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Wealth in People, Wealth in Things: a Materialistic Reading of Luke 16:1-9

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Abstract

This paper examines how Luke presents Jesus as a Graeco-Roman orator who employs parables as a rhetorical tool to define a new socioeconomic order for the early Christians. It focuses on wealth and poverty as an interpretive paradigm for the text, Luke 16:1–9. It suggests that this parable mirrors unequal socioeconomic statuses in first-century Roman Palestine, where a few elites created wealth in things (material wealth) via the exploitation and violation of the poor majority. The article argues that Luke's description of the client's shrewd action, his master's commendation, and the narrator's charge in Luke 16:1–9 reconciles the two opposing sources of wealth in Roman Palestine: wealth in things and wealth in people. The article suggests that the parable portrays wealth as holistic, encompassing both cash/commodities and socioeconomic justice. Thus, the parable aims to challenge the dominant Graeco-Roman values, encouraging a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor. The article concludes with some theological and hermeneutical reflections on potential responses to the problem of wealth in Africa.

Introduction

The attention that the narrative in Luke 16:1–9 has received in scholarship may lead one to believe that there is nothing more to say about it. Bailey's interpretation, critiqued by Bidnell (2011:188), posits that the parable portrays the 'master [as] God, who generously, not foolishly, refrains from jailing his steward initially and continues to extend his mercy following the steward's action in reducing the debts'. Except in the materialistic interpretation of what this parable is, very few, if any, would argue against this.

By comparing the socioeconomic and material conditions of the ancient world with those of the contemporary economy, this materialistic interpretation draws attention to the problem of wealth inequality and the detrimental consequences of prioritising commodities as a source of wealth over the well-being of the entire population (Hombana 2024a:6). Thus, the significance of the theme is enhanced by its usage in a number of circumstances. This connects the parable to a broader area of study that eventually supports Luke's theme of wealth and poverty.

Most scholars have taken Bailey's interpretation on board but do not see it as withdrawing the parable from its socioeconomic setting. However, Bidnell's (2011:189) meticulous research, for instance, contends that this interpretation 'removes the [parable] from its immediate social setting, with the result that questions regarding patrons and clients, such as exploitation [of people for wealth acquisition], indebtedness and survival are cast aside as irrelevant'. In response to Bidnell's call to employ socioeconomic relations in ancient Roman Palestine as an interpretive framework, Yusufu Turaki (1999:122) identifies key components of the domains of wealth 'production and accumulation' or 'exchange and consumption', particularly in his description of a 'wealthy individual doing business with merchants' in things such as livestock, family land, and bridal wealth, 'while the steward' acquires wealth in people, 'having to' reconcile the matter of wealth, production, and prosperity with the moral and cosmological order 'by satisfying those both above and below him'.

While detailed attention has been given to the steward's unjust behaviour, the charge by the master, 'Καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας, ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπῃ δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς'

(Luke 16:9, UBS4), in Luke 16:9, appears less problematic in scholarship. In this article, I argue that the verse itself provides us with a key to understanding Luke's theme of wealth creation and poverty. Noting the charge as it is used in this parable, I suggest that Luke portrays the client's action, the master's approval, and the narrator's charge in Luke 16:1–9 as reconciling two opposing sources of wealth, 'sociality and solidarity' and 'cash and commodities' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2009:72), in the first century, and also propose how the Lucan Jesus' parable challenges the dominant Graeco-Roman values, encouraging a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor.

With a focus on the subject of wealth and poverty in ancient Roman Palestine, let us now examine the interpretive paradigm for the narrative in Luke 16:1–9. This study looks at themes from the writings of numerous scholars and draws on previous work to clarify the significance of the theme within its context. Discoveries are given as the subject serves as a lens through which the narrative in Luke 16:1–9 is viewed and understood. The article's conclusion provides hermeneutical and theological reflections on the theme's components within the Nigerian setting.

Wealth and Poverty in Ancient Roman Palestine

In the preceding section, we hinted at the significance of interpreting Luke's parables within the socioeconomic setting of ancient Roman Palestine and how it serves as a key to reading and understanding the parable in Luke 16:1–9. The significance of the theme of wealth and poverty is primarily understood in the context of the pervasive idea of unequal economic status that was prevalent in first-century Roman Palestine. The fundamental issue that often surfaces here concerns the relative inequality of wealth. In a moment we shall return to this subject. With respect to wealth and poverty in ancient Rome, Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:400) explain,

> Wealth and poverty are integral to the honor-shame culture culture, where to be called poor represents the incapacity to uphold and defend a particular social status, and to be called rich represents greed and the capacity to deny others what is rightfully theirs.

Accordingly, we may draw the same conclusion as Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:400) that, at least for the poor, the acquisition and accumulation of money in ancient Roman Palestine were not equal, since most scholars argue that one's access to 'wealth is limited'.

Bidnell (2011:208) sees a historical development in the functions of wealth and poverty in ancient Roman Palestine; central to wealth procurement is the idea of 'limited' access to wealth, whereby one person's gain necessarily means 'someone [else] is being deprived and denied something that is his'. The unequal distribution of wealth that existed in ancient society, between the rich and the poor, preceded the later development of the modern concept of wealth disparity in a socioeconomic sense. Bidnell (2011:150) observes that in the first century AD the 'capacity of wealth to offer security, well-being and freedom' did not yet exist. If wealth arbitrarily cannot offer security, food and water supply, or collective well-being, then Luke's gospel aims to reverse such a notion, by redefining wealth, using the parable in Luke 16:1–9. Thus, when people become rich, they use the notion that wealth is limited, have decided to keep and guard it, and have thus made themselves superior; in this way, 'for the amount of such property sufficient in itself for a good life is not unlimited' (Aristotle, *Politics,* III.9).

It may also be noted that this notion of wealth limitation appears central to the discourse on poverty in ancient Roman Palestine, with its stress on the prevalent attitude of the poor in ancient Roman Palestine – a category developed by Foster (1967:304). Now, according to Foster (167:304) regarding the poor, which must include in ancient Roman Palestine, their behaviours are patterned in such a way as to suggest means of livelihood such as 'land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety' – and food, education, and employment – '*exist in finite quantity* and *are always in short supply* […] Not only do these and all other 'good things' exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition *there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities'*. (Foster 1967:304, emphasis original).

However, the basic idea expressed by the idea of limited wealth is to allow the rich to be richer and the poor to be poorer. The rich and the poor are thus brought together in an unhealthy competition – the rich uphold their position

by storing up their excess wealth while the poor pursue social justice and equitable wealth distribution (Hombana 2024a:5). The point of departure here is that one can only become rich by adopting the role of an ancient trickster. Jerome examines the reputation of the rich in ancient Roman Palestine. He notes that 'Every rich person is a thief or the heir of a thief' (*Hieremiam* II.V.2). In the same vein, Malina (1981:84) and Oakman (1991:159) both note that the rich adopt a defensive tactic fixated on upholding their existing social status instead of seeking to improve it. This then could suggest that the rich who jostled the poor in ancient Roman Palestine gained their wealth from the unequal relations they had with the society that surrounded them. The key point then in Malina's description of the rich is the argument that their means of wealth manifest greed. In this context, the rich are seen as evil persons. Such a presumption that one person's wealth increases at the expense of another's carries with it the view that wealth itself is inherently evil. This point leads to a basic issue regarding the source of wealth in ancient Roman Palestine: in people or things?

Malina (1981:75) returns to Foster's proposition to argue that the idea of 'limited good' includes 'all the desired things in life […] literally all goods in life', but in a way that also implied the economic hardship which ancient Roman societies exhibited; all of this is premised on the existence of the rich, a social and economic minority group who enjoyed a life of ease and indulgence. Under such arrangements, as Luz (2007:189-90) shows, 'according to Semitic usage 'poor' means not only those who have no money but in a wider sense also the oppressed, wretched, dependent, [and] humiliated. […] The general rule is that the [poor one] has to work, the [destitute one] has to beg'.

It is against this backdrop that Luz judges that neither the 'poor', who, through manual labour, can make out a living, nor even the 'destitute', whose prevalence was noted amongst early Christians as people who were reduced to begging, who had lost any standing in society, who had no means, no family, or any social connections, were able to enjoy a life of ease and indulgence. Luz (cited in Neyrey 1998:171) concludes: 'The poor often end up destitute as a result of loss of land to the rich'. He traces the evident condition of the poor through several realities, attesting that wealth in ancient Roman Palestine implied exploitation, violation, greed, and social injustice. Thus, the

inequitable wealth distribution in ancient Roman Palestine leads Hombana (2024a:3) to posit, reflecting Luz's evidence, that

> Jewish society in the 1st century CE was characterised by a diverse range of social and economic classes. There were wealthy landowners and merchants, as well as many who lived in poverty. Disputes over inheritances and property were not uncommon, as is evident from the situation presented in [a case] whereby someone asks Jesus to intervene in a family inheritance dispute.

