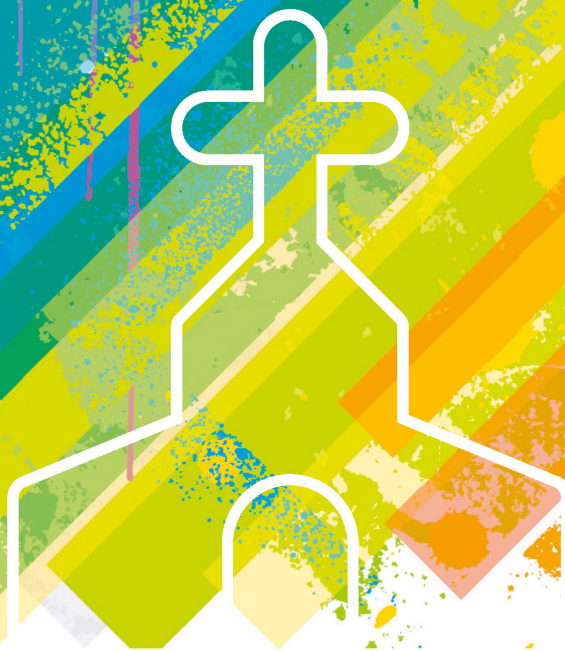


# New Frontiers In Contemporary Missiology: Southern African Perspectives



Henry Mbaya (Ed)









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## Editor's Preface

In this book, seven authors deal with issues of African identities, gender, human sexuality, prophecy, prosperity, and health – and their implications for mission in southern Africa.

John Klaasen highlights the significance of the African notion of personhood in 'African anthropology' – as a theological concept for construing a developing sense of identity among Africans and as a model for engaging with missiological approaches in a context of transforming identities.

Henry Mbaya foregrounds the significance of African contexts in the dialogue between Christianity and beliefs and rituals pertaining to ancestor veneration by highlighting the engagement of some church leaders and theologians with this issue and its missiological implications in southern Africa.

Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni examines the issue of African personhood in relation to gender issues and human dignity and the missiological implications of these relations.

Isabel Apawo Phiri engages with the issue of human sexuality. She argues for an informed conversation about this issue that has as its goal the healing of divisions within and between churches.

Jerry Pillay and Daniel Orogun reflect on the current phenomenon of prophecy and prosperity in the African context, critically examining the contexts which trigger beliefs and practices associated with it and offer recommendations pertaining to some of the challenges it poses.

Tabona Shoko discusses the impact of Covid-19 on the Lutheran Church in Harare. Using theological and sociological methods, he highlights the effect of Covid-19 on human dignity in the church.





## CHAPTER ONE

# African Identity, Personhood and Missional Innovation

John Klaasen 

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### Abstract

This chapter highlights African identity and personhood as they inform an African approach to missional development praxis. This involves a dialogical model of missional development that responds to the historically dominant Western mode of mission as entailing domination, rationalism and secularism. This approach is not unidirectional and domineering but rather embodies African dialogical and conversational values. It emphasises the use of local initiatives, resources and participation as its greatest assets. It is rooted in the spiritual aspect of personhood, which is affirmed as part of the identity of persons, and which, consequently, is invaluable for the development of persons and the community. Unlike in the West, the African worldview does not dichotomise the spiritual and material or the body and soul. Instead of imposing itself in different contexts, this model utilises the African worldview to incorporate difference in order to foster mutual enrichment and holistic development.

### Introduction

Recent trends in missiology and mission activities indicate that Africa has seen the fastest growth rates in the number of people who ascribe to one or other form of religion. Statistics indicate that Christianity is growing rapidly while, at the same time, secularism is increasing in Europe.

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Europe was once viewed as the home of Christianity, and most of its population were Christian in one form or another, yet this is arguably no longer the case. An investigation into mission studies and identity in regions where Christianity is experiencing growth can contribute new and innovative insights to mission and to critically engaging with mission studies.

This chapter seeks to contribute to innovation in mission studies and, in particular, missionary models and paradigms.

The distinctiveness of European and African identities is well demonstrated in the perceptions of prominent and influential historical figures. In the 18th century, Linnaeus attested that God had placed all humans in a hierarchy that favoured those from the northern hemisphere, with Americans and Europeans at the top of the ladder. Americans are described as “tenacious, contented, free and ruled by custom”, Europeans are “lively, inventive and ruled by rites ... Asiaticus are stern, haughty, stingy and ruled by opinion ... Africanus are cunning, slow, negligent and ruled by caprice” (Anthony 2019:4).

It is no surprise then that Europe was generally referred to as civilised and Africa as uncivilised. Europe was regarded as innovative, inventive, and as the cradle of humanity, while Africa was a place riddled with savagery, superstition and backwardness. These perceptions spilled over into the spheres of politics, economics, science and technology, and, in particular, religion. Religion, and more specifically, Christianity, has a close connection with identities in Europe and Africa.

The spread of Christianity has deep historical roots along Europe’s colonial and imperial routes to Africa. Encounters between Europeans and Africans have not always been mutually beneficial, and the consequences of colony and empire have meant long-term damage to the culture, language, habits, livelihoods, and religious practices and beliefs of Africans.

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The question under investigation concerns the resurgence of African identity and African approaches to mission and mission studies. The notions of 'personhood as African anthropology' and 'personhood as a theological concept' are correlated, first, to bring into focus the growing awareness of people's identity as Africans, and second, to develop a model of mission that sets aside antagonistic European missiological approaches to Africa in favour of a dialogical approach that confronts recent humanitarian problems. Such an approach takes as its starting point the African context and dominant African notions of identity. A dialogical approach moves beyond the limited and narrow view of identity that has been dominated by a single and universally applied norm. Reason as a universal norm for what it means to be human neglects the diversity, contextuality, creativity and fluidity of identity.

Mission studies and activities must take seriously the evolving nature of humans and how this becoming transforms the manner in which people interact. The environment, socio-political structures and factors, the notion of the Other, spaces of movement and the diversification of religious rites and rituals have an impact on mission approaches to various peoples who have dissimilar confession and belief systems.

### **European Mission and African Identity**

The late David Bosch, in his comprehensive book on the theology of mission, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* – which has become a classic resource within African and South African mission studies – lists seven challenges to the church as regards mission. These seven challenges are as follows: (i) The West has lost its millennium-long domination of Christianity and there are efforts by certain societies to untangle themselves from the West's approach to Christianity; (ii) unjust structures, unfair policies and oppressive laws that perpetuate suffering, such as racism, sexism, domination, exclusion and isolation, are being challenged as never before in human history; (iii) the West's

notions of progress and development are being questioned in light of the results of Enlightenment era of universalism, positivism, rationalism, individualism and secularism; (iv) the Western worldview is regarded with scepticism in light of the depletion of the natural resources and environmental exploitation; (v) advances in science and technology contribute to the threat of human extinction. Nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and the machinery of mass destruction result in constant mistrust and suspicion among nations; (vi) European theology is being challenged as a dominant force because of its ignorance of other cultures of the world; and finally, (vii) the religious landscape has shifted from Christianity being the dominant religion to one of religious diversity (1991:188–189).

The shift from Europe to Africa is the result of the complexity and contestation of ideas of normativity, essentialism, and universalism. The list of challenges identified by Bosch is by no means exhaustive but constitutes a clear indication of the overwhelming significance of contextual problems and situations for mission. It is for this reason that African worldviews, African identity, and African missiological approaches need to be liberated from Western theologies and dependent missionary activities. Mission is not limited to a Western worldview and to the Western theologies that have been applied to African personhood and African Christianity.

African mission does not reject Western theologies and Western mission as irrelevant. Western theologies and Western mission have been instrumental in formulations of core faith and belief creeds, statements, and practices. Western mission practices have played a prominent role in the spread of Christianity around the globe and remain fundamental to interpreting faith and religion in order to achieve holistic mission activities and transformations.

In a symbolic description of the importance of the Western approach to theology, Bosch recognises the value of the past for any present comprehensive mission response to current problems and challenges: “We reflect on the past not just for the past’s own sake; rather, we look upon it as a



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compass – and who would use a compass only to ascertain from where he or she has come?” (1991:189)

The dominance of Western approaches to mission and the consequences of colonialism and imperialism are not regarded as products of ‘memory loss’; rather, they are remembered precisely as attempts to confront the challenges of the time. An African approach to mission and mission studies challenges these Western approaches through a correlation of African notions of identity and African mission.

A dialogical approach to mission is self-critical. Self-criticism paves the way for interaction and genuine critique. African anthropology is not monolithic, but dynamic, creative, diverse and fluid. The many cultures, languages, rituals, rites, symbols, habits and lifestyles within South Africa alone are characteristic of the many notions of, and diverse perspectives on, what it means to be human within the African worldview. In the same way, the African worldview is not inferior to European worldviews; the African worldview co-exists with other worldviews, and African anthropology is unique and comparable to European anthropology.

European mission to Africa has by and large taken the form of there being giver and receiver, developed and underdeveloped, civilised and uncivilised, Christian and heathen. Following the two world wars, development in the form of technological progress and modernisation was the only way towards restoration, growth, and advancement. Bosch (1991:433) rightly propounds that

in missionary circles it was recognized that neither the traditional charity model nor the model of ‘comprehensive approach’ (which was initiated in the 1920s and concentrated, in particular, on education, health ministries, and agricultural training) was adequate. A more fundamental strategy was needed. The concept which gave expression to the contemporary challenge was development .... Hurriedly, Western churches and mission agencies got onto the bandwagon as well.

Development has a historical link to Christianity and to economic and political policies. The term development has been strongly associated with the European crisis of the early and mid-20th century. Development was a means of escaping the devastation caused by wars and economic and social depressions and took on the cloak of modernisation. One of the major flaws of the modernisation project was the secularisation of society. Development was in a barbed-wire position, that is, it was static or one-way. Through modernisation, some countries were able to increase economic activity, build a human-rights framework that would curb the transgression of human rights and expand democratic rule that would give populations self-determination and protect religious freedom. Modernisation, however, also runs counter to tradition, hierarchical religious orders, non-material means, and ultimately, religious practices and beliefs. This shift led to secularisation and a decline of religious practices, rituals, religious authority, and membership.

Despite the obvious signs that the use of development by European governments and social relief agencies in relation to the developing world was riddled with inconsistencies, the European missions were strangled by the development model of the West. A brief historical overview of the ecumenical movement and the development debate illustrates the barbed-wire or static effect on the church.

Sakupapa considers the ecumenical movement and the development debate in terms of five significant circumstances. First, in 1966, the ecumenical gathering was still plagued by the devastation of the two world wars and the subsequent modern project towards progress. Various conceptualisations led to different perspectives on the church's mission. Development as a project-oriented activity involving charity and systemic political and social transformation dominated the debates (2018:3-4). Klaasen (2015:327) asserts that the reason for these foci was the financial crisis prior to the conference and the widening gap between the rich (mainly Western) countries and poor (mainly developing) countries.

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A more significant reason is that, for the first time, the Third World had a large contingent present.

Second, in 1968, the Uppsala assembly continued to emphasise development as entailing changes in international economic policies and structures. The trajectories of the debate about mission were a continuation of the resolutions of the 1966 Geneva conference, with the rich and, by implication, the West, providing economic aid to the poor developing countries (Klaasen 2015:327). Bosch raises a critical (and what may have been an obvious) point: The whole development debate has been critiqued and challenged (1991:234). Changes in the development debate would only be taken seriously following Uppsala 1968 (Sakupapa 2018:5).

Dickinson (1991:270–271) lists seven limitations of economic development as the best possible mission activity by the church, namely:

1. Economic development is too narrow and neglects the social, cultural and religious aspects of social transformation,
2. The absence of actual development of the poor rather than abstract economic policies and principles,
3. The lack of evidence of the development of poor nations; rather, the gap between the poor and rich nations was widening,
4. Gross national product has proven to be a justification for middle- and upper-class economic progress and does not indicate the extent of the poverty that large parts of nations are experiencing, despite growth within the developing nations. Modernisation theory has caused more losses for the poor nations: “Some of the serious consequences of the modernization theory include dependency, loss of fundamental societal structures, loss of creativity and imagination, depleting of both renewable and non-renewable natural resources and dehumanising through the false dichotomy of the private and public person,”

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5. Many theologians viewed the new emphasis on development as a justification for the maintenance of the status quo,
6. Production has caused antagonistic relations between humans and nature, amongst humans, and between living and non-living beings. This raised serious questions about the identity of persons and what it means to be human, and
7. Finally, the kind of development that the two assemblies adopted did not filter development down to the poor; rather, resources and agency remained in the spotlight.

Third, in 1969 in Cartigny, the Committee on Society, Development and Peace, a joint venture between the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace, pointed out the limitations of the previous notions of development which had been employed at the earlier ecumenical gatherings. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Roman Catholic priest, successfully argued for the replacement of development by liberation (Sakupapa 2018; Klaasen 2015:330). This was a significant shift from the church's dominant Western approach to mission to a Third World perspective. Instead of the narrow focus on economics and technology, people-centredness, the agency of the poor and contextuality became the hermeneutical lens for ideas about growth.

According to Bosch, the liberation-rather-than-development approach was taking root in ecclesiastical conceptions. Development and underdevelopment were not the context in which theology and mission operated, but rather reflected the widening gap between the rich and poor, capitalism and socialism, domination and dependence, oppressors and oppressed. The solution for poor nations was not the export of technologies but the uprooting of the core causes of injustice which the West was reluctant to address. There is a clear shift to human capital, human dignity, and self-determination. "Development implied evolutionary continuity with the past, liberation implied a lean break, a new beginning" (1991:434–435).

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The fourth and fifth gatherings, in Montreux in 1970 and Nairobi in 1975, respectively, were characterised by a new notion of development. Nations outside the West significantly influenced the notions of development under discussion at the Montreux gathering. The Indian economist, Samuel Parmar, was influential in establishing a shift towards three-pronged development that comprised economic growth, self-reliance, and social justice. There was a complete shift from a certain type of economics as the end to be achieved, in terms of which humans were a means of production, to a focus on the human person, and in particular, the poor. This transformation was coupled with a shift in ideas about the means of achieving development. Responsibility for development was seen to lie with the poor and marginalised, as agents of their own growth and freedom, and not be a matter of dependence on the West and the rich. Structures that are characterised by domination, marginalisation, and oppression were condemned as non-developmental. Parmar, who served as the assistant director of the Ecumenical Institute of the WCC, summarised this new shift, stating that

development is a means to human welfare; it is not an end in itself. Man (and woman) is more important than social processes. But if efforts for development are to bear fruit these processes must be allowed shape the values and structures of society .... Eradication of poverty and economic stagnation necessitates structural changes (1967:353).

It is quite fitting, and is no surprise, that Nairobi 1975 became the new face of development. This assembly used the approach developed by Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD), that of 'action-reflection', to replace the principle of economic growth with that of social justice. The economically deprived, the poor and impoverished, replaced unjust economic systems as the means for development. Sakupapa (2018:4) notes the shift in emphasis to the centrality of the poor:

The CCPD developed an action-reflection programme that focused on the theme: 'The Church and the Poor' following

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resolutions of the WCC Nairobi Assembly (1975). This study programme led to a trilogy published between 1977 and 1979. The CCPD developed the theological concept of the 'church of the poor' out of this study. In a joint statement issued by the CCPD and the WCC Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS) in 1974, the identification of the Church with the poor is almost raised to the rank of an additional *nota ecclesiae* (see CCPD/CICARWS 1975).

Participation replaced the emphasis on economics with ethical and political factors. It is not only economic policies, modern structures or production that bear on development but also moral and ethical considerations of the manner in which production occurs and who benefits from it. It also concerns power relations between nations and how such power is used to benefit the world's poor and vulnerable populations.

The shift from economic and technological advancement is also reflected in the re-emergence of diakonia. Diakonia became the focus of social responsibility within the ecumenical movement in the 1980s and reached new heights at the 2013 Busan gathering in South Korea. Sakupapa (2018:5) claims that,

between the mid-1980s [and] the early 1990s, the WCC linked diakonia intimately with koinonia ... More recently, an understanding of diakonia as an integral dimension of the ecumenical movement [has developed] ... Such a perspective sees diakonia as part of the nature and mission of the church within the framework of the pilgrimage of justice and peace.

In a concise but insightful overview of diakonia within the ecumenical movement, Nordstokke affirms the continuity of development and diakonia. Since the inception of the WCC, diakonia has been part of the mission of the church, with two paradigms being prevalent. The one has had to do with charity work, mainly in Africa and Asia, and the other with political and social structures. South Africa has been a recipient of both

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forms of diakonia work. The Programme to Combat Racism, which was a result of the 1968 Uppsala Assembly, was the most notable political strand of diakonia (2014:58).

This brief sketch of diakonia does not negate the contested nature of development (Conradie, 2016) within the context of mission and mission studies. The concept of development has been criticised for its limited scope, and, in light of secularisation, diakonia has not been spared similar critical views. This chapter takes cognisance of the limitations of these concepts; however, the terms are used here as mutually enriching and relevant to the mission of the church in relation to the political, spiritual, and social deprivation of the poor nations of the world.

As Nordstokke (2009:76) notes, the “relation between diakonia and development is an important topic to which much attention is given. One important question is how development is understood and, consequently, what role faith-based approaches can have in working for development”. These two questions encapsulate the contribution that this chapter intends to make to broader knowledge of mission. It is not my intention to provide reasons for the superiority of, or preference for, one term over the other. Instead, the intention is to contribute to the innovative ways in which the church and her mission have enhanced the growth of poorer nations such as South Africa. “Diakonia as development work” is a helpful phrase for summarising the mission of the church: as one of diakonia with an emphasis on social responsibility. Using the two concepts in this manner also clearly differentiates the development work of the church from that of secular initiatives. “Diakonia as development work” comprises the following elements:

- It is connected to churches, both at the grassroots level and at national and international levels,
- It is based on the Christian faith and worldview,
- It strengthens faith, understanding and meaning,
- It relates religion to value systems, and

- It is biased towards identity that is entangled with agency (Nordstokke 2009:79–81).

## Identity and the Missionary Model

Christian identity has been widely accepted for centuries as the formulation and interpretation of the doctrine of the imago Dei (Horan 2019:11). In what follows, this doctrine is juxtaposed with African notions of personhood in order to assess an African perspective of development.

The late John de Gruchy provided a minor yet profound addition to the widely accepted doctrine of the imago Dei. De Gruchy (2003:24) asserts that

it is important to recognise that in both creation accounts from which the affirmation of identity is traditionally drawn, the truth of being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) or being filled with God's own breath is immediately coupled with the theme of vocation, the calling to be responsible actors in the world newly created by God (Genesis 1:28; 2:15).

