirmed that congregations could procedurally change their affiliation to a non-geographically determined synod. Congregations in some regional synods can move into a non-geographically circumscribed circuit.

These snapshots of the decisions made by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church reveal a clear trajectory. Initially, objective geographic boundaries were the primary means of determining membership in the Dutch Reformed Church Congregations. In 1994, it became possible for members to change congregations, but this was still subject to approval by the affected congregation. Decisive steps were taken in 2002. The responsibility for determining membership shifted from the church councils to the members themselves. By 2013, it was stated that congregational boundaries had been *passed* and their demise had to be ratified. The shift was from an objective measure of membership in congregations that were geographically proscribed to the free choice of individual members.

Missional Theology and Congregational Boundaries within the Dutch Reformed Church

Significantly, the context in which the call was made for congregational boundaries to be formally abolished was part of a defining report on the Church's missional nature (NG Kerk 2013: 202–14).

The missional church is rooted in the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, which posits that mission originates in the nature of God. This understanding emphasises that God the Father sends the Son, and both the Father and the Son send the Spirit, culminating in the church's sending into the world. The Church, therefore, is not merely a community that engages in a mission; it is defined by its identity as a sent community that embodies the mission of God. This perspective highlights that the Church is called the image of God, the body of Christ and the dwelling place of the Spirit, representing and extending God's love as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom of God (Guder and Barrett 1998: 1–16; Roxburgh, Boren and Priddy 2009: sect. God's dream for the world; Franke 2020: 31–60; Knoetze 2024: 236–8).

Of special importance for our discussion here is the fact that missional scholars and the missional report adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church stress that the church and congregations are formed to be these signs, instruments, and foretastes of God's kingdom through a specific dynamic. Pat Keifert (2006: 37), a very influential voice in the South-African missional conversation, writes:

> *In this new Missional Era, this time of the missional church, congregations that are faithful, effective, and efficient will be part of the transforming mission. They will be transformed by the mission – called, gathered, and centred in Word and sacrament, and sent into the mission of God in daily life. (My emphasis)*

Missional Ministry in a Networked Society

To give effect to this calling to be gathered, formed, and sent into the world, the report on missional ecclesiology adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk 2013: 210) emphasized that a new approach to church planting is imperative. It averred that church planting has become urgent among people whose lives are shaped more by this network culture than by their geographical location. This means that the Dutch Reformed Church must reconsider this matter beyond the boundaries of congregations, circuits and synods. According to the report, this was necessary because South Africa displayed an increasing resemblance to a "network society", where place was seen as less important than "flow", where the flow of information, capital, images and the mobility of people define society. The report of the Dutch Reformed Church explicitly wants the church to learn from the Church of England's *Mission-Shaped Church* (Archbishops' Council 2004: xv), which contended that:

> *Communities are now multi-layered, compromising neighborhoods, usually with permeable boundaries, and a wide variety of networks, ranging from the relatively local to global. It is clear that the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church's strategy to deliver incarnational missions. However, the existing parochial system alone cannot fully deliver the underlying mission.*

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Thus, accepting the Church of England's invitation, the Dutch Reformed Church's report encourages congregations to create space for new expressions within the existing system. This is a mixed approach (the Archbishop of Canterbury speaks of a "mixed economy") (Müller 2009; Dunlop 2025) of congregations that function within the familiar framework of parish boundaries and new possibilities that operate within other types of networks.

In due course, the approach where congregational members could relate to churches based on geographical proximity was also extended to the congregational level, where congregations could relate to circuits and synods on a non-geographical basis (NG Kerk 2023: 10–11).

The Parish Reasserts Itself

Trenchant critiques have been offered of the theology of the Church of England's Mission-shaped Ministry report (e.g. Davison and Milbank 2011; A. Milbank, 2023). Here, I focus on Milbank 2008, which critiques the Fresh Expressions movement, particularly its approach to establishing churches within specific demographic groups.[1]

He argues that the idea of the church planting itself in the fragmented and superficial spaces of modern society, rather than inviting people to "come to church". Milbank views this planting of churches as a rejection of the essence of the Church itself. Instead of embedding itself in existing social networks that reinforce a divided and self-interested society, the church should challenge these networks, which foster relationships based on personal appeal or utility, and promote a more unified, transformative community.

Against the acceptance of a network "society" as a given, Milbank (2008: 124) makes the following radical statement: "Only pure geography encompasses all without exception." Churches are not defined by language, culture, income groups, generations, or religious or religious institutional affiliations. In this statement, I find the core of an alternative way of being missional for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

The Dutch Reformed Church as a "Parochial" Church

The Dutch Reformed Church differs from the Church of England in two respects. First, unlike the Church of England, the Dutch Reformed Church was never (although the

1 One could perhaps riposte that Milbank does not come from the Reformed tradition, and that is true. Equally, one could also say the same of the Mission-Shaped Church report. Both Milbank and the authors come from the Anglican tradition, listening to his counter voice to the Anglican Fresh Expressions theology could be a way for the DRC to be self-critical.

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quip was often made that the Dutch Reformed Church was the National Party – the governing party during apartheid – at prayer) and certainly is not now an established church that has the mandate and responsibility for curing the souls of everybody in the nation today. Secondly, it is no secret that the Dutch Reformed Church has not seen itself as a Church that wanted to welcome "all". The church provided theological justification for apartheid. This policy was officially changed in 1986. In its mission, it organized and established different "daughter" churches along racial lines (Boesak 2008).

Notwithstanding these substantial differences, one could attach a measure of parochialism to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Although the 2013 report states that congregational boundaries no longer function practically within the Dutch Reformed Church, it is still formally the case that every square centimetre of South Africa is part of a Dutch Reformed Church congregation. Similarly, the country was divided into circuits and regional synods. For much of the NG Church's history, the boundaries between congregations, circuits and synods have been fixed (Van Der Merwe 2021).

Second, a congregation's geographical area is understood as the area where it accepts institutional responsibility to promote the Kingdom of God in every sphere.

The working hypothesis that I would like to advance is that if we were to assume that the way the Kingdom of God could be advanced in every sphere by a missional church would be to be called, formed around the word and sacrament, and sent into the world to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom. Could it then be a way of integrity for the Dutch Reformed Church to live out its missional calling in South Africa for congregations to invite *all* within its boundaries to be formed around the word and sacrament to be sent out into the world? Alternatively, could it be that the Dutch Reformed Church takes responsibility for itself so that everybody within a proscribed area has access to the Ministry of the Word and the sacraments?

In other words, the Dutch Reformed Church pursues a path of retrieval, that, contrary to its 2013 report, considers congregational boundaries and church buildings as places for celebrating the Word and Sacraments. But the boundaries and buildings that are inclusive, rather than exclusive.

Confessions and Systematic Theological Implications

In the following section, I turn to confessions to find a starting point for this question. I do not problematize the confessions from a historical or even dogmatic perspective here – I use them as a heuristic guideline to speak about a specifically reformed understanding of the Ministry of a Local Congregation.

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The Belgic Confession (1561) in Article 27 states, on the one hand, the universality of the Church:

And so his holy church is not confined, bound,
or limited to a certain place or certain people. But it is spread and dispersed
throughout the world, though still joined and united in heart and will,
in one and the same spirit, by the power of faith.

Paradoxically, however, as we have already noted, this scattered church worldwide will always be found in a local concrete form.

If I may then, for a moment, juxtapose the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) (Lord's Day 21, Question 54 and Answer) and the subsequent statement: "What do you believe concerning the holy, Catholic, Christian Church? Answer:

I believe that the Son of God, through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community, I am and always will be a living member."

Could it be that within the concreteness of a defined geographical area, a local congregation can see the entire human race and the environment in which it must flourish, as it manifests in that area, as part of its ministry?

For several years, it has been the case that anyone within or outside the boundaries of a Dutch Reformed congregation could choose to participate without being officially prevented on the basis of race or any other characteristic. For me, the missional question goes further as it asks, "Who does the church choose to actively and intentionally welcome as part of the congregation?"

In this case, the member who is primarily responsible for choosing (by implication) which congregation he or she, and where applicable, their family, will join, and then, by implication, the congregation that takes the choosing individual as the starting point for the focus of its own ministry.

Alternatively, put differently in line with this argument, does the congregation have a caregiving responsibility only towards the people who have chosen to become and remain members of the congregation? Alternatively, does this responsibility extend further to other areas? If so, where would that responsibility lie, and what would it entail?

Let us take the marks by which the church is recognized as a point of departure "when the church preaches the gospel purely, administers the sacraments purely as Christ instituted them, and uses church discipline to punish sins" (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

It cannot be inferred from this that the only responsibility of the local church is to preach the Word, administer the sacraments purely and apply discipline; in other words, that this is all that a congregation needs to do. According to this classic formulation, preaching, sacraments and discipline are indispensable to a true Christian church. I follow another Anglican theologian, Paul Avis (2005: 19–20), when he argues (as I cannot here, alas) that the Ministry of Word, Sacrament and pastoral care are not only "central to the Church's purpose" but that they "comprise the mission of the mission of the Church exclusively and without remainder".