We seem, then, to have come full circle in trying to show how the rich in the first century might have defined themselves in relation to the poor, whereby material accumulation was prioritised without the 'enhancement of collective well-being and the harmonious integration of spiritual values' (Hombana 2024a:6). The relative struggle experienced by the poor in this unequal relationship is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in their designation of the rich as evil. While the evidence of Hombana firmly supports the notion that the rich (generally as tricksters hoarding wealth and possessions among the poor) did come to the attention of Jesus (Luke 12:13–21), the evidence of Luke 16:1–9 would seem to depict another scenario.

It appears to me that the economic struggle in ancient Roman Palestine would have been occasioned instead by two contrasting sources of wealth: wealth in things and wealth in people. We may hypothesise here about the nature of the relations between the rich and the poor, along with their respective designations. Significant in this respect is the charge to the steward in Luke 16:9. The charge occurs within a context where the master is characterised by excessive materialism, as it resulted in breaking away from the enhancement of collective well-being; and the poor are oppressed by this. Jesus realises this and instructs his audience to make wealth in friends, due largely to societal injustice; thus, 'the parable warns against the accumulation of wealth for personal gain, aligning with the ideals of economic transformation and addressing historical injustices in the country' (Hombana 2024a:5).

Interpreting Parables in the New Testament and Old Testament

Central to this study is an interpretation of the parable in Luke 16:1–9 and the way in which it may be used as a means to assess the validity and usefulness of poverty and wealth as an interpretative framework for reading and understanding the biblical text. It is important, therefore, that there is clarity concerning how the first century understood parables and how we can interpret and apply the lessons in our time. This discussion falls into two parts: a consideration of what may be understood by 'parable' and an enquiry into whether the locus of meaning is to be sought primarily in the original historical context or in the parable's direct relevance to today.

Tolbert provides a definition in her *Perspectives on the Parables* that highlights a number of important aspects of parable interpretation in the New Testament. According to Tolbert, parables are metaphorical stories whose meaning is derived from the relationship between the story world and its suggested referent rather than from discrete allegorical features. Parables are rhetorical acts, thus their literary location, historical context, and target audience must all be taken into consideration when interpreting them. These factors all influence the impression the story aims to elicit. Their impact comes from drawing the listener into a decision-making or engagement moment where the story upends preconceptions and reorients reality (Tolbert 1979:40). She (1979:17) notes, 'a parable is that short, unified story, embedded in a longer gospel narrative, that one chooses (or tradition has chosen) for various reasons to call a parable'.

Tolbert stresses that parables should be viewed as a supplement to other genres, such as narrative genres, even though parable obviously works in three distinct areas:

> it denotes a proverb […] it introduces a story by making clear the point of the narrative in advance [or] it illustrates a saying. (Bidnell 2011:42).

Having considered what a parable is, attention now turns to an analysis of how they function. Central to this question is how parables have been understood in the ancient world and how they should be understood by contemporary readers. Scott (1989:28) demonstrates that each gospel understands parables in a different way and that the gospel writers can be very directive in interpreting the story for the reader. For example, some parables function as figurative language, allegory, metaphor, or non-figurative language. However, all parables are about the kingdom of God. Thus, Dodd (1961:20) notes that

> not only the parables which are explicitly referred to the Kingdom of God, but many others do in fact bear upon this idea, and that a study of them throws important light upon its meaning.

Interpretation of the parables raises two further significant questions. What did they mean *then*, that is, in their original setting? And what do they mean *now*, that is, in twenty-first-century African contexts? This study regards the narrative parable in Luke 16:1–9 as an open-ended story about different aspects of life in first-century Palestine. Parables are not to be read as allegories depicting something other than the content of the story, nor do they refer to some notion or concept of the kingdom of God. They are both historical artefacts, which reveal something about the society and culture of that time and place, and literary creations, which encourage the reader into an encounter with the text.

Let us move on to read the parable of the unjust client. The theme of unequal wealth accumulation provides our immediate link to the interpretation of the parable in Luke 16:1–9.

Reading the Parable of the Unjust Client in Luke 16:1–9

Earlier I alluded to the functions of socioeconomic relations in ancient society. The relationship between the poor and the rich is mostly comprehended through the unequal distribution of wealth, with its accompanying limitations in accessing wealth, and this is how the poor, for instance, have largely been treated over the past centuries. A key issue that often surfaces here concerns how wealth is procured to the detriment of the poor and how respect for

human dignity is not prioritised. It is necessary, therefore, to read the parable of the unjust client in Luke 16:1–9 prospectively in relation to the socio-economic relations.

Contextual Considerations

The parable of the unjust client occurs in the larger narrative context of Luke 9:51–19:28, dubbed the Lucan travel narrative. The narrative begins in Luke 9:51. In this section Luke portrays Jesus as a Graeco-Roman orator who employs the agency of parables as a pedagogical tool to challenge the dominant Graeco-Roman socioeconomic relations by redefining wealth, poverty, and social relationships. In addition, within the travel narrative, Jesus encourages a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor. This theme is echoed in different parables of the Lucan gospel (Luke 14:15–24, 15:11–32). Given these webbed contexts of the unjust steward, we will explore below the meaning of the pericope under study.

In this pericope, Luke 16:1–9, the unjust client was reported by some anonymous people to his master for squandering his possessions, and both of them engaged in a dramatic conflict of interest. The unjust client was first called to give an account of his management at Luke 16:2. During this phase of the parable, the master had accumulated his wealth through material possessions (Luke 16:1), but Luke's description of the manager's act of wisdom suggests that wealth can be accumulated through relationships rather than just material possessions (Luke 16:9). This new socioeconomic identity is now closely defined more precisely by friendship. I have noted that Luke's parables reflect how Jesus constructs a new socioeconomic identity for early Christians by redefining wealth, poverty, and social relationships. That new identity is now closely linked to this pericope and defined more precisely by Luke.

In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in 16:19–31, Luke provides us with a narrative parallel within the chapter itself. In the encounter following the parable of the unjust client in 19:1–9, Luke appears to give some precedent for the accumulation of wealth through relationships rather than just material possessions, however elliptical, in Lazarus and the rich man's parable. In 16:19–31, Luke uses the name Lazarus (poor) in his encounter with the rich man. This parallel is significant, not least because it explains wealth as holistic, encompassing both cash/commodities and socioeconomic justice. It is here

that the poor are exalted and the wealthy are warned about their dependence on material possessions.

The Master's Goods: Wealth in Things (verse 1)

It is at the level of the materialistic interpretation of this pericope, Luke 16:1–9, that the theme of wealth and poverty becomes more prevalent in Luke's gospel. In verse 1, Luke presents the rich man via his wealth in things, which itself coheres well with the dominant Graeco-Roman culture of wealth in material possessions. The point here is that, given the rich man in verse 1, we may reasonably see in the text a reference to goods – entrusted to the management of his client.

Scholars have typically noted the master's goods (such as livestock, family land, and bridal wealth); within the socioeconomic context of this parable, this level of riches was characterised by exploitation, violation, greed, and social injustice in the Graeco-Roman world (Hombana 2024b:3). The wealthy man is possibly to be understood as a negative figure on account of his wealth (Combrink 1996; Kloppenborg 1989:487–488). That is, Luke aligns the rich man with the ideals of economic injustices in society and affords him the capacity to deny others what is rightfully theirs (Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003:400). While salutary, this opinion does not get to the heart of Luke's use of the theme of wealth and poverty.

It is clear that, in this verse, several things are brought to bear on the wealthy man. There is attention given to the relationship between the master and the client. There is more to be gained from asking why the master did not sell the manager as a slave but decided to dismiss him. Mann thinks that the two were in a patron-client relationship. The client serves as a commodities manager responsible for making deals and profits for his patron (Mann 1991). Indeed, they find themselves in precisely the patron-client relationship in which there is interdependence and mutual gain, though still characterised by hierarchy, inequality, and exploitation. The landowner can use the steward to make profits from the land while at the same time distancing himself from those he exploits (Herzog 1994:240–244). This then can be deduced as the patron's source of wealth, despite relationships, dependents or allies, and influence. Yet, it is material wealth in things gained by the exploitation of the poor that

the rich man prioritises. Within this social order are found certain complexes about the wealthy landowner that must be examined.

First, the master's social position of honour contrasts with that of the manager. Here we detect the socioeconomic imbalance in the ancient Graeco-Roman world. The manager was to give an account of his management to his master later; his occupation and livelihood are in jeopardy (Luke 16:2).