A contextual reading of ancient Near Eastern society as against a critical interpretation of the account of creation in Genesis unravels the idea of the domination and uniqueness of humanity. Middleton's account of the Genesis creation narrative includes a broad notion of image. One of the meanings of Hebrew word *tselem*, for image, is idol, and there the body is a substantial part of the image. A second observation by Middleton is more significant. The word 'likeness' or *demut*, as used in Genesis 5:3, refers to the comparison of two objects. Middleton then concludes that hierarchy and division according to status and class in ancient Near Eastern society was legitimised by the use of the imago Dei (1994:20).

Genesis 1, and the imago Dei in particular, is a call against such oppression and division and for the legitimization of the rule of God, which all humanity shares by virtue of



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having been created in the image of God. It is a reaction against the separation of human individuals from one another and involves a return to the creation in God's image in terms of a reciprocal, interdependent relationship that is legitimated not by oppression and domination but by empowering and liberating one another (Klaasen 2021:194).

This theological approach to identity challenges the classical formulation of the doctrine of humanity. Whereas the traditional use of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, as taken from the timeline of creation, gives an absolute, unique position to humans, De Gruchy adds the 'doing' or stewardship by humans to the being or substance. Middleton challenges the unique role of humans, that of domination and separation. He claims that the *imago Dei* works precisely to break down the domination and separation of humans from other creatures. These critiques not only raise questions about the centuries-old interpretation of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* but also incorporate action and doing into Christian anthropology.

Desmond Tutu's perspective of personhood, which is rooted in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, finds synergy with the views of both De Gruchy and Middleton. For Tutu, what it means to be a person is entangled with one's spirituality and active agency. Tutu does not adhere to the ideas of the radical community of renowned African scholars such as John Mbiti. Within the latter's notion of community, the individual is merely a means to community. Radical community results in dependency and in a loss of the ethic of responsibility. For Tutu, persons are interdependent within the community, and that results in their responsibility towards one another for their mutual growth and enrichment. Tutu (2004:28-29) claims:

We are stewards of all of this .... The dominion we were given in Genesis 1:26 was so that we should rule as God's viceroys, doing it as God would – caring, gently, not harshly and exploitatively, with a deep reverence, for all is ultimately holy ground and we should figuratively take off

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our shoes for it all has the potential to be 'theophanic' – to reveal the divine.

African identity is not monolithic. Personhood, being a person, is a common reference for what it means to be human in the African context. Different and diverse notions of personhood are used across the African theological and geographical spectrum. In another study (Klaasen 2017), I outlined three different conceptualisations of African personhood. One of these, presented by Ifeanyi Menkiti, is closely related to the radical communitarian view of John Mbiti. According to this view, a person is inextricably bound by community and exists for the sake of the community. Kwame Gyekye opts for a moderate community that recognises that individuals have inherent qualities, such as reason, which allow them to shift through developmental stages. Tutu advocates a notion of personhood that is rooted in spirituality and that connects individuals to one another in an interdependent manner (Klaasen 2017:38).

Despite the diverse notions of personhood within the African worldview and in African scholarship, there are common threads that run throughout. First, the community plays a major role in the identity of persons. The community forms a part of who the person describes themselves to be in terms of their identity. Unlike the autonomous individuality that is present in the Western notion of identity, within African personhood the individual is not absolutely autonomous – one's growth is influenced by one's past and traditions. This relationality is further extended to the world around the person, whether this be the spiritual or the material world. In other words, all reality is relational. Second, identity is made up of our biology, our spirituality, and our ethics. Who we are is not restricted to one norm, whether this be reason, the body or our abilities. African identity is about both the being, the material that includes the body, tradition and family, and the doing, which, in theological terms, is described as calling or vocation. Calling or vocation refers to the tasks or purpose that a person sets out to perform or achieve. This implies that one

is never a passive bystander but is always intended to be active in the growth and wholeness of oneself and others. Third, and closely related to the above, the individual has a responsibility to grow, and this responsibility is aligned with the mission of God. Responsibility negates the dependency on modernisation theory and liberal theories that foster development. Fourth, identity, within the African worldview includes the spiritual aspect of the person. African identity does not dichotomise the body and soul; in terms of identity, soul and body constitute one entity.

### **An African Dialogical Model of Missional Development**

The model of mission being developed here attempts to be innovative, contextually aware, authentic and inclusive. It is an African dialogical model of missional development operating from the perspective of African personhood, and it is in dialogue with other innovations to undertake development work as mission. A model is a certain process or activity with identifiable aspects that govern the structure of an entity. The specificities of an African model relate to African characteristics such as the interwovenness of being and doing, the creative tension of body and soul, the link between responsibility and the ability to respond, the connectedness of spirituality and matter, and the situatedness of the individual within the community. It is the constant interaction between these entities, perceived to be autonomous within the Western framework, that makes African perspectives of mission contextual, interactionist, creative, eschatological, and vocational.

‘Dialogical’ refers to the two-way interaction between different parts of the same unit. It is based on dialogue that assumes two or more partners. It is not a one-way communication of instructions and directions but rather involves two-way conversations with mutual and common goals. The dialogue originates within and takes place between two parts of the same unit. This kind of dialogue is referred

to as 'intra-dialogue'. Activity between the individual and community is one form of such dialogue. In the same way, it also occurs with external partners, and this can be referred to as 'inter-dialogue'. The dialogue between an African mission perspective and a Western perspective is an example of inter-dialogue.

The way development is used in this model is also very specific. Conradie states that the concept of 'development' has its roots in the French *développement*, which refers to the unfolding of property in order for potential growth, extension, multiplication and increase to emerge. Despite the complexity that the concept entails, the use of a prefix such as human, psychological, business, rural, urban, spiritual, economic, social, and community has led to this being a multidisciplinary phenomenon (2016:1).

Missional development assumes a continuity of consultations on ecumenical mission and evangelism, such as those discussed above. The use of development in this suggested model positions it within the mission of the church and the mission of God. This firmly places the scope of development beyond economic or human development. Missional development assumes that part of the creation of humanity conforms to the use of God's creation for prophetic challenges that take the form of justice, liberation, salvation and freedom. This kind of development, which is holistic, includes both matter and soul, visible and invisible, persons and non-persons.

### **Markers of an African Dialogical Model of Missional Development**

Many Western development agencies and educational institutions employ development models that seek to use the assets of the poorer nations for sustainable development. Assets-based action and 'Use your Talents' are two models that are growing within the developing world. Notwithstanding the positive results that these kinds of development and diakonia have shown, the human capital, material resources and

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initiatives largely originate in the West and have a Western agenda. An African model uses the resources, human power, contextual circumstances, lived experiences and local needs and skills of African peoples as points of departure. The social assessment of the model is determined by the local people, and local structures and procedures determine the direction of the vision and the mission.

In this scenario, responsibility lies with local people to use their agency to enable the growth of individuals. Responsibility is both about exercising agency and creating a space for the tasks to be accomplished. The space for development is coupled with the fulfilling of the calling of the persons involved. In this sense, responsibility is a communal effort, and different persons and structures play diverse roles in the process of growth. Myers (1999:76) contends that

when the poor accept their marred identity and their distorted sense of vocation as normative and immutable, their poverty is complete. It is also permanent unless this issue is addressed and they are helped to recover their identity as children of God, made in God's image, and their true vocation as productive stewards in the world God made for them.

Within this space of responsibility, "development is not about the professional against the unskilled, but everyone is viewed on the basis of her capacity", whether this refers to technical skills, human capital, soft skills, practical skills or informal knowledge (Klaasen, 2017:41); when these capabilities are placed within the divine order of creation, they are all holy and equal.

African identity is not static, with one norm; it is dynamic and recognisable by the rituals that mark the stages of a person's life. In the same way that the orthodox theological understanding of "to be created in the likeness" of God means to move towards greater personhood, African identity is constituted by the various stages of a person's life. These

stages are initiated by rituals and symbols which represent growth, maturity, change, responsibility, and dignity.

Such rituals and symbols are tools that open the passage into the community and the powers and structures that govern the organising of the community as a properly functioning unit. These cultural and social practices need to be respected as potential tools and capital to transform impoverished contexts into viable and creative possibilities for development. Ngong claims that the spread of Christianity in Africa is not a result of a non-scientific approach to certain contemporary and material issues; rather, it is a matter of the role that religion plays in forming the wholeness of the person. It is this that makes religion meaningful and relevant in the post-globalisation and postmodern age. The kind of Christianity that accompanied colonisers is expressed, experienced, and expounded through the lens of local rituals, habits, symbols, structures, and practices (Ngong, 2017:25).

African identity does not place spirit and matter or science in a hierarchical order for healing to occur. When the contributions of a scientific worldview are rejected merely on the basis of the scientific evidence and not on the basis of their falsehood, then what transpires is merely a power struggle between one dominant worldview and another. Replacing a Western scientific worldview with an African spiritualised one is as harmful as oppressive Western imperialist, colonising Christianity. Ngong (2017:31) rightly affirms that

to simply draw attention to the fact of the expansion of Christianity in Africa without equally stressing the helpful role that faith plays in societal and individual lives – as those who simply baptize the African supernaturalistic worldview tend to do – does not seem to be in line with the African view of religion as critical to the quest for human well-being.

African identity includes the dialogical movement of the spiritual, psychosocial, and biomedical as part of a continuous

whole. Both hierarchy and dichotomisation need refuting. Healing can be both spiritual and scientific.

## **Conclusion**

Christian mission has re-emerged as an important phenomenon amidst growing secularisation in a postmodern age. The growth of the scale of the spiritual, social and political influence of the African continent has drawn heightened attention from beyond Africa.

With the re-emergence of Christianity as a religious and socio-political influence, the question of classical, and mainly Western, Christian mission to Africa and other developing continents is coming under renewed scrutiny. The shortcomings of economic development models, such as modernisation theory, and diakonal initiatives, such as asset-based action and 'Use Your Talents', mean that they are not sustainable as these approaches do not use the local community as the lens through which to implement development.

An African dialogical model for missional development takes African identity and the African worldview as its lens for mission. This approach is not monological and domineering but dialogical and conversational. The approach uses the initiatives, human capital, methods of production, local innovation, and the context and customs of the local community as its greatest assets.

The spiritual aspect of personhood is affirmed as part of the identity of persons and, consequently, is invaluable in the development of both persons and community. Unlike that of the West, the African worldview does not dichotomise the spiritual and material or the body and soul.

The African dialogical model for missional development is not wholly relative; rather, its dialogical nature opens opportunities for interaction, conversation, fluidity and, ultimately, growth. Instead of dominating a variety of contexts, this model uses the African worldview to invite

difference to be table for the sake of mutual enrichment and holistic development.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Betwixt Jesus and Ancestors? Christianity in Southern Africa

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### Abstract

This chapter highlights the tensions and conflict that surface among Christians with regard to the relationship between Jesus and ancestors in African cultures, spirituality, and Christian practices in southern Africa. First, it highlights the Hebrew traditions and the arguments of scholars that seem to negate, while others appear to affirm, the tradition of the reverence of ancestors. Second, the chapter discusses the arguments of various scholars that either support and dismiss these practices, as well as Christian traditions that take opposing views on, and engage in differing practices in relation to, this issue. By way of conclusion, the chapter offers perspectives by means of which it suggests that ancestral veneration can be viewed from a cosmological and Christological point of view.

### Introduction

Tutu said that African Christians ... [suffer] from a kind of schizophrenia. Missionaries had expected them to become westerners before they could become Christians: “They had to deny their African-ness to become genuine Christians .... Virtually all things African were condemned as pagan and to be destroyed root and branch...”. Most African Christians accepted this cerebrally ... but their psyche had been damaged by it: “[They are] shuttling back and forth between two worlds,

during the day being respectable western-type Christians and at night consulting traditional doctors and slaughtering to the ancestors under the euphemisms of a ‘party’” (Allen 2006:136–7).

The often-vexed question of the status of the ancestors in relation to Jesus Christ in Western Christianity always intrudes in the life of an African in southern Africa; this is especially the case whenever a crisis occurs. It is an issue that the African has faced since the arrival of missionaries in southern Africa in the seventeenth century. Must the ancestors be invoked alongside Jesus at a time of family ritual observances or crises? Must an African Christian observe ancestral rituals? These critical questions stubbornly refuse to go away. How does the church respond to such questions?

The above quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s biography suggests that this dilemma faced by Africans amounts to living a double life – trying to be genuinely Christian and following African religious cultural values. In effect, Tutu implies that missionary Christianity alienates Africans from their cultural heritage. Tutu’s view would be supported by Salala (1998:133) who is of the view that many Africans ‘double-up’ on Christianity and African traditional religions precisely because Christianity does not address the profound needs and concerns of African people. This is probably one of the reasons that, when faced with a crisis, many African Christians fall back on the traditional practices associated with the traditional African religions.

This question touches on a deeper one – what is the essence of African Christianity, and by implication, of the African churches in southern Africa? This is a pertinent question precisely because underlying it is a deeper one, namely that, unless the church takes African culture seriously, it remains alien, and, therefore, does not fit the African context.

In other words, unless Christianity seriously engages with African values and practices, it remains a foreign element in the southern African context. In light of these critical

questions, this chapter seeks to highlight the relationship between Western Christianity and African culture in southern Africa. More specifically, it seeks to address the issue of the relationship between Jesus Christ and life and belief in ancestors, and its implications for the Christian faith in southern Africa.

### **Life After Death in Christian Tradition**

The Roman Catholic Church Archdiocese of Cape Town (2016), in its blog, proclaims that

most if not all Black Catholics within the Archdiocese of Cape Town (ACT), South Africa, pray to their ancestors. Is this acceptable in terms of our faith? Does it amount to idolatry as some maintain? Should this practice be banned, as some Christian denominations have insisted?

In stating that they ‘pray’ to the ancestors, the church suggests that blacks ‘worship’ their ancestors. This would be a far cry from the missionary era when ancestral veneration was demonised, and the black Christians involved incurred censure. In light of this, what do we make of Jesus’ claim that “no one comes to the Father except through me”? (John 14:6). Does ancestral veneration conflict with worshipping Jesus? The fundamental issue is the notion of life after death for black Catholics as well as Protestants.

The Western missionary churches came to southern African in the seventeenth century with a doctrine of and belief in life after death; Jesus Christ was at the centre of this doctrine (see Fast 1991). However, it was the Roman Catholic Church, and to some extent the Anglican Church, which taught the notion of and practised the ‘veneration’ of saints. The Protestant churches had rejected this doctrine and practice with the Reformation. Nevertheless, the doctrine had a long history and tradition within the church.

Gonzalez (2010) asserts that the notion of life after death has a long tradition in the Christian church. In the early

church, martyrs, and saintly persons, saw themselves as modelling their lives on Christ. Their lives came to exemplify continuity with that of Christ. For instance, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul referred to the Christians as “saints” (Gonzalez 2010:10). In this respect, Paul recognised the Christian believers as living testimony, as people who faithfully followed of the pattern of Christ. They were ‘holy’ people. With the rise of martyrdom in the second century, the idea of saintliness came to be associated with the veneration of the martyrs through physical material objects associated with them.

Gonzalez (2010:10) states that,

as early as the middle of the second century, it was customary to gather at their tombs on the anniversary of their deaths, and there to celebrate communion. Once again, the idea was that they too were part of the church, and that communion joined the living and the dead in a single body. It was this practice that gave rise to saints’ days .... The practice of gathering relics of martyrs seems to have begun fairly early.

In the mid-second century, the “Martyrdom of Polycarp” tells us that the bones of Polycarp “would have been more precious to us than pearls” (Gonzalez 2010:57). It is as if the door between earth and heaven were opened by the prayers of the saints. The medieval period was the climax of this spirituality. While the Roman Catholic Church preserved this tradition and spirituality, most Protestant churches of the Reformation abandoned it at the Reformation. In the seventeenth century, these two Church traditions were brought to southern Africa representing these two contrasting positions. With regard to the Roman Catholic Church, in many ways there are parallels between the doctrine and practice of the veneration of the saints and martyrs and African religions and spiritualities.

## **The Veneration of Ancestors in Hebrew Scriptures**

A number of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures indicate God's disapproval of ancestral veneration. Deuteronomy 18:9–14 provides ample insights into God's view of practices associated with ancestor worship, or veneration, and divination (New International Version):

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving to you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.

This text suggests that exclusive worship of Yahweh distinguished the Israelites from other nations that venerated their ancestors. In other words, monotheism constituted the identity of the Israelites. It characterised and defined their religion. Then, there are also texts such as Leviticus 19:31 which prohibit the Israelites from interacting with “ghosts”, and “departed spirits” for guidance and/or divination (Num 22:7, 1 Sam 6:2, and Josh 13:22 also concern divination). Similarly, Samuel had warned Saul against the sin of witchcraft: “For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” (1 Sam 15:23).

Some scholars have argued that ancestral worship is forbidden in the Bible and, as such, is irreconcilable with the Christian faith. For example, in his doctoral dissertation, “Ancestor worship and the challenges it poses to the Christian mission and ministry”, Choon Sup Bae concludes that “analysis of the phenomenon of ancestor worship and its articulation [in] the Bible has proven conclusively that ancestor worship is essentially a form of idolatry in spite of the justifications employed by the traditional religions” (2007:212).

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However, the Bible also describes traditions that suggest that the notion was widespread. Andriolo (1973:1661) notes that worship of the dead was common among the nations:

The Bible itself refers to such practices as ensuring the dead are gathered together with the clan on ancestral land (Gen 50:24–25), caring for the dead spirits (Deut 26:14; Is 57:6), and consulting them for occult knowledge (Deut 18:11; Is 8:19–22; 19:3; 1 Sam 28:3–25). It is clear that ancient Israel venerated its dead (Deut 10:15).

Ross Kane affirms (2018) that

the people of Israel continually harkened back to God's work among their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and among Samuel, David, and the prophets. In the words of the psalmist, "the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance" (Ps 112:6). Remembering ancestors reminded Israel of God's work across history and of their own dependence upon the moral communities that preceded them.

Hence, it would seem that the veneration of ancestors in southern Africa some has parallels with the old Jewish traditions. Why has this practice endured over the ages? Victor Molobi (2005) has identified Exodus 20:5 as a key text in favour of the practice of the veneration of the ancestors: "for I the Lord God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love and keep my commandments". This appears to justify Africans' consideration of ancestors as intermediaries: "Even if you do right but your predecessors did wrong, you may be liable for their sins and punishment accordingly. This understanding causes African traditionalists to ask favours from their senior ancestors for, supposedly, they have already bypassed the life of the living and its challenges" (Molobi 2005). In this respect, some Hebrew traditions may have parallels with the notion of ancestral veneration in some



cultures in southern Africa. However, in African culture, spirituality and religion, underlying the question of the ancestors is the deeper issue of the nature of life.

### **Unity of Life and Law of Harmony**

For ages, Africa has understood and experienced life as dynamic. It is power, a form of energy, a vital force. In this framework, the natural world and spiritual world live as parts of a web, in harmony with each other. Equilibrium establishes this order and ensures continuity of life. This life is also integral, a unity; hence, life and death operate along a continuum – death leads to life; the body yields to the spirit; the spirit may also be embodied. Life here has implications for life after death. According to BJ van der Walt (2003:75), “the greatest duty of human beings is to live in harmony with the spirit, human and the natural world”.