What is at stake here is a shift from the traditional understanding of membership, or at least the relationship between membership and the church's ministry. Within a defined geographical area, everyone and everything within that area is seen as people whom the congregation should serve.

In an earlier study, Milbank constructively explained the tension between the universal and the particular. In the context of another argument, he contends that agape-love, which in later Christian usage was mistakenly used to refer to universal, disinterested love, is actually, according to the Christian tradition up to at least Aquinas, interpreted as "neighbourly love", and this neighbourly love means "a preferential developed affinity with us, as well as those strangers with whom we suddenly we are bonded together whether we like it or not, by instances of distress, shared experience of preferred comfort" (Milbank 2003: 39).

Milbank (2003: 54) is surely right that we have a "limited range of intense capacity for affection and attention". In the context of Milbank's argument, this contingent and contained affection is due to a natural impulse to save our nearest and dearest from danger. Analogously, congregations have limited resources and are constrained by real constraints.

Clearly, congregations are not *everything for everyone*. Therefore, the question is not whether the congregation's ministry and care should be limited in some way, but in what specific way it should be proscribed.

A voluntary approach would be to limit the ministry to those who choose to associate with the congregation for reasons of denominational affiliation or resonance with the congregation's cultural style, or to have a minister (and in many respects, this would be inevitable). Another approach would be to discern to whom God is sending the congregation and how the congregation can be incarnated within that demographic or community setting. Both of the afore mentioned approaches is in many ways a given, but adding to the cultural, and theological approaches one could ad that that the Dutch Reformed Church should not shake off but take up its "parochial mantle" (Van Der Merwe 2021) with humility and with steadfastness.

Paas (2016: 194–95) provides a descriptive typology for understanding how churches position themselves within a context of subjectivization, based on three axes. The first axis is Private versus Public visibility, which contrasts an

invisible, subjective gathering with the church as a distinct, public body. The second is Consumption versus Sacrament, where the church is positioned either as purely instrumental and dependent on member choice or as having a non-negotiable structure that is sacramentally transparent to God's future. The third axis contrasts the anti-institutional ideal of Community (organism) with the necessary structure of the Institution (organization).

The idea is not to give a prescriptive, unrealistic goal to pursue where the Dutch Reformed Church needs to be everything to everyone in South Africa, but to form the missional imagination of congregations, to accept a different kind of responsibility for the places in which they were planted. This entails an invitation to move away from an overemphasis on the private nature of church participation to emphasize the public nature, to move toward a sacramental understanding of church, rather than an absolutisation of free choice, and to take seriously the institutional nature of the church.

Another disclaimer might be in order; the intention of churches to be present in the community to engage in creative gatherings and forms of community should not be condemned as such. Affording these gatherings and churches the status of churches is, however, not necessary. These gatherings could be seen as a manifestation of the liturgy after the Liturgy, or in another sense, continuations of this liturgy.

Strategic Parochial Ventures

This entails two interrelated reforms: On the "what" front, it would mean that every congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church would take its core identity seriously as assemblies of Word and sacrament, in a word *catholic* churches; and indeed take the prophetic warning of Von Allmen (1965: 314) deeply to heart: "But if … we are unwilling to obey Jesus Christ through the restoration of the weekly Eucharist … then the day will soon come when even what we have will be taken from us (cf. Mark 4.25 par)." Related to this reform, the invitation would be for the DRC to reimagine its church buildings not as merely functional spaces for ministry but as "one place, a sacred place, where the church can gather and make bold statements about its mission and faith without compromising its fundamentals or being ashamed" (McAlpine 2011: Where We Need to Be section).

If the above statements guide what DRC Churches in South Africa could be, the "for whom" question is equally fraught.

So far, we have touched on, but have not addressed, the elephant in the room. On the one hand, we have emphasized that the Dutch Reformed Church is closely tied to Afrikaners through its geographical responsibility to South Africa. Historian Ruhan Fourie is correct in stating that the history of Afrikaners is also the history of the NG Church, which, particularly in the aftermath of the South African War (1899–1902), identified itself as a "volkskerk" (people's church) for Afrikaners. This involved

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mutual identity formation, in which the NG Church aligned itself with the spiritual and material fate of its Afrikaner members. Simultaneously, the institution played a leading role in shaping the Afrikaner identity.

In our reflections so far, this raises a very legitimate question that the Cas Wepener (2025) Scholar at the University of Stellenbosch poses to the Dutch Reformed Church in its official Newspaper, *Die Kerkbode*: "Why do church services still not reflect South Africa's great diversity?" Implicit in this question is a value judgment. In South Africa, unilingual and single-ethnic churches are anachronistic, and the Dutch Reformed Church stands out. Perhaps a counterquestion could be elicited from this perspective: Is it always and in all circumstances wrong for a congregation to minister to people in their mother tongue, in this case, Afrikaans, and for congregations to be constituted by predominantly one ethnic group, in this case, Afrikaners?

Milbank's exposition helped me navigate the complex position of the Dutch Reformed Church (2003: 54).

> *The Samaritan is also the neighbor, and Jesus is clearly not teaching us to respect and help strangers only as strangers. Nevertheless, one should interpret the parable to mean, in addition and inversely, that the daily neighbor is also the arriving stranger through time … and this reading duly qualifies, without cancelling, the main point that has just been made. This specificity of given proximity, which is also an endlessly surprising gift of renewed contingent arrival, is our only creative way to participate in God's equal love for all.*

It was through contingent and perhaps providential intertwining with the Afrikaner people over time that the DRC became rooted in South Africa. It is a fact that these places are becoming more demographically diverse, with different people from various language groups and cultures arriving contingently. The invitation for the DRC is to welcome these "strangers" as true neighbours. This welcome specifically makes provisions for welcoming them to the ministry of words and sacraments. The question would immediately arise: "But what form should this welcoming take?"" Would this not be a platitudinous statement with which no one could disagree? Perhaps. However, the axiomatic proscriptions above (one consecrated building in a specific bounded area) would give particular focus to the DRC.

First, it would not entail planting a new non-geographical congregation. Second, this does not mean hosting an additional non-sacramental service in a language other than Afrikaans in the same building. It would also not entail planting a new independent congregation in the same building. It is instructive to return to the image of the Parable of the Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), which is set in a context where the once dominant "Judeans" find the Samaritans as "strangers" on their geographical doorstep. The Dutch Reformed church could discover them not only as strangers

but as neighbours, and to strengthen an allegorical point, perhaps, being sacrificial in caring for them, *as* innkeepers. If I reflect on the days when I tried to minister, this would have been the theology that could have informed my ministry. Was it necessary to provide the opportunity for students to be ministered to in a gathering of Word and sacrament together with their fellow Afrikaans students, or at least in the same building with them? Perhaps not; however, it did seem that these strangers were inevitably on the doorstep of a territory where the DRC traditionally took responsibility for Dutch Reformed students. This "fresh expressions" impulse could have been more fully developed by engaging in "liturgy after the liturgy"" gatherings – eating together and socializing to discover the meaning of living together.

Taking this stance unavoidably confronts the church with the scandal of division in a painful way. This is perhaps one of the advantages of our approach. The ministry's missional focus would inevitably be to seek ways to practise sacramental repair.

Conclusion

I am convinced that (once again) taking seriously the concreteness of place in the form of geography and congregational boundaries, and all who live there, as a reference point and perhaps even a starting point for the congregational ministry, can help the Dutch Reformed Church, and perhaps other churches, wrestle with what, and how to be the church in their context.

Taking these points of departure seriously can challenge the Dutch Reformed Church as a collective in another way. On the one hand, it is to take up a renewed reflection on a theology of place (Niemandt 2019), but it would also invite the church to take *co-responsibility* for ministry in various *places* in South Africa. This would mean that resources are shared, allowing the Church to be "present in every place" (Foulger 2023) and not only in well-resourced areas or places with a strong representation of a particular demographic group. Again, it would be foolhardy to think that the DRC could do this alone, so the urgent task of ecumenical ministry becomes all the more pressing.

These reflections may seem dogmatically restrictive or prescriptive in nature. However, in a way, as with geographical boundaries for the congregational ministry, these conceptual boundaries can be freeing. First, there are certain things that we cannot and have not to do. Second we are given an almost endless opportunity to be South Africa, where place and geography have such a violent history (with the Group Areas Act, forced removals of people etc.). It may be precisely the place and concreteness of geographical boundaries where and how our congregations can be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

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ARTICLE

On the Gifting God: A Eucharistic Intervention in Missional Theology

Marthinus J. Havenga

Abstract

This article aims to offer an intervention in missional theology by considering how God is not only the one who sends us into the world, but also the one who welcomes us home at the Lord's Table, from where mission unfolds. It begins by turning to Athol Fugard's important 1969 play *Boesman and Lena*, which – amid the harrowing experience of exiled people on the move – includes a eucharistic scene in which the characters find solace in the sharing of dry bread and bitter tea. From here, the theme of alienation and not-at-homeness, not only evident in the play but pervasive across the world today, is examined in light of Augustine's insights into the human condition and the church's calling as a company of pilgrims and strangers. This leads to a consideration of missional theology and certain misunderstandings it can foster, which risk contributing to exhaustion and burnout. As a response, and returning to the motifs in *Boesman and Lena*, the article reflects on Gospel narratives and the witness of the early Church, showing how the God who sends is also the God who gifts, feeds, and shelters – meeting weary travellers on the road and equipping them for mission. To conclude, reference is made to how these insights have informed recent initiatives in ministerial formation among theological students in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Keywords: Missional theology, Eucharist, Athol Fugard, South Africa, Dutch Reformed Church

Boesman and Lena

Last year (2025) saw the passing of one of South Africa's most eminent writers and playwrights, Athol Fugard. Often hailed as the most-performed English-language playwright in the world after Shakespeare (see Manim 2019), Fugard had a long and deeply significant career that was marked by socially and politically engaged plays that continually challenged the status quo, while offering glimpses of a different future.

