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An African Christian Reflection on the Metaphorisation of the Church as Body

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Abstract

New Testament writers picture the relationship between Christ and his church as well as the relationship among the members of the church using such metaphors as a community of citizens, the body of Christ, a household, a building, a bride, and a temple. A proper understanding of these and other ecclesiological metaphors is required to enhance the African understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. Yet not much theological attention is given to these metaphors in contemporary African theological discourses. This research was, therefore, conducted to examine the body metaphor from an African socio-cultural and religious perspective to enhance the African understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the Christian church. The researcher used a literature-based research methodology to gather data from the library and internet. A contextual theological framework was used to analyse the data, focusing on understanding the subject matter within the African socio-political and cultural context. After a brief outline of the concept of the church, the paper examines each of the selected metaphors of the church in relation to the African worldview and finally offers implications (reflections) for Christian discipleship. The paper found that the African worldview better prepares African believers to appreciate the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. It, however, also noted some limitations of the African socio-political structure that need to be dealt with in order to make the metaphors as meaningful as they are intended to be. In addition to its contribution to African Christian

ecclesiological discourse, the paper attempts to decolonise Christianity and make it both meaningful and relevant to the African society.

Introduction

Since the inauguration of the Christian church, its nature, purpose, and operations have been subject to various interpretations across different cultures. Different New Testament writers have used different metaphors for the church, each contributing to a holistic understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. In this context, a metaphor refers to a term or phrase that is used to describe something that it is not literally fit for. N. Dobríc (quoted in Wessels 2014:714) argues that 'metaphorical concepts represent interwoven basic structures of human thought, social communication and concrete linguistic manifestation through a rich semantic system based on the human physical, cognitive and cultural experience'. The New Testament authors use various metaphors to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church, as well as the dynamics among believers. These include such images as a community (such as God's people, a heavenly citizenship, and God's kingdom), a family (like the household of God or a bride), a body (the body of Christ), a building (God's temple), and a field (plants, a vineyard, or a vine).

A clear understanding of ecclesiological metaphors is essential for deepening African insights into the church's identity, mission, and functions. This is because these metaphors have parallels in the African worldview that make it easier for Africans to appreciate them. Nonetheless, contemporary African theological discourses have not given sufficient attention to the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the church, particularly the body metaphor. This gap in theological inquiry has hindered a holistic appreciation of the church's identity and function in African Christianity. The primary problem this study addresses is the lack of theological engagement with ecclesiological metaphors, especially the body metaphor, within African theological discourse. This study is justified by the need to bridge this theological gap and provide an Africa-centred interpretation of the church as the body of Christ. Over the years, Western approaches to the study of the metaphors have dominated African theological discourse. It will be argued that a proper understanding of these metaphors through an African socio-political and cultural lens can deepen African Christians' appreciation of their identity and role within the church. That is, exploring these metaphors within the African worldview would ensure that theological concepts resonate with indigenous cultural frameworks, making Christianity more meaningful and contextually relevant. The article adopts a literature-research approach whereby data was collected from existing publications. To address the research problem the article adopts a contextual theological approach. This framework may be defined as

> the strategic adaptation of theological doctrines and practices to specific cultural *milieus* whilst emphasising the primacy of the gospel over cultural norms. (Boaheng 2024:212)

This theological model is guided by the following principles: adequate understanding of contextual realities, the importance of maintaining the core of the Christian message, the need to be cautious of syncretism and folk religion, the need to be cautious not to mistake shadows for the reality of the gospel, and the need to connect one's contextual theology to a global theological framework (Boaheng 2024:213–221).

Understanding the Concept of the Church

The English word *church* comes from the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) which means 'the assembly of called out ones' (Williams 1996:15). In the Septuagint, *ἐκκλησία* translates the Hebrew קהל (*qahal*) which means 'an assembly' (Ryrie 1999:455). In the Graeco-Roman world the word *ἐκκλησία* was used in the political sphere in reference to 'the gathering of the citizens of a city' (Erickson 1998:1041; see also Acts 19:32, 39, 41; Williams 1996:455). It is like an African society calling its members through the gongon beater to assembly at a particular place.[1] After the establishment of the New Testament faith community, the believers of Christ became known as the *ἐκκλησία*. The New Testament *ἐκκλησία* comprises people who accepted the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the means of salvation, had expressed faith in Christ as their saviour, and had confessed their sin for forgiveness of sin amidst repentance. The members of the church had been removed 'from the dark situation of sin

[1] The gongon is a type of drum that is played to summon citizens of a society.

and evil' (Williams 1996:17). The New Testament group of believers were first referred to as the 'ἐκκλησία' in Acts 11:26. The description of Jesus' disciples as the 'ἐκκλησία' meant that the members of the early church identified themselves both as citizens of the city of God and as people who stood in continuity with the Old Testament community of God's people.