Morality, that is, good human behaviour, humanness, entails good conduct towards humans as well as nature since these are interrelated. Finally, life is conceived as a ‘collective’ rather than as separate pieces. It is this chain of interrelatedness that gives meaning to the life of an African. A good disposition towards other humans, nature, and animals is valued as an expression of humanness. If anything goes wrong at any level of this structure, the whole structure is affected.

### **The ‘Veneration’ or ‘Worship’ of Ancestors in Southern Africa?**

Long before missionaries’ arrival on the sub-Saharan continent, Africa had conceived of the notion of life after death. The ancestors, who Mbiti calls the “Living Dead” (1969), were the embodiment of life after death. Hence, ancestors have long constituted the pillar of African religion and spirituality. Citing Hammond-Tooke, Bogopa defines ancestral spirits as “the foundation of the Southern Bantu religion. All cultural groups have a special name to refer to the ancestors, and the names for these special beings are more often used in the plural

form as a sign of showing respect” (2010:2). In South Africa, different terms are used by various cultural groups to refer to ancestors. AmaZulu refers to them as *amadlozi*; for amaXhosa, ancestors are *izinyanya*. In Sesotho, they are known as *badimo* (2010:2).

On the other hand, Hans-Jergen Becken states that the answer to the question of what an ancestor is “will reveal some differences from the occidental forms of ancestor veneration” (1993:335). The answer derives from “the communal understanding of African society .... They celebrate the communion of their family to which also the late members belong” (1993:335). The Zulu Nazarite leader, Shembe, had also “given a place to the ancestral spirits in his system of theology .... In his church, the dead are entitled to veneration, and commemoration services are held in their honour” (Vilakazi 1986, cited in Becken 1993:335).

Specifically with regard to southern African context, even though these terms seek to understand the nature of the relationship between Africans and their ancestors, there are critical problems in trying to fully comprehend the relationship between them. According to Becken, the Western expression ‘ancestor veneration’ “refers to the quasi-religious act of solemn commemoration of late relatives” (1993:335). This relationship involves use of material items, mostly blood, as a means of propitiation of the ancestors. Hence, ancestral veneration entails the commemoration of the departed in which the relationship is materially and spiritually expressed.

At the centre of ancestral veneration is the issue of values and their role in the ordering of society. The relationship between the cosmos and its implications for the earth is crucial in African religions and cultures.

Max Gluckman distinguishes the attributes of the ancestors from the nature of their relationship with their progenitors. He states that “ancestors represent positive moral forces who can cause or prevent misfortune and require that their descendants observe a moral code.” He further states that

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the cult of the dead, on the other hand, is not exclusively directed to kinsmen, but to the spirits of the dead in general. Here spirits are prayed to for the achievement of the amoral or antisocial ends, whereas ancestors can be petitioned only for ends that are in accord with the basic social principles (1937:117).

Klaus Nürnberger (2007) acknowledges the widespread practice of the veneration of the ancestors. He has persuasively argued that the fundamental weakness of Western Christianity has been its inability to present a Christology that meaningfully addresses the existential needs of Africans, a gap that has been filled by ancestral veneration. He argues that the missionaries preached a Jesus too removed from Africans' mundane issues and, consequently, that this Jesus seemed unconcerned with their daily lives. This sharply contrasts with the authority of immediacy in the lives of Africans. In other ways, the veneration of the ancestors occupies a place in the lives of Africans that rivals that of Jesus (2007:54–69). This Jesus failed to meet the needs of Africans in times of crisis. Igor Kopytoff (1971) seems to make a similar point. He states that

ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of their living kinsmen; indeed, African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. Ancestors are intimately involved with the welfare of their kin-group but they are not linked in the same way to every member of that group.

The ancestors are deemed to have role in and influence over the lives of the living. In fact, some Africans tend to believe that the ancestors control their destinies. From the evangelical perspective, it would seem that the power that is attributed to the ancestors rivals that of Jesus Christ – they occupy a lofty place of power which seems to supersede that of Christ. According to Fortes (1965), the link “is structured through the elders of the kin-group ... the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the kin-group”.

### Anderson asserts that veneration of the ancestors

is not an outmoded belief which is dying out in South Africa's urban areas. The veneration of ancestors is still widely practised in the black townships of South Africa as in many parts of Africa, although the incidence of veneration of the ancestor cult among church members is not as high today as it was thirty years ago (1993:29).

Luvuyo Ntombana (2015) seems to suggest that Protestant churches have built bridges between ancestral veneration and Christian spirituality. In his studies of Pentecostals, he observes that very few differences exist between these religious groups with regard to African rituals. He asserts that the African independent churches and the mainstream churches permit their members to practise male initiation with accompanying ceremonies (2015:119).

Furthermore, he observes that the mainstream churches observe a line of separation between "church life" and "cultural traditional life" and that while they allow their members to observe these rituals only outside church spaces, the African independent churches permit them to take place within their sacred spaces (2015:119). He observes that the mainstream churches allow its members to perform such rituals, even those involving sangomas (traditional healers) as long as the practice remains strictly within the family (2015:119).

### **"Surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses"**

Mbiti once stated that the "spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings" (1969:75). According to Mbiti, this world is inhabited by divinities and spirits (Mbiti 1969:75). Africans relate to these spirits through rituals, and they consider these spirits to be an extension of their lives. There is, therefore, a very close relationship between the two forms of life. The biblical perspective is similar. The model of church militant and church triumphant is not at all at variance with the African notion of the living

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dead, that is to say, the ancestors. To put it differently, the notion of the soul surviving death is not exclusively Christian. African belief in the continuity of life is a notion with a long, strong tradition in religions and cultures in Africa. Thus, Mbiti (1990:82) illustrates that

the living-dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently', and they speak the language of the spirits and of God ... they are the 'spirits' with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them.

With regard to southern Africa in particular, Berglum (1976: 122) states that, among amaZulu, one may become an ancestor even before death. Hence, death is not a precondition to becoming an ancestor; the living aged can also be regarded as ancestors. Ancestor-hood is a venerable stage in the life of a person who is acknowledged to have lived a morally good life, one which descendants should emulate. He or she has exemplified the virtues of humanness, of ubuntu.

Michael Nel, referring to the Zulu context, states that "community and continuity are key elements for understanding the ongoing importance of the ancestors for African families; even though dead, the ancestors remain an integral part of family relationships" (2007:8). Family relationships survive death: "Since the dead remain in communion with the family, family ties are not severed by their death". This is because the "continuity of family crosses generations ... is not limited to past generations and includes future generations also" (2007:58).

In this respect, communality has a bearing on continuity. The survival of the community depends on on-going ancestral support. The two are intricately intertwined in a web of reciprocal relationships. For WRM Ngobese, this relationship has a socio-moral dimension. He states that amaZulu believe that

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life continues even after death through the ancestors who are regarded as the heroes of the tribe or clan. They are venerated because of the exemplary life they lived here on earth. That is why they are ritually remembered and ritually brought back to look after the members of the family who are still here on earth (2009:100–101).

They are venerated due to their moral and ethical leadership. Their higher standard of moral behaviour elevates them to a stature and rank worthy of veneration. However, this status does not elevate them to the level of divinity – Ngobese notes that the “ancestors do not take the place of the Supreme Being or Mvelinqangi (the first Appearer)” (2009:100–101).

Meyer Fortes has stressed the juridical authority of the ancestors in the lives of their progenitors. In his view, this relates to the ordering of society in Africa:

Ancestors symbolize the continuity of the social structure, and the proper allocation at any given time, of the authority, and right they held and transmitted. Ancestral worship puts the final source of jural authority and right, or to use the more inclusive term, jurisdiction, on a pedestal, so to speak, where it is inviolable and unchallengeable, and thus able to mobilize the consent of all who must comply with it (1965:137).

The critical issue is authority in the ordering of the community in order to stabilise it. The ancestors mediate the authority necessary for maintaining balance and equilibrium in society and in the natural world. They are experienced as the ‘living presence’ that ensures the continuity of harmony between nature and humans. They rule and order as guardians through moral and spiritual authority. Their authority is not imposed but rather made available through customary etiquette.

Nürnbergger (2007:37) has argued that Africans’ experience of the authority of the ancestors in their lives in relation to weak Christian Christology has been the fundamental factor that continues them to draw them to

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reverence of ancestors. He asserts that “effective authority must be existentially present. The authority of the most proximate ancestors is present. Everything of existential importance is present” (2007:37). According to Nürnberger, “distance does not exist between the most proximate of the deceased and the living in terms of space and time, but only in terms of authority and power” (2007:37). For many people, ancestors are a reality to be given due acknowledgment as they provide for felt needs and are the benevolent guardians and protectors of people.

On a level deeper than Nürnberger’s thesis of authority, what underlies the veneration of the ancestors is the critical African theological principle of the quest for reconciliation between the cosmos and the ethereal. Behind the practice lies an important symbolic dimension, namely, the quest for integration of the spiritual world and the natural world.

Theologians distinguish two dimensions of relations, the vertical and horizontal. The former entails the relationship between God and humans and the latter that between humans and the created order. While Christianity stresses the vertical relationships between humans and God, behind the veneration of the ancestors lies the critical issue of the integration of the living and the living dead and nature (Meiring 2007:736).

Thus, the horizontal dimension suggests that

the ancestors are still part of the community, humans must cherish their relationship with them as a way of maintaining God’s created order. Crafford (1996:15) believes that ... they are revered as members of the community having greater status and power, and may at times even be regarded as behaving arbitrarily and are argued with. The ancestors also represent the ideal community and serve as a model for their descendants of what their communities should be like (Meiring 2007:741).

In the context of Zulu traditional structures, Nel (2007:101) states that the ancestors “are venerated because of the exemplary life they lived here on earth. That is why they are

ritually remembered and ritually brought back to look after the members of the family who are still here on earth". In this respect, according to this view, ancestors are viewed in the same manner as 'saints' in the Roman Catholic tradition. They are not only revered but venerated. Ngobese asserts:

The ancestors do not take the place of the Supreme Being or Mvelinqangi (the first Appearer). Mvelinqangi is approached through them. This is a sign of respect according to the African world view (weltanschauung). A senior person is approached through those who are close to him or her. The ancestors either bless or curse (2009:100101).

The Tswana Methodist theologian and poet, Gabriel Setiloane, strongly suggests that the ancestors are present in the lives of their descendants; they bless and sometimes withhold blessings if the latter do not conduct themselves well. He states (1978:407):

Ah, ...yes ... it is true.  
They are very present with us;  
The dead are not dead; they are ever near us;  
Approving and disapproving all our actions,  
They chide us when we go wrong,  
Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,  
For kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home.  
They increase our store and punish our pride.

For Setiloane, the ancestors live and interact with their descendants, sometimes blessing them, or disapproving of their behaviour and conduct. In this respect, their authority derives from their role as moral guides and custodians. They are acknowledged because of their 'authority of presence'. They are esteemed because they are experienced as being available in times of need.



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Buti Tlhagale, the Roman Catholic archbishop, has gone further. In 2000, he is reported to have urged his church to accord the ancestors a status similar to that of saints and suggested that they be venerated alongside the saints in the church liturgy:

A libation of blood – a ritual pouring as a symbolic sacrifice honoring the ancestors of black Africans – should be incorporated into local Catholic liturgies such as the Mass ... “Sacrifice to the ancestors continues to be a very common practice among Africans”, Archbishop Tlhagale said. “The slaughtering of an animal – cow or sheep – takes place wherever there is a funeral or a marriage feast, or in times of illness, unemployment, family feuds or the birth of a child. The practice should be considered within the context of inculturation, according to which local, indigenous culture and values are a means of presenting, reformulating, and living the Christian faith” (Bruyns 2000).

It would seem as though Tlhagale views ancestors in the same manner he does saints. Just as the saints are believed to play a role in the lives of Christians, so too are the ancestors in the lives of Africans. Seemingly, power is attributed to both saints and ancestors.

According to Aylward Shorter, ancestors and saints are venerated in the same liturgy in the Catholic Church:

A recent liturgical experiment is the new Christian funeral rite in [Zimbabwe], during which, not only are the Christian saints invoked at the graveside and bidden to welcome the departed soul into their company, but the dead man’s ancestors are also invoked by name for the same purpose (1977:126–127).

In this respect, saints and ancestors are considered on almost the same level. The fact that they are invoked together suggests that they have equal power and are both worthy of veneration. Certainly, the example of Zimbabwe is unique. To what extent must ancestors be considered saints? The

Zimbabwean instance seems to suggest a manner in which the church appears to have succeeded in teaching people to appreciate the Christian tradition from the point of view of African heritage. It suggests the 'success' of contextualisation. In terms of Bosch's (1980) definition of *missio Dei* as God crossing the frontiers of cultures and belief systems, it would appear that, in Zimbabwe, the liturgy has become a vehicle that mediates African values. Christian liturgical theology gives expression to the ancestral values of the encounter.

While, in general, there has been a positive attitude towards ancestors from some missionary-instituted churches, the Pentecostal and Zionist churches have in the main been negative or indifferent. In his research, Anderson found that, in general, "the majority of the members of Christian churches reject ancestor veneration" (1991:81); more specifically, in "many Pentecostal-type churches contact with the ancestors is rejected, while for others there is a far more tolerant and ambivalent attitude to the ancestor cult" (1991:87).

The rejection of ancestral veneration in the Pentecostal churches is significant because these churches, unlike the Western missionary-instituted churches, are not particularly ritualistic. Their emphasis on the Holy Spirit seems to preclude involvement with the notion of the spirits of ancestors. Preoccupied as they are with the experience of the Holy Spirit, it would seem that these churches view the practice of venerating another spirit as rivalling their own teachings. Here, it would seem that emphasis on the Holy Spirit fills the vacuum that would otherwise be experienced by those in other churches who venerate the ancestors (Anderson 1991:81).

On the basis of research undertaken on the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC), Lukhaimane (1980:51) states that the ZCC "did not restrict its members from making sacrifices to their ancestors". It would seem that there is some leeway with regard to this issue, with some members wholeheartedly objecting and others accommodating ancestral veneration. According to Lukhaimane (1980), some ZCC members believed that it was important to undertake ritual sacrifice.

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The ZCC's reluctance to restrict its members from venerating the ancestors is probably because, unlike in the Pentecostal churches, the ZCC has incorporated some aspects of African cultures. On the whole, the ZCC seems to be more positive about African culture than do the Pentecostals.

Becken argues that ancestor veneration is not exclusively a black custom in southern Africa. It has also long been prevalent among whites (1993:335). For example, in some of church buildings, there are memorials for deceased men and women and commemorative plaques and tablets for soldiers who were killed on the battlefield (Becken 1993:335). In addition, when a dear one has departed, they place flowers on the grave, and they have a tea party or even a meal. They spend a considerable amount of money on buying a tombstone, in some cases, of marble. Occasionally, they visit the graves of their departed dear ones to place flowers there (1993:335). In Western culture, a gift of flowers to one's relative or to a friend signifies a deeper relationship; in Africa, the shedding of blood is a great symbol of family communion.

Operating from a sense of racial and cultural superiority, white people have disregarded a similar custom within their own community, and they had learned in their studies that "the ancestor cult is the central feature of African religion, the heart of the African spirit world" (Anderson 1993:29). When Africans revered their ancestors, though in their own way, missionaries condemned this as non-Christian, some even referring to it as "ancestor worship" (Becken 1993:336). From this perspective, it had to be suppressed or entirely uprooted. It had to be demonised (Anderson 1993:31) as having to do with the devil, idols, and evil spirits (1993:32), demons (1993:33) and angels of Satan (1993:35).

### **Conclusions – Implications: Jesus in the African Christian Family**

The preceding discussion has highlighted four points. First, it demonstrates the fact that the veneration of ancestors is practised, or tolerated, in some Christian traditions, while

in others it is totally rejected. Likewise, it shows that some Hebraic traditions are open to the practice while others are opposed to it. In short, there appears to be no consensus on this issue. Second, the fact that some Christian traditions (denominations) seem to tolerate the veneration of ancestors highlights the significance of this issue as one that influences African Christian spirituality. This underscores the importance of taking the southern African context and, more specifically, African culture, more seriously.

The fact that other traditions try to engage with this practice would also suggest that they are involved in cross-cultural mission – in David Bosch’s phrase, “God crossing the frontiers of culture” (1980:17). Third, the discussion highlights the significance of the African cultural-religious notions of the ‘continuity of life’ and ‘communality’, which constitute the bedrock of African spirituality. More profoundly, the practice of the veneration of ancestors seems to underscore the critical importance of the principles of reciprocity and interdependence.

The fact that some Christians have a dual allegiance may suggest that they view Jesus and ancestors as functioning in a similar cosmological order and framework. Thus, in their view, the ancestors have the ‘authority of the presence’ in a manner similar to which Christ does. The underlying assumption is that the ancestors do not function outside the cosmological framework of the glorified Christ. They are perceived as being ‘divinities’ that have achieved a spiritual status that appears to qualify them for ‘veneration’, that is, to be ‘revered’, though not to be ‘worshipped’ as God is. They are a model, an example of good living for an African.

Finally, with regard to the Christian traditions that appear to affirm ancestral veneration, it would seem that ancestors are viewed as ‘reflectors’ of light whose source is Jesus. The ancestors may manifest something of the character of Jesus as the Word made flesh. The biblical notion of Jesus as “Light” and “Life” (John 1:1–18) is appropriate here. Those who simultaneously have allegiance to Jesus and

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ancestors may view Jesus as operating on the African cultural-religious principle of the vital force, as the causal agent which ontologically explains the *modus operandi* of the ancestors. As the source, or origin of Life, Jesus embodies the vital force, the cosmological principle on the basis of which the ancestors function.

In this cosmological framework, there appears to be a correlational relationship between Jesus and ancestors. It is as if Jesus were the window through which one can see the ancestors, while the ancestors 'reflect' something of the characteristics of Jesus. This is significant from the point of view of the biblical tradition that portrays Jesus as the 'Light' and 'Life', the 'Word', who, within the African framework, correlates with the vital force, the unity of Life, and the Law of Harmony. In this respect, Jesus as the Light operates within the framework of the vital force.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Whose Umntu Anyway? Ubuntu in Relation to Gender and Human Dignity: Missiological Implications

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### Abstract

The concept of ubuntu has been widely explored across various academic disciplines, yet it has also been subject to misuse and commercial exploitation. It has been appropriated as the name of an open-source operating system, a soft-drink brand, and various education initiatives, among other things. Furthermore, ubuntu has been employed to justify practices that exploit hospitality and perpetuate gender binaries. This paper contends that, considering these contexts, the concept has been overcooked and has lost its taste.

Drawing on the isiXhosa expression, “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*” (a person is a person through other people), this paper argues that ubuntu is inherently linked to the human dignity and identity of African individuals. It poses the question: To what extent is *umntu* intrinsically connected to human dignity and identity in the African context? Exploring this question unveils the missiological implications of ubuntu and sheds light on gender roles within the *umntu* framework.