Second, the identity of the one who makes the initial charge against the steward remains hidden. It would seem that his attitude specifically identifies him as one who is close to the manager, whereas the identity of the reporter is left hidden, presumably suggesting that 'he could be anyone, and members of the audience may be familiar with the circumstances where they can identify who [the accuser] is' (Bidnell 2011:194). This then could mean that the manager was reported by people close to him. For example, Marshall (1978:617) observes that 'it may be that one or more characters have determined to get rid of this steward in order to usurp his position, … Perhaps a fellow servant in the master's household has his eye on the job'.

Be that as it may, what emerges clearly from the rich man and his manager is the tension of prioritising the individual accumulation of material wealth in things over collective well-being in Luke's day, a tension to which the master himself was committed.

The Master's Foolish Decision (verse 2)

We may, then, explore more closely the master's decision to dismiss his manager – and here I think Luke provides a helpful insight into the master's just but difficult initiative and foresight. However, while the master's verdict is just in the parable, in the socioeconomic context of Lucan communities the master's verdict to his manager (Luke 16:2) would have been understood within a culture of shame. The flow of the narrative from the master's beckoning the manager (Luke 16:2) to his verdict, 'constitute[s] a significant feature of the honour and shame', or wealth and poverty, 'culture in which the story is set' (Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003:334). This verdict would have been understood as a declaration of dishonour and shame which, among other things, was reserved for those who lost their reputation in the society.

From the beginning of the parable, R. T. France (2013:489) notes that the manager was accused by people who probably wanted him to lose his job; this accusation was 'not merely of incompetence but of dishonesty (16:8)'. Be that as it may, what emerges clearly from this parable, it seems to me, is the wealthy man's verdict. For example, Bidnell (2011:195) notes that the wealthy man 'makes and announces his decision to dismiss' the client without substantiating the veracity of the charge of embezzlement 'and before he has even seen the accounts'. But perhaps more can be gained by asking why the wealthy man had made the decision at this point without waiting for his client's account. The answer, Parsons (2001:55) thinks, may be that the rich man 'wished to spare no insulting image to paint the client as a pathetic, even despicable, character […] the image of a traitorous, small-minded and greedy [client who wanted to misappropriate wealth for himself]'. Bidnell (2011:196) effectively characterises the rich man's decision as that of someone who had been convinced to challenge and threaten the client's reputation in order to transfer his position to someone else.

The merit of this assertion may be judged by some of the extant evidence found in (traditional) societies, which suggests that such report conveyed to the master

> constitutes a challenge, a significant feature of the honour and shame culture in which the story is set. Acquiring honour was often achieved by means of a [competition] in which two people of similar social status seek to increase their own personal honour by outdoing the other. The exchange is initiated by one challenging the other with a word or gesture or action, positive or negative which has the potential to undermine the other's honour. (Malina 2003:334)

Furthermore, the idea of wealth misappropriation seems to be at the heart of the discussion in Luke 16:2, which prioritises the master's financial gain and profits over the reputation and welfare of his client – a view argued by Jeremias (1972:181) and affirmed by Crossan (1992:107). According to Jane Guyer (1995), 'wealth' means power and status, as seen in this master passing verdict without confirming whether the charge against his client is true or false. This decision prioritises wealth in things over wealth in people, as it

resulted in breaking away from the enhancement of his client's well-being; and the client is oppressed by this.

However, the basic idea expressed by the idea of 'wealth in things' is that 'a wealthy man increased productivity by organising and controlling people for his selfish interest […] (by) aggregating human dependents' (Miller 1990:251). Guyer (1995:83) describes this type of wealth as the items that people give value to, the stores they amass through various means, including extortion and exploitation, the allowances paid for their service, the 'treasures they hoard and eventually abandon, and all the intricate cultural constructs that count, glorify, and imagine these items as sources and tools of power'.

What seems to be happening in this story is that the rich man only cared about his material wealth, which depicts not just a habit of viciousness being exercised by the wealthy in society but, more likely, the dominant Graeco-Roman value of placing a higher priority on commodities as a source of wealth than on the welfare of the whole (Hombana 2024a:6).

The Client's Unjust and Wise Decision (verses 3–7)

It is necessary to view the client's unjust action in verses 3–7 in light of the master's contempt for his well-being. What is paramount here is that we hold suspect the client's lament in verse 3, 'ὅτι ὁ κύριός μου ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ' ἐμοῦ', that is based on the presumed distress of losing his means of survival and reputation, 'σκάπτειν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαιτεῖν αἰσχύνομαι' (Luke 19:3, UBS4). If Luke makes anything clear, it is that the client is 'determined to respond by going on the offensive and seeking to outdo the challenge voiced by his master' (Bidnell 2011:195). The response of the client to his master, then, may be equated with the opportunity to 'put his own challenge back both to his employer and to the [accuser]' (Bidnell 2011:195), who will take over his position.

The motive of the client is examined in two ways by Parrott (1991). He begins by noting, in line with Bidnell (1991:499; see also 2011:195), that the client 'does not wish to […] beg'. This is significant because it suggests that honour and shame are central to this parable. Here, the client is begging for 'an honourable way out and must find a means of establishing some degree of honour in the challenge he throws back at his employer' (Bidnell 2011:196).

The decision occurs within a context where the rich and the poor are brought together in an unhealthy competition – the rich uphold their position by storing up their excess wealth while the destitute continue to beg and lament for equitable wealth distribution. Bidnell (2011:196) rightly sees the issue at stake here as that the 'steward wants to avoid the "shame" of begging', a state of relegated status. Since the client has experienced the luxury of riches and honour, the point of departure here is that he is unwilling to live in poverty once more.

In our analysis of this parable in verse 3, the second reason is crucial to our understanding. Against this large backdrop, Bidnell (2011:196) concludes that the client's monologue reveals the 'motivation behind the action he is about to take in an attempt to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people he has previously demanded payment of debts from'. Thus, we may safely conclude that wealth procurement and distribution between the rich and the poor in Luke's gospel were incompatible, at least for the poor, for whom access to wealth seemed to be unattainable.

In verse 4, Malina (1981:76) sees a historical development in the socioeconomic relations of ancient Roman Palestine. The unequal relationship that exists in Lucan society, between the legal right of the poor to access material wealth and the exploitation of the poor for material possessions, created the socioeconomic context of ancient Roman Palestine. He observes that, in the first century, a unified concept of wealth in people did not yet exist. Thus, when people wanted to be rich, they used the notion that one could only become rich by adopting the role of an ancient trickster. In this way, because of the idea of 'limited good', one person's gain necessarily means 'someone [else] is being deprived and denied something'. Amidst dominant Graeco-Roman values, especially the concept of wealth in things, the client constructs a new identity for early Christians by redefining socioeconomic relations, encouraging wealth that is procured by a 'community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor, social justice, equitable wealth distribution, and collective well-being' (Hombana 2024a:1).

Bidnell (2011:196) largely confirms this redefinition of wealth in ancient Roman Palestine. Indeed, the client's 'focus is on establishing new relationships for the future' instead of amassing and retrieving his master's

assets as he did in the past. The concept of wealth in people, which underlies these arguments about the client, is different from that of the master, which preceded it in the socioeconomic context of the parable. The master's wealth represented a wealth that used people as a means to an end as far as socioeconomic interaction with the poor was concerned. Wealth represented an individual's material possessions, power, and status. Wealth in people, on the other hand, contends that 'human beings could be explicitly valued in material terms' (Guyer 1995:86). The establishment of friendships provides our immediate link to the master's commendation in this parable.

The Master's Commendation and Charge (verses 8–9)

In the preceding section, we alluded to the redefinition of wealth in Luke's gospel. The client's unjust and wise decision should be comprehended under the notion of wealth in people, or friendship, with equitable wealth distribution and collective well-being, for instance, seen in the client's decision. It appears to me that the master's response here would have been occasioned by condemnation after hearing the news of such significant debt reduction. A key issue here in verse 8 concerns the relative discord of the master commending the steward for being unjust. The commendation occurs with respect to the Lucan gospel whose quest for social justice does not support the client's unjust decision. The Bible presents new Christians' '*converted* state, as having resulted in their *break away* from societal norms and practices' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2008:67, original emphasis). This commendation would seem to justify the client's unjust action; it would also seem to be the socially calculated way to get at or take revenge against the rich.

However, with respect to the master's commendation, Fitzmyer (1965:23-42) explains that the client is not dishonest and is therefore worthy of praise. He treats the client's action as a pragmatic, reputation-preserving tactic in a crisis; the praise highlights skilful initiative, not moral approval. Fitzmyer's long treatment stresses the narrative context and rhetorical irony. He perhaps justifies the client's action, but it is unclear to the present reader. This line of interpretation gained common ground with Ireland (1992:47), who notes that the primary focus of the narrative is not a moral evaluation of the steward's integrity. Instead, the text emphasises his pragmatic drive for survival and the

strategic methods he employs to ensure his future security; an endeavour that, retains a distinct sense of social honour.