The Body Metaphor

One of the most frequently used and the most vivid representations of the church is the expression 'the body of Christ' (Dunn 1998:548; Schreiner 2001:335). This metaphor is particularly significant because of how frequently it is used, the different ways it is used and developed, and how significant it is theologically. With no Old Testament root, a number of sources have been put forth for the body metaphor. One school of thought considers Jesus' assertion that the persecution of the church amounts to persecuting Jesus himself (see Acts 9:4–5) as the source of this metaphor (Schreiner 2001:549). Other possible sources include Paul's own Adamic Christology, Paul's 'in Christ' theology, corporate personality, or sacramental theology (Dunn 1998:549; Schreiner 2001:335). The symbolisation of the city as body in Paul's Graeco-Roman context might have also influenced his thought. Seneca, an ancient writer, uses the body metaphor in a similar way to that found in Pauline literature. Seneca uses the body metaphor to denote the divine-human unity (cf. Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:22–23, 5:23, 5:30), the unity of the constituents of human society (cf. Romans 12:4–5, 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Ephesians 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 4:25), and the relationship between the state as 'body' and the emperor as 'head' (cf. Colossians 1:18, 2:19, Ephesians 1:22–23, 4:1–16, 5:23) (McVay 2006:292). No matter one's position, the source of the body imagery is not as important as the theological message it carries.

Paul uses the body metaphor both for the universal church (Ephesians 1:22–23) and the local church (1 Corinthians 12:27) (Erickson 1998:1047). The body imagery underscores the link between the church as a group of believers and Christ as the head of the church. It underscores that one's salvation unites the person with Christ; hence believers are 'in Christ' or 'with Christ' (Erickson 1998:1047). For Paul, Christ's presence in the believer is the foundation upon which one believes and hopes for the glory that lies ahead (Colossians 1:27, Galatians 2:20). Christ is actually the source, the agent, and the owner of all things that were created (Colossians 1:16) and the head of this body of which believers are individual parts (Colossians 1:18). Being united with Christ, the believer derives nourishment through him to whom he/she is connected (Colossians 2:19). The connection between the believer and Christ is reminiscent of Christ's vine metaphor which depicts him as the vine and believers as branches connected to him (John 15:1–8). The body imagery further underscores that the church is the locus of Christ's present activities just as his physical body was the locus of his activities during his first advent (Erickson 1998:1047).

Aspects of the Body Metaphor

The Headship of Christ

First of all, the headship of Christ in his body signifies his authority over the church (Ephesians 1:22–23, Colossians 1:18) (Enns 2008:361; Very 2019:386). It means that he is the leader and the lord of the church, directing and superintending the affairs of the church. Therefore, ministers in leadership positions in the church must consider themselves as representatives of Christ. Ecclesiological leadership must be practised in accordance with Christ's will and directives. The church cannot exist apart from Christ (Williams 1996:66). Without the head (Christ) the church is simply dead (a corpse). In the African environment, people frequently encounter snakes on their farms. Since snakes are venomous one has to avoid them and/or kill them when one encounters them. There is an African proverb that says, 'When the head of the snake is cut, what is left is a robe', meaning the snake becomes powerless when its head is cut off. So people will encourage others to cut off the head of a snake if they really want to make sure that they (the people) are safe. Just as the snake has no life without its head, so the church becomes lifeless outside Christ. The headship of Christ with respect to the church, therefore, underlines that the entire life of the church 'is virtually connected with Christ' (Williams 1996:66).