Utilizing an indigenous storytelling methodology, this chapter delves into the essence of *umntu* in relation to ubuntu, while also examining the concepts of human dignity and identity within the context of gender binaries.

## Introduction

The concept of ubuntu is challenging to convey accurately in Western languages as it delves into the core of human existence. In praising someone, we often say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”, meaning they embody generosity, hospitality, friendliness, care, and compassion. This sentiment reflects Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s (1999) renowned quote emphasizing the interconnection of humanity: one’s humanity is inextricably bound up with that of others. In isiXhosa, “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*”, and in isiZulu, “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” express the idea that one’s humanity is defined by belonging, participating, and sharing with others. Those who embrace ubuntu are open to others, affirm their worth, and possess a sense of self-assurance derived from belonging to a greater whole. They recognise that their own well-being is intertwined with the dignity and flourishing of others. This chapter explores these concepts further through indigenous isiXhosa expressions, delving into the intricate dynamics of ubuntu and individuality within African communal life.

## Methodology

This section employs indigenous storytelling as its chosen methodology. According to Chilisa (2012), ‘indigenous’ refers to the ways in which cultural groups perceive reality, understand knowledge, and shape their value systems, which inform the research process. This definition prompts questions about how colonised ‘others’ define their reality and how these realities can be studied. Indigenous research emphasises local experiences rather than relying on Western theories to define research issues. Moreover, indigenous methodology is context-sensitive, creating designs, methods, and theories relevant to local contexts and derived from indigenous knowledge.

The method of indigenous storytelling utilised in this chapter builds upon a framework I proposed elsewhere for studying pastoral care and counseling (Penxa-Matholeni 2022a). Stories hold significant importance in the lives of

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black Africans, encompassing various forms such as *iingoma* (traditional songs), *umxhentso* (traditional dance), *iintsomi* (folktales; *izinganekwane* in isiZulu), *eziko* (stories shared by the fire), *ukubetha izandla* (clapping of hands), as well as the names of individuals and places and metaphors. These stories serve as valuable tools for collecting, preserving, analysing, and disseminating information, as well as facilitating socialisation. Chilisa (2012) acknowledges that indigenous languages and oral literature provide essential insights into the stories and experiences of indigenous peoples, highlighting the richness of diverse cultures and contexts. This approach does not aim to fragment knowledge but rather recognises and honours the cultural diversity present within indigenous communities (Chilisa, 2012).

### Self-locating

The following statement was made by the then deputy president (and later, president) of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, on behalf of the African National Congress in Cape Town on 8 May 1996, when the ratifying of the new Constitution of South Africa:

I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom. My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert .... Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that I am an African. Today it feels good to be an African, (May 1996).

Mbeki's eloquent quotation not only celebrates the beauty, history, and diversity of the African continent but also situates the speaker within the rich tapestry of African heroines and

heroes. Chilisa (2020:198) emphasises the significance of “self-praise” or identity stories in African cultures, where individuals often articulate their self-narratives as cherished attributes in relation to their history and family lineage. This approach aligns with indigenous methodologies, emphasising interconnectedness and communal identity.

I, in turn, position myself in relation to Mbeki’s text. As the granddaughter of *oMbathane*, *Nondzaba*, *Xesibe*, *aMandlane*, *oTutuse*, *oNomdimba*, *oNtlokwana ibanzana*, I am intricately connected to my mother and father’s lineages, which are both extensive. The biblical reference from Hebrews 12:1 resonates deeply, illustrating the profound influence of the “great cloud of witnesses” in shaping my identity as an umXhosa woman who has experienced the enduring legacy of apartheid in South Africa. Oral historical recitations of family lineages, passed down through generations, hold immense value and serve as vital signifiers of identity (Letseka, 2012). It is from this worldview that I approach interpretation in this chapter (Penxa-Matholeni, 2022b), recognising the interconnectedness of personal history, cultural heritage, and communal identity in the African context.

### ***Umntu* in Relation to Gender: Exploring Proverbs and Metaphors**

Proverbs and metaphors provide valuable insights into philosophical and theoretical frameworks rooted in community value systems, driving change and progress (Chilisa, 2020:190–191). This section examines two isiXhosa metaphors – “*ingcwaba lendoda lise ndleleni*” (the grave of a man is along the road) and “*amaqobokazana angalala endleleni yazini kunyembelekile*” (when the young maidens sleep on the road, something is at stake) – to elucidate the humanity of Africans beyond gender binaries. These metaphors encapsulate both genders within the broader scope of humanity.

The first metaphor highlights the valour of heroes willing to sacrifice their lives in battle, symbolising their commitment to noble causes for the sake of the nation.

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Conversely, the second metaphor, conveying the significance of young maidens sleeping on the road, underscores the heightened stakes involved in their endeavours. This juxtaposition emphasises the essential roles of both men and women, demonstrating their harmonious coexistence and mutual support rather than competition.

*Endleleni* symbolises the seriousness of their shared mission, transcending gender boundaries to encompass a liminal space where all individuals – men and women alike – are united in purpose. Both metaphors emphasise vulnerability and courage, underscoring the interdependence of both groups (Penxa-Matholeni, 2021). This collective endeavour reflects the communal ethos inherent in African cultures, where individuals derive their identity and purpose from their interconnectedness within the community (Lutz 2009, cited in Mligo 2021:1).

The expression “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*” encapsulates this interconnectedness, signifying that one’s humanity is defined through relationships with others. Women and men in African contexts rely on each other’s strengths, recognising the importance of collaboration in achieving common goals (Kasomo 2010:129). This communal ethos challenges patriarchal gender norms imposed by colonisation, encouraging a redefinition of gender roles within the community (Chisale 2018:6).

*Endleleni* serves as a metaphorical space for growth and mutual understanding, one where individuals – regardless of gender – redefine their identities and relationships. It is a place of collective transformation; all fellow travelers are invited to join the journey towards a more inclusive and equitable society. Accessing *endleleni* entails embracing risk and vulnerability, fostering self-reflection and collective growth. To use Cilliers’ (2022:37) words: “Access *endleleni* (my emphasis added) at your own risk. This is a risky and fragile site. A further notice should read: Be ready to deconstruct and reconstruct yourself. Hard hats on ...”.

### ***Umntu* in Relation to Human Dignity and Identity**

Yet those whose dignity has been disregarded or even trampled on know full well what human dignity means. Its meaning is established by the denial of it. (Huber 1996, cited in Koopman 2010)

The quote from Huber (1996) poignantly reflects the profound significance of human dignity, particularly for those who have experienced its denial or disregard. At the core of *umntu* lies an understanding of identity that is intricately intertwined with relationship – an embodiment of the principle of interconnectedness. Chirongoma et al (2008:194) assert that since ubuntu embodies humanness, its central ethical value and starting point is dignity, emphasising the intrinsic dignity of every individual by virtue of their humanity.

Within *umntu*, dignity becomes an inherent aspect of being *umntu*. Mpho Tutu van Furth, in a podcast, of Caroline Glasbergen, “New Female Leaders, (2021) further elucidates that ubuntu serves as the ethical and philosophical foundation of African life, instilling in individuals a deep awareness of their interconnectedness. Those who embody ubuntu recognise that their own humanity is diminished when others are humiliated, oppressed, or treated unjustly. This quality of ubuntu imparts resilience, enabling individuals to withstand dehumanisation and preserve their humanity.

Additionally, ubuntu acknowledges and values local wisdom, as exemplified in Setswana philosophy by the concept of botho. Botho emphasises that our humanity is measured by our capacity to respect, welcome, and empower others. Failure to uphold these principles not only dehumanises others but also undermines our own dignity (Penxa-Matholeni et al 2023). Thus, *umntu* inherently encompasses a profound respect for human dignity and an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of all individuals within the human family.



## Identity

Identity is a multi-faceted concept, deeply rooted in oral traditions and cultural practices. Ritualistic chants, riddles, songs, folktales, and parables serve as powerful expressions of cultural identity, resonating across generations and reclaiming voices silenced by centuries of colonialism and cultural imperialism (Elabor-Idemudia 2002:103).

Scholars such as Montle (2020), Banda (2018), and Kaunda et al (2018) have contributed to the discourse on African identity, offering diverse perspectives. However, challenges to these perspectives, notably by Maluleke (2020), highlight the contested nature of African identity.

In this chapter, I explore African identity through the lens of the rituals practised by amaXhosa, drawing from my personal experience as a black umXhosa woman.

For too long, narratives about us have been shaped without our input or agency (Maluleke 2019). Dube (2000, cited in Penxa-Matholeni, Boateng & Manyonganise 2020:1) poignantly captures this sentiment, emphasising the importance of narratives written by and for the community they represent.

Central to this discussion is the concept of space, which is intricately linked to African identity. The rituals of amaXhosa, particularly those surrounding childbirth and marriage, underscore the significance of space as a locus of cultural meaning. *Efukwini*, (a term denoting both a birthplace and a sanctuary for a new mother and her child) revered as a sanctified space, serves as the backdrop for significant life events, from birth to marriage and beyond. The rituals performed within these spaces not only mark individual milestones but also reinforce communal bonds and cultural continuity.

As Falola (2003:55) aptly notes, participation in communal beliefs and rituals is fundamental to human identity. Among amaXhosa, rituals such as *kwantonjane* and *ulwaluko*, accompanied by traditional songs and dances, serve

as distinctive markers of African identity. These rituals not only affirm individual identity but also affirm belonging to a larger community, shaping the collective identity of *umntu*.

European missionaries in the early 1820s misunderstood and devalued these rituals, reflecting a broader historical legacy of cultural misrepresentation and erasure. This chapter seeks to unravel these misconceptions and celebrate the richness and resilience of African cultural identity, as embodied in the rituals of amaXhosa.

### ***Umntu in Relation to the Community: Ngumntu Ngabantu***

Most African philosophers concur that a noteworthy element of ubuntu involves a communal and traditional lifestyle; to this end, everyone is their neighbor's keeper. Murove (2014) asserts that, if we are indeed one another's keepers, we can deduce that people can only be responsible within the context of their relationships with others. Murove (2014) further states that not many of us will ever be completely self-sufficient nor sufficient in every way.

In other words, one's humanity is caught up in or inextricably bound up with that of others. This means that, as humans, people belong together in an assembly of life. I cannot separate myself from others. For example, when one asks umXhosa, "Ninjani?" (How are you?) – here, 'you' is not singular but plural, even though only one person is being addressed. This notion of greeting is extended to family, extended family, livestock, agricultural land, and the like, and both the greeting and the answer focus on the wellbeing of the whole community and the land. This inherent communality affects how one tells, writes, or writes about black African stories.

The existence of a community is not a fixed or ready-made phenomenon. It is a process that must continually be cultivated by its members. Relationships should be constantly assessed, and any relationships that are oppressive should be reviewed (Manyonganise 2015:202). MW Dube

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et al (2016) assessment provides the basis for reassessing ubuntu. Community is widely understood to include, in an interconnected fashion, living people, the divine powers, and the environmental community. Indeed, most African communities identify themselves with a particular animal. This totemic identification underscores the fact that the *botho/ubuntu* understanding of community includes a web of relations among entities that are not necessarily anthropocentric. Rather, the *botho/ubuntu* concept of community includes non-human denizens of the earth, (Dube 2016).

Furthermore, *umntu* in the community becomes the community. For instance, in Khayelitsha, an informal settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, during the fire season, neighbours are on the lookout to help extinguish fires observed in one another's houses; this occurs even when the owner is absent. The same applies regarding flooding during heavy rains in these informal settlements.

Chisale (2018:4), concurring on the nature of such communal relationships, notes the remarks of a community elder:

if it happens that an elderly person's house was destroyed by a storm, and s/he is now too old to build or fix a new home for her or himself ... the community will meet, all neighbours, women and men were expected to go there and assist their fellow community member ... Its similar to when there was death, the person was not supposed to struggle to find out where food will come from, everything came from neighbours ... All neighbours did something to help, if there was death, the King's police went up the mountain and announced that there is death at so and so's family, even if you were doing something, you were expected to leave and go there. Everyone was supposed to go there, no one remained in their houses all neighbours except for children would go and help with something.

It is important to care for one another within a community, which is one big family; we are related and joined as one community. These rich African worldviews and beliefs have been dangerously misunderstood, not only by European or Western missionaries of the past but also by the local white mainstream churches that evangelise in the black townships of South Africa.

### **The Implications of Identity and Human Dignity in Missions**

The scenarios discussed above challenge how one undertakes missions in black African communities. Mthethwa (1996, cited in Louw 2008) asserts that African religion or spirituality pervades and permeates every facet of the life of African people and cannot, therefore, be examined in isolation. Rather, they must be examined together with other factors by those who study the practice of religion and undertake missions in black African communities.

Colonial-era Christian missionaries, who saw themselves as the custodians of the Christian faith, viewed with suspicion any spirituality they did not recognise. Hence, 'saving the souls' of people was and is their most important mission; yet, in the process of 'saving souls', they fragment the lives of black Africans. Mbiti (1969, cited in Boateng 2020:39) affirms that Africans are recognised as being exceptionally religious and that they do not know how to exist without religion. The othering and misunderstanding by 'outsiders' of what makes an African an African is dangerous when missions are undertaken. Africans hold all of life dear: the humanity of each person, the dignity of each person, and the identity markers of each African.

Illustrating this misunderstanding of and disdain for African worldviews by missionaries, Manona (1991:36) demonstrates the way amaXhosa were cruelly treated by missionaries, citing the following examples: First, at Burnshill, Rev. Laing, who served the community from 1831 to 1872, at one point burnt amabhuma (initiation huts for young

men) and overturned containers of umqombothi (a traditional African drink) he found his followers consuming. Second, in Grahamstown, as late as 1939, a white clergyman threatened with excommunication boys who wanted to go to the veld for initiation. The boys defied the order and went through the full process of traditional initiation. When they returned, however, they had to make confession before they could participate in normal church activities again. This was, and still is, a display of a religion that considers itself superior. This legacy is still felt, particularly in the so-called ‘born-again’ churches, such as that of which a relative of mine is a member. His son could go to initiation school but cut ties with all the ‘heathen’ components of his culture. This meant drinking fruit juice instead of umqombothi and eliminating everything else that makes this ritual unique and marks the identity of amaXhosa. As a result, the young men in the community do not regard him as a ‘proper’ man. His identity has been raped; by that I mean that something sacred and special to a young umXhosa man has been violently taken away, chipped away and changed. Mndende (1998) refers to such experiences as the condemnation that forces African spirituality underground and into internal exile. For missiology to be effective in black African communities, it needs to embrace all that makes those communities who they are. African ways of knowing and being are embodied in such rituals, and Africans’ dignity lies in who they are.

## Conclusion

This chapter has delved into the fundamental question: How deeply is the concept of “*umntu*” intertwined with the notions of human dignity and identity within the African context? Through an exploration of isiXhosa expressions and their implications for gender, human dignity, and African identity, the essence of “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*” has been unpacked. It has become evident that, within this framework, there exists a profound interconnectedness, devoid of hierarchical structures, as one’s existence is inherently linked to that of others.

Moreover, the redefinition of African identity through the lens of amaXhosa rituals serves as a significant marker in this discourse. The implications of these insights for missiology in black African communities have been considered, emphasising the importance of embracing the entirety of these communities' experiences.

Furthermore, the elucidation of the “*endleleni*” metaphor has been instrumental. It offers a pathway toward unity, where individuals – regardless of gender or status – are set upon a migratory journey aimed at challenging prevailing norms. This liminal space, where growth and transformation occur, signifies a realm of endless possibility. It is within “*endleleni*” that the process of redefining and reconstructing oneself takes place, transcending the constraints of predefined destinations.

In essence, this chapter underscores the importance of recognising and embracing the interconnectedness of humanity, the significance of indigenous markers of identity, and the transformative potential inherent in communal journeys towards the unknown. Through such understanding, a deeper appreciation of human dignity and a more inclusive vision of African identity emerge.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” on Matters of Human Sexuality: African Women’s Missiological Perspectives

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### Abstract

This chapter responds to the question: What is the authentic African voice when it comes to responding to the challenge of human sexuality? It highlights the development of the debate and of discourse on this issue over the years, considering the historical phases of these as they have occurred between the ‘Western churches’ (mother churches of African churches) and African churches. This is achieved by assessing the influence of the early and modern missionaries in shaping the discourse on human sexuality and by capturing some of the responses of African scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies; by engaging with “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”, the World Council of Churches (WCC) document on matters of human sexuality; and by suggesting how the churches in Africa can create safe spaces for genuine, informed conversations about human sexuality, conversations that are broad and heal divisions within and between churches.

### Introduction

As the World Council of Churches (WCC) prepared for its 11th assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, from 31 August to 8 September 2022, it was anticipated that one of the topics

that would divide the churches attending the assembly would be that of human sexuality. In the minds of many, human sexuality equals homosexuality. The theme of the assembly was “Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity”. Reading the theme with the challenge of human sexuality in mind, one may ask: How are Christians moved by Christ’s love to promote reconciliation and unity in the church and in the world?

The WCC assembly is the largest ecumenical gathering in the world. The WCC is the broadest and most inclusive Christian organisation in the world, with 352 members who represent more than 560-million Christians in over 120 countries. Its membership comprises most of the world’s Orthodox churches (Eastern and Oriental), as well as African-instituted churches, Anglican, Assyrian, Baptist, Evangelical, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old-Catholic, Pentecostal, reformed, united/uniting and free/independent churches, Disciples of Christ and Friends (Quakers). Together, these churches represent diverse positions on human sexuality in a context in which the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe (WCC Constitution, Article III).

As of 2022, the World Council of Churches (WCC) had 98 member churches from Africa. Africans have a long history in the WCC, although, in 1948, when the council was established, most of them were represented by the missionaries from Europe and North America. Soon, political independence in Africa was coupled with church autonomy from missionary control. During the post-colonial period of the 1950s and 1960s, many churches in Africa sought membership in the WCC in their own right. The political sovereignty they achieved “gave them complete autonomy to chisel their destinies and many of them applied for membership with the WCC. Even the African Initiated Churches (AICs), which were regarded as

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separatist or sects, applied for WCC membership” (Kaunda & Phiri 2016:865).

Having a voice in the WCC also translated into bringing an authentic African voice to matters on the WCC agenda. What is that authentic African voice when it comes to responding to the challenge of human sexuality? In relation to homosexuality, which is one aspect of human sexuality, churches from Africa tend to break with the views of their ‘mother churches’, which have taken a stand either to accept gay people as members, or, with regard to church leaders, have taken a stand to bless same-sex unions. Here, I provide five examples: a) The Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus, cut ties with the Church of Sweden when the latter approved and blessed same-sex Unions. b) When the Episcopal Church in the USA ordained a gay bishop, the Church of Uganda, the Anglican Church in Nigeria, the Anglican Church in Rwanda and the Anglican Church in Kenya cut ties, creating a crisis in the Anglican Communion. c) Splits have also appeared in relations between the Presbyterian Church in the USA and their partners in Africa; d) the Church of Scotland and some of their partners in Africa; and, e) and between the United Methodist Church in the USA and some of their partners in Africa.