In this article – which will ultimately, within a larger conversation on hospitality, centre on the notion of the gifting God[1] – I will begin by revisiting one of Athol Fugard's most prominent plays from the years he lived and worked in what was then called Port Elizabeth, South Africa, during the 1960s. During this time, Fugard collaborated closely with fellow playwrights and actors such as John Kani and Winston Ntshona, who together organized themselves under the name of the *Serpent Players* (so called because they workshopped, rehearsed, and performed their plays in an old, abandoned reptile park just outside the city). The play I turn to is *Boesman and Lena*, a work conceptualized and first staged in 1969.

Performed, like much of Fugard's other work, on a bare stage with minimal props and theatrical trappings, the play presents the audience – and the reader of the play's script – with a couple, Boesman and Lena, from the so-called Coloured community, who are drifting across the Swartkops mudflats outside the city, with only a few torn possessions. Boesman and Lena, we come to learn, have been evicted, or rather forcibly removed, from their previous home and are now searching for a new place to stay. We thus find them on the road, in limbo.

Amidst this harrowing and deeply vulnerable situation – one that speaks of, and protests against, the inhumanity of the apartheid regime – another character appears: an old, nameless Xhosa man who also, like Boesman and Lena, seems to be aimlessly drifting around the mudflats. Despite Boesman's resistance, Lena calls him over to sit by the fire they have made, and in what follows, we are presented with the tense and fragile interactions between these three roving strangers.

The play – structured, like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in two mirroring acts – is ultimately marked by a sense of hopelessness. It speaks of entrapment within a brutal, unjust system, of lives suspended in suffering. And, as with *Waiting for Godot*, it ends without a clear resolution. Yet, this is not to say that the audience is not presented with brief moments of consolation, hope, and even beauty that unfold on stage. Amidst the desolation, there are at least two clear moments in which the characters – especially Lena and their guest – experience a momentary transfiguration of their current reality. In these instances, one could argue, a sort of homecoming[2] takes place that nourishes them both in the present and for the future. The first of these moments occurs when Lena begins to rhythmically clap, sing, and dance by the fire. The second – significant for what follows – comes toward the very end of Act 1, when Lena and their Xhosa guest share, as two wandering strangers,

1 For this notion on the gifting God, I am indebted to Robert Vosloo and an early, unpublished response he offered in 2013 to the Dutch Reformed Church's "Framework document on the missional nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church".

2 To reference words by Paul Celan, which served as inspiration for the opening track of U2's 1984 album, The Unforgettable Fire. See Aykroyd 2013.

a mug of bitter tea made on the fire and pieces of dry bread that have lain on the stage untouched until now. While sharing the tea and bread, Lena says: ‘As long as it doesn’t rain, it won’t be so bad. The blanket will help. Nights are long, but they don’t last forever. This wind will also get tired … Look at this mug … an old mug, hey. Bitter tea, a piece of bread … There, don’t waste time. It’s still warm [they drink and eat]’ (Fugard 1999: 224–5).

While Fugard largely moved away from the Christian faith of his upbringing and at times identified as a Tibetan Buddhist, it is often noted how his plays remained saturated with Christian and biblical imagery. In a review of one of his later works, *Playland* (1994), a theatre critic once remarked: “[Given the play’s] obsessive biblical references … you’d think the author was a devout churchgoer” (Herman 1994). This is arguably also true of a play such as *Boesman and Lena*. A wide array of biblical imagery is employed throughout the play, and the scene just described, in particular, carries unmistakable Christian – especially eucharistic – resonances. The way the tea and bread are offered and shared evokes the image of Holy Communion – the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist – through which two wandering strangers are not only physically nourished, but also, even if only for a moment, find inner hope and strength for the night and the road ahead (McDonald 2012: 75). According to Fugard himself this scene – with its ingredients of “the fire, the mug of tea, the bread” – could be regarded as “Lena’s Mass”, offering us a vignette of the “sacramental”, amidst the ruggedness and restlessness of the road (quoted in Wertheim 2000: 62).

Aliens and Exiles

Considering the introductory remarks on Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena*, I would like to explore in what follows the Eucharist as a site of shelter, nourishment, belonging, embrace, and perhaps even homecoming for weary strangers on the road. I especially want to do this as part of the conversation on missional theology and the missional church, which – while arguably being prominent in various parts of the world – has become central to the church I belong to and serve in, namely the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (see Marais 2017). Before turning, however, to missional theology and the Eucharist, I want to make a few comments on the reality Boesman and Lena find themselves in, that of wandering migrants, neither here nor there.

It is crucial to say, at this point, that the particularity of what is depicted in Fugard’s play – tied to the specific realities of South Africa’s horrendous past, a past which continues, of course, to have real and horrendous consequences in the present – cannot be overstated. Fugard is describing, and – through the mode of protest theatre – speaking out against a very specific and concrete situation in South Africa’s history that left, and continues to leave, many people in this country desolate,

without refuge or hope. Yet, those who study Fugard's work note that, while the particularity of his writing must be acknowledged and honoured, what he depicts on stage often transcends its historical and geographic specificity, speaking into our broader human experience. As Temple Hauptfleisch would say, Fugard's plays address 'universal themes through localized stories' (Hauptfleisch 1982: 10). This, perhaps, helps explain why, for decades, his works have been performed all over the world with a frequency close to Shakespeare's, as mentioned before.

It can accordingly be said that in witnessing the events surrounding Boesman, Lena, and their unnamed Xhosa companion on stage, we are confronted not only with experiences tied to specific historical and political realities (important as these are), but also with larger, more universal themes of dislocation, estrangement, and alienation. Much like in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the audience of *Boesman and Lena* is drawn into an experience of profound *not-at-homeness*, which arguably reaches beyond the immediate circumstances of *homelessness*. The characters in *Boesman and Lena* do not merely lack a place to sleep; they are vagrants, exiles, refugees, who are cut off from any enduring sense of belonging. This is a state of being many people around the world can arguably recognize today.

In their recent book *The Home of God*, Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz observe that we are currently – in our late-modern world – living through a profound 'crisis of home'. On a concrete level, this is evident in the millions of people around the globe who are migrants – people willingly or forcibly displaced from the places they once called home. Such displacement often leads, in the words of John Berger, to an experience where the "centres" of people's worlds are dismantled and transformed "into a lost, disorientated one of fragments" (Berger 1984: 57). Volf and McAnnally-Linz note that this sense of dislocation and alienation also extends beyond physical displacement. Across the world, even when people are at their so-called "homes", there seems in our time to be a general feeling of *not-at-homeness*, an estrangement from our environment, from others, from ourselves, and – perhaps – of any stable sense of meaning, identity and belonging (Volf and McAnnally-Linz 2022: 13). Ours is a world seemingly longing to belong but failing to do so.

Volf and McAnnally-Linz go on to note that while this heightened sense of alienation and dislocation – both physical and existential – is a defining feature of our present moment and calls for urgent responses, including theological ones (which their book seeks to offer), we should not overlook the fact that these feelings have, in many ways, always been part of the human condition. There seems to be, they write, an "abiding out-of-jointness to things, witnessed (but not exhausted) by the abiding disquietude of the human heart" (Volf and McAnnally-Linz 2022: 13). Some would even argue that the emotions conjured by a play such as Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* are intrinsic to human existence itself. One such voice – as hinted at by Volf and McAnnally-Linz's reference to the "disquietude of the human heart" – is, of

course, the fourth/fifth-century African bishop, Augustine of Hippo, the theologian of the *cor inquietum*, *par excellence*.

In *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (2019), James K. A. Smith observes that, for Augustine, human existence – at its very core – is marked by a sense of estrangement. We are, he believed, strangers to ourselves and to one another, wandering from the moment we are born until the day we die through a strange and estranging world in which we continually feel adrift. According to Augustine, Smith writes, “migration”, and the restlessness that accompanies it, are “encoded” in our DNA – both spatially and existentially (2019: 3). This is not a reality from which the Christian or the Church is exempt. We too, living East of Eden – what could be called, in the words of Heather Walton, *Not Eden* (Walton 2015) – must journey through the “sea of this world” (*mare huius saeculi*) as Augustine notes in multiple places (see e.g. Augustine 1988: 62), on the way to the *civitas Dei*, where we will find our final homecoming: a homecoming in which, as *The City of God* ends (in John Healey’s translation), “we shall rest and see”, and “we shall see and love”, and “we shall love and we shall praise” (Augustine 1968: 408). The Church, for Augustine, is therefore a *societas peregrina* – a society of pilgrims, a company of “aliens and exiles” (1 Pet. 2.11) under way (Claussen 1991: 48; Smith 2019: 51).