Ireland (1992:47) further notes that it is his wisdom that is praised, not his honesty or dishonesty. Such a justification cannot help but come across as advocating a sort of unfaithfulness in management. If the client's action is justified in this parable, why would the manager give loans to people without having his master know about it? Certainly, readers can resonate with elements of Fitzmyer and Ireland's line of interpretation, but injustice and unfaithfulness seem to be ringing in the air.

Be that as it may, in the socioeconomic context of ancient Roman Palestine, it is largely socioeconomic disparity and injustice that immediately strike one, especially in their wealth creation and distribution. Landry and May suggest that 'the [client] reduces the bills so that the debtors will appreciate the master's assumed generosity' (2000:309). Thus, in adopting this view, the observation would show that the client was haggling between three poles: (1) to reduce the bills and therefore make life easier for the debtors, (2) to make those who owe him acknowledge the master's supposed benefaction, and (3) to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people. Jesus emphasises this deed as a lesson in forethought. It could be characterised as social intelligence, the capacity to be relational, wise, and to take strategic action within human networks – a worldly cleverness in dealing with others.

Verses 8 to 9, which mirror the tension between the two opposing sources of wealth, may also be viewed as a form of reframing the dominant order of wealth creation in ancient Roman Palestine. With regard to their socioeconomic setting, Hombana (2024b:) notes that this parable speaks directly to a citizenry subjugated by Roman hegemony, thereby asserting the intrinsic value of individuals oppressed within contemporary economics and social structures.

By commending the client's action and the charge to 'make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness' (Luke 16:9, KJV), Carter (2000:560) notes that 'Jesus subverts the established order, positioning the downtrodden as the recipients of divine favour'. To this extent, the reconstruction and subversion

of contemporary values challenge the legitimacy of the oppressive structures and provides a framework for envisioning a just society grounded in God's kingdom, where true wealth is about loving and caring for God's people. (Hombana 2024b:4)

This line of thought is endorsed by scholars interested in materialistic reading, which illustrates how the parable resonates with the oppression and marginalisation of the communities of 'children of light by the children of this world' throughout history (verse 8). The parable offers a counter-narrative, encouraging the children of light to be tactical in securing their future. This notion is echoed by Tamez (1993), who reads the Bible from the vantage point of the poor and the oppressed. For her, the parable is primarily about social justice, structures of oppression, and God's preferential concern for the poor. She prioritises the socioeconomic context and the ethical demand the text places on wealthy and powerful actors. Similarly, Escobar (1980) maintains that this parable 'serve[s] as a call to action for the Christian community to stand in solidarity with the marginalised and to work towards the dismantling of unjust structures'.

Luke's gospel gives attention to wealth disparity against the marginalised groups, offering a framework that reconstructs and redefines the existing socioeconomic values in ancient Roman Palestine. For example, Hombana (2024b:5) notes that Luke presents 'them within a framework that challenges the socio-economic order upheld by the Roman Empire and its local collaborators. The parable serves as a poignant critique of those who benefit from and sustain the economic exploitation of the masses'. Through a materialistic lens, this parable underscores 'the inherent tension between the accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of spiritual and moral integrity within an oppressive economic system' (Hombana 2024b:5).

The client's shrewdness to create wealth in friendship highlights the moral and spiritual dangers associated with complicity in the imperial economic structures. For example, Hombana (2024b:5) continues,

> This difficulty for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven underscores a broader critique of an economic order that prioritises material wealth over communal well-being and

> justice. The critique of wealth in Luke's Gospel extends beyond the individual to a systemic level, calling into question the broader socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. Biblical scholars argue that Luke's Gospel, through its emphasis on the difficulty for the wealthy to attain spiritual fulfilment, aligns with a broader theological narrative that champions the cause of the poor and marginalised.

Critical Comparison of Ancient and Contemporary Socioeconomic Relations

The comparison between ancient Roman socioeconomic relations and those in contemporary African societies needs to be approached critically. In this article, the primary comparison is with the Nigerian context. Readers may find similar comparisons with other African contexts. While drawing parallels between the two is tempting, one must acknowledge the vast differences in their political, economic, and cultural landscapes (Smith 2020:134). In ancient Roman Palestine, socioeconomic relationships were institutionalised and formalised, often taking the shape of legal contracts, public recognition, and civic duties (Lenski 1996).

To appreciate fully the extent of this socioeconomic structure, Bidnell (2011:16) divides the category into nine levels. He notes,

> At the top is the ruler, the autocrat with considerable powers, such as the Roman emperor […] In second place, below the ruler, comes the governing class, about 1–2% of the population, made up of client kings […], governors […], or the religious hierarchy, such as the chief priests. In third place is the retainer class, about 5% of the population, comprising soldiers, bureaucrats and religious leaders […] In fourth place is to be found the merchant class, not highly regarded, […] while in fifth place comes the priestly class, the priests and Levites […]

> [I]n sixth place are the peasants who work the land and who live rurally, who are powerless and are taxed at considerable rates ranging between thirty and seventy percent of their produce. Below them, in seventh place, comes the artisan class, possibly peasants forced off their land and working for their survival in the urban centres. Jesus and the fishermen belong to this stratum. In eighth place is the unclean class, such as tanners, and in ninth place are to be found the expendables, about 5–10% of the population, landless itinerant people for whom one option is banditry.

Accordingly, we may draw the same conclusion as Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:400), who explain, 'to be called poor represents the incapacity to uphold and defend a particular social status, and to be called rich represents greed and the capacity to deny others what is rightfully theirs'. The unequal distribution of wealth that existed in ancient society, between the rich and the poor, preceded the later development of the modern African concept of wealth disparities.

In contrast, modern African socioeconomic relations tend to function less formally and more fluidly. In engaging this problem in contemporary Africa, culture bestrides the past and future. Ijatuyi-Morphé (2009:77, emphasis original) notes:

> In (emergent) African 'society,' the problem of poverty/wealth has been understood on several fronts. It is often phrased or depicted in a *dualistic* way as: agriculture vs. infrastructure, rural (poverty) vs. urban (prosperity), people (= sociality and solidarity) vs. things (cash and commodities), humanizing the natural world (communalism) vs. naturalizing the human world via objects (capitalism), tropical regions vs. temperate regions, and primitive position vs. progressive orientation.

These relationships are frequently embedded in kinship networks and informal social structures. While there might still be socioeconomic classes in contemporary Nigerian society, the present issues-related poverty affects

every social class. For example, HIV/AIDS and malaria can be summarised as a problem of health that affects every social class. In a similar vein, Daniel Rikichi Kajang (2020:189) notes that 'Africa is struggling with major health care challenges […] African nations are still at the level of 'disease care' and are still struggling to provide very basic health services'.

Again, resurfacing here is the long-standing problem of food production and housing security in a country where 'more than 50 million Nigerians are living in one-room apartments' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2011:318). Regarding these social/cultural challenges, Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011:318) observes, 'Both food security and housing security are almost inconceivable of realisation without job security'. This challenge is often expressed by Africans as, and indeed also ascribed to, a 'corruption problem'. Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011:318) probes: if food and housing security are integral to the problem of poverty in Africa, then it is not far-fetched to view corruption as a major cause of poverty and under-development in Africa.

Socioeconomic justice emerges *vis-à-vis* the solution to the problem of poverty/development in Africa – an economy that does not only rest on 'natural endowments of resources and labor' but on 'creat[ing] the conditions for rapid and sustained productivity growth' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2011:321). Indeed, this is the direction for which Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011:323) argues, as he shows how, in contemporary African societies, to be called poor is equated with 'inappropriate use of values and beliefs', which hinders the achievement of national prosperity, and to be wealthy is equated with 'an appropriate use of values and beliefs which foster the achievement of national prosperity'.

This article has investigated how socioeconomic relationships in ancient Roman Palestine were often a means of survival in contexts marked by poverty, political instability, and the erosion of state services, which resemble contemporary African societies, which are more about maintaining social order and political stability within a relatively prosperous empire for the benefit of the minority elite group of that society (Carter 2008:1–14; Lee 2017:77). These contrasts give a sharp focus to how poverty and wealth adapt to different historical and political contexts (Nguyen 2018:21).