The churches in Africa have rejected same-sex relationships on the basis that they are unAfrican and unChristian. This has been echoed by African politicians in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Uganda and Nigeria, countries that have maintained old British laws against homosexuality which have been repealed in modern-day Britain. In fact, most African countries continue to uphold colonial laws against same-sex unions. Such decisions have led to scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies in Africa and abroad questioning statements by religious and political leaders about homosexuality being unChristian and unAfrican.

Scholars from other disciplines in humanities and social sciences have also contributed to the debate. In this chapter, engagement with the topic is limited to a) ascertaining the influence of the early and modern missionaries in shaping

the discourse on human sexuality and capturing some of the responses of African scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies; b) engaging with the WCC document, “Conversation on the Pilgrim Way”, on matters of human sexuality; and c) suggesting how churches in Africa can create safe spaces for genuine and informed conversations on human sexuality that are broad and heal divisions within and between churches.

### **The Influence of the Early and Modern Missionaries in Shaping the Discourse on Human Sexuality and the African Response.**

Ezra Chitando has rightly argued that,

the theme of human sexuality has been a consistently problematic one since the arrival of the Christian faith in Africa. It has generated considerable debate, creativity and controversy. At stake has been whether churches in Africa have been realistic in their engagement with African understandings of human sexuality. Although the more recent debates over homosexuality threaten to dominate the discussion of it in Africa, it is only a fraction of the larger issue. Human sexuality has been an integral part of the story of African Christianity. Across different epochs and geographical contexts, churches have sought to address human sexuality in Africa (2016:993).

Based on this understanding, I attempt to categorise the human-sexuality debate in African Christianity into four phases.

The first phase occurred during the early missionary and colonial period when the description of what constituted acceptable African sexuality was determined by the Western expression of Christianity. For most parts of Africa, this occurred in the course of missionary enterprises of the 19th century when the gospel was brought to sub-Saharan Africa (excluded here are South Africa and Angola as the gospel had already reached those regions in the 15th and 16th centuries). The writings of the missionaries of this period indicate that

they did not accept African ways of expressing sexuality and aimed to transform them to reflect those of the West. One example of this concerns the initiation ceremonies for Chewa girls and women of Central Malawi.

Although it did not involve the cutting of female sexual parts, these ceremonies were banned by the missionaries of the various denominations who worked among the Chewa. This resulted in resistance from Chewa women as the ceremony was a platform for sexual education which the Chewa valued highly. As a result, the missionaries negotiated the implementation of a Christian version, which was accepted by the Chewa Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic and Baptist churches (see Phiri 1997). Similar stories of resistance relating to issues that concern missionaries and African women are recorded by Nyambura J Njoroge (2000), Esther Mombo (2002) and Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler (2005). What was at stake here was the definition an African Christian and recourse to resistance in order to be able to define oneself through cultural appropriation.

The second phase encompasses the post-colonial period when the discussion on human sexuality was framed within the African theological strand of enculturation and indigenisation as a means of achieving African selfhood and identity as both Christian and African. This was the period of the regaining of African identity within the Christian faith by reclaiming African culture; African traditional religions too become sources for theologising. Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Raggies Gunda (2012) have argued that it is the theologians of this phase who have influenced the views of current African church leaders regarding the nature of African culture and provide the content of acceptable Christian views on African sexuality. Examples of theological work relevant here include that of John Mbiti (1973, 1990) and Laurent Magesa (1997, 2004, 2005). Their central argument is that, in African culture, as in Christianity, sex is solely for the purpose of procreation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, in “A critique of Mbiti’s view on love and marriage in Africa” (1993), has argued against this narrow understanding of sex in African culture and in Christianity. She

critiques Mbiti's uncritical use of African culture and religions as tools for creating an African identity. Her critique applies to all scholars who fall within the same category as Mbiti. She has called for respect for the dignity of all God's people as elements of God's creation. Oduyoye's appeal to cultural hermeneutics takes the conversation to the third phase.

This third phase is characterised by an intersectional approach to resisting racism, sexism and homophobia. One could say that African women's theologies are another response from Africa that rejects missionary definitions of what it truly means to be African and Christian. What African women theologians, who are members of the Circle, stand for, and what tools they use for analysis, are well articulated in the publications of Oduyoye (2001) and Musimbi Kanyoro (2002). In "What's in a Name? – Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies", Phiri and Nadar (2006:6) argue that,

feminist cultural hermeneutics has ... been used as a tool to analyse a variety of issues within African culture, including that of sexuality. Although sexuality has been widely engaged in feminist discourse in the West, it is usually discussed in the context of sexual orientation and reproductive rights. In contrast, amongst African women theologians, such issues are discussed in the context of rites of passage, including childbirth (women's sexuality in the context of giving birth), menstruation (purity and impurity laws), circumcision (male and female), marriage (the patriarchal constraints within marriage and the different forms of marriage), and even death (practices such as widow-cleansing).

An examination of the Circle's first publication, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (1992), reveals a whole section of five articles that address African women and sexual practices, using a broad definition of human sexuality. The articles represent an African feminist critic of sexual practices in Africa, providing concrete examples from specific African cultures and African religions



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(including Christianity). Since then, the work of African women theologians has avoided generalisation, demonstrating an appreciation of the diversity of peoples and their practices in Africa.

Following the 1989 Circle conference – and especially as a result of the choice made to take seriously the growing prevalence of HIV among African adolescents and African women – African women theologians, as individuals, through master’s dissertations, PhD theses, and individual research published as articles or books, have explored the issue of sexuality in greater depth. The list of these publications is too extensive to mention here.

Van Klinken and Gunda (2012:119) have pointed out that works by African women theologians on “gender and sexuality are discussed in relation to the HIV/Aids epidemic, and they have developed into progressive theologies of gender justice” but have not fully explored the issue of same-sex relationships. While this is true, in the same article, Van Klinken and Gunda acknowledge that the work of the Circle is based on the lived experiences of women, which is prioritised. Nevertheless, some Circle members have highlighted that working on the non-medical determinates of HIV has revealed that practices of same-sex relationships are more common than previously thought (Phiri & Nadar 2009).

Musa Dube has paved the way by explicitly inviting church leaders to be inclusive of sexual minorities in their sermons (2003). Mombo (2006) too has challenged the church to be inclusive of sexual minorities. These calls for inclusivity are based on research that shows that it is not true that homosexuality is unAfrican. They are also an affirmation of the solidarity of all those who are excluded by the beliefs advocated by the church and in society. The justice of God is for all people: women, children, people living with disabilities, people living with HIV and sexual minorities. This leads to the next phase, to which I now turn.

The fourth phase focuses on the influence of conservative and progressive Christianity in the USA and

Europe on African theologians, churches and governments. Kapya Kaoma's (2016) article on "Unmasking the colonial silence: Sexuality in Africa in the post-colonial context" digs deep into this subject – he argues that considerable sums of money are invested in Africa by the conservative evangelicals to influence African churches and politicians on the question of homosexuality.

Following the example of the early missionaries, most of the money is invested in schools, seminaries and universities where formation of the African youth is takes place. Additionally, Kaoma has pointed out that there is also influence from Europeans and American politicians who have withheld aid to some African countries that refuse to change their laws to accommodate the human rights of sexual minorities. This is supported by the research of Van Klinken and Gunda (2012:1) and Van Klinken and Chitando (2021:8). These scholars of religion, theology and the Bible have rightly concluded that homosexuality in Africa has become a site of struggle in the modern-day missionary enterprise.

Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa was the first senior African church voice to draw from black theology against racism and link it to resistance against to homophobia. This is well documented in his foreword to *Aliens in the Household of God* (1997), edited by Germond and De Gruchy. I was privileged to listen to his address at the All Africa Conference Symposium in 2012 in Nairobi, Kenya, in which he challenged African church leaders to trust him on the matter of getting rid of homophobia. He promised not to mislead them about this, just as he had not during the fight against apartheid (see the photo in Phiri & Werner 2013, p. xxxiii). At the time, there was no audible comment from the African church leaders in the conference room or outside. However, he succeeded in making them aware that this is an issue which they should address together as an ecumenical body. In fact, nine articles in *Ecumenical Encounters with Desmond Tutu: Visions for Justice, Dignity and Peace* (2021) affirm his influence on the development of the intersection of discourses on race, gender and homosexuality.

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Tutu's thinking is echoed in the writing of other Anglican biblical and theological scholars such as Gerald West, Beverly Haddad, Kaoma and Gunda. Gunda's doctoral thesis – "The Bible and homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A socio-historical analysis of the political, cultural and Christian arguments in the homosexual public debate with special reference to the use of the Bible" (2010) – is the first one of which I am aware that focuses completely on homosexuality from an African perspective. His boldness in writing this thesis has been at a cost though, with both politicians and church leaders repudiating it. Kaoma shares a similar story.

However, such experiences have not stopped the younger generation from focusing their research on homosexuality. I feel honoured to have co-supervised, with Sarojini Nadar, the master's dissertation of Lindiwe Mkasi (2013) on "A threat to Zulu patriarchy and the continuation of community: A queer analysis of same-sex relationships amongst female traditional healers at Inanda and KwaNgcolosi, KwaZulu-Natal". Another youth researcher who followed the same tread is Ntobeko Dlamini, (2021) with "Unheard voices: Stories of LGBTI+ clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa". In this research paper, Dlamini followed discussions of the ordination of sexual minorities in the Methodist Church in sSouthern Africa and highlighted the perspectives of those affected by the churches' negative responses. Here one hears a plea from a young church leader asking the church to respect the dignity of all of its members because who they are is a result of God's creation.

Dlamini's article was part a youth essay completion issued jointly by the WCC and the All Africa Conference of Churches as part of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The article was part of the category of gender justice, which was highlighted on pilgrim team visits to Colombia. The next section highlights how the framework of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace has created a missiological and practical safe space for churches as they journey together on matters of human sexuality.

## **“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”**

The Busan assembly of the WCC initiated the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace in 2013. The assembly extended the invitation to join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to the WCC fellowship, other churches, people of other faiths and people of Good. In 2014, the Central Committee of the WCC adopted a document entitled, “An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”, which explains that being on a pilgrimage of justice and peace involves participating in God’s mission towards life. It is about foregrounding issues and places relevant to life and the survival of people and the Earth. The document explains as follows:

It is a transformative journey that God invites us to in anticipation of the final purpose for the world that the triune God brings about. The movement of love, which is essential to the triune God, manifests itself in the promise of justice and peace. They are signs of God’s reign to come which is already visible here and now wherever reconciliation and healing are seen. Christians are to partake in these signs of God’s reign and to struggle for them in response to God’s will and promise. The pilgrimage of justice and peace is thus grounded in God’s own mission for the world and the example of Jesus. Following Jesus means meeting him wherever people suffer injustice, violence and war. To experience God’s presence with the most vulnerable, the wounded, and the marginalized is a transformative experience; Alive in the Spirit, Christians discover their deepest power and energy for the transformation of an unjust world, joining with other faith communities and all people of good will as companions on the way (2014:2).

At the same WCC 2013 assembly, the Programme Guidelines Committee affirmed that a number of issues challenging to the churches had been heard at the assembly. These included questions about gender and human sexuality. The committee advocated that these challenging issues can be faced together

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as part of the common pilgrimage. They concluded by saying that “controversial issues have their place within the safe space on the common agenda, remembering that tolerance is not enough, but the baseline is love and mutual respect” (Senturias & Gill 2014:247).

Armed with the above mandate, the then general secretary, Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit formed a reference group on human sexuality in 2014. The Executive Committee approved the mandate for the group in July 2014. A staff working-group under the leadership of Isabel Apawo Phiri was formed to support the reference group. The group submitted its completed document, “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way: Invitation to journey together on matters of human sexuality – A resource for reflection and action”, to the Executive Committee in November 2019.

Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, the document was presented to an online meeting of the WCC Central Committee only in February 2022. The compromised recommendation was that the document is was received with appreciation “as a resource document for those member churches and ecumenical partners interested in dialogue on issues of human sexuality” (“Conversations”:5). The recommendation was phrased in this way because the churches who did not support the document feared that it would become a WCC policy, and then all churches in the fellowship would be forced to adopt it. This has not been the case with other WCC documents. Member churches of the WCC are autonomous and make their own policies.

For the working group on “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”, it was a great relief to reach this stage as the work had been confronted with many difficulties since 2014 – from WCC member churches that did not want the WCC to be a platform for a conversation on human sexuality. In an organisation that makes decisions by consensus, it was a huge achievement to have this document accepted, though there had been confusion surrounding the decision process at the February 2022 Central Committee meeting. What is important is that,

in addition to receiving the document for those churches interested in it, the Executive Committee in November 2019 also recommended that there be an ecumenical conversation on human sexuality at the 11th assembly, a decision which the Central Committee approved together with the report of the Assembly Planning Committee. “Conversations on Pilgrim Way: Invitation to journey together on matters of human sexuality” then became the background document for the 11th WCC assembly ecumenical conversation.

### **Lessons Learnt from “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way”**

As unity is a priority in the WCC, the diversity of the fellowship is reflected in important documents of the WCC. This was the case with the composition of the reference group on human sexuality. In addition, the WCC takes seriously the dictum ‘not about us without us.’. Therefore, among in the reference group on human sexuality, there was also the category of experts comprising church people who openly identify as members of sexual minorities. They related personal stories of marginalisation and discrimination within the church. In this way, the group affirmed the agency of the people from the margins. For a group whose members have differing views on human sexuality to have had a sustained dialogue and, over a period of five years, together write and produce a document with which the whole group identifies is no small achievement.

Second, the reference group on human sexuality drew from the mission identity of the WCC, whose foundations are rooted in the modern missionary enterprise of 1910. Over the years, the mission identity of the WCC has undergone transformation as it has responded to the challenges and diverse contexts of a changing landscape. In the context of ecumenical mission, “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” builds on “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes”, with its emphasis on mission from the margins. “Together Towards Life” was approved by the Central Committee meeting of 2012 and adopted by the 10th

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WCC assembly in 2013. Of particular significance to work on human sexuality is paragraph 6:

Mission has been understood as a movement taking place from the centre to the periphery, and from the privileged to the marginalized of society. Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18–31) to further God’s mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish. If there is a shift of the mission concept from “mission to the margins” to “mission from the margins,” what then is the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins?

Paragraph 46 provides examples of the categories of people who are discriminated against even by many churches, and it includes sexual orientation:

The good news of God’s reign is about the promise of the actualization of a just and inclusive world. Inclusivity fosters just relationships in the community of humanity and creation, with mutual acknowledgement of persons and creation, and mutual respect and sustenance of each one’s sacred worth. It also facilitates each one’s full participation in the life of the community. Baptism in Christ implies a lifelong commitment to give an account of this hope by overcoming the barriers in order to find a common identity under the sovereignty of God (Galatians 3:27–28). Therefore, discrimination on the basis of xenophobia, racism, classism, casteism, sexism, ableism, ageism or against people on any other grounds such as religion, sexual orientation, language, disability, incapacity, or having a medical condition such as being HIV-positive, is unacceptable in the sight of God (“Together Towards Life” 2012:8).

This quotation spoke directly to and encouraged the reference group on human sexuality, which has faced constant challenge from some WCC members that which said that, according to their faith traditions, sexual minorities do not exist. Denying the existence of a group of people is an extreme form of discrimination, which is completely rejected in the mission and justice agenda of the WCC, as reflected in the mission statement and in the framework of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The reference group constantly referred to its mandate from the 10th assembly that the WCC incorporates a safe space for dialogue on difficult issues and drew from previously approved documents that affirm that, in the WCC, all human beings bear the image of God. The “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” document strongly argues that,

Christians, in all church traditions, believe that all human beings are created in the image of God (Gen.1) and affirm that “Jesus Christ is the one in whom true humanity is perfectly realized.” (Faith and Order Paper 199 2005, 10). Sexuality is recognized as part of God’s good creation, and is integral to human identity and integrity. It is considered a divine gift, intrinsically good, intended by God for humanity to celebrate this divine gift in life-giving, consensual, faithful, and loving relationships. In dealing with such an approach to sexuality, human persons can grow into the fullness of their humanity and divinity.

The reference group on human sexuality was also encouraged to use the Faith and Order study document, “Moral Discernment in Churches”, which is a helpful tool for understanding different approaches and mutual learning among churches from diverse confessional families, as is the case with members of the WCC. “Moral Discernment in Churches” argues that, while there are different pathways that churches use to arrive at ethical and moral decisions, all churches base their discernment processes on the same sources: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. A significant contribution of African theologians to “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” is the inclusion of



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particular traditions of indigenous wisdom, such as the challenge that African women theologians have raised – that it is only wisdom that is life-affirming for all humanity that we need to be drawing from. In this sense, all sources for moral discernment should include a critique from the perspective of those who are stigmatised and discriminated against, as the same sources have been used to traumatise people on the margins. The example below demonstrates the importance of context in moral discernment.

In the case of human sexuality, the various contexts in which Christians find themselves affect how they respond to sexual ethics and norms. For instance, it is normal in Africa for a mother to breastfeed in public, but it is considered less acceptable in the global North. Similarly, an African man may marry more than two wives, yet still oppose same-sex marriages. A Western Christian may accept same-sex marriage but oppose polygamy. The way in which moral discernment is contextual explains some of the disagreements associated with human sexuality in global Christianity. Morality is contextual in most cases (“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” 2022:19).

This example also demonstrates the importance of study and research to understand the dynamic nature of culture. Culture should not be treated as static as interpretations shift as diverse cultures and religions encounter one another.

Third, “Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” builds on years of conversations about and advocacy on human sexuality at the WCC assembly – since the New Delhi WCC assembly in 1961 – and the definition of human sexuality has been broad. Initially, the WCC response was to tackle a broad range of issues on the matter. The New Delhi assembly, for example, indicated that,

the churches have to discover what positions and actions to take in regard to sex relations before and after marriage; illegitimacy; in some cultures, polygamy or concubinage as a social system sanctioned by law and customs; in some Western cultures short-term marriages, or liaisons, easy divorce; in all parts of the world mixed marriages

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(inter-faith, inter-confessional and inter-racial) with the diminishing of caste and class systems and of racial prejudice.... All this, and much else, forces the churches to re-examine their teaching, preaching and pastoral care and their witness and service to society.

The Uppsala Assembly in 1968 also addressed human sexuality, focusing on the 'birth-control' debate, stating that,

family patterns change in different social settings, and Christian marriage can find its expression in a variety of ways. We should like materials elaborating the problems of polygamy, marriage and celibacy, birth control, divorce, abortion and also of homosexuality to be made available for responsible study and action.