It is important to note that Augustine does not view the condition just described as one to be mourned. For it is precisely in the wilderness of this world – or, to borrow the imagery of *Boesman and Lena*, in the maze of the mudflats through which we, and all humanity with us, are moving – that the triune God is present and at work, bringing about God’s redemptive purposes. Augustine believed that *salus* – salvation, healing, restoration – is being wrought by God all around us, and part of the calling of the *societas peregrina* is to perceive and to share in this unfolding work of divine grace (Harrison 2006: 238–64).

Missional Misconceptions

It is, then, precisely this insight – that the triune God is not absent from the world but actively at work within it, that God’s rhythms of providential grace reverberate throughout creation and invite our participation, as Augustine suggests in Book 6 of *De Musica* (2002) – that the missional church movement has helped bring to the fore again, especially here in South Africa. While in other parts of the world the missional conversation has, perhaps, responded to perceived processes of secularization (see Guder 2017: 223), here in South Africa – and particularly in the Dutch Reformed Church – the focus has very much been on overcoming the church’s former and present isolation (Niemandt 2017; Schoeman 2020). The call has indeed been for the church to open itself up – not only to its place in the mudflats it is surrounded by – but to the realisation that the *missio Dei*, which someone like Augustine gestures

toward in a work such as *De Trinitate* (with its focus on the *processio Dei*; Baik 2011: 50) – is present in these mudflats, further and deeper than we can begin to imagine.

I think we cannot be thankful enough for the role the missional conversation has played in the Dutch Reformed Church in helping it break out of the enclaves that once marked its existence. Today, it is arguably rare to walk into a congregation that is not – in one way or another – asking: Where is God active in the community and the world around us? What is God up to out there? And how can we join in that action? This posture, I believe, has become central to the identity of many congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church. Yet, reflecting on the tea and bread scene in *Boesman and Lena* and the eucharistic images it evokes, I want to draw attention to a misconception that could potentially, in my view, take hold in congregations when these essential missional questions are asked.

For some, the emphasis on the *missio Dei* as something happening "out there" in the world, with us called to join in, can inadvertently lead to an externalization or displacement of God, as if God is not firstly *here* but *there*, with the church then having to figure out how to get to *there* so as to join-in what God is doing. In Reggie McNeal's book *Missional Renaissance*, he writes that the church always lags behind what the Spirit is doing in the world; "not wanting to be left behind," he writes, "missional followers of Jesus are running" trying to "catch up" (2009: 36).

At a basic level, this is of course true – as one of the missionaries in the acclaimed South African novelist Elsa Joubert's *Missionaris* realizes: the church does not take God to the world; God is already there and active, and we are called to join where God is (Joubert 1988: 310). But where this can become problematic, I think, especially when this displacement takes place, is the following: firstly, when it begins to seem as though it depends on our ingenuity and dexterity to find out and join in on what God is doing. Here, the conversation very quickly moves from the *missio Dei* to *our* mission of trying to join the *missio Dei* – ironically making it less about God and more about us. Secondly, and especially important for my contribution here, this idea of constantly trying to catch up to where God is and what God is doing (lest – to quote McNeal – we "find [ourselves] on the other side of a divide that renders [us] irrelevant to the movement of God in the world" [McNeal 2009: 17]) can become utterly exhausting – especially in what Byung-Chul Han, the German-Korean philosopher, calls our 'burnout society', where everyone is called, in Han's words, to be "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Han 2015: 8).

In synodical meetings of the Dutch Reformed Church, it is repeatedly noted how many ministers are currently booked off due to burnout. This, I think, should raise the question of whether – even if only lingering in the back of ministers' minds – the pressure to constantly see and join in where God is and what God is doing "out there" might be contributing to ministers feeling worn out and depleted. After all, who among us can – by our own ability – keep pace with God? Constantly feeling the

pressure to build towers to get to where God is, may not only be problematic (as we see in Gen. 11.1-9) but also utterly tiring.

The God Who Encounters Us

Here, it might be helpful to turn to Scripture and how it speaks about God's activity in and toward the world. What can, of course, be affirmed is that the picture Scripture paints is indeed one of a God who is active everywhere – as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the whole cosmos. The triune God, in whom, through whom, and for whom all things exist (Rom. 11.36), is indeed constantly bringing about redemption and new life throughout creation. The story of the Bible *is* the story of the *missio Dei*, of God's mission in and towards all that is.

That being said, what we also find in Scripture is not necessarily a picture of people frantically running after God, trying to play catch-up with Christ and the Spirit – to borrow McNeal's words. Rather, again and again, we see the triune God as the one who sees, seeks out, and meets people where they are – ever since that first question to Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3.9).

While space does not allow for a full exploration of this theme across the whole of Scripture, I want to focus briefly here on Christ, the Incarnate Word who came to his own, and his encounters with people – especially after the resurrection, as the Church begins to take shape. In the captivating vignettes from John 20 onwards, for example, we indeed witness the risen Christ constantly *encountering* his followers, not the other way around (Balthasar 1990: 252): joining them, welcoming them, embracing them, breathing the Spirit onto them, speaking peace over them and, all-importantly, sharing meals with them, as they are trying to make sense of the resurrection and its implications for their lives and for the world. We can think of Mary at the tomb, or the disciples in the locked upper room, or of Thomas in his doubt – and especially of the disciples and Peter at the Sea of Tiberias.

In this vignette written down in John 21.1-14, we find the disciples who have seen and spent time with the resurrected Christ, yet who seem – almost like Boesman and Lena – caught in a moment of limbo, not knowing what to do or where to go. Instead of being out there, going where Christ is and fishing for people as they were called to do (Mt. 4.19), they are somewhat aimlessly fishing for actual fish, as they did in their previous lives. But then Christ *appears to them* on the shore (as is emphasized in the text; see Ford 2021: 530), with a fire already burning, cooking fish for breakfast to be served with bread. In this moment, we meet – once again, as so many times in the Gospels – Christ as the hospitable "host", "cook", and "server" who welcomes and feeds them, and does so with abundance (Ford 2021: 532). And it is precisely out of this tender moment of hospitality, where Christ meets them and not the other way around, that the church's mission is born: as the disciples are fed by Christ, Peter is

commissioned not only to tend to others, but also, importantly, to feed them – that is, to embody the loving care and hospitality of Christ in the church and in the world.

I've often been fascinated, when reading the narratives in John 20 and 21, by their temporal dimension – specifically, the suggestion that each new encounter occurs after a set sequence of days. One could posit that this timing reflects something of the rhythm of the early Johannine community, a community very much defined as a "community of practice" (Ong 2016: 101–23), in which these texts emerged and were read. The Johannine community would have gathered at least weekly for worship and the celebration of the Eucharist. As the Didache, for example, instructed early Christians: "Come together on the Lord's Day, break bread and give thanks" (Deiss 1967: 77). In this light, one can imagine a continuity between the risen Christ who, after a rhythmic sequence of days, encounters, welcomes and feeds his disciples in the biblical text, and the risen Christ who, after a rhythmic sequence of days, encounters, welcomes and feeds the early church community in the weekly worship service – not with fish and bread, but with bread and wine, his body (cf. Aune 1972: 113).

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, we know that worship – and especially the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which was highly liturgical from the earliest days – was absolutely central to the lives and ministry of early Christians (Cullmann 1976: 86–7). The key practices of the early church, as recorded in Acts 2.42, were that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer". Especially the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Winfield Bevins writes, was an ongoing "celebration of God's holy presence in, with, and among them as they came together" (Bevins 2019: 62). It was a moment not to do, but to receive – to wait for and be welcomed by Christ at the table, to be fed, and, as strangers and exiles on the road, to experience anew, as Graham Ward (2009: 187) writes, "life, nourishment, and nurture". As people *of the Way*, they – as the early church – were also constantly *on the way*, a *societas peregrina*, a company of pilgrims and strangers – who needed to hear, see and taste that God, in Christ and through the Spirit, was not only "there", somewhere active in the world, which they knew, but also "here". And that – as Andrew Murray notes in his reflections on the Lord's Supper – Christ eagerly desired to eat with them, to share their company and that of the world (Murray 1897: 25). Indeed, in and through the Eucharist, they could know that the "gifts of God" were given to the "people of God".

It was then also – just as with Peter – out of this encounter with Christ, an encounter marked by hospitality, care, and nourishment, that the church was sent into the world: to be and to give what had been received. As Hans Urs von Balthasar (1988: 105) writes, in the early church, it was out of the drama of the celebration of the Eucharist that the drama of Christian life and mission emerged. Or, as Alexander Schmemann puts it, "the liturgy of mission" is made possible by the Eucharist (Schmemann 1973: 46). Or, to use the words of Rowan Williams, the "sacrament of

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the bread and the wine", where people encounter – or rather are encountered by – "God the giver", points back to what he calls "the sacrament of the brother/sister", thereby enabling and equipping people to serve the other (Williams 2021: 12). This is why, from early on, the Eucharistic gathering would end with the words *Ite, missa est* – "Go, you are sent". I think it is deeply significant that the word used in many traditions for a Eucharistic service – *mass* (*mis* in Afrikaans) – comes from *missa*, one of the final words in the eucharistic liturgy, which means to be sent. For – it could be said – it is from the *mass* that mission begins, where God meets us, feeds us, and sends us back into the world.

In Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, we find strangers, exiles, and vagrants drifting around the Swartkops mudflats; and – at least in the play – their tired sense of displacement, of not-at-homeness, remains unresolved. Yet, first through singing and dancing, and later through seeing, taking, and eating the dry bread and bitter tea, the wilderness they find themselves in momentarily becomes a haven, a home – making survival through the night and what lies ahead, including the hopeful visions Lena holds onto, possible. In our church – which I believe is committed to following the triune God wherever we are sent – I think it is, at the moment, essential to focus not only on the God who sends but also on the gifting God who feeds: the God who first welcomes and feeds Abraham through Melchizedek before Abraham welcomes the strangers at Mamre; the God who gives manna in the wilderness, who turns water into wine, who waits on the beach with fish and bread, who gives his own body as food for the hungry and thirsty. To recognize where God is present and active in the world – and to join in this action – we also need to recognize where God is present and active in our midst. We need, together with others – any strangers or pilgrims who are also tired and weary – to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34.8), so that this goodness can be identified and shared in the world. In a time when not only we, but everyone, seems to be burned out, this is perhaps the task of the moment: to share God's goodness, God's beauty, God's rest with the world, all things we receive with open hands when sitting at the Lord's Table.

Ministerial Formation

To conclude, it can be said that – on a practical level – this is something that can, and perhaps should, already be communicated to, and above all experienced by, students preparing for the ministry. For many years, the missional impetus – closely tied to so-called missional capacities that need to be acquired – has been at the heart of ministerial formation in the Dutch Reformed Church. Alongside their academic training, students have been encouraged to engage in missional activities, culminating in a fully-fledged missional project in their final year before ordination. The message was simple: go out, find somewhere God is at work where the church is

not, and then design and undertake something to address this reality. This has, to be sure, led to wonderful initiatives, and – as a church – we are thankful for how God has called and inspired students to discern where they can join God's mission, often in very unexpected places.

At the same time, this invitation to initiate something missional has sometimes brought with it a measure of uncertainty and even stress for students who – especially when younger – are very much part of what Jonathan Haidt (2024) has described as the anxious generation. Over the past few years, I have often heard questions such as: What would qualify as a missional project? Is what I am doing missional enough (or – perhaps even more pointedly – missional to begin with)? I have been trying to do something, but it does not seem to be working – what now? Am I poorly discerning where God is at work? At times, it has seemed that students who should be energized to enter congregations and help mobilise often-tired congregants were themselves already weary, even before they had properly begun.

It is precisely in response to this that, while – importantly – keeping the training's missional focus and continuing to encourage missional initiatives, we have sought to anchor our ministerial formation programme in the four basic Christian practices Rowan Williams discusses in his small booklet, *Being Christian* (2014) – a booklet our group of facilitators worked through with students, also in preparation for Williams' visit to South Africa at the end of 2024. The four practices are: baptism (where we learn, and continue to be reminded, who we are in Christ), the reading of Scripture (where we listen for and to the voice of the living God who speaks), prayer (where we place our lives and that of the world in God's hands), and – significant for this contribution – the Eucharist (where we are invited to sit at God's table and, as those who have been fed, are sent back into the world).

After about two years, we now look back, astonished by the way these practices – particularly the focus on the Eucharist – have shaped students' pastoral imagination, and engagement with ministry and one another. By not only meeting at God's table but – especially in the weeks focusing on the Eucharist – orienting all discussion and practice around it, students have expressed a renewed sense of belonging, of being embraced and seen, and of grounding for the work ahead. Interestingly, this has not produced an insular community focused only on itself. As each session concludes with the reminder that "from this table we are sent", students have also clearly embraced the missional calling to step into the world where God is at work, carrying with them the care, attention, and nourishment they have experienced at God's table. What the effect of this will be once these students settle in ministry is still to be seen, but our hope – shaped by what we have observed – is that the Dutch Reformed Church may increasingly live as eucharistic communities, embodying God's care, presence, and solace in a country and world desperately in need thereof.

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BOOK REVIEW

Brierley, Justin, 2023. *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers Are Considering Christianity Again*

Carol Stream, Illinois
ISBN: 9781496466778

Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

The British freelance writer, speaker, and broadcaster Justin Brierley has been working in radio, podcasting, and video for twenty years. He also has become known for creating weekly dialogues between Christians and non-Christians in his *Unbelievable?* radio show and podcast. This allowed him "to chair hundreds of debates between the most influential voices on both sides of the conversation on faith." (2) In his book, he gives a broad perspective on the topic at hand based on enquiry as much as on many personal talks and encounters with critics of religion as well as apologetics of faith. The central metaphor of the book is one of a tide. Brierley suggests that faith in God is moving like a tide and after many years of decline and retreat, he senses a gentle and small, but recognizable return of faith in the UK and in other parts of the so called West: "In this book I will make a bold proposition – that Matthew Arnold's long, withdrawing Sea of Faith [from his poem *Dover Beach* in 1867], is beginning to reach its farthest limit and that we may yet see the tide of faith come rushing back in again within our lifetime." (4)

Brierley begins his book with a brief overview of the rise and fall of new atheism in the two-thousands (chapter 1). He traces the – mostly British – discourse on atheism and (partly aggressive) criticism of religion in general and the Christian faith in particular undertaken by people like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel C. Dennett, etc. He shows the dynamics and influence as well as tensions and shortcomings of the movement, which led to the different phases he identifies (rise, falter, unravel, split, implode, fall).

He then turns to a new interest in and conversation about God and the Christian faith in the public sphere in recent years (chapter 2). This, he outlines with the aid of people like Jordan Peterson, who (re)discovered the relevance and intellectual

appeal of the biblical resp. Judeo-Christian tradition. He introduces many cases of people from the public sphere (like Peter Boghossian, Helen Pluckrose, Douglas Murray, and Bari Weiss) as well as 'everyday secular people' who found new interest in the biblical story and the Christian cultural heritage, as well as in Christian values (like self-sacrificial love) and Christian convictions (like human sinfulness and objective truth). This new interest in faith is accompanied by a growing awareness of the limits and even downsides of a secular (and increasingly digital) culture.

Subsequently, Brierley takes a closer look at European history and the massive influence of Christianity on it (chapter 3). For this quest, he relates among others to the work of the historian Tom Holland, who claims that the basic Christian teaching that "God himself died the death of a slave [...] laid the foundation for the abolition of slavery, the modern welfare state, and even the freedom for people to reject religion in the modern world." (66) He unfolds Holland's thesis on topics like human rights, slavery, and the care for the weakest.

After exploring the cultural influence of the Christian faith, Brierley turns toward the Bible as the fundamental text and source of Christianity (chapter 4) and takes different perspectives on the Scripture, like a statistical, historical, atheistic, and psychological. He also offers reasons for the reliability of the Bible, and he examines some central objections.

With the aid of a debate between Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins, Brierley offers an alternative story of science (chapter 5) and examines the relation between faith and science to make a case for the tied bonds between human reasoning, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the history of science. He introduces some scholars (Rosalind Picard, Francis Collins, Alister McGrath) who converted to the Christian faith "after encountering a world that could not be explained by scientific materialism alone." (157)

In the sixth chapter, Brierley shares some stories of converts, who are listeners of his podcast: "Many have a story of ›deconstructing‹ as adults from the straitjacket of an oppressive form of faith they once inhabited, but then failing to find satisfaction in an atheistic account of reality. Many of these are tentatively reexploring Christianity." (165) Their stories lead to questions about materialism, determinism and the meaning of life, because all portrayed converts "have something in common: a search for a meaningful account of life and purpose that New Atheism was unable to provide." (167) Thus, Brierley makes a case for the claim that determinism "is a self-defeating philosophy that radically undercuts itself" (181) and criticizes – with reference to the psychiatrist, philosopher and neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist – the reduction of human reasoning to the left hemisphere of the brain, which leads to many problems we are facing at the moment, like polarization and alienation as well as a meaning crisis.

The closing chapter sums up the central themes of the book, and Brierley suggests: "As the New Atheist story of scientific materialism begins to wear thin and as people

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tire of the quasi-religious stories that are fomenting the present culture wars, I am convinced we are seeing our culture gradually become more willing to consider the value of the Christian story again." (208) He then offers a threefold advice for the church to engage with a post-secular and post-materialist culture and to prepare itself for a possible awakening: a) Embrace Both Reason and Imagination, b) Keep Christianity Weird, and c) Create a Community That Counters Cancel Culture.