There is another saying: 'when a carcass rots, it begins from the head'. The meaning is that the quality of the body depends on the quality of the head. In other words, the body cannot be bad if the head is not bad. Relating this to the church, the quality of the church depends on the quality of its head. Since Christ, who is the head of the church, is perfect and sinless, the church must be holy. The church must reflect Christ's righteousness to the world that loves unrighteousness. At the same time, the point can be made that the quality of the church may be affected by the human leaders put in charge of its affairs. Instead of learning from Christ, some believers erroneously imitate their leaders as was the case in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 3:1–4). The failure of the leader, therefore, affects the church greatly. It is therefore important to be cautious and prayerful when choosing leaders for the church.

Unity and Interconnectedness

The body metaphor also implies unity, interconnectivity, and interdependence between members of the church (Enns 2008:361; Erickson 1998:1047; Williams 1996:68). In this sense, unity means the formation of an organic whole that is marked by agreement and internal cohesiveness. The unity of believers is rooted in their common foundation of faith and practice. The unity that exists between the individual members of the church is unity in spirit, which transcends merely natural ties, whether family, nation, or race.

In the Old Testament, Israel was divided into different tribes and later into different kingdoms despite their common ancestry (from Abraham). Their unity was not necessarily based on their common ancestry but on their relationship with a common God, Yahweh, and with their families. Similarly, in most traditional African societies, unity among people depends mainly on their common object of worship, common linguistic tradition, common geographical location, and family ties. This unity is not effective because it does not accommodate people of different backgrounds, including people of different languages, different tribes, and different geographical areas, among others. Generally speaking, the possession of a human soul by everyone, as a spark from God, serves as a unifier for all humanity. However, even in Africa where people are generous and hospitable and easily share their resources with others, it is not easy to unite with 'outsiders'. Therefore, like ancient Israel, unity in Africa is practically limited to a nation or a closely knit community.

But in the New Testament the unity among Christians has no limit, knows no boundary (Kosse 2006:1314). The inward unity of the members of the church cannot be expressed by any outward relationships. The oneness of the believers is patterned after the oneness between the Father and the Son (John 17:21). Just as the Holy Spirit is the bond of union in the Godhead, so he is the source of the unity in the church. Paul illustrates this spiritual union in at least the following four ways.

The first is the filial unity that is based on origin or parentage. Here, Christ is said to be the 'firstborn among many brothers and sisters' (Romans 8:29, NIV used throughout). It must be noted that Christ is not begotten in the way that believers are begotten; he is the only begotten son of the Father; believers are made in his likeness. In 1 Corinthians 3:1–12, Paul laments that the Corinthian believers had developed factions such that they were living in unity no more. He tells them that he (Paul), Cephas, and Apollos are all fellow workers working for Christ and Christ alone is the head of the church. He, therefore, asks the church if it were any of these church leaders who was crucified for humanity. He makes the point that the crucified Christ is one, not divided, and for that matter his followers are not expected to be divided but to be united in mind, purpose, and whatever they do. The unity that is expected to be among members of the church is also shown in Ephesians 4:4–6.

The second symbol of unity is the conjugal union (Ephesians 5) based on the institution of marriage. Marriage is a divine institution that binds two people of different backgrounds together in a covenantal relationship that is expected to be broken only through the death of one of the partners. The strength of the marriage bond is underlined by the use of the word 'cleave' in relation to the man's attachment to his wife (Genesis 2:24). Such a bond is never to be broken by any human being (Matthew 19:6). This is the kind of bond that unites the members in the body of Christ. The closeness of this union, its fruitfulness, indissolubility, and complete interchange of goods, is significant for a holistic understanding of the ecclesiological unity.

The third aspect of the unity is the sacramental unity (1 Corinthians 10:16–17) (Enns 2008:548). Sharing the cup signifies sharing in the benefits of the atoning blood, and sharing the loaf sharing in the benefits of Christ's substitutionary atoning death on the cross (1 Corinthians 10:16). Paul establishes an analogy between the sharing of the one loaf at communion and the unity of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17). All believers are united in feeding on the crucified and resurrected lord.

Fourth is the organic unity existing between the head and the body. Paul gives this unity a trinitarian dimension – one body, one spirit, one hope, one lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all (as an empowering spirit) and through all (as a gift-bestowing spirit) and in all (as a life-giving spirit) (Ephesians 4:4–6). The trinitarian God is social/relational in nature and so humankind, being made in God's image, is also social in nature. The formation of societies due to the social nature of humankind means human beings live in communities of people of diverse background. Yet, the community is a united body, a body that thrives on unity in diversity, a situation that is similar to the unity that exists among the distinct personalities of the triune God.