The broad approach to human sexuality by WCC consultations and conferences continued up to the Canberra assembly in 1991. Between Canberra and Harare (1998), more focus was placed on sexual orientation, as requested by some WCC member churches as, in a speech in 1995, then president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, openly referred to homosexuals as being worse than dogs and pigs (Gunda 2010:17). At the 1998 Harare assembly, safe spaces were created in which to hold workshops specifically focusing on sexual orientation. It was also in Harare that the Programme Guidelines Committee refocused the conversation from sexual orientation back to human sexuality. In addition, it has been since Harare that one notices an emphasis on an intersectional approach to human sexuality. It was here too that the use of "the shared theological and hermeneutical reflection that has informed earlier ecumenical ethical discussions on issues such as racism" was recommended.

The import of this request is, of course, that the conversation on human sexuality be framed in the same way as the conversation entailed by the Programme to Combat Racism, the focus of which had for a long time been apartheid in South Africa. From Harare (1998) to Porto Alegre (2006), and from Porto Alegre to Busan (2013), the conversation on

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human sexuality was also greatly influenced by sexuality in the context of HIV and Aids and by the human rights agenda of protecting the rights of every human being – which, in religious language, is expressed as the inherent dignity of all humanity.

From the Busan assembly to Karlsruhe (2022), the definition of human sexuality followed the broad-based, circular one of the World Health Organization (WHO):

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (2006:3).

The advantage of following a WHO definition is that the various aspects of human sexuality are brought together in a manner which shows their inter-relatedness. While many issues are mentioned, it can only prioritise issues based on the signs of our times. This definition is particularly crucial when examining the human sexuality debate on the African continent, a matter to which I now turn.

### **How Churches in Africa Can Create Safe Spaces**

“Conversations on the Pilgrim Way” encourages genuine and informed conversations on human sexuality that are broad and that heal divisions within and between churches. Such a resource is intended not only for WCC member churches but for use by all churches. Churches in Africa should aspire to learn from this document as a church that continues to learn is in tune with the Holy Spirit. The creation of safe spaces in which this conversation can occur in the churches in Africa

is one step forward – the document explains how such safe spaces can be created. A second step is the spirit in which the conversation happens. As described in Ephesians 4:2, forbearance is critical: “with all humility, and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”. Without adopting this attitude, conversations cannot happen. Third, the document advocates that, no matter our differences, we should not choose to separate ourselves from other churches or from members of our own church. It is important to practise forbearance by staying together in love because Christ demands that His followers remain united.

Finally, “Conversation” challenges all churches and asks them to sharpen their approaches to issues in pastoral theology and counselling which might be answered in different ways. Most importantly, they have to reflect an approach which implies careful listening and biblical and theological discernment by all concerned, since members of the church (and many people of good will) are wrestling with these issues and seek moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance from the churches.

The “Conversation” document has exposed the fact that the field of pastoral theology is not yet equally advanced and developed within and among WCC member churches. This is true for Africa too. A detailed study of the pastoral theology of human sexuality is required to examine family life, human sexuality, and pastoral theology itself.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Prophets and Prosperity: African Perspectives on Christian Mission

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### Abstract

African Christianity and its mission have largely been shaped by Western influences and culture, often at the cost of devaluing the African way of life and dignity. This chapter reflects on the African context, paying particular attention to the rise of prophets and prosperity and the impact of their activities on the Christian mission. In this chapter, we argue that prophetic actions by some African prophetic healers are connected to marketing, profiteering, and prosperity. Our discussion establishes, based on historical facts, the continued existence of prophetic healing and miracle activities, their socio-economic and socio-political triggers, and how these impact the Christian mission in Africa today. We then proceed to critique the rise of prophets and prosperity ministries in Africa based on a biblical understanding of mission and conclude with some considerations regarding God's mission in Africa today.

### Introduction

Since the coming of missionaries to Africa, Western imperial and colonial tendencies have indubitably influenced the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the development of Christianity on the African continent. Often, the context, culture, beliefs, epistemologies and sufferings of African people were not taken into consideration. Since then,

we have learnt that the incarnational model of Christ in this context is a necessary imperative for upholding, affirming and celebrating the lives, history and culture of people without robbing them of their human dignity, personhood and African identity. Mission in an African context tells us that you can be African and Christian. Thus, the Christian mission must be understood in context. We must constantly ask: How is God at work in this context? This, rather than assume that God is not, or has not already been, present there. To do this we need to engage in sober reflection and, often, a kenotic process of self-emptying and re-learning.

This chapter reflects on the current focus on prophecy and prosperity in the African context. These two elements have dominated the propagating of the gospel as two sides of the same coin, especially among certain Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa. What has emerged is a new sense of commercialism (which is different from the focus of Western missionaries) which is linked to Christian experience and engagement. To understand this trend of prophecy and prosperity, we examine the African context to understand how it triggers such beliefs and practices. We offer a critique of the African approach to prophecy and prosperity and conclude by reviewing recommendations for the Christian mission in Africa in the context of the African experience. Let us begin by stating the problem.

### **Prophecy and Prosperity in Africa**

It is popular knowledge that the African missional space is pervaded by a proliferation of churches. While some African Christians may refer to it as a 'revival', certain consequences of this phenomenon are a cause for concern. Chief among the increasingly proliferating Pentecostal groups are the prophetic movements known for prophetic and healing activities. Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021:5) underscore the observations that prophecy is a distinct feature of these neo-prophetic churches, that the prophetic office remains central

to their activities and that prophecy is at the core of their liturgy (cf. Daswani 2015; Kalu 2008).

Ideally, prophecy, as a missional tool, ought to be appropriated in selfless service and for the glory of God; in reality, it has become a business tool, as is evident in the practices of some prophets. Ramantswana and Sebetseli assert that neo-prophetic churches regard the prophet as “a person in whom the power of God resides – the power to heal, deliver, bless, curse and also utter prophecies” (2021:5). Thus, the purpose of the gift of prophecy is to address the personal needs of followers with much emphasis on healing, deliverance, prosperity, miracles, health, wealth, and the like. Such ideas are reflected in the titles of programmes, such as ‘Prophetic Service’, ‘Deliverance Service’, ‘Night of Fire,’ ‘Miracle and Healing Service’, among others.

Using these programmes as platforms, prophetic and healing meetings have become activities that rake in money. Carrette and King (2005) assert that such practices imply that a certain form of spirituality has emerged, a spirituality of capitalism, one which promotes atomisation, self-interest, corporatism, utilitarianism, consumerism, quietism, political myopia and thought-control or accommodation. Conversely, John Calvin held that “prophecy is that unique and outstanding gift of revealing what is the secret will of God, so that the prophet is, so to speak, God’s messenger to people” (Wilson 2015). In other words, prophecy and related activities should be centred on service to humanity for the glory of God and not on prophets’ acquisitive venality. Resane (2016:1–17) argues that these are bizarre practices that are rooted in anti-institutionalism, anti-intellectualism, anti-nomianism and anti-sacramentalism. What is worse is that such prophets operate without either institutional checks and balances or academic rigour while, at the same time, disregarding moral standards.

Moreover, despite the adverse effect of prophetic activities in Africa, the prophets are becoming stronger and subscriber demand for their services is increasing (see

Chitando & Kudzai 2016:76). If the negative impact increases as the movement continue to grow, it then makes sense to consider that important enquiries are necessary. First, how do prosperity and prophecy relate to mammon and materialism? How do they connect and impact on the Christian missional assignment in Africa? Second, why do Africans increasingly subscribe to these prophetic healers and seers? What are the possible triggers of these prophetic activities? Third, what are the socio-economic, socio-political, and public health factors that impact on mission in the African context? Finally, what are the possible ways to curb the negative implications these prophetic activities have for Christian mission? Responding to these questions in the sections below forms the bulk of this chapter. One after the other, we focus in on the triggers of prophetic activities; the socio-economic and public-health implications; critical analyses of some prophetic activities, using John Calvin's prophetic prism; and, finally, we provide recommendations for directing mission perspectives in the African context.

### **Triggers of Prophetic Ministries and Activities in Africa**

Without claiming absolute knowledge of all existing triggers, below, with cited examples, we discuss a few socio-economic, political, and spiritual triggers.

#### **Poverty and Economic Crisis**

An important question is: How did the prophetic movement leverage the rise of poverty in Africa to build its castle of power and prosperity? Lindhardt (2015:1) asserts that, with the economic stability of the 1980s and 1990s, the activities of the Pentecostals and the prophetic movement were limited. However, the story changed in 2000. In the opinion of Omenyo, their emergence in 2000 was a response to the escalation of poverty. In his words, "their emergence in most parts of Africa occurred under conditions of economic, political and social hardship, which were accompanied by economic reforms, low

wages and quality of life, the absence of social services, and the withdrawals of the welfare frontiers of the state” (2014:142). Likewise, Chitando and Kudzai argue that “all these movements rose to prominence after 2008, the year often characterised as the lowest point in the Zimbabwean crisis ... this crisis refers to hyperinflation, massive unemployment, retrenchments, and the general collapse of the economy since 2000” (2016:74).

Clearly, the rise of the prophetic movement is not unconnected to the escalation of poverty in Africa. From a holistic perspective, it may then be accurate to infer that poverty cannot be seen to self-exist. It has a ‘triogonoceros’ nature as it exists alongside corruption and religious opportunism. Thus, corruption in the socio-political system allows public servants and political leaders without conscience to plunder the wealth of the nations, thereby denying the masses basic needs like food, habitable houses, quality healthcare, good water, electricity, job opportunities, and so forth (see Orogun & Pillay, 2021:1–9). Additionally, Beegle *et al* (2016:2) observe that, of the top ten countries with the highest rates of inequality, seven are in Africa. More precisely, Beegle *et al* (2016:4) assert that Africa will not meet the Millennium Development Goal target of halving poverty and that it is projected that the world’s poor will be increasingly concentrated in Africa. Further projections indicate that nearly 90% of the countries unable to eliminate poverty by 2030 will be in Africa. Statistics South Africa (2019) reports that, in that country, the food poverty line per person per month stands at R547. Consequently, an average South African lives on R18.70, or \$1.20, per day. Indeed, Africa is in a state of poverty.

Sadly, some religious leaders have leveraged the poverty status of the masses to commercialise prophecies and consequently exploit the people through prophetic racketeering. For example, Prophet Magaya lives well on prophetic deliverance from the spirit of poverty. He claims to have a prophetic calling to break the chains of poverty (Mahohoma, 2017: 4–5). Giving to the prophet in order to receive prosperity is part of the requirements of casting

out such demons of poverty (cf. Chibango 2016:55–82). The prophets claim that these poverty spirits attract ill luck, business failure, lack of housing and other economic misfortunes (Mahohoma 2017:8). By inference, when the governing system fails and people wallow in abject penury, subscription to a prophetic solution is inevitable.

In Zimbabwe, Mahohoma states that “economic hardships endured for so long and unemployment pushes people to look for solutions from the prophet. While the poor look for jobs, houses, or prosperity, the rich generally seek for protection of their money and properties” (2017:8). Eventually, thousands of people gather and throw their resources at the feet of the prophetic miracle workers; the prophets get richer, and the people get poorer. Clearly, one cannot agree more with Kuoppamäki (2017) that these wealthy prophetic preachers enjoy a luxurious lifestyle as proof of the power of their prayers; however, heavenly intervention is not responsible for their success because all of the money comes from the pockets of faithful followers. Indeed, endemic poverty in Africa triggers the evolution and expansion of prophetic healing activities.

### **Injustice**

Nations, institutions and human society are governed by laws so that justice may be ensured. However, where a poor justice system prevails, prophets leverage the gap to provide an alternative justice system by means of spiritual judgement. Such alternatives are presented through programmes such as ‘Judgement Night’ and slogans like ‘Fall down and die’, among others. Chitando and Kudzai (2016:76) report that Prophet Magaya runs a programme titled ‘Judgement Night’ with disgruntled politicians and masses in attendance to seek divine justice. In addition, the Mountain of Fire and Miracle ministry in Nigeria runs various prophetic programmes where adherents seeking divine judgement and justice pray using the slogan ‘Fall down and die’ (See Olajimbiti 2018:13–27).



Through such prophetic services, the oppressed find succour: God hears their cries through the ministry of the prophets, mysteriously delivers judgement and assures prosperity. Other programmes targeting spiritual and alternative justice include Nigeria's Prophet Joshua Iginla's 'Judgemental Night'; in Ghana, Prophet Nana Poku's 'Judgement Night'; The 'Prophetic Judgement Night' of Prophet Wisdom Ogbe in Nigeria; The Zimbabwean Prophet Makandiwa's 'Judgement Night'; and the 'Judgement Night' of Prophet Thuso Molefhe of Botswana, among others.

Additionally, some politicians who visit prophets like TB Joshua seek spiritual help when political and justice systems seem to run contrary to their ambitions; this is especially the case where rigging elections is a popular practice. Likewise, when electoral injustice and corruption reign, people lose faith in the government and turn to prophets for political direction. In addition, when politicians in power break their social contract after having received the people's political mandate via an election, people may become discouraged and seek alternative direction concerning who to choose as their next political leaders. In this vein, some political prophets are rising to the occasion in response to the needs of their followers. In summary, a failing judicial system is a trigger for the eruption of prophetic activities in Africa.

### **Competitive Market Share among the Prophets**

Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021:2) note that competition in healing and miracle marketing circles is an underlying factor influencing the rise of bizarre practices within the neo-prophetic churches. This easily snowballs into the heavy commercialisation of miracles via packaging, the promotion of faith materials, the display of stage-managed miracles, and the like. This is evident in Alpha Lukau's 'raising of the dead', Prophet Bushiri's 'walking in the air', and TB Joshua's publicly advertised 'healing and deliverance' sessions. Einstein (2008:21) notes that "increased marketing means increased competition, which in turn generates more marketing".

As each prophet stages miracles, other prophets strive to showcase greater and unique miracles in order to convince followers, thereby increasing their number. Thus, the greater the publicity generated via marketing, the more popular the prophetic healing activities and, ultimately, the greater the number of followers attracted.

### **Poor Health Care Services**

The initial stage of the Pentecostal movement in Africa was dominated by prosperity preaching. However, over time, peoples' needs, especially challenges to their health, paved way for prophetic healing and deliverance. Our opinion as authors is that poor healthcare services are an offshoot of poverty in Africa in the context of economic collapse. Mahohoma (2017:3) is of the opinion that simple logic shows that when the economy is in shambles, nothing that depends on it improves. In the same vein, Chibango (2016:61–62) attributes the rise of prophetic healing and miracle-working to inadequate healthcare services, a shortage of medical facilities and drugs and the emigration of medical doctors and nurses who are seeking greener pastures elsewhere.

It is against this background that prophetic healers claim that they have the power to cure diseases. Some employ certain tools in the course of their services. For example, in South Africa, Prophet Lethebo Rabalago uses 'Doom' spray, an insecticide, to achieve healing and deliverance; Prophet Legeso Daniel feeds his congregants grass; and Prophet Penuel Mnguni has fed snakes to congregants. The majority of the prophets utilise anointing oil as a means of healing. Prophet Magaya refers to the anointing oil as "blank cheque anointing", claiming that it has the power to heal when applied to an affected part of the body (Mahohoma, 2017:5). In light of such evidence, it may be correct to infer that where there are poor healthcare systems, communities will run to prophets for divine healing.

## Spiritual Circumstances

The spiritual experience of Africans plays a key role in the establishment of prophetic activities. According to Nkurunziza (2013:61), in Africa, spirituality extends beyond outward religious practices and behaviours associated with religious convictions to involve internal, personal, and emotional expressions of joy, peace, confidence, comfort or sorrow resulting from the existence of a faith within. Kalu (2008:180) asserts that many Africans hold spirituality in great reverence so as to keep their homes secure from opposing forces of darkness that derail destinies. Thus, African Pentecostal spirituality is linked to the manner in which Pentecostals have attempted to deal with 'African' fears and problems. Nkurunziza (2013:68) further notes the similarities between Pentecostalism and traditional African religions as regards awareness of the spiritual world, belief in divine healing and exorcism of evil spirits.

Kalu (2008:171) agrees that traditional healers and neo-Pentecostals share a common appeal – combatting evil forces. According to Hollenweger (1972:158), many South African black communities celebrate prophetic healers and deliverers, such as sangomas. Likewise, Nigerians celebrate prophets, as they celebrate traditional spiritualists and Zimbabweans adore prophets like their traditional spiritual nangas. From the church's historical perspective, Kalu (2008:171–180) concludes that spiritual and demonic powers afflicting people make them seek help from African healers and miracle workers. Hence, when prophetic healing began in Africa, it was easy for people to embrace due to their existing spiritual understanding of the role and functions of African traditional seers, healers, and priests. In essence, their own spiritual experiences and a further desire for help easily triggered the passion of followers for African prophetic healers. We discuss the implications of these prophetic activities in the next section.

## **Implications of Prophetic Activities in Africa**

There are three consequential questions this section seeks to address. First, how do prosperity and prophecy relate to mammon and materialism? How do they impact on the church's missional assignment in Africa? What are the implications of prosperity and prophecy for public health and safety? We attempt to respond to these questions below.

### **Mammon and Its Implications for Missional Work**

Several reports demonstrate that the actual focus of prophetic healing activities is material gain for the prophets. Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021:3) relate that some prophets provide their followers with one-on-one session services priced between R5 000 and R15 000. These charges exclude the purchase of holy water, anointing oil, bracelets, and the like. Fihlani (2018) reports that more than 40,000 attendees of Prophet Bushiri's meetings have purchased some form of specially designed merchandise that has been on sale. Such goods include miracle oil, healing water, calendars, wrist-bands, branded towels, T-shirts, and caps. Vendors tell patrons that Bushiri had prayed and imbued the goods with healing powers. As indicated, thousands of adherents purchase such items. Likewise, Kuoppamäki (2017) reports that Chris Oyakhilome of Nigeria preaches that anyone seeking a miraculous recovery from disease must sow a 'precious' seed and asserts that, by this, Oyakhilome is referring to money. Likewise, Fröhlich (2019) demonstrates the connection between African prophetic activities and mammon as he reports that Andrew Ejimadu, a Nigerian prophet based in Zambia, popularly referred to as Prophet Seer 1, vomited money during one of his church services in South Africa. The prophet claimed he carries money worth millions inside his stomach. While some onlookers were amazed at the magic, others called for his arrest on money-laundering charges.

Relevant to such items of information on mammon is the report of South Africa's Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities

(CRL Rights Commission). Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva, the head of the commission at the time of the release of the report, asserts that some of these churches were making a considerable profit from so-called 'faith products' that were being bought by poor people desperate to have their lives changed for the better. In its probe, the CRL Rights Commission revealed the abuse of people's belief systems and links between religion and commerce in light of the wealth that some religious practitioners are amassing (2017:6).