Justin Brierley's book is a thoroughly crafted piece of work and draws from many serious and sound as well as authentic and inspiring sources. Even though some ideas and thoughts are not absolutely new (like in chapter 4), the collection, review, and reassembly of the material is helpful to make his case and illustrates the phenomenon of a rebirth of faith in God, often to the surprise of those who (re)discovered the Christian faith lately.

The book asks the Church in the West a serious question: If the different converts portrayed throughout the book are "the firstfruits of those who have come through the meaning crisis, [...] what will the church be ready to offer if people come knocking at its door?" (220) To reflect this possibility and a potential ecclesial interaction should be a prioritized task for theological thinkers and church practitioners alike. Such an endeavor falls in line with a variety of contemporary attempts in different Western Churches (e.g. in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands) to foster ecclesial innovation and adapt church structures to better suit the challenges it faces.[1] The perspective Brierley's book emphasizes might challenge the churches to reflect on ecclesial innovation in a holistic way that combines structural questions with theological as well as apologetical and aesthetic aspects. That the effort for ecclesial innovation and church renewal should be guided by profound theological questions shows this statement Brierley makes: "But I'm not so convinced that we can forever enjoy the fruits of religion without the roots of religion, especially when it comes to Christianity." (61)

About the Reviewer

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1 For an introduction in some German initiatives see Herbst, Michael: Regional and/or local: Can church be present in close proximity and in regional cooperation at the same time?, in: Ecclesial Futures 2025 – Vol. 6 – Issue 1: 21-39, DOI: 10.54195/ef22223; Eiffler, Felix: Evaluation of Ecclesial Innovations as Empowerment, in: Ibid.: 40-52, DOI: 10.54195/ef22190; Schlegel, Thomas: How do new forms of Church emerge in mainline churches and what does it tell about patterns, dynamics and competition?, in: Ibid.: 53-61, DOI: 10.54195/ef22491.

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BOOK REVIEW

Paul Bradbury, Isabelle Hamley and Andy Smith (eds). 2025. *Being the People of God. Missional Ecclesiology for Uncertain Times*

London: SCM Press
ISBN: 9780334066422

Reviewed by Patrick Todjeras

Being the People of God is an ambitious and wide-ranging edited volume that seeks to reimagine Anglican identity, mission, and ecclesiology for a rapidly changing post-Christendom landscape. Emerging out of ongoing work within the Church of England to articulate a renewed theological vision for worship, witness, and pilgrimage, the book gathers theologians, bishops, parish practitioners, and pioneers. The result is not a single thesis but a textured mosaic – a multilayered attempt to describe what it means for the Church to inhabit its vocation amidst cultural flux, institutional fragility, and surprising signs of life.

The Vision and Structure of the Book

The editors organize the volume around three interlocking identities of the Church: Being Worship, Being Witness, and Being Pilgrim. This triadic structure is already the first signal of the book's theological ecology: church life is not reducible to gathered worship or to social engagement or to individual spirituality. Rather, these dimensions belong together in a dynamic relationship that mirrors the Trinitarian movement of gathering, sending, and accompanying.

Each of the three major parts blends theological essays with empirical "On the Ground" case studies, creating a rhythm of conceptual reflection and contextual embodiment. This combination is one of the book's primary strengths: the reader is not left with abstractions but encounters real parishes, church plants, estates ministry, cathedral life, ecological conversion projects, and the stories of Iranian Christian migrants navigating identity and belonging.

Part I, "Being Worship", explores worship not as a liturgical technique but as the primary way the Church is caught up into God's life. Several chapters

highlight worship's formative power: disciples are not primarily produced through programmes but through a community shaped by doxology, Eucharist, and mutual interdependence.

A particularly striking chapter is "The Tender-hearted Community – Why Inclusion Means Interdependence", which reframes inclusion beyond diversity management toward a theological anthropology of shared vulnerability. Worship becomes the school of a community in which all members – disabled, neurodivergent, elderly, young – contribute to the church's doxological wholeness.

The case studies ("Being Worship in the Parish"; "Life, Death and Resurrection in Church Planting") ground this vision in everyday ecclesial practice. They illustrate how worshipping communities wrestle with decline, experimentation, and the ambiguities of renewal. The theological claim implicit here is notable: worship is not an escape from reality but the heart of Christian resilience.

Part II, "Being Witness", shifts the focus to mission in a late-modern, increasingly fragmented, and globalized society. A chapter on "Being Witness at the End of Modernity" is central: it argues that the inherited paradigms of the English parish system – geographically fixed, culturally assumed, institutionally stable – are no longer adequate. Instead, mission now unfolds amid mobility, multicultural cities, and the diminishing plausibility of Christianity.

Two themes stand out:

- Mission in a global city highlights the complex identities and migrations shaping London and other urban centers. The chapter recognizes that the Church of England is no longer a monocultural institution but part of a polycentric Christian landscape, increasingly influenced by diaspora communities.
- "Being Witness to the Edges" attends to socio-economic marginalization and estate ministry. The authors resist romanticizing "the edges", instead giving voice to the profound challenges of trauma, poverty, and community fragility.

Again, "On the Ground" case studies enrich this section: ecological conversion ("Awakening from Earth Amnesia"), pioneering on outer estates, and navigating contextual mission in shifting landscapes. These contributions remind the reader that witness is less a strategy than a posture of presence, attentiveness, and long obedience.

The third movement, "Being Pilgrim", introduces a spiritual and eschatological lens. To speak of the church as "pilgrim" is to situate Christian life within uncertainty and hope. Several chapters stand out:

- "Being Pilgrim in the Cathedral" explores how ancient spaces can become sites of hospitality for seekers and tourists, without reducing worship to cultural consumption.

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- "Being Pilgrim in the Shadow of Empire" engages critically with the Church of England's entanglement in colonial histories, calling for postcolonial repentance, truth-telling, and the reshaping of ecclesial practices.
- "Being Pilgrim into the Unknown" articulates an ecclesiology of uncertainty – a deeply honest recognition that institutional trajectories are unpredictable, and that faithfulness may require relinquishment.

The closing case studies (including the journey of Iranian Christian converts) are powerful reminders that pilgrimage is not only metaphorical. Many Christians in the UK now live literal pilgrim identities marked by migration, displacement, and vulnerability. Their presence challenges the majority church to rethink belonging and the hospitality of the people of God.

For readers of *Ecclesial Futures*, this book offers significant contributions:

- A narrative ecclesiology: The book resists abstract systematization. Instead, it allows ecclesial identity to emerge from lived stories, contextual experiments, and theological reflection. This fits well with the journal's interest in practical-theological futures rather than idealized blueprints.
- By combining scholarly essays and practitioner narratives, the volume mirrors the complexity of missional leadership today.
- The book assumes – rightly – that the Church of England is no longer culturally centred. Its proposals stem from a minority-aware, missionary posture rather than nostalgia for institutional privilege.
- The inclusion of estate ministry, ecological conversion, and migrant Christian stories situates the future church not in strategies but in honest encounters with contemporary social realities.
- The book's ecclesiology is marked by modesty: the church is on a journey, not in control of its future. This resonates with emerging research on ecclesial improvisation, learning communities, and adaptive ministry.

No edited volume can do everything, and several limitations are worth noting. While rich in narrative insight, some case studies would benefit from clearer research method descriptions (sampling, data collection, and limits). The volume is deeply rooted in Church of England structures. This provides depth but limits broader ecumenical applicability, especially in global South contexts. Given the post-pandemic shifts in ecclesial life, digital mission and hybrid belonging receive little attention. The diversity of contributors is a strength, but readers may wish for a more tightly woven theological integration in the concluding sections.

Being the People of God is a thoughtful, theologically substantial, and pastorally honest contribution to contemporary Anglican ecclesiology and missiology. It neither denies the fragility of current church life nor succumbs to despair. Instead, it offers

a hopeful, grounded, and often moving exploration of what it means to worship, witness, and walk as God's people in a liminal age.

For practitioners, the case studies will spark imagination. For scholars, the theological reflections offer fertile ground for further research. For the wider missional conversation, the volume exemplifies a church seeking not to preserve an institution but to rediscover its vocation.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Cockayne, Joshua and Foulger, Will (eds). 2024. *New Churches: A Theology*

London: SCM Press
ISBN 9780334066156

Reviewed by Dejan Aždajić

In many church contexts today, "new church" can trigger enthusiasm or defensiveness, evoking missionary energy while also raising fears of fragmentation, consumerism, or ecclesial amnesia. This edited collection refuses to begin from the usual battle lines. Cockayne and Foulger name three polarities that often distort the conversation: the gap between practitioners and theologians, the perceived opposition between inherited and new churches, and the rivalry sometimes assumed between planting and pioneering. Their aim is not to force consensus, but to foster a more truthful and theologically informed exchange. Their central insistence is that theology is not an add-on to starting new churches, because the Church is "theological" in its very being, called into existence by God, ordered by God's self-revelation, and sustained by grace. The Church is not first a set of techniques later seeking doctrinal justification, but a community formed by God, whose practices, mission, and hopes already presuppose claims about God and the world.