Hermeneutical and Theological Reflections on Luke 16:1–9 in Post-colonial African Context

Many scholars have put forward the idea that African socioeconomic relations are similar to those of the New Testament or Graeco-Roman civilisation (Gathogo 2008; Hombana 2024a; Ijatuyi-Morphé 2008, 2009, 2011; Kaunda 2020). However, one wonders why, especially in recent biblical scholarship, a more critical approach to the study of this hermeneutical comparison between socioeconomic relations in ancient Roman Palestine and contemporary African society has been given little or no sustained attention. One could argue that this little or lack of sustained attention highlights a gap in scholarship that requires attention. One of the socioeconomic characteristics that Africa and first-century Roman Palestine have in common, particularly in their origins, interactions, and significance, is the issue of wealth and communal ethics.

The parable of the unjust client (Luke 16:1–9), for instance, has deep roots in the socioeconomic context of first-century Roman Palestine, where the procurement of wealth was mostly defined by exploitation, violation, avarice, and social injustice (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2008:67). In this context, the master's delight in material wealth and failure to protect the welfare of the client can be understood within the Lucan theme of wealth and poverty. However, Jesus' deliberate use of the poor client as one who seeks wealth in friendship challenges dominant Graeco-Roman values, encouraging a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor.

'African Socialism 'and 'Scientific Capitalism'

In describing the overarching hermeneutical similarities between ancient and modern cultures, it is necessary to review Ijatuyi-Morphé's exploration of the sundry issues or problems within this social/cultural context. Ijatuyi-Morphé's 'The Religious Context of Poverty and Wealth in Africa' (2009) performs two main functions. Ijatuyi-Morphé first introduces the reader to the concept of 'African socialism' and 'scientific capitalism' (2009:71). He explains his frustrations with scientific capitalism, not that he is against scientific capitalism. Indeed, he will later call for the reconciliation of these two sources of wealth in biblical scholarship. He does get the feeling that there should be no disconnect between wealth and people. He writes,

> In essence, it seems to me, what emerges from all this is not simply the coincidence of a discourse strategy of *subversion* or *inversion*, as both Isichei and Ferguson seem to argue. Rather, it is the need to work toward a more comprehensive analysis and solution. That is, to marry *(paradigms of) discourse* (at the top/vertical level) with *development realities* (at the bottom/horizontal level). This, I suggest, will lead to a more judicious assessment of the true relation between 'things' and 'people'. (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2009:74, original emphasis)

Second, Ijatuyi-Morphé delineates between scientific capitalism and African socialism. In summary, African socialism focuses on 'moral and cosmological order' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2009:74), emphasising sharing, solidarity, and communal mutuality. This source of wealth creation does not view people as an end in itself and is based on mutual dependence between the rich and the poor.

The parable can be related to Ijatuyi-Morphé's 'moral dimension of African discourse regarding "wealth" – in people; set in the context of "African socialism" versus "scientific capitalism"' (2009:71). The Lucan Jesus frequently addresses justice and righteousness, critiquing the scientific capitalist theory that relies on rational economic laws to justify wealth creation in ways that appear neutral, universally valid, and detached from moral, social, or religious concerns (Ferguson 2006:70). For example, in Luke 16,

> Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the master, who burden[s] the client with his goods and commodity while failing to practice mercy. This critique extends to economic practices, advocating for fairness and the protection of the vulnerable against imperial exploitation. (Hagner 1993:113)

Creation of wealth through the act of friendship in Luke, such as in Luke 16:1–9, 'extend[s] beyond personal virtues, functioning as acts of resistance against the economic oppression of the Roman Empire' (Hombana 2024b:5). Jesus' teachings emphasise respect for human dignity and the *imago Dei*, contrasting with the scientific capitalism theory that dominates the modern African society

– ‘the elite, who used such acts to elevate their social status and maintain power’ (Hombana 2024b:5). For instance, while the wealthy often used people to secure favour or assert dominance, Jesus encourages an ethic of kindness and solidarity, where matters of wealth creation are reconciled with moral and cosmological order from communal wellbeing ‘rather than self-promotion. This promotes an alternative communal ethic, prioritising the welfare of the poor and fostering a sense of equality and resistance to the social hierarchies imposed by both Roman and local authorities’ (Hombana 2024b:5). Examples of this, as noted by Hombana (2024b:5), ‘include communal sharing among early Christian communities (Ac 2:44–45) and mutual aid networks that provided for the needs of the marginalised, which further emphasised a countercultural model of economic justice’.

The parable focuses on the ways in which, as James Ferguson (2006:71) proposes, the ‘moral and cosmological order might be reconciled with issues of wealth, productivity, and prosperity’. Four elements make up this cosmological ‘order’, according to Yusufu Turaki (199:123), ‘cosmic harmony; spiritual meaning; mystical/spirit powers; and kinship community’. This reconciliation of cosmological order is made evident in the client’s decision to reduce the bills and therefore make life easier for the debtors, to make the debtors appreciate the master’s assumed generosity, and to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people. As a result of the client’s decision (Luke 16:3–7), Ijatuyi-Morphé (2009:72) notes that the master’s areas of ‘production, accumulation, or exchange and consumption (such as livestock, family land, and bridal wealth) acquire a profoundly social significance and are imprinted with moral values’. The parable shows that, as Ijatuyi-Morphé (2009:72) identifies in African discourse, ‘“cash and commodities” (= *things*) and “sociality and solidarity” (= *people*) […] depict two contrasting “realms” or “domains”, and consequently, two different types of “wealth” or “prosperity”.’

In this parable, African socialism emerges fundamentally opposed to scientific capitalism 'avoiding the emergence of social classes within society; integrating African identity and what it means to be African; and economic development [characterised by mutual dependence and] directed by a large public sector’. (Friedland and Rosberg 1964:20). For example, Senghor (1964:165) asserts that African socialism, ‘we must assimilate, not be assimilated’. Senghor

(1964:29) then argues that socialist structure already existed in African community before the arrival of the colonialist. He writes, '…Africans had already realized socialism before the coming of Europeans …but we must renew it by helping it to regain a spiritual dimension'. According to Senghor (1964:14), African Socialism in all its forms, differs from the theory of scientific capitalism because Africa's social background of tribal community life not only makes socialism natural to Africa but excludes the validity of the theory of class struggle.

In this regard, Ferguson (2006:75) sums up Senghor's position: 'The key oppositions […] were not primarily between rival economic systems or modes of production, but between conflicting moral orientations: selfishness versus sharing, exploitation versus solidarity, individual acquisitiveness versus communal mutuality'. Consequently, the parable urges wealth in people and wealth things be reconciled; as Ferguson (2006:74) argues, a recurring African idea 'is not that the human world is ruled by powerful objects, but that […] the world, even the natural, bears the traces of *human* agency'. This parable opposes the prioritisation of cash and commodities over the human world where, as Ferguson (2006:74) argues against capitalist fetishism, 'capitalism naturalizes the human world by imputing powers to objects', or prioritising cash and social commodities.

What comes out of this narrative is not just a coincidental discussion about how to reconcile wealth, production, and prosperity with moral and cosmological order, as both Ijatuyi-Morphé and Turaki seem to contend. Rather, it is the need to strive for a democratic society that is equitable, inclusive, and based on mutual dependence.

Reframing Wealth: The Influence of Ubuntu

The shift in Jesus' parable – from the master's wealth in things without caring for the client's welfare (Luke 16:1) to the client's wealth in friendship with people (Luke 16:3–9) – is significant. This orientation aligns with the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises collective well-being and mutual dependence (Tutu 1999:35). *Ubuntu*, often summarised as 'I am because we are', prioritises communal well-being over individual legalism, mirroring Jesus' portrayal of salvation as holistic, encompassing both spiritual transformation and socioeconomic justice (Shutte 2001:12).

In many African communities, however, prioritising commodities over collective well-being still functions as the source of wealth, exploitation, violation, and the unequal distribution of wealth, much like the struggle between the rich and the poor in the first century (Kaunda 2020:415). Jesus' parable thus serves as a radical critique of unequal wealth distribution, exploitation, greed, violation, and social injustice, guiding African Christians toward a just, inclusive, and spiritually grounded democratic society (Hombana 2024a:1).

Wealth and the Challenge of Kidnappings for Ransom in Nigeria

A crucial aspect of the client's action is the decision he takes to reduce the bills and therefore make life easier for the debtors, to make the debtors appreciate the master's assumed generosity, and to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people. In first-century Palestine, wealth is secured by adopting the role of an ancient trickster; one person's gain necessarily entails another's loss (Malina 1981:71–93). Similarly, in contemporary African societies, certain forms of greed, exploitation, and violation of human dignity for financial gain may carry heavy consequences. The parable challenges African communities to consider the cost of life and human dignity and the consequences involved in violating human dignity (Okure 1988:77).