To summarise, the commission called into question the relationship between religion and commerce. The commission reasoned that, as with politics, economy, sports and many other fields, the religious sphere is not immune to fraudulent activities. The commercialisation of religion is tied to the issue of healing and miracles – the problematic component being the advertising of miracles, healing, and prosperity (CRL Rights Commission 2017:9). Ultimately, the missional implications of these practices are that the prophetic movement has not only misrepresented the church of Christ but has also subjected the image of the church to ridicule. The prophetic movement has replaced the Bible-based sacrificial service of the missional church with a commercial venture. As society becomes more informed about the exploitative irregularities of the prophetic movement, there may be resistance to the gospel in some African communities – not only by Christians but also by other religious organisations and their adherents who may be aware of the tricks behind prophetic commercialisation.

### **Public Health Implications**

As mentioned above, poor health systems in African communities have been instrumental in the rise of the prophetic healing movement. Chief among the claims of the healing prophets is the power to cure HIV/Aids and other diseases. Fröhlich (2019) reports that, in 2018, Walter Magaya, popularly called 'healer' and 'doctor', announced his discovery of a scientifically proven cure for HIV/Aids that uses two plants, one found in Zimbabwe and the other in Mozambique.

He further claimed that the drugs had been tested on several HIV-positive patients, and that, afterwards, they were completely free of the virus. Fihlani (2018) also records that Prophet Bushiri has claimed to have healed people of HIV/Aids. Bushiri further claimed that he got doctors in Pretoria, South Africa, to bring in tested HIV patients and that, after his prophetic prayers, they were HIV-negative.

In a live TV interview, in reaction to the claim of Bishop Hamilton Nala of KwaZulu-Natal that he cures HIV with 'faith water', Dr Catherine Orrel noted that spiritual healing claims are not medically proven and remain unsubstantiated. She was of the opinion that such prophets are preying on desperate people who are afraid to die. Since anti-retroviral drugs constitute a lifelong treatment and are not easy to take all the time, a once-and-for-all healing water supplied by the prophets may be viewed as an easy way out. Unfortunately, such effortless means have not been proven to be authentic (Orrel 2013). More critically, many people are dying because they have given up use of prescribed medication after experiencing 'prophetic healing'.

In summary then, we have established in this section that prophetic healing activities have negative implications for public health and safety, injure and harm people, and, most significantly, bring Christian mission into disrepute. In the next section, we critique the prophetic activities discussed so far.

### **Critiquing African Prophetic Activities**

It is clear that the African context brings new ideas to an understanding of the Christian mission on the African continent. This is largely due to the dynamics of this context, which have led to economic exploitation and the abuse of Christians, as demonstrated above. The biblical understanding of prophecy is quite different from what we observe today in Africa.

The prophets of Israel are known from biblical literature and its early history as those sent by God, those who proclaim

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the word of God and who interpret Israel's history and destiny. Prophets are essentially messengers from God calling God's people back to God's plan, will and Word. Prophets have an important role to play in addressing socio-political and economic injustices and are still needed and relevant today. They are not prophets making 'profits' from the people they serve but rather seek justice for the oppressed. Unfortunately, what we observe in Africa today is the linking of prophecy to prosperity rather than to God's justice.

It should also be stated that prosperity is not wholly condemned in the scriptures. Wealth is considered a blessing from God (Prov 11:24–25, Gen 13:2, Ps 68:19, Deut 8:18). However, the scriptures are clear that those who accumulate wealth and do not share with the needy are not obedient to God. Jesus made it clear that you cannot worship God and Mammon and that it is difficult for the rich to inherit the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24). Rather than teaching us to pursue prosperity, the Bible teaches us to be content and to find our contentment in God through Jesus Christ (Phil 4:11–12). Furthermore, the Bible teaches us to share wealth with the poor (Acts 2:42 ff, Mark 10:17–25) and not to accumulate riches for self-gain. The latter is what we see happening today – 'prophets' who extort money from people on the pretext of being messengers of God.

It is unfortunate that mission and ministry are used by some for capitalistic, commercial gain rather than with the serious intent of proclaiming the good news of Christ to the world. Christian mission has over the centuries emphasised various aspects of its rubric. If we attempt a more specifically theological synopsis of 'mission' as the concept has traditionally been used, we may note that it has been paraphrased as 1) propagation of the faith; 2) expansion of the reign of God; 3) conversion of the heathen; and 4) the founding of new churches (see Pillay 2017:37). Drawing from this, mission is seen as the saving of souls, service (diakonia); worship (leiturgia); the transformation of society, community and world; a process of humanisation, community development, and the construction of churches,

among other things. Pillay points out that to “emphasise one or more aspects of mission does not render it wrong; it is just incomplete in the comprehensive biblical understanding of God’s mission in the world” (2017:37). Defining a missional church, Pillay (2017:38) states that

a missional church is one that is centred on the good news of Jesus Christ and the triune God; has a broad view of mission; focuses on the kingdom of God as it works for justice, peace and righteousness on earth; and leads people to faith in Jesus Christ as it seeks to transform both the individual and the environment.”

The ‘kingdom of God’ is a broad theme for Christian mission today – it is understood as life free from the reign of all those forces which enslave humanity. The ‘kingdom’ is where human beings are no longer subject to destructive forces but rather help people to become more human. Therefore, the goal of mission, among the other aspects mentioned, must be to point to humanity in Christ (Pillay 2010:16). If humanisation is also the goal of Christian mission, then we must be wary of ‘prophets’ who dehumanise the people of God by forcing them to do biblically untenable things like eating grass, drinking petrol, and the like. Moreover, we need to hold in question and to accountability the so-called ‘prophets’ who use ministry to accumulate wealth and prosperity in the name of God. Christian mission and ministry must be life-affirming and uphold the human dignity and identity of the people of Africa and beyond.

Interestingly, John Calvin, who was recognised as a prophet in his time (see Jon 2014:6), provides some understanding as to how we may assess prophets today. In interpreting Calvin’s comment on 1 Corinthians about the prophets, Wilson (2015) provides an important summary: (1) Calvin sees prophecy as “revealing what is the secret will of God”. This includes both interpreting scripture and understanding exactly what the Church needs to hear, with a view to applying the former to the latter; and (2) Calvin happily agrees with Paul that prophecy is somehow greater than the



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gifts of men. In addition, (3) he held that the prophets' calling is to be messengers who bring news of what God wants.

McCallum (2017) argues that through intense study of the word of God, Calvin developed a prophetic prism, a three-dimensional theology that emphasises God (*gloria Deo*), Christ (*sola Christus*), and the Word (*sola scriptura*) as the core facets of a theological prism for contemporary prophets and all and sundry. Briefly, first, all that prophets do must be to the glory of God and not for human self-glorification. As we have shown, most of the 'prophets' discussed above are invested in self-glorification, power and prosperity – all of which are questionable in biblical terms. Instead, the call is to follow the example of Jesus who, in his ministry, consistently pointed back to the Father.

Second, prophetic activities within the human institution of faith must be centred on Christ alone and not on the miracles of the prophets. Invariably, manipulating people with stage-managed miracles, extortion, and the sale of miracle emblems for commercial gain, as discussed above, cannot be a service undertaken unto Christ alone. Christ deceived no one – neither did he manipulate those who approached him for help – because his mission is to glorify the Father. This is the prophetic standard African prophets must emulate. Ultimately, the African prophets are not above Christ as Christ remains above all mediators; all prophetic activities must occur within the framework of Jesus' miracle culture.

Third, as Calvin claimed, *sola scriptura* must be the guiding principle by which 'prophets' lead and guide the people of God. The African prophetic movement must be accountable to the word of God. Yes! The bible encourages believers to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy; however, the scripture makes no allowance for its abuse. Using Calvin's prophetic prism – God's word alone – all of the anti-scriptural practices and examples discussed above are biblically untenable and should be rejected. At this point, we may move on to ask how we understand Christian mission in the African context.

## **Considerations for Mission in Africa**

Drawing from what we have said above, specifically in relation to prophets and prosperity in the African context, we offer the following considerations for mission in Africa today.

First, we need to understand afresh the task of God's mission (*missio Dei*) in Africa and in the world. This can be aptly summarised in the idea of extending God's reign in the world, which involves a broad definition of mission as not only 'saving souls' but transforming the world to reflect God's glory. This includes political and socio-economic transformation. The task of mission is to change both the individual and the environment. The African context warrants and validates such an understanding of God's mission.

Second, in doing mission, we need to understand the mission context so that we appropriately 'incarnate' the gospel of Christ in that context. Each context is unique and provides different understandings, interpretations and methods of missional engagement. For the African context, for example, none can deny the need for prophetic ministries; yet the context defines the way in which such ministries are exercised. As we have seen from this research, the African context of poverty, injustice, poor public health and spirituality has led to exploitation and abuse of people, linking prophetic healing to prosperity.

Third, in Africa, there is definite need for prophetic ministries in light of social, economic and political injustices; these should impact on the nature of contextual Christian mission. Interpretively, prophetic ministry is good, appreciable, and acceptable as long as it is for selfless service in the church and in society. Prophetic ministries must be devoted to the glory of God, centred on the ministry and example of Christ and based on the Word of God. Any notion of prophets seeking material profits must be seriously rejected with the contempt it deserves.

Fourth, given what we have shown in this research about prophets and prosperity and their impact on public health and

safety, there is a need for collaboration and shared ministries with other stakeholders and public sectors. For example, a multi-faceted healing process should be implemented through working collaboration between the medical health system and the prophetic healers.

The prophetic movement must embrace an integrated approach to healing and ministry. As the World Health Organization (in Myers 2011:10) infers, “a holistic approach to a phenomenon integrates the physical, spiritual, mental, and social aspects that relate to the whole being of any person” (cf. August 2010:45). In Kalu, Wariboko and Falola’s words, “a holistic expression of healing defines healing as a multi-dimensional component that has different facets to it. Here, sickness includes more than physical illness and, therefore, healing should become multi-faceted” (2010:214).

Consequently, African prophetic healers should embrace a multi-faceted approach to healing and be open to collaboration. An example of this is the collaboration of some Botswana churches with the health sector and the government to tackle the HIV pandemic (Audet, Ngobeni & Wagner 2017:1–6; cf. Obed 2001:220–231). In this regard, Beegle *et al* (2016) indicate that there has been a reduction in the spread and impact of HIV/Aids in Botswana. Similarly, some medical articles have hailed the cooperation of African traditional healers in providing honest and ethically based collaboration with the medical health sector in the interest of public health (See Iwu & Gbodossou 2000; Obayendo 2020; Pharma News 2018; Rumun 2014). Such collaborative initiatives can only strengthen and enhance the Christian mission of taking the whole gospel to the whole person in the whole of Africa.

Finally, Christian mission is best served within structures of accountability and responsible service, whether these are within denominational structures, mission boards, mission organisations or similar entities. The majority of ‘prophets’ who engage in prophetic ministries for commercial gain usually have no accountability to formidable mission structures and, left unchecked, they tend to bring disrepute

and do disservice to the Christian faith. Any mission activity must affirm the human dignity and identity of African people – and of all people.

## Conclusion

The research presented here has focused on mission in the African context, specifically, on the rise of prophets and prosperity in Africa today. It has examined poverty, injustice, competitive market-share among the prophets, poor healthcare services and spiritual circumstances as these pertain to the African context and has shown how these impact on Christian mission in Africa, especially in relation to prophets and prosperity. We critiqued the latter from the perspective of the biblical understanding of mission and concluded by listing salient points that ought to guide missional engagement in Africa.

God's mission in Africa and the world at large is the responsibility of all believers. We do God's mission responsibly and best when we affirm life, human dignity and identity. Such affirmation is desperately needed in Africa today in the wake of the so-called prophets' use of the prosperity gospel for self-gain. God invites us to share in God's mission of healing, reconciling and seeking justice in a broken world.

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## CHAPTER SIX

# The Impact of Covid-19 on Liturgical Worship: The Case of the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

This chapter discusses the impact of Covid-19 on worship in Zimbabwe, with special reference to the Lutheran Church, Eastern Diocese, Mt Pleasant Parish. The church is an orthodox and liturgical one whose historical forms of worship are biblical and evangelical. The advent of Covid-19 in March 2020 had a serious impact on worship in the church. Using a qualitative research design, a missiological approach and empirical research, the chapter argues that the pandemic adversely affected human dignity and African identity. The pandemic had negative effect on fellowship: it led to a loss of jobs and livelihood, a reduction in the number of members, a halt to offerings, and impelled sickness and death. Pastoral services such as home visits, baptism, holy communion and funerals all ceased. Weddings, revivals and prayer meetings and prison fellowship were suspended. In an effort to halt the pandemic, the government introduced lockdown measures, compounding the negative impact of the situation. The virus had social, psychological and economic effects on human values. Touted as ‘super-spreader’ of the virus, the church became ‘contagious’ although it is traditionally renowned as a place of healing. The ban on social gatherings undermined the African social fabric; restricted movements and quarantine of infected people fuelled stigma and discrimination; the wearing of masks affected the human ego; and the shunning



of funerals and avoiding of handshakes were taboo and un-cultural. In desperation, people turned to traditional medicines and online services. Vaccines met with low uptake due to conspiracy theories and cultural beliefs. The virus had crossed the Rubicon, delivering a situation that warranted divine intervention. The chapter concludes that the pandemic had negative impact on worship and undermined human dignity and African identity. Yet perhaps a new evangelism based on technology is what is needed to deal with the new phenomenon and to restore African humanness.

### Introduction

The Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe is a liturgical church. According to Lutheran doctrine and tradition, the church has an order of service which starts with the first hymn and includes chants punctuated by further hymns, usually five in every service. The order of service reaches its climax in the sermon and ends in reading of the Lord's Prayer and benediction. There are also special services and events such as the Holy Communion, baptism and funerals which follow certain patterns, and others that are based on the church calendar, such as Easter Sunday. The latter is anchored in singing of *litania* which alter the normal liturgy and order of service.

The onset of the Covid-19, a novel virus disease, was first reported in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019 (Odigbo, Eze & Odigbo 2020:1). In March 2020, it spread to the rest of the world and was soon detected in Zimbabwe where, as elsewhere, it posed a challenge to the Lutheran liturgical service, one with which the church had to contend. From the outset, Lutheran Christians felt that the end of the world was imminent. Most Christians regarded it as a sign that the coming of Jesus Christ was at hand. They also regarded it as divine punishment for ungodliness. It was observed to be an instrument both for bringing the people of God back to the path and of salvation. At the same time, the pandemic dehumanised members of the church as they felt impotent to intervene meaningfully to

eradicate it. As such, it was taken as a call to earnestly seek the Kingdom of God and its righteousness (Focus group discussion 25/12/21).

Both the gravity of the pandemic and government-imposed restrictive measures affected the form of worship. This chapter examines the impact of Covid-19 on liturgical worship in the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe. It is based on research conducted in the Eastern Diocese, at Mt Pleasant parish in Harare.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The chapter derives its theoretical framework from Choolayil and Putran (2021), who observe that the Covid-19 pandemic had a deleterious effect on human rights in society. Their study argues that although the government of Zimbabwe's aim was to roll out a set of strategies to contain transmission of the pandemic, measures like lockdown inflicted significant damage on society (Choolayil & Putan 2021:1). Although the study is based on experiences of migrant workers in India, who suffered the net effect of violations of human rights in the course of the pandemic, the observations therein are relevant to this study in terms of the impact of Covid-19 on human dignity and identity in the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe.

This chapter is based on empirical research in the form of interviews and focus-group discussions with parishioners at Mt Pleasant Parish in Harare. It employs theological and sociological methods in articulating the influence of Covid-19 on human dignity and identity in the church.

### **Restrictive Governmental Measures**

When the virus first struck in the Chinese city of Wuhan, little did the international community anticipate its rapid spread, which occurred within months. As it was spreading across borders into Zimbabwe in March 2020, various governments had to respond swiftly to control the spread of the pandemic. The Zimbabwean government announced a raft of restrictive

lockdown measures that included maintaining social distance, wearing face masks and making use of sanitisers to try to curb the spread of the virus. Gatherings of more than 50 people were banned at workplaces, churches, funerals, weddings, shops, beer halls, restaurants and sporting facilities. Churches and other institutions had to stop operating. As one church member said, “Church *dzakavharwa*” (Church is closed) – all church activities, such as *misangano yevashandiri nezvapupu* (meetings for the women and men’s wings) and those of witnesses, ceased.

A curfew was put in place from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am to control the movement of people, except for staff providing essential services. Above all, the police and army were deployed to help maintain law and order at check points along the main roads. Some people criticised this move as one that undermined human rights (Odigbo *et al* 2020:10). Although, at times, when the pandemic appeared to have receded, some of the restrictive measures were relaxed following review, the church, beer halls and restaurants, among other facilities, remained closed. This meant that church gatherings such as church services, prayer sessions and night vigils could not take place. The result was that members felt degraded in that their activities were considered as being on par with social facilities and liquor shops.

### **Suspension of Gatherings and Introduction of Virtual Services**

The suspension of gatherings negatively impacted on the operations of the Lutheran Church. Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, church gatherings, such as weekly Sunday services and meetings, had made worship vibrant. The norm is that the calendar is filled with various church programmes and events, such as Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Day of Pentecost. Events such as these are observed throughout the year, boosting the church and strengthening the faith of the followers. However, the issuance of the ban by the government and the insistence that people produce Covid-19 cards as

proof of vaccination were so limiting such that church leaders scoffed at the ban on the grounds that the church's mandate is to save souls, not to drive away people (*The Zimbabwean* 15 August 2021). Nevertheless, the ban on gatherings nurtured the commencement of virtual church services.

### Virtual Services

Virtual services involved live-streaming and the posting of pre-recorded sermons to WhatsApp groups. However, the switch to virtual services paralysed the normally lively performance of the congregation, removing the vibrancy of face-to-face church sessions and diluting the impact of physical contact between preachers and congregants. Regular, in-church responses that normally enlivened the worship environment, such as facial expressions, the nodding of heads and some people standing up, clapping or shouting "Halelujah!" were not available to the preacher or to those attending (Private interview 2/10/21) as virtual services are more of a one-way communication system.

While the 'virtual church' became the 'new normal' during the lockdown period, it had some serious shortcomings. The major challenge was that most people could not afford data bundles to attend to live-streaming services; poor network coverage compounded the situation. Most areas in Harare also experience challenges with constant electricity supply, and this affected the smooth flow of services.

The virtual method of the provision of services deprived members of their natural setting of worship and enforced segregation as it allowed only a limited number of participants to attend the services, in particular, those with suitable devices. As some people remarked, "Online service *haiite inobhowa. Hazvienzani nokusangana pameso*" (Online service, it's boring and different from face-to-face interaction). This meant that the main effective mode of virtual service delivery, the use of pre-recorded sermons on WhatsApp groups, became the preserve of the affluent. Yet, in some instances, when lockdown was relaxed, people resorted to home groups

or garden services even though this risked lack of adherence to social distancing; only groups of people whose members were familiar with one another met at selected home groups. Researchers have observed that Covid-19 spread rapidly amongst people who are closely related as they were likely to eschew health safety measures on the basis that they know one another (*Zimbabwe Herald* 20 January 2021). Concerning virtual services, members felt that things were never the same, *zvakasiyana* (of a different quality; private interview 25/02/22).