Even though one's qualification into the church is an individualistic affair (involving a personal salvation experience), the members of the church are interconnected. Therefore, when divisions over spiritual gifts were creating problems in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 12–14), Paul provided a solution that emphasised the unity in diversity of the body of Christ (Schreiner 2001:367). He established that God has intentionally given believers diverse gifts for the wellbeing of the church. Believers are many parts of the same body, each part playing a different role (Romans 12:4). The interconnectivity becomes clear in the assertion that Christians in Christ 'though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others' (Romans 12:5). Therefore, if one refuses to function, the entire church will suffer, meaning the various parts are equally important. Paul develops the idea of the equality of the various body parts by arguing that, whether he/she is a Jew or a Gentile, every believer has been baptised by the same Spirit into the same body and, for that matter, they have all drunk one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). He argues further that even some gifts are more conspicuous than others; none of the gifts is more important than any other (1 Corinthians 12:14–25). Paul urges the Colossae Christians to let the peace of Christ dominate their corporate life, having been called to such a harmony as Christ's body (Colossians 3:15) (Schreiner 2001:338). He also emphasises the unity between Jews and Gentiles as members of the Christian community, having been reconciled with each other and with God through Christ's work on the cross (Ephesians 2:11–3:13) (Schreiner 2001:1047; Very 2019:385). Before Christ's death, there existed a division between Jews and Gentiles, but now there is reconciliation and unity symbolised by the image of the body. As Kuzuli Kosse puts it

> By his death and resurrection, Jesus opened the way to new alliances for all people, who had formerly been without grace and were enemies of God (Eph. 2:12-13). (2006:1314)

Mutual Edification

The organic nature of the church implies growth to maturity (Ephesians 4:12–16) (Very 2019:386). Just as every organism grows to maturity, so the church is expected to grow toward maturity. Spiritual gifts have been given to enhance the maturity of the community so that it (the community) can function well like a fully grown man (Enns 2008:361; Very 2019:386). Lilly Nortjé-Meyer translates Ephesians 4:13 as follows:

> Everybody should come unto a perfect man, unto the dimensions of the full stature of Christ. The tenor in this case is not the church, but Christ, the full stature of Christ. (2005:735)

Here, there are no defects in any area of the body; each component is perfectly formed and performs its intended function excellently. Nortjé-Meyer (2005:735) notes that in the Graeco-Roman world the male body was considered the norm while the female body was defective. Paul's use of the male figure 'to describe the leader, ruler and decision-maker' of the church is, therefore, consonant with the Graeco-Roman public and socio-political values (Very 2019:387). Women's roles in the households of the in-group were similar in both Graeco-Roman and Ephesian culture, and Ephesian women held no leadership positions in the church (Very 2019:387).

In the body of Christ, everybody matters because every believer has a specific role to play for the common good of the church (1 Corinthians 12:7, 1 Peter 4:10) (Erickson 1998:1047; Williams 1996:68). Paul's teachings about diverse gifts and different but equally important body parts functioning together in a single organism underline the unity of the members of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12–25). The body metaphor, therefore, depicts the church as a close-knit community that exists for the good of all of its members. One must actively participate in the body of Christ not only because each member depends on the others but also because each member has a duty to care for the other members (Williams 1996:70). This fact further underlines the need to participate in the activities of a local church in which one edifies others and also benefits from other members.

Since no one has all the gifts (1 Corinthians 12:27–31), each person should exercise what they have been given (Romans 12:6) so that the church will lack nothing in respect of these gifts (Williams 1996:70). Given that no one has it all, members of the body of Christ are expected to bear one another's burdens so that, together, the whole church can be presented as a purified whole (Galatians 6:2). To this end, those who are found to be in sin are to be restored (Galatians 6:1). Paul's approach to dealing with sinful members varies. In some cases in Galatians 6, sinful members were to be restored gently. In some other cases, he requires the church to excommunicate sinful members from the fellowship so that they will not defile it.