For instance, in Nigeria, kidnapping people for ransom and beheading people for the so-called money ritual have led to violations of human dignity (Landau 2012:67). The client's actions challenge these prejudices by demonstrating that wealth must be secured through love and respect for the collective well-being of people and society. The implication for African Christian ethics is clear: true wealth is not about the 'treasure we hoard' (Guyer 1995:83) but is about loving and caring for God's people through building a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor, social justice, equitable wealth distribution, and collective well-being (Hombana 2024a:1).

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Practical implication of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*: a Tumbuka concept of the efficacious omnipresence of God

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Abstract

This article explores the deeper and richer meaning of the Tumbuka attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete*, translated as the omnipresent God. It encourages exploration of the wealth underlying reflections on attributes of God in African languages for the purpose of forming a more contextual Christian faith. The attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* communicates God's omnipresence with a unique concept of effectual and gentle, life-giving, and supporting flow of God's presence. The church is discussed as a product of and an ingraft in the efficacious flow of the indiscriminate presence of God. The article also deliberates on the implications of believing in *Chiuta chinyetenyete* for the church, its formation, and the practice of faith. With data gathered through a qualitative literature review and observations, this article emphasises the need for the church to understand the flow of God and to flow in and with God's presence so that its formation and exercise of faith vivify his efficacious omnipresence in all contexts.

Introduction

Migliore (1991:74) describes the triune God as a living unity with dynamic constancy. He presents God not as static but as constantly on the move, transforming a world suffering under effects of sin. Arcadi (2016:631) states that "God's omnipresence is God's acting at all locations", even beyond the visibility of the most advanced human technology. Meanwhile, Gasser

(2018:43) speaks of God's constant activity in the cosmos that he created and sustains.

In this article, the word "flow" refers to the transforming, constant, and dynamic presence of God among his creation as witnessed from creation to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ to the final consummation. The Tumbuka attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* evinces the efficacious, gentle, continuous, indiscriminate, and effectual flow of God's omnipresence in time and cosmological space. Although the flow of deadly liquids has devastating effects on life, *Chiuta chinyetenyete* signifies the gentle life-giving, supporting, and enhancing flow of God's presence. The flow of God's presence in the concept of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is comparative to a capillary system in soils or osmosis in plants, leaving trails of life transformation by its dynamic nature (Bentley 2020:186).

The church is one of the evident trails of God's transforming presence in the world and a privileged ingraft into the flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*. As the product of the flow of God's presence, the church is the outcome of God's gracious salvific work. As an ingraft, the church, through the filling and guidance of the Holy Spirit, is incorporated into God's life transforming presence. The church is co-opted so that it vivifies the efficacious nature of God in communities grappling with a host of challenges. The ingrafting of the church depicts a God whose presence does not only flow among but also flows through and with his creation.

Scholars have discussed how God vivifies his efficacious presence in the church by describing it as the display window of his grace (Breed 2017:69), a provisional manifestation of his reign (Migliore 1991:189, 195), infused with *theosis* for sanctification (Biriukov 2019:143), and empowered for service in the world (Sproul 2015:2449). This portrays the church as a sign of the continued existence of God's sovereign grace and a means through which he vivifies his transforming omnipresence.

The question discussed in this article is: What does it imply that the church is a product and ingrafted into the flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* for its formation and practice of faith in African contexts? The article proposes the need for the church to know the flow of God and to flow in God and flow with God so that

its formation and its exercise of faith vivify his efficacious omnipresence in African contexts (Breed 2017:69).

Understanding the omnipresence of God

Gasser (2018:43) discusses the omnipresence of God from his divine activity to and in the world that he created, is immanently interrelated with, and continues to actively sustain. The cosmos is in God as it is constantly within the sphere of his divine activity in time, referring to God's omnipresence permeating from eternity to eternity, and space, denoting planets, galaxies, and all the atmospheric contents that humans have and will ever perceive either by natural sense or through cosmological, astrophysical, and astronomical studies and beyond. This implies that God's omnipresence is and will remain as unfathomable as God himself both in time and space.

The idea of the cosmos being within the sphere of God's divine activity signifies that even if God's omnipresence is transcendent, he is actually fully active among his creation. In short, it underlines that God's divine activity is far beyond yet inclusive of the earth. It also affirms the contradictory yet complimentary attribute of God recorded in Jeremiah 23:23 that he is a nearby and a far away God (Hoek 2014:1). The same concept of God being near and far is traceable in Solomon's prayer during dedication of the temple, built to be God's dwelling place. Solomon struggled with the idea of the temple being the Lord's dwelling place (2 Chronicles 6:1-2) and God's transcendent omnipresence (2 Chronicles 2:6, 1 Kings 8:12-13). In describing the transcendence of the Lord's presence, Solomon stated that even the highest heavens cannot contain him (1Kings 8:27, 2 Chronicle 2:6, 6:18). Put the other way, the presence of God in terms of space is limitless because it goes beyond the perceived highest heavens (Hoek 2014:2).

Meanwhile, in Psalm 139:8 the omnipresence of God goes down to *sheol*, a Hebrew word translated in Tumbuka as *malo gha ŵakufwa* (the world of the dead). This connotes that God is present among the worlds of living and the dead. In English versions *sheol* denotes a grave, depth, pit, or realm of the dead with a huge insatiable appetite (Bentley 2020:191). Therefore, the omnipresence of God does not only go above the highest heavens (2 Chronicles 2:6), it also includes the insatiable *sheol*. So, God's presence in

cosmological space is without limits or boundaries, ranging from higher than the highest heights to the insatiable depth. Meanwhile in time, the omnipresence of God is eternal.

The concept of omnipresence also encompasses aspects of being near, alluding to the active immanence of God in the cosmos (Gasser 2018:44). This understanding of the active immanence of God contrasts the concept that God is too transcendent, too external, too separated to be concerned with what is happening in the world (Gasser 2018:44). Though God is transcendent, even beyond the highest heavens, he is, at the same time, present and actively involved among and within his creation. Therefore, in as much as it is impossible for the entire transcendent, ineffable, and unfathomable God to dwell in a temple built with human hands the way that people live in houses, he can be present in it by the immanent aspect of his omnipresence.

The Tumbuka People

Tumbuka people are dominantly located in the northern part of Malawi and north-eastern part of Zambia, particularly in Lundazi district and Miyombe. They are also found in the southern part of Tanzania, especially along the border with Malawi (Musonda et al 2019:110). Tumbuka people speak Chitumbuka. Like other African ethnic groups, in the pre-missionary era Tumbuka people solely practiced African Traditional Religion (ATR). In Tumbuka ATR, the spiritual world had a threefold hierarchy of spirits comprised of *Chiuta* (the Supreme being or spirit); territorial spirits, especially those of the dead chiefs or chiefdom heroes; and ancestral spirits which had a mediatory role that varied from clan to clan (Musonda et al 2019:110). Missionary work among the Tumbuka people, especially on the northern part of Malawi and north-eastern part of Zambia, was dominantly initiated by the Free Church of Scotland.

Missionaries preached the gospel of God's salvation in Jesus Christ and taught concepts of the Christian faith, but did not bring a new vocabulary to African ethnic groups. Christianity borrowed words for God's names and attributes from Africa's pre-missionary religious language. *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is one of the attributes of God Christians borrowed from pre-missionary Tumbuka religion. In Chitumbuka *chinyetenyete* is used to describe God's omnipresence.

Understanding the attribute of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*

The simple Chitumbuka expression of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is *Chiuta wali pose pose pa nyengo imoza munyengo zose*, meaning God is present everywhere at the same time, and at all times. However, the attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* conveys a richer and deeper meaning with practical inferences worth exploring than merely *Chiuta wali pose pose pa nyengo imoza munyengo zose*. Though bearing the same basic idea, the two vary in their underlying meanings. Therefore, *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is not used for linguistic complexity but to bear and relay the depth of the underlying reflections on God which *Chiuta wali pose pose panyengo imoza munyengo zose* may not put across. The concept of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* signifies the active and perceivable presence of God with traceable life-transforming effects in all places in the past, present, and future. This shows that Tumbuka ATR had reflective and practical aspects. These two influenced each other, as all practices were informed by reflections and vice versa.

Chiuta was originally a Tumbuka traditional religion name for the supreme being. It is now used in the church for the Christian God. The name *Chiuta* is a construct of *uta*, the Chitumbuka word for a bow, and the prefix chi, which expresses a big size or greatness. Literally, then, the name *Chiuta* means the big or great bow. The Chitumbuka name for the supreme being, *Chiuta*, is a confession of inner convictions arising from deep reflections on the divine being. The name obviously bears Tumbuka people's rich underlying beliefs about the divine being, though it is not clear why the Chitumbuka name for the supreme being is Chiuta i.e. the big or great bow. It is assumed that since a bow was used by hunters and warriors among the Tumbuka and Chewa people it is possible that *Chiuta* in Chitumbuka (and its comparable *Chauta* in Chichewa) refer to God as "the great Provider and Defender" (Wendland 1992:436). The name *Chiuta*, with its associated meanings and attributes like *chinyetenyete,* demonstrates the depth of the Tumbuka people's reflection on their religion.