### Face Masks

As Covid-19 took its toll globally in devastating and unpredictable ways, governments around the world, including that of Zimbabwe, introduced the mandatory wearing of face masks as a precautionary measure to help curb the spread of the virus. Although their efficacy has been the subject of debate, most people complied and wore face masks. As Lupton, Clark and Southerton remark, “from a health perspective it is said to offer protection to others by limiting the distance and spread of the droplets spread through inhalation, speech, sneezing and coughing” (2021:10).

Some Lutherans felt that the wearing of face masks was biblically sanctioned, and they encouraged their fellow members to use them. They referred to passages like Leviticus 13:45–46 to the effect that anyone with a “defiling disease” must “cover the lower part of their face” and engage in social distancing. Other relevant verses include Genesis 24:65 and 2 Timothy 2:15. A backlash against face masks arose when some people felt that they infringed on their freedoms and rights. Others felt that they caused discomfort and affected their breathing. Overall, the attitude was that face masks were tantamount to harnessing people like cattle using *chitomu* or *chaheki* (devices placed over the mouths of cattle during cultivation to prevent them eating crops; private interview 14/11/21). In this sense, Covid-19 diminished the dignity and identity of church members.

## **Quarantining of the Sick**

A further challenge occurred when a family member became infected and had to be isolated in line with health practices. One would all of a sudden become dangerous to the family. According to the script, as soon as one was affected, a husband and wife could not share a bed. When one was infected, neighbours supported the victim by dropping off food and other supplies at the gate in order to help care for the sick while avoiding infection. Under the strict conditions that were in place, only Ministry of Health officials could enter the homes of affected people. The idea of preparing food for the sick and leaving it at the door, in line with the quarantine policy, was a direct challenge to the dignity and identity of a family member, but it was what the Covid-19 measures dictated.

Covid-19 demanded change to the Lutheran way of life in many respects. One was not allowed in a homestead without one's hands having been washed or sanitised. This gave the impression that one was not welcome unless this task had been performed. In African thought, suggesting that one is dirty diminishes one's humanity, dignity and identity. A new ritual, the washing of hands and sanitisation, was born out of the Covid-19 challenges.

## **Impact on Church Events, Sacraments and Rituals**

Covid-19 had serious impact on church events such as Easter and Holy Communion and on other church practices.

### **Easter Events**

Easter holidays constitute one of the most important events in the Lutheran church calendar. This is a festival and cultural holiday which runs from Good Friday to Easter Sunday and celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is held annually in March or April. For the event, members gather at University of Zimbabwe chapel, the venue for prayers and Bible study, and listen to talks by invited guest speakers, such as the bishop, pastors and other professionals. For instance, in 2022,

the Easter programme included topics such as the power of prayer, mental health and 'Christianity in a new normal' (Mt Pleasant Parish Newsletter, 2022). The programme attracted large gatherings at the church. The event was punctuated with the partaking of Holy Communion. With the incursion of Covid-19 and the regulations to mitigate its spread, such religious practices had come into conflict with church tradition. The lockdown, which banned the Easter gatherings for all Christian denominations, created a strong sense of loss, anxiety, depression, anger among followers. This ban on gathering was received by some of the faithful as unacceptable and as a degradation of religious piety; it was a serious blow to the entire church. It resulted in over-interpretation of the nature of the pandemic, rumours, stigma, and marginalisation and also exacerbated conspiracy theories about the pandemic.

### **Holy Communion**

The Eucharist (Holy Communion) is the culmination of, and the most sacred sacrament in, the liturgy of the Lutheran Church. It is a central rite of the Christian religion: bread and wine are consecrated by the pastor and shared among the members of the congregation, obeying Jesus' command at the Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the Holy Communion had been administered using one cup for drinking wine (the blood of Christ); the practice was that the pastor used towels to clean the upper layer of the cup before giving it to the next communicant. Yet, with Covid-19, the practice had to be changed – the pastor had a tray bearing several cups, and each congregant would pick a cup, drink the wine and then drop the cup in the rubbish container. Moreover, the common practice had been that communicants queued, and the pastor administered the Lord's Supper to them. The church suspended the celebration of the Lord's Supper during intense Covid-19 lockdown periods. It was served sparingly at garden services when the pastor visited families and undertook Holy Communion with four to six households gathered in one place. These had the advantage of networking and sharing the Word



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together. The Covid-19 restrictions affected members of the church, who felt deprived of its most sacrosanct element. It literally dismantled unity in the family of God.

While the outreach programme benefited followers in the Mt Pleasant area, those beyond the suburb were disadvantaged due to the government's lockdown restrictions. It proved to be difficult for the Lutheran Eastern Diocese bishop and the dean to travel to meet parishioners. In normal situations before the outbreak of the pandemic, one or both would visit congregants in the parish once or twice per year to stay in contact with membership and stimulate growth of the church. In addition, the church leadership would visit the missionary base in Sweden and return with charity donations for the poor. However, the cessation of visits had a negative impact on the souls of the saints. In addition, the church lost a good number of its followers. Prior to Covid-19, the Lutheran Church had served as a place for socialising for members from Mberengwa district and Matabeleland South, where the church had first established roots during the missionary era. Most members had obtained their education at schools, such as Musume, Chegato, Masase, Munene and Manama high schools, in the Mberengwa and Gwanda areas. The church had also become the centre for alumni of the Lutheran schools. Without regular meetings at church, this entire social fabric unravelled, and this led to moral and spiritual decay, with some members not returning. As one commented, "Faith needs strong people not slack" (Private interview, 16/01/22). The pandemic therefore created an opportunity for the faint-hearted to vanish, and it sapped the energy of its committed membership.

### **Home Fellowship**

The practice of home gatherings and worship had been adopted by the church prior to the onset of Covid-19; later it was used as measure to circumvent the spread of the pandemic. It intensified when the pandemic gained a foothold amongst the people. Home gatherings are church services conducted in a person's house by a group of persons from the

same church who live close to one another; such gatherings became a means of continuing church services during lockdown. These small groups are referred to as cell-groups. Each cell-group has a leader who acts as an intermediary between church management and church members: members are able to contact their pastors through their cell-group leaders. If a member is hospitalised, bereaved, put to bed or wants to carry out a special thanksgiving, he or she informs the cell-group leader, who then communicates with the pastor in order to undertake further action.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, many church members were not fully committed to house fellowship meetings even though these had always been encouraged by the leadership by means of announcements. The pandemic and the attendant lockdown prompted the church to revitalise house-fellowship centres, primarily through live streaming on social media platforms and WhatsApp. While such modes of interaction allowed the maintaining of the momentum of the church services, members had difficulties using the facility because of challenges that have already been mentioned – network access and operational costs via electronic devices. As a result, members felt hapless, their power weakened by the pandemic.

### **Music and Dance**

Music and dance are part of African expression of praise and worship in the Lutheran Church. This part of church service was also affected by Covid-19. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, congregants used to meet every Sunday and in mid-week for prayer sessions, choir and dance practice. The church services are also punctuated by music and dance. Congregants actively participate in praise and worship, thereby making the worship environment lively. Music, instruments such as piano, drums, jingles and whistles as well as dance make the church service and worship lively and interesting, especially for the youth. Examples of activities include Song 1:

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*Dai pasina Jesu wakandiponesa ndiani waizondiona?*

*Hapana waizondiona, hapana waizondiona, hapana waizondiona.*

Had it not been Jesus who saved me, is there anyone who would do so?

There is no one who could save me....

### And Song 2:

*Hosana huya uvone zvoita nyika, Hosana vuya uvone zvoita nyika*

*Musaita moyo yenyu mikukutu saThomas waramba kutendeuka*

*Wavona mavanga wotendeuka.*

Hosana come and see the world, Hosana come and see the world

Do not harden your hearts like Thomas

Who doubted resurrected Jesus until he touched his scars.

Music and dance invariably constitute a complex and inherent part of human culture and heritage. They are powerful symbolic expressions of people's identity in religious contexts. The fact that the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe is deeply rooted in the indigenous culture is evident in its promotion of enculturation. At a gathering of the Lutheran Church men and women, youths and old people dance as an expression of faith. According to Mbiti (1976:56), conversion to the gospel takes place within a cultural framework. The gospel has been and should continue to be proclaimed in the melodies of African culture, through the words of our 1 000 languages, through the vibrant tunes of our 3 000 musical instruments, through the joyous reading of our bodies and the solemn symbols of our artists. On that note, church services or ceremonies without music and dance may be unsuccessful in the Lutheran Church. The curtailment of singing in the church in an attempt to control the spread of Covid-19 defaced the blueprint for Lutheran worship.

## **Funeral Rites**

In normal circumstances, Lutherans observe funeral rites for the dead. The Lutheran liturgy allows for funeral ceremonies to be conducted under the leadership of the priest. Lutheran Christians believe that such rituals are meant to connect people with the unseen beings. The rites involve pre-burial rituals such as a handshake when expressing condolences, the body lying in state at the deceased's homestead and viewing of the body; those of spreading the mat in the grave and the removal of shoes and metal items from the corpse; and post-burial gatherings and rituals, such as visiting the grave after burial, the distribution of deceased's property, and the unveiling of the tombstone. Shoko (2007:63) holds that some of the Lutheran practices resonate with traditional customary beliefs and practices, as is typical of Christianity in an African context. According to Petersen (2005:4), a burial following customs and tradition is necessary in order to avoid trouble in the family and in the community; funeral rituals are required to be performed in the prescribed manner to appease the spirits. If the requisite funeral rituals are not performed, people believe that the dead person will come back as a ghost to torment the family and community. In addition, failure to perform the required death rituals may cause mental illness, misfortune and deaths among family members. It is believed that if the dead are not granted due honour upon burial, according to culture and tradition, they may avenge themselves (Shoko 2007:36–37). However, the ban on viewing the bodies of Covid-19 victims and on gatherings of people at funerals meant that most ritual practices were not undertaken. Such burials somehow resembled the burials of paupers, and that scenario desacralised the funeral rituals and demeaned both the dead and the living.

## Impact on Social, Economic and Medical Matters

### The Man's Role

The role of a man in the Bible and in Shona culture was clearly spelt out and functional prior to Covid-19. The duties of the man or husband are spelt out in the Bible; these begin with leadership. The scripture is clear that the husband must be the leader of his home and have control of his life (1 Tim 3). In church, he takes up a leadership position as a bishop, pastor or elder (although, today, female pastors have also been ordained). As such, the wife submits to the husband (Eph 5:21–24). The Bible sums up the role of man as ruler, leader, teacher, lover, protector, provider, manager and priest. In Shona culture, which is patriarchal, the man is head of family, and, as the breadwinner, he provides for, protects and fends for his family. A 'real man' is defined by his power and authority over womenfolk. Yet, at the onset of the disease, the role of men was severely affected by the pandemic. Like everyone else, they had to conform to the dictates of the lockdown and stay at home. Most men suffered from depression because of 'home capture' – their movement was restricted, and they had to sit, day in and day out, at home with their wife and family. Children were also confined to their homes and schools were closed; many cases of child pregnancy were recorded, and many youths turned to drugs. The man became impotent as he watched all this happening to himself and to his family. Such experiences sucked away male power and dominance and can be seen as both anti-biblical and counter-cultural. The man's confinement at home, where he found himself bowing to the woman's dictates, violates the Pauline theology of the father as head of family (Eph 6:4). The woman is usually at home while the man is at work. In the context of Covid-19, the man's role was weakened. One Zimbabwean comedian celebrated the arrival of Covid-19 as welcome news because it disciplined husbands at home. She prayed to God to keep up the pandemic in order to tame the man:

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*Maita henyu Jehova kutiunzira virus vana baba tava kugara navo pamba. Zvanga zvanyanya vachitinyepera kuti vari kubasa kana kuona bhora ivo vari kupfambi. Mwari dai virus raramba riripo ndizvo vana baba kuti vagare pamba. (Private interview, 16/01/22).*

We thank you God for bringing this disease. Our men used to abandon us at home under the pretext that they were fending for their families or watching soccer at the club, yet they entertained prostitutes. God retain this virus indefinitely because we need our men at home.

In this manner was the father's power and dominance whittled away by the pandemic.

### **Social Impact**

Acknowledging the gravity of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) noted that the Covid-19 outbreak affected entire populations, but particularly social groups in the most vulnerable situations, such as people living in poverty, older persons, persons with disabilities, youth and indigenous people. The observation is relevant to members of the Lutheran Church who are part of the elderly poor, especially those without access to running water. Due to their limited movement, few obtain employment opportunities, a situation which was exacerbated by the pandemic.

Although the government received Covid-19 funds from international agencies to help ameliorate the dire situation, those resources were not adequate to the population as a whole, leaving most people vulnerable to the disease.

### **Economic Impact**

The finances of the Lutheran Church come from the people. The collections are undertaken in form of offerings (*kutsirano*), tithes, donations, and the like through fundraising activities. Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, during church services,

members were reminded of the importance of giving tithes and abundant offerings. In response, some church members made large donations as a means of showing off their wealth. Unfortunately, Covid-19 kept many people away from church, and ongoing reminders to give were put on hold. Subsequently, members stopped giving money to the church.

Apart from tithes and offerings, the church uses projects as sources of income. These include selling chickens, a piggery, the sale of uniforms and bazaars operating at parish, deanery and diocese levels. Pastors and church workers receive their pay from funds generated by such activities. The cessation of church services meant that levels of giving declined. Some givers lost their jobs and could not sustain their offerings. As a result, available cash slowly dwindled, and this affected the operations of the church. The pastors, in particular, who survive on the offerings of church members, felt the pinch of the virus as it hurt their congregations and caused embarrassment to the man of the cloth (Earls 2020).

### **Traditional Medicine**

The onset of Covid-19 brought into the spotlight the issue of traditional medicine and its efficacy in the treatment of Covid-19. For a long time, traditional medicine in Zimbabwe has been looked down upon and scandalised by ethnographers and missionaries as evil and inferior, a matter of superstition and magic. The *n'anga* (traditional healer) has been described as a witchdoctor with the power either to kill or to support life (Shoko 2018:1). The Lutheran church has been vocal against the use of traditional medicine and recourse to traditional healers. Anyone viewed as connected to traditional healers risked being excommunicated from the church. However, with the emergence of Covid-19, some Lutheran Christians shifted to traditional medicine to save lives in the face of the ravages of the pandemic. Most people, including some prominent Christians, used traditional herbs in form of roots, tubers and the leaves of trees, which are ground into powder or soaked in water to form concoctions. Some common herbs used include

*zumbani* (*Lippia javanica*), *mufandichimuka* (which boosts immunity), *mukandanyoka*, *moringa*, *mutsine*, *mubvamaropa*, *mtarara* and *mutsambatsi* (Shoko 2007:5). Tubers include *tsangamidzi* (ginger) and *karibekantu*. Most of the herbs were supplemented with more widely used substances such as garlic, lemon, onion and honey. The methods of healing used include *kufukira* (inhaling), which resembles a form of exorcism used in traditional healing circles. While traditional medicine has not been scientifically proven as a cure for Covid-19, the popular belief is that it reduces the symptoms of the disease. Scholars affirm that traditional healing is holistic, covering both physical and spiritual dimensions (Shoko 2007:89). By switching to traditional medicine during the pandemic, Lutherans faltered in their execution of Christian faith. However, the matter ignited the calls for the enculturation of the Gospel in an African context.

### Benefits of Covid-19

It would be folly to depict the effects of Covid-19 as being exclusively negative and as only jeopardising dignity and identity in the Lutheran church. There are some positives that accrued from the presence of the virus in Zimbabwe. For instance, the switch to virtual services is in line with globalisation and the fourth industrial revolution, with its emphasis on technological advancement and innovation (Xu, David & Kim 2018:90). Covid-19's interaction with traditional systems represents a call for the enculturation of the gospel in Africa. In fact, Graco (2022) affirms that virtual communication globally has become the 'new normal'.

Covid-19 also benefited the church and families in that the 'stay at home' method of preventing the spread of the disease increased socialisation among family members as they spent much time together. It brought oneness to families because members were always sharing and encouraging each other to stay safe and, for those infected and affected by the virus, to take their medication. Some marriage procedures like *marooro* (lobola) became strictly family affairs in order



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to avoid the spread of Covid-19. Some interviewees had this to say:

*Vanhu vakadzidza kugara pamisha yavo zvakaderedza matambudziko echirwere uye nokupedza makuhwa. Yakatidzorera kuma natural herbs, nokuziva simba riri muma herbs. Covid-19 yakaita kuti vanhu vatsvake Mwari chaizvo (Private interview, 16/01/22).*

People learnt to stay at home, which reduced the spread of the disease, but also to minimise gossiping. It took us back to the use of traditional herbs, and, in the process, conscientised us to the power and potency of traditional medicine. Covid-19 also raised awareness among people to learn to seek God.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings recorded above, this chapter notes the dire situation Covid-19 posed in relation to the liturgy and its effect on human dignity and identity. The chapter makes the recommendations discussed below that are relevant in the post-Covid-19 era.

The church must reflect on the use of traditional medicine in its health system in the post-Covid-19 era. The use of **traditional medicines** such as herbal teas and nutritional support can be considered a complementary approach in the spirit of enculturation to support people's overall health and well-being. However, this must be guided by World Health Organization protocols, and health professionals must be consulted on the matter.

The church should be pragmatic in attending to economic needs that can help mitigate pandemics that affect people's health and wellbeing. It must have a robust resource mobilisation programme and should not totally depend on tithes and offerings for life-saving projects. It is recommended that the church diversifies its means of income so that it is

able to continue operating in case of further unpredictable eventualities such as Covid-19.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted people's daily lives and exposed deeper societal issues such as stigma and discrimination, the church must play a role in restoring **human dignity** and **identity**. This can be accomplished by recognising vulnerability and its interconnectedness with other social issues and by placing an emphasis on re-establishing people's self-respect, especially that of vulnerable people, in accordance with scripture: "I will restore you to health and heal your wounds (Jeremiah 30:17).

### **Conclusion**

This investigation has revealed that the pandemic led to numerous changes in the liturgical practices within the church. While the pandemic raged, a number of age-old traditions of the church, such as Easter and Holy Communion, were no longer being observed in the same way. Several liturgical practices within the church, for example, funerals and other rituals, were discontinued or modified as the lockdown restrictions were rolled out by the government. Above all, the pandemic, despite its positive role of ushering in the use of new technology, had an overwhelmingly negative effect. Restrictions on movement, the wearing of face masks and the use of sanitisers, quarantine and partaking in the use of traditional medicines affected social and economic dimensions and undermined human dignity and identity within the church. As such, it posed a challenge for Christianity: to review its approach to seeking the Kingdom of God and to devise a new mode of evangelism premised on the dictates of the new normal.

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