With the above exposition on the body metaphor, the paper proceeds to deduce some implications for African Christianity in terms of theology and praxis.

Theological and Pastoral Implications (Reflections)

The body metaphor has implications that can be noted and outlined.

The Communal Nature of the Church

The body metaphor outlined above highlights the communal nature of the church. People enter the church individually, but the church as a whole is a community. The ecclesiastical community comprises the church triumphant (dead believers), the church militant (living believers), and the church expectant (yet-to-become believers). The African family system prepares the African to appreciate the communal nature of the church. The African extended family system goes beyond the nuclear family to include other members such as grandparents, aunties, uncles, nephews, nieces, and others. Like the ecclesiastical community, the extended family is three dimensional, comprising the ancestors (comparable to the church triumphant), the living (church militant), and the unborn (church expectant). Though people enter the African family as individuals, there is a strong connection that binds all the people in the family together.

The communal nature of the church can be considered in two dimensions. First, the church is an international community that includes people of all nations and maintains unity in diversity (Gorman 2014:283). The communal nature of the church can be understood from the following definition of a community:

> A group of interacting people, possibly living in proximity, often refers to a group that shares some common values and is attributed with social cohesion within a shared geographical location, generally in social units larger than a household. (Ovbiebo 2013:10)

The local church usually comprises people in the same geographical area who have experienced the saving grace of God and have a common agenda, to be like Christ. Each local assembly contributes to the overall quality of the church.

Second, the church as a community is a relational community that seeks to develop relationships with God and with one another (Osei-Bonsu 2011:70). Thus, the church's communal nature has both spiritual and social, vertical and horizontal, dimensions. The spiritual aspect has to do with the church's efforts to bring lost humanity back to God. The church has a responsibility to partner God in his missionary agenda of reconciling the world unto himself through the cross. The church – whether individual members or the corporate body – must endeavour to glorify God through worship (Gorman 2014:283). The social dimension includes the church's ministry to the marginalised, the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the hurt, and the violated. The church must not be divided into social classes where some people are seen as first-class members because of their socioeconomic or political status while others are considered inferior.

As a unit, the African family is expected to address the needs of its members. For example, the family protects the young ones from bad influences. In the same vein the church must protect her members from false teachings. In Africa, where many people suffer from injustice, social exclusion, poverty, disease, and psychological illness, the social dimension of the church's ministry is crucial. The African Christian community must become a voice for the voiceless and the marginalised. The church must develop the leadership capacity of its members to be active participants in national political processes. This will ensure that Christian principles are incorporated into public policies. The church should speak prophetically against ungodly policies run by governments and encourage governments to address the needs of the citizenry rather than amassing state resources for personal gain. In a true community, there is the need for empathy and encouragement. The experience of one member must be the experience of all (1 Corinthians 12:26).

While the comparison between the church and the African family system highlights the communal nature of both institutions, it is important to also acknowledge their differences and the limitations of the African metaphors. The African family is primarily based on biological lineage and kinship ties, whereas the church is a spiritual family where membership is based on faith in Christ (John 1:12–13, Galatians 3:26). Unlike the African family, which one is born into by default, entry into the church is by spiritual rebirth and faith. Additionally, the church, as an international community, is open to all people, transcending ethnic, tribal, and national boundaries (Revelation 7:9). In contrast, the African family system is often exclusive, emphasising ancestry, lineage, and ethnicity, which sometimes creates barriers between different communities. Another key difference is that while the church, as the body of Christ, has an eternal purpose (Ephesians 5:25–27), the African family, though significant in earthly life, is temporary and bound to socio-cultural changes. Another limitation relates to the hierarchical nature of African society. In many African family systems, authority is concentrated in the hands of elders or patriarchs, sometimes leading to oppressive structures where the voices of younger members, women, or marginalised groups are suppressed. In contrast, the church emphasises servant leadership and mutual submission (Matthew 20:25–28). The church needs to note these limitations and find ways to address them in the quest to make the metaphor meaningful to the African audience.