Meanwhile, *chinyetenyete* is derived from the word *nyete*, an expression for the gentle flow of fluids or liquids on a surface or material. A *nyete* kind of flow

is similar to osmosis in plants or a capillary system in soils. It is different from other words like *kuthika* that refer to spilling or pouring liquids or other substances. *Nyete* is closely related to the expression *pese* which equally expresses the flow of spilled liquid. However, *pese* is used to express a more forceful flow of liquids or describe the spillage of substances in a spreading manner, while *nyete* denotes a gentle flow and is used exclusively for fluids or liquids.

The repetition of *nyete* in the attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* can mean a continuous, effectual flow of God's presence in the world. The nature of the flow is not destructive, violent, or forceful, but gentle, life-giving, enhancing, or supporting. The omnipresence of God is reflected upon as transformative, life-giving, supporting, and enhancing in nature. Just like capillary action and osmosis have positive effects on nature, *chinyetenyete* provides a unique interpretation with practical aspect of believing in the omnipresent God. Notably, nyetenyete in chinyetenyete may also mean the flow of liquids everywhere or all over.

This rich depth of the underlying concept of a divine attribute in African local languages like *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is worth exploring for the purpose of forming contextual Christian faith.

Chiuta chinyetenyete, a sign of a deep contemplation on the supreme being

As already alluded to, the attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* did not come from nowhere. It reveals the Tumbuka people's deep reflection on and the quality of their belief in the supreme being, even in the pre-missionary era. The underlying reflection of the attribute accepts the active presence of God and goes a step further by including the idea of the effectual nature of his omnipresence. Since God is life, as Karl Barth put it (Titus 2010:216), the attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* depicts God as having a flowing divine presence which give, preserves, transforms, and invigorates the lives of his creation. Within this concept, God's omnipresence is not a passive presence or a fruitless involvement but active and effectual with traceable life transforming impacts (Lindland 2005:128).

The concept of flow in *Chiuta chinyetenyete* gives the impression of what Migliore (1991:74) terms dynamic constancy. Therefore, *Chiuta chinyetenyete* presents God as one who is dynamic because he moves towards and with his creation to his full, final, and eternal domain. The attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* upholds the immutability of God in his love and purposes, while embracing the idea of God's movement towards his creation in Christ and the Holy Spirit to redeem, perfect, and lead it to final consummation.

Chinyetenyete, the indiscriminate flow of God's presence

Nyetenyete in *chinyetenyete* also refers to the flow of liquids everywhere, connoting an indiscriminate or non-selective flow. *Chiuta chinyetenyete* entails that God's gentle flowing presence is indiscriminate or non-selective in time and cosmological space. This view of the indiscriminate presence of God counters all human-induced tendencies toward social, racial, and gender discrimination. God is equally present in and among people of different cultures, genders, and races, thereby condemning all hegemonic enforcing attitudes and assumptions displayed in habits of either lower self-ranking or self-exaltation in comparison to others. The non-selective presence of God in *Chiuta chinyetenyete* challenges humanity to co-exist in its racial, cultural, gender, and economic diversities. In turn, this unified humanity should corporately strive to appreciate and co-exist with nature. This will protect creatures like snakes, cats, owls, hyenas, etc. from alienation or victimisation, especially in African societies where such animals cause spiritual insecurity because they are considered a bad omen or an embodiment of evil witchcraft powers (Moyo and Pali 2025:5). Co-existence with creation is essential because the God who created is present with and among all of creation in its diversity, including animals and places assumed to be spiritual threats.

Time-related indiscriminate flow of God's presence

Reflections on the supreme being among the Tumbuka people were coordinated and interrelated where his names and attributes complimented each other. In relation to time, *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is linked to another Chitumbuka attribute *Chiuta wa muyirayira* (Genesis 21:33, Isaiah 40:28), which translates as the forever or everlasting/eternal God. Combining the two attributes evinces that the life-giving, enhancing, and supporting omnipresence of God has been and will always flow, eternally. Put another

way, the combination of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* and *Chiuta wa myirayira* suggests a ceaseless and eternal flow of God's presence even in historical moments classified as dark such as the slave trade, apartheid, colonialism, the Covid 19 pandemic. Considering the devastating effects associated with such events, explaining the efficacious presence of God is contentious. However, the assurance of God's presence gives hope that he will continue working ways out of such challenges. The time-related indiscriminate flow of God's presence embraces the idea that the efficacious flow of God's presence is from eternity and flows through the process of creating a good creation, to redeeming all of creation after the Fall, and finally leading it to the final and eternal consummation.

Cosmological space indiscriminate flow of God's presence

The answer to the rhetorical question ''Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" asked in Jeremiah 23:23 is obvious: Indeed, God fills the heavens and the earth. Therefore, it can be deduced that God is present in the cosmological space of the heavens, the earth, and even the dreaded *sheol*.

The cosmological indiscriminate flow of *Chiuta Chinyetenyete* is verifiable in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament God is the creator of all things, the whole universe (Genesis 1 and 2). In the New Testament, the first indiscriminate flow of God's presence is seen in Jesus' newly-formed spiritual family (Mark 3:31-36, Joubert 2020:64-65). This family is drawn from various biological backgrounds, built around him, based on hearing his word and doing the will of his heavenly Father, and linked to God's kingdom (Joubert 2020:64-65). Under this new family, in addition to the synagogue system of worship, ordinary homes become gathering spaces for believers from various biological families to receive spiritual information, formation, transformation, and reformation from God (Joubert 2020:64-65). Jesus visits, eats, and provides spiritual guidance even in homes of detestable tax collectors like Levi (Mark 2:13-17) and Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10).

The second cosmological indiscriminate flow of God's presence in the New Testament is the Holy Spirit empowering apostles for the concentric mission of testifying to God's salvific act in Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The concentric mission confirms that God is God of, with, for, and among all nations, even those thought to be a no-go

area. This indiscriminate Christ-instructed and Holy Spirit-empowered concentric mission pushed apostles outside their spiritual comfort zones towards discriminated people and places. For example, Peter said "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (Act 10:28). God repeated the same vision three times to reorient Peter's view of his efficacious presence among the Gentiles. Even then, Peter and the circumcised believers were astonished when the Holy Spirit came on Gentiles who heard and accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:45).

Unfortunately, the inclusion of Gentiles in the church was a controversial issue in the newly-born church. Peter was criticised for going to the house of and eating with the uncircumcised (Acts 11:2). A council was convened to resolve the dispute over the process of accepting the uncircumcised in the church (Act 15). The bone of contention was how these Gentile should be incorporated into the church. Must they be circumcised to seal their incorporation or not? The resolution to accept Gentiles as part of the church without circumcision was based on God confirming his indiscriminate and unconditional acceptance of them by filling them with the Holy Spirit (Act 15:8).

Throughout the book of Acts, God's indiscriminate filling with the Holy Spirit occurs in unlikely people in unlikely places. For example, the Holy Spirit fills Samaritans and Gentiles in their own land and homes (Acts 8:14-17, 10:44, 19:6). The Holy Spirit actively leads Phillip into the desert to share the gospel of salvation in Christ to an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).

The church's struggle to share the gospel beyond the bounds of Jewish society proves that it was not apostles taking God to the Gentiles, but God unveiling his limitless and indiscriminate transforming presence among the Gentiles. The more the apostles and circumcised believers followed the lead of the Holy Spirit in the process of unveiling God's efficacious omnipresence among unexpected people and in unanticipated places the more they learnt the extent of his inclusiveness.

Sociological indiscriminate flow of God's presence

In the New Testament, the sociological indiscriminate flow of God's presence is evident as God in Jesus indiscriminately reaches out to people even by going

to where they are found. Jesus not only welcomes, but also visits and eats with sinners and condemned tax collectors in their homes (Luke 15:1-2, 19:1-10). Jesus goes to places that the Jews avoid for religious reasons, such as Samaria (John 4:4-6). While in Samaria Jesus has a conversation with a woman at a well who for unknown reasons came to draw water at a traditionally unusual time (John 4:1-24).

The indiscriminate life-empowering presence of God is also seen in the courage, wisdom, and miracle-working of unschooled and ordinary people, such as Peter and John (Acts 4:13). The flow of God's presence humbled members of Sanhedrin when these men responded to them with amazing courage. The astonished Sanhedrin concluded that Peter and John derived their courage from Jesus their Master (Act 4:13). Though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned, this incident fulfilled Jesus' promise in Luke 12:11-12: "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say".