The editors therefore address two audiences tempted to mistrust one another (practitioners who fear theology slows action and reflective critics wary of novelty and self-deception) and warn against two corresponding pathologies: activism hardened into technique and reflection drifting into detachment. The volume argues that theology must stay close to practice and remain open to theological correction, since new ecclesial ventures can teach the wider Church by stripping away inherited assumptions and making convictions visible. Its four parts and nineteen chapters repeatedly return to basic questions: What is the Church when mission is framed as *missio Dei*? Who is acting when churches are "planted"? What counts as "success" if the primary agent is the Holy Spirit? How do polity, funding, training systems, and cultural assumptions quietly harden into theological commitments? While missiology, praxis, context, and ecclesiology cannot be neatly separated, the sequence still moves from divine agency through formation and leadership into contextual

studies and toward ecclesiological synthesis, less a sustained argument than a staged conversation exposing how much ecclesiology is already embedded in what often passes for “strategy”.

Part One establishes the book’s theological claim: church planting is not the Church’s self-generated project but participation in the missional life of the Triune God. Mark Collinson refuses to treat *missio Dei* as a slogan, asking whether planters live as if mission is first God’s work, which the Church joins and which exceeds its structures. He contrasts ecclesial imaginations that either centre the Church as God’s primary instrument or locate it within a larger divine action and warns that legal frameworks and inherited polity can domesticate innovation, therefore he concludes that forms must remain reformable and responsive to the Spirit. Powley argues that method is never neutral. Planning, leadership structures, team composition, and strategy carry implied theology and cannot be spiritualized away, yet method must not become the measure of faithfulness, since the Spirit’s work cannot be assessed by numerical growth or visible impact. The remaining chapters deepen the same concern from complementary angles. Cockayne offers a trinitarian corrective, reframing planting as participation in Christ’s communion with the Father through the Spirit, so that planters are witnesses and participants, not creators, of ecclesial reality. Miller emphasizes narrative and theodramatic practices over information transfer. Butler holds together human responsibility and the Spirit’s primacy without heroic leadership or denial of labour. Honey, drawing on Aquinas, commends humility, receptivity, and openness to being helped and changed, making tangible the claim that theology forms character.

Part Two turns to praxis, training, leadership, and theological method. Ayokunle insists that planting must learn from world Christianity and indigenous theologies rather than treating Western frameworks as the default measure of good practice. Wier shows how planting and pioneering have moved into mainstream planning and that they cannot be understood apart from patterns of funding, deployment, and accountability. Selvaratnam frames planting as craft through apprenticeship, prioritising embodied communal formation over transferable competencies and managerial technique. Audu and Butt close the section by drawing on community organizing and pressing new churches to develop public practices of leadership and cultural engagement resilient under social pressure without collapsing into activism. Part Three treats contexts as sites of learning rather than templates. Bradbury commends small, simple, slow communities and challenges scale-driven accounts of success. Hodgett highlights play, creativity, and co-creation as integral to relational formation. Squirrell stresses learning through contrast rather than idealization. Wallace’s chapter on Anglo-Catholic planting foregrounds tradition and sacramental identity while probing how new initiatives relate to inherited ecclesial forms. Part Four presses the ecclesiological question of what is being planted. The contributors

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warn that planting can slide into reproducing a culture, style, or aesthetic, with mission language masking deeper distortions. Williams offers a hopeful realism, alert to institutional constraints and to fresh growth without contempt for inherited patterns. Ross refuses triumphalism in distilled reflections from practice. Hall and Searle ask what we want to plant, proposing a dissenting ecclesiology that interrogates assumptions about success, reproduction, and discipleship. Moynagh revisits planting and pioneering by mapping pathways of emergence and the assumptions they carry about culture, formation, and belonging. Valentine closes with Romans 16, grounding ecclesial imagination in a Pauline vision of movement, diversity, and leadership patterns that resist uniformity.

As with many edited collections, the book's strength is also its limitation. It offers no single, tightly argued ecclesiological system, but a multi-voiced conversation whose coherence lies in shared instincts: resist polarization, avoid simplistic contrasts between old and new, name tensions between planting and pioneering without turning them into warfare, and ground mission in God's agency, the Spirit's work and the formation of communities in worship, discipleship, and ethical life. It repeatedly challenges the temptation to treat church planting as a mechanism for solving institutional decline, reframing it instead as a theological and pastoral vocation requiring patience, humility, and discernment as much as innovation. The internal divisions sometimes overlap, and some readers may wish for a stronger synthesizing conclusion that states more explicitly what a theology of new churches must include. Even so, the book is a significant and timely contribution. It offers neither quick solutions nor self-congratulation for the planting movement. Instead, it presses searching questions about God's agency, the Church's identity, and the spiritual posture required to begin new communities without turning them into monuments to human will. At its best, it shows that theology is not detached but essential, if new churches are to be not merely new but genuinely ecclesial, gospel-shaped, and sustained by the life of the Triune God.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Olofinjana, Israel Oluwole, Wise, David and Reifsnider, Usha (eds). 2025. *Polyphonic God: Exploring Intercultural Theology, Churches and Justice*

London: SCM Press
ISBN 9780334066583

Reviewed by Patrick Todjeras

This timely edited volume emerges from the conviction that the future of the Church – at least in the UK – will be irreducibly intercultural or it will be diminished. Set against a postmodern, secular, and sharply polarized Britain in which public discourse regularly declares the "failure" of multiculturalism, the editors argue that intercultural churches can embody a counter-narrative of the kingdom, enacting unity-in-diversity in concrete congregational life.

The book's central theological proposal is the metaphor of a "polyphonic God". Drawing on Trinitarian theology, the editors suggest that the Triune God is not mono-cultural or mono-lingual but "speaks more than one language and inhabits multiple worldviews while remaining one in essence". This metaphor provides the imaginative center of gravity for the volume: if God's being is polyphonic, then the church as the Body of Christ is called to reflect that polyphony in its worship, leadership, and public witness. Intercultural churches are thus not a pragmatic response to demographic change but an ecclesiological imperative.

The book is structured in three parts, each combining theological reflection and grounded case studies.

Part I, "Intercultural Theology: Foundational Thought and Perspectives", sets out the theological framework. Israel Olofinjana opens by locating intercultural ecclesiology within the contested politics of multiculturalism in Britain, making the case that intercultural churches offer a constructive alternative to both assimilationist and segregationist imaginaries. David Wise then develops the rich metaphor of "tapestry" to describe inter-ethnic congregations, emphasizing that beauty arises not from uniformity but from the careful weaving together of distinct threads. A third chapter reads Ephesians through the lens of the household of God, exploring

how the family metaphor can both illuminate and challenge contemporary intercultural church practices.

Part II, “Intercultural Churches and Practices: Ecclesiology Re-imagined”, offers a set of empirical and practical explorations. Chapters range from liturgical questions – such as Ian Collinge’s discussion of “re-tuning” worship for a culturally diverse age – to congregational narratives from across the UK. We hear of a Korean diaspora church in transition, of Greenford Baptist Church’s long-term journey towards intercultural community, of an Edinburgh congregation seeking to live “among the nations, for the nations”, and of the complexities of identity formation captured in the disarming question, “What even is my culture?” These chapters will be of particular interest to practitioners, as they do not present idealised success stories but rather processes marked by partial steps, tensions, and ongoing negotiation.

Part III, “Intercultural Justice: Racial Justice and Reconciliation”, explicitly connects intercultural ecclesiology with theologies and practices of justice. Here, the volume most clearly fulfils its stated ambition to bring together three conversations often pursued separately: intercultural church, mission, and racial justice. Kate Coleman’s contribution on “just leadership” foregrounds the cultivation of radical empathy as a means of confronting systemic injustice. Sharon Prentis reflects on “intercultural life together” as an embodied form of racial justice in worship and mission, while Mohan Seevaratnam explores a spirituality of holiness that refuses to separate piety from solidarity. A chapter by Dominic and Catherine De Souza envisages intercultural churches as catalysts for racial justice, and Usha Reifsnider’s concluding reflection on antiracist mission in postcolonial Britain situates these ecclesial experiments within longer histories of empire, migration, and majority-world Christianity.

Several features make *Polyphonic God* a significant contribution to the literature on ecclesial futures. First, the book is unapologetically grounded in the British context, with particular attention to the interplay between Black Majority Churches, historic denominations, and new intercultural congregations. This rootedness allows for thick description: the reader encounters specific places, leaders, and congregations rather than abstract models. At the same time, many of the dynamics explored – diaspora leadership, “reverse mission”, contested narratives of national identity – will resonate far beyond the UK.

Second, the volume weaves together voices from different social locations and disciplines. Academics, denominational leaders, and local practitioners all contribute chapters, modelling the very polyphony it commends. This plurality is not merely about representation; it shapes the theological method. Missiology, political theology, practical theology, and leadership studies are brought into conversation in ways that resist easy systematization but mirror the complexity of lived intercultural church.

Third, the editors insist that racial justice is not an optional “add-on” to intercultural ecclesiology but integral to it. Particularly in Part III, the book challenges any

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notion of "diverse" churches that leave underlying power structures untouched. The insistence that intercultural congregations must attend to histories of colonialism, whiteness, and structural racism gives the volume a prophetic edge and positions it well within ongoing debates about decolonizing theology and mission.