Fellowship and Interdependence

The metaphor of the body also underscores that the church must experience genuine fellowship. The interconnectedness that characterises the body of Christ has no room for isolated Christianity – 'Jesus, yes; the church, no' – whereby people claim to be Christians but refuse to fellowship with other believers (Williams 1996:69). Likewise, in Africa, one becomes a member of the family by default not by choice. No one can refuse to belong to the family and so isolated life is not the norm. According to African cosmology, social exclusion is not desirable. This worldview prepares the African Christian to accept the relevance of Christian fellowship. Just as the African's relationship with the spiritual realm should be reflected in social relations, so the believer's vertical relationship with Christ needs to yield a horizontal relationship with other believers. Erickson (1998:1058) is right to say 'Christianity is a corporate matter, and the Christian life can be fully realized only in relationship to others'. The Christian's most important responsibility to the congregation is to regularly attend the gatherings of the believers (Hebrews 10:25; see Psalm 84:4, 84:10, and Acts 2:42) (Dever 2007:793). The believer does not only need Christ (the head) but also needs other members of the body to survive and grow. For this reason, a believer, by default, is placed in a situation of total interdependence with other Christians.

Fellowship in this sense goes beyond mere social relations to the point where people have a deep mutual understanding and emotional connection. The early church gives a classic example of this fellowship. The newly converted individuals 'devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the teaching of the apostles' (Acts 2:42). It is interesting to note that among their many pursuits, these early disciples are said to have made 'fellowship' one of their top priorities. This term 'fellowship' derives from the Greek word *κοινωνία* – usually translated 'fellowship', 'community', 'participation', or 'sharing' – describes people uniting for their common good and coexisting as a community (Acts 4–5) (Osei-Bonsu 2011:70). The opposite of *κοινωνία* is *ἴδιος* (*idion*) which implies a private, hidden, and non-participatory experience (Kariatlis 2012:53). The example set by the early church (Acts 2:42–47) indicates that fellowship among believers may lead to the sharing of possessions for the wellbeing of every member of a church. This sharing, however, is not meant to have everybody possessing the same amount of wealth but to ensure that those who have little do not have too little to live on and those who have much do not have too much while others have little (2 Corinthians 8:15).

Thus, the Christian community must be characterised by interdependence, interconnectedness, tolerance, solidarity, and sharing of resources. In the African worldview, one's existence is inextricably linked to the existence of other human beings. This idea is expressed in the saying

> My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours […] A person is a person through other persons. (Tutu 1999:31)

The African communal worldview promotes the 'spirit of caring and community, harmony, and hospitality, respect, and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another' (Mangaliso 2001:24; see also Meylahn and Musiyambiri 2017:1) and contradicts selfishness and self-centredness. As hinted earlier, the African communal worldview is a good foundation for developing the communal nature of the church.

The practice of *ukusisa* among the Zulu people of South Africa is a practical illustration of how the African communal sense of life informs attitudes towards wealth and its creation. Like many other Africans, the Zulu community holds that human beings originated as a group/family, not as a single individual (Mahlangu 2016:3). Therefore, the interest of the community comes before the interest of the individual. A person only enjoys meaningful existence within cohabitation with other persons. In the *ukusisa* system, a wealthy Zulu man (*umnumzane*) would 'lend' a cow and a bull to a poor family (who has no cattle) to take care of (Nussbaum 2003:3). After they had their first offspring, the family would return the original cow and bull but keep the offspring (Nussbaum 2003:3). This is done to ensure that the poor receive their own 'seed capital' to progress in life and maintain their dignity. This practice of sharing wealth strengthens the community as a whole. It also reduces the unemployment rate in the society.

Similarly, wealthy African Christians are expected to use their resources to create employment opportunities for their communities, especially the youth in the society. One of the major problems in contemporary Africa is the high unemployment rate. Many African communities are full of unemployed youth who, for lack of employment opportunities, are involved in sports betting, ritual murder for money, illegal mining activities, prostitution, armed robbery, and internet fraud, among other things. They attend church on Sunday and are fully engaged in these unethical activities on Monday. The sharing of resources, life coaching, human power development, and donating seed capital to start one's own business are some of the steps that can be taken to arrest the situation.

Finally, just as the fellowship among members of the early church resulted in personal and corporate spiritual growth, fellowship among members of the contemporary Christian community is expected to promote the spiritual growth of each member and of the entire community. Each member must have direct access to Christ if the anticipated growth can be realised. It is, therefore, important for the church to ensure effective discipleship of believers through Bible study and application, effective individual and corporate prayer, and intentional evangelism, among other things. African Christian leaders must, therefore, equip their members to practicalise their priesthood in Christ who has made every believer a priest.

Welfare System Reforms

Welfare schemes are very important in any human institution. God established a welfare system for ancient Israel to cater for the needs of such needy people as widows, orphans, and aliens. Based on this example, almost every church in Africa has a form of welfare scheme. One of the common welfare models in many churches in Ghana and Africa today is the No-Contribution-No-Chop (NCNC) policy.[2] This policy requires members of the welfare scheme to contribute an amount of money every month toward the welfare of the members. The contribution to the welfare scheme is the same for everyone, irrespective of the person's economic strength. When there is a need for one to benefit from the welfare scheme, the person has to provide his/her membership contribution card to prove that he/she has not defaulted in the payment. More often than not, the poor among the people are found to be defaulters and so are disqualified to benefit from the scheme. There are some people who are not able to join this welfare system because of their inability to make the regular contribution. Thus, the welfare scheme that is expected to care for the needs of the needy ends up excluding them from its benefits. The welfare system that is supposed to benefit everyone (but especially the needy), ends up widening the economic gap between the rich and the poor. Such a welfare system does not promote human flourishing. This has created a number of controversies and agitations in some churches.

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[2] Here this policy is used as representative of what prevails in most parts of Africa. The choice to analyse this system stems not only from its prevalence in many African societies but also because of the author's familiarity with it.

The paper advocates that the NCNC model of welfare be replaced by a system that will have everyone contributing according to the person's capacity. The fund raised through this voluntary contribution would then be distributed according to need. This means that all members of the church would be automatic members of the scheme. People would be members of the scheme on the basis of their membership in the church. This would not only deal with the discriminatory character of the NCNC model but would also encourage the sharing of resources that aims at ensuring everyone has the basic needs of life.

The proposed welfare system is based on the principle of solidarity. This welfare paradigm is underlined in the following greeting and response by the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Their greetings and response in the morning and lunchtime would be:

> *Mangwani, marara sei?* (Good morning, did you sleep well?) *Ndarara, kana mararawo.* (I slept well, if you slept well.) [...]
> *Marara sei?* (How has your day been?) *Ndarara, kana mararawo.* (My day has been good if your day has been good.) (Nussbaum 2003:4)

These greetings – which are expressed toward a native or a stranger – underline that all persons are interconnected such that one's problem is the problem of all. What the Shona are saying is that we are all so connected to one another that if you did not sleep well, or if you are not having a good day, how can I sleep well or have a good day? Mbiti (1999:106) captures this idea as: 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am'. The individual's life acquires true meaning within a societal context. Thus, in the African worldview, unity is strength; the larger the unit, the better. There is no true being without communion.

The African communal sense of life teaches the African Christian community to think and feel that: 'Your pain is My pain, My wealth is Your wealth, Your salvation is My salvation' (Nussbaum 2003:2). Therefore, the church cannot be considered healthy when individuals are unhealthy. Just as the body parts need one another to survive, so the Christian community also needs every single member to function effectively. Again, the church cannot be a community of *shalom* when some of its members are suffering. The church must have solidarity with the poor and the sick through regular visitation, counselling, and donating to them.

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted some areas in which the body metaphor may help reform the church in Africa. The areas considered include how the African communal sense of life might enhance the African understanding of communion ecclesiology. The paper also brought to the fore how the body metaphor may promote authentic and healthy relationships and fellowship among the members of the Christian community. The impact of the body metaphor on the reforms that are needed within church welfare schemes was also highlighted. From the study, it can be concluded that the metaphorisation of the church as the body of Christ suggests God's interest in the human body. This means that God is interested in what one uses one's body for. In a culture where people consider Christianity as a religion that is only interested in the spirit, this metaphor serves to promote the right way of using one's body. It can also be concluded that the African church needs to intensify efforts toward discipleship in order to facilitate the growth and maturity of her members. Finally, care must be taken not to allow denominationalism to create factions among Christians; in the body of Christ denominationalism has no place. Members of the body of Christ transcend denominational, racial, gender, economic, political, and social boundaries. Thus, it is better for Christians to align themselves more with the universal dimension of the church than with the denominational dimension.

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