There are, however, some limitations that readers of *Ecclesial Futures* may wish to note. The UK focus, while a strength, also means that conversation partners from other regions – especially from the Majority World – are present mainly through diaspora voices in Britain rather than through sustained engagement with churches in Africa, Asia, or Latin America themselves. Comparative case studies might have further enriched the argument, particularly given the global scope implied by the metaphor of a polyphonic God.

Methodologically, the book sits somewhere between empirical research and narrative theology. Many chapters offer descriptive accounts of congregational journeys, but the precise research methods employed (sampling, data collection, analytical frames) are not always transparent. Readers looking for robust empirical studies of intercultural congregations may therefore need to supplement this volume with more methodologically explicit research. Conversely, those seeking a tightly argued systematic ecclesiology may find the polyphony of voices occasionally diffuse; the editors' introduction and conclusion could perhaps have drawn more explicit thematic threads together.

Finally, while the Trinitarian metaphor of polyphony is suggestive and generative, it would benefit from further critical interrogation. Questions remain about how this image relates to classical doctrines of divine simplicity and unity, and how it avoids projecting contemporary ideals of diversity back into the divine life. Some readers might also wish for a more explicit engagement with pneumatology, sacramentality, and eschatology in relation to intercultural ecclesial practice.

These caveats notwithstanding, *Polyphonic God* is a rich and provocative resource for those concerned with the shape of the church in an era of migration, fragmentation, and renewed struggles for racial justice. It will be of particular value to practitioners and leaders who are already engaged in intercultural ministry and seeking theological language for what they intuitively sense on the ground, as well as to scholars exploring the intersections of ecclesiology, mission, and race. For readers of *Ecclesial Futures*, the volume offers both a window into emerging intercultural church movements in Britain and an invitation to imagine how a "polyphonic" vision of God and church might reconfigure their own contexts.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Kwiyani, Harvey. 2025. *Decolonizing Mission*

London: SCM Press
ISBN: 9780334063193

Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

The Malawian theologian Harvey Kwiyani has worked for 20 years in mission in the West (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and the UK), and from his perspective between countries that used to colonialize others and countries that used to be colonized by others, he states the need to decolonize mission. He writes in the introduction to his book: "The global context of the twenty-first century requires us to think afresh about God's mission in the world – what it is and how to participate in it. We cannot continue to depend on twentieth-century thinking to shape our twenty-first-century missiology, [because] that missiology falls short in the current postcolonial post-Christendom world of the twenty-first century" (27–28). But there is also a theological need for a decolonized approach to mission: "In a generation or two, it will be black and brown Christians taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. In other words, God's mission decolonizes" (36).

Kwiyani shows the tight, complex, and highly ambivalent interdependencies between mission and colonization by means of the history of Malawi and its colonization by the British (chapter 1). He introduces a wide range of people with various perspectives on colonialism and slave trade, like David, Agnes, and William J. Livingstone, John Chilembwe, and Joseph Booth. He resumes: "That David Livingstone's mission station became his daughter's colonial estate whose managers persecuted local Christians, burning their houses and schools, and forcing them to work on the estate for free, shows the challenges of attaching the mission of God to the mission of empires" (63).

Kwiyani then (chapter 2) takes a close look at the historical and geopolitical situation of Jesus' life and states: "We cannot effectively begin to understand Jesus or appreciate the movement that he started without paying attention to the overbearing image of the Roman Empire that was the backdrop to everything he did" (81). Kwiyani shows how omnipresent the Roman rule was in the life of Jesus, his disciples, his country, and his time, and how rarely Jesus referred to Rome and the emperor. Kwiyani interprets the whole ministry of Jesus as an attempt to subvert the colonial

and suppressing power of the Roman empire. This is true for Jesus' ministry as well as for the ministry of the disciples he sent out into the world.

After describing Jesus' dealing with the empire, Kwiyani sketches the Pauline eagerness and desire to preach the gospel in Rome, which he finally did (chapter 3). The author is astonished by the fact that Paul pursued his plan in a radical way, ignoring several prophetic warnings. Next to Paul of Tarsus, Kwiyani introduces Paul of Thebes (227–341), who went in a different direction from the apostle. Paul of Thebes "is generally considered to be one of the earliest Christian Desert Fathers and thus a pioneer of Christian monasticism" (112). The two Pauls are introduced to show the very different approaches Christian mission can take, and "God used them both, but to some extent the movement that Paul of Thebes started served the wider Christian communities beyond the empire better" (115).

The fourth chapter of the book traces the European expansion to find a sea route to India. The author shows the central role of the Spanish and the Portuguese kingdoms and the papal influence and order to dominate, christianize, and cultivate the people in those newly discovered and conquered worlds. This endeavour includes the American as well as the African continent and shows how deeply interwoven European colonial history, racism, slave trade, and civilizing mission were. This heritage can still be observed: "In the mission communities in the West, there is an obsession with evangelizing people in other parts of the world while ignoring those very people when they find their way to the West. This is a testament to their commitment to mission as civilization" (152).

Since then, the modern term "mission" (and "missionary") can be traced back to Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556); a detailed look at the history and the context of the emergence of the Jesuit order shows how deeply the modern idea of mission is rooted in a militant theological language and ecclesial mindset (chapter 5). The success of the Jesuit mission, Kwiyani assumes, lies also within power structures: "It was 'mission' because it was done from a position of power. Yes, God sends people, but Jesuits, in addition to being sent by God, were sent by the popes on the popes' missions" (183).

Kwiyani follows the historical trail of European mission into the nineteenth and twentieth century (chapter 6) and shows how close the missionary endeavours were linked to colonialism and by it with the great migration of Europeans into the world. As a result, thinking and talking about mission as well as doing mission is a matter of trust: "A theology that struggled to critique this unholy union between mission and the European destruction of humankind – for example, Africans, Native Americans, Indians – ought not to be trusted in the twenty-first century" (194).

After exploring the history of mission, Kwiyani deals with the language of mission (chapter 7) and demands to decolonize the way people talk and write about mission. He states: "Most of our mission language is still shaped not only by Western thinking

but also whiteness" (211–12). One way to do this is to listen to each other and for Western theologians "to realize that there is some good missiology out there that can enhance their own understanding of what God is doing in the world" (213). This proves to be a great challenge, because Western discourses on mission fail "to sufficiently engage voices outside its own white and Western echo chambers" (213). Part of this attempt is to

a) appreciate non-Western missionary work in every part of the world – even in the West, and
b) to acknowledge that mission and evangelism happen not only in the South but in the West as well.

The mission initiatives in the West are often undertaken by people from other parts of the world who came as migrants to Europe and the USA. They come from places where, in many cases, many more Christians live than in the West (e.g. Africa). It seems likely that a new era of an African missionary movement is on its way. Kwiyani suggests to decolonize many more terms, like "unreached people groups", "Evangelical mission", and "missional church", because "Western missiology is too small for World Christianity" (253). To listen to World Christianity would entail learning many new perspectives on things like prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the spirits.

An emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the main actor in mission ("Mission is first and foremost a work of the Spirit. Above all else it is a pneumatological adventure", 251) draws a line to chapter 8, where Kwiyani unfolds a mission according to the colonized. By this, his intention is "to discuss some of the critical ways non-Westerners look at the missionary enterprise of the past 200 years, [but he is] not seeking to deconstruct the act of sharing the gospel itself (as some have done)" (269). For this task, he explores how mission appears in African novels in the twentieth century as well as in the theological discourse in the mid-twentieth century. One finding is that for "many Africans, most of what we call 'mission' is simply evangelism and pastoral ministry" (285) and this kind of ministry is not only done by clerical people but also by everyday Christians: "We have what could be called the evangelisthood of all believers in most African countries" (288).

In the final chapter (9), Kwiyani sketches the need for a new missiology. Kwiyani asks a question, which he immediately answers: "'Is the mission of God possible without the help of empires?' I am confident that the sharing of the good news is indeed not only possible without imperial help, but it also works out better without colonialism" (297). He draws his key arguments from the life and fate of Jesus from Nazareth and the history of the Early Church. The power of the gospel (and of the early ecclesial mission) lies in its weakness, vulnerability, and humility. And: From the very beginning at Pentecost, the missionary movement was diverse and multicultural: "This ought to be characteristic of mission in the twenty-first century" (300).

The missiologies of the nineteenth and twentieth century do not work for the twenty-first century, and the author suggests to revisit, correct or discard these concepts and create new ones, because a "careful reflection is necessary. We need to learn how to engage in God's mission among God's people in God's world, simply as God's co-labourers, servants and slaves – with no armies to make the way before us and no empires behind us" (301).

Kwiyani offers an important book for this time in (church) history. In his research and ministry, as well as in his person, he connects Western as well as mon-Western perspectives and makes a strong case for a fresh and much-needed new attempt to mission for the twenty-first century. He does this considering God's mission, embodied in the life, teaching, and fate of Jesus Christ, as well as against the back-drop of Christianity as a current, worldwide, diverse, and multicultural movement. By this, he points to the work for theology and missiology that has to be done in the next decades.

About the Reviewer

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

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

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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