In short, the indiscriminate flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* stands against an imperialistic approach to the Christian faith (Bosch 2011:4). Instead, it lifts those regarded as least in the perceived strata of human hierarchy by demolishing social barriers. The common, the unschooled, sinners, Gentiles, and Samaritans who receive the gospel of God's salvation in Christ are incorporated into his covenant by indiscriminately filling them with the Holy Spirit.

The account of John and Peter before the Sanhedrin is especially important for our own times, especially in light of increasing claims to God's revelation, power, and anointing by some church leaders. Regrettably, such claim induces competition and domineering attitudes over members and fellow leaders. Church leaders and members are categorised into classes of grace, power, and anointing, while others are reduced to listeners not be listened to (Moyo 2023:162, 163, 221). Reflection on *Chiuta chinyetenyete* who fills believers in Christ with the Holy Spirit indiscriminately consolidates an all-inclusive unified diversity of the body of Christ. It counters the use of God-given gifts and services as a cause for discrimination. Rather, it reinforces the embrace of others, treating apparently weaker members of the body of Christ as

indispensable and showing them honour rather than contempt (1 Cor 12:22-26).

The implication of believing *Chiuta chinyetenyete* on forming practical Christian faith

Gorman (2022:16) states: "Divine description is simultaneously human prescription". Attributes of God are not static expressions but descriptions of his self-revealed divine character, life, quality, and action. Believing in a God with indiscriminate and efficacious transforming characteristics, qualities, and actions obliges believers in him to exhibit a corresponding quality of spirituality. This should not insinuate a comparative equity between God and human beings, because God remains ineffable even in his communicable attributes. Believers share communicable qualities with the transcendent God as learners of his nature. God's incommunicable attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, eternal, also have a bearing on believers' life of faith. In other words, the self-revealed divine qualities in (in)communicable attributes importune a quality of spirituality that arises from faith in God. Therefore, the church should understand the implications of believing in a God with the attribute of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* for its formation and practice of faith.

This article suggests two practical implications of believing in *Chiuta chinyetenyete*. The first is that the confidence of Christians' faith and its formation should be draw from the fact that the church is a product of the limitless and efficacious flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*. The second is that the church is an honoured ingraft in the *missio-Dei* where *Chiuta chinyetenyete* tasks it to attest and vivify the limitless and efficacious flow of God's presence in its respective contexts.

The church as a product of the limitless transformative flow of God's presence

The church is one of the evident outcomes or trails of the limitless gentle, transformative, and gracious flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, Christ chooses, gathers, defends, and preserves the church, making it believe the true faith by Word and Spirit, implying that the church is God's initiative, not vice versa (Sproul 2015:2400). To stress the point of God

being the initiator of the church's existence, Moyo (2023:50) states that no human being can know and believe in God unless God has graciously revealed himself. Moreover, even faith, by which Christians relate to God, does not proceed from human nature, effort, or intellectual analysis. It is a gracious gift of the God who inspires human will to transit from unbelief to belief (Ephesians 2:8-9; Moyo 2023:50).

The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that God's Spirit effects an effectual calling by persuading and enabling believers to embrace the freely-offered Jesus Christ through convicting of sin and misery, enlightening minds, and renewing human wills (Sproul 2015:2475). It takes the conviction, enlightenment, renewal, and persuasion of the Holy Spirit for the church to embrace the freely-offered Jesus Christ. The idea of God being the initiator of the Christian spiritual journey provides a stable base for building Christian faith. The idea also implies forming a faith that culminates in ceaseless worship of God expressed through a life of humility, obedience, and service to him at all times and in all contexts. This warns leaders in the church to avoid falling into the traps of pride, authoritarianism, and domineering attitudes in their service to God.

The church as the means for the limitless transformative flow of God's presence

Understanding the church as the outcome of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* opposes stagnation, passivity, and the inactivity of believers. It also stands against dualistic, escapist, pietistic, and ecclesiastic approaches to Christian faith (Van der Watt 2003:53-54), because such approaches conflict with God's act of redeeming a world suffering under the effects of sin. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit thoroughly empowers the church for its existence and its calling, the *missio ecclesia* in fulfilling the *missio Dei*. God continues to flow in the church by the Holy Spirit, sanctifying it for continued growth in a renewed life under divine grace, and empowering it to proclaim God's holistic salvation in word and deed. This implies that the church joins God and assumes his nature of constant dynamism thereby becoming an institution for demonstrating what it means to have a relationship with the triune God.

Various images have been used to depict the church's role of being the means of the limitless transformative flow of God's presence. Breed (2017:69)

describes the church as the display window of God's grace. This suggests that through the church God vivifies his transforming love and grace to its respective social settings. It depicts the church as an institution where God exhibits his nature, quality and works of grace. From the Byzantine era, a cold iron rod placed in fire has been used to typify the *theosis* effected by the grace of God on the church (Biriukov 2019:143). Even as the rod on fire remains iron takes on properties of the fire, becoming red hot, capable of igniting other fires. In the same way *theosis* takes place when the church, likened to iron rod, is placed in the fire of God's grace, taking on qualities of his communicable attributes (Focus 2020:225) for the growth of itself and effective service in the world.

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the church plays its role of being the means of the limitless flow of the transforming grace of God by the indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christ not only provided ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints (Sproul 2015:2449), he is also present and actively involved with the church in its life and service. This opines that Christ and the Holy Spirit are actively involved in the church's service of gathering saints from the world and perfecting them for his kingdom. Thus, the church neither acts alone nor out of its own power, but acts in and with God from whom it draws the authenticity of its life and ministry.

John Calvin puts it in a stronger way, stating that the church is the mother of salvation (Migliore 1991:185). Just as a mother conceives, births, and nourishes her child, so does the church for believers. The church plays its role as *Chiuta chinyetenyete* flows in it through its ministry of preaching and teaching the Word, its acts of service, and other means that communicate the deep message of God's sacrificial love.

Migliore (1991:195) describes the church as a sign of the continuing grace of God in Jesus Christ from history to posterity. Bosch (1991:9) states that the church is a pointer, symbol, example, model and foretaste of God's reign. These descriptions of the church should not be mistaken for fixed or immobile bearer of information about God's salvation. After experiencing the infusing, indiscriminate, and gracious flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*, the church becomes the dynamic and active means by which God reaches the world with the

goodness of his sacrificial salvific act in Christ. It is imperative, then, for the church, being the outcome of the limitless transforming flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*, to embody the life and *mission Dei* as modelled by Christ, so that through its members the Holy Spirit may perpetuate God's life-giving, supporting, enhancing, and transforming presence in the world.

This means that in the process of restoring humanity and all creation, God is present in the church and works through the church. God's work, however, is not limited to the church. Though the church has been ingrafted into Christ and is empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in the *missio Dei*, it does not thereby become a restrictive conduit pipe that God must pass through in the process of restoring his people and creation. After all, God's process of restoring creation precedes the existence of the church. Even so, the mandate for diaconal and missional service in the world, empowered by the indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit, shows that the church occupies an important space and plays a key role in God's transforming mission among his creation. In this case, *missio Dei* takes the form of being God's transforming activity in, with, and through the church. The ingrafting of church into the *missio Dei* by *Chiuta chinyetenyete* whose presence is effectual, transforming, life-giving, supporting, and enhancing has serious reflective implications for the church. It entails the need for the church in its formation and practice of faith to embody the effectual life-giving, supporting, invigorating, and transforming nature of *Chiuta chinyetenyete*. With this reflective implication of the *missio Dei* under *Chiuta chinyetenyete*, the church assumes more responsibilities than just being a display window of God's grace because it has to actually flow with and in the efficacious omnipresence of God.

In expressing its faith through missional, kerygmatic, prophetic and diaconal service the church reflects the effectual, sanctifying, and empowering presence of *Chiuta chinyetenyete.* This implies that the formation of practical faith in the rapidly growing and vibrant church in Africa should vivify the ongoing gentle and life transforming flow of God's presence. There are three vital tasks to be undertaken by the church in the process of forming a faith which fulfils the mandate of vivifying God's continued presence as an implication of believing in *Chiuta chinyetenyete*.

The task of knowing the flow of God's presence in African contexts

Chiuta chinyetenyete envisages a God who is well aware of the direction he is leading the church and all of creation. The European missionaries' movement to Africa, irrespective of its flaws, was initiated by God, not missionaries (Kaunda and Hinfelaar 2021:6). The God who was actively present among Africans invited and led the church in Europe to be part of what he was doing in Africa by sharing the gospel of his salvation in Christ through missionaries' human-to-human contact. As a way of owning God's vision for Africa, it is imperative for the African church, as a privileged ingraft into the flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* to know God and his ongoing mission within and without the continent so that it offers services in line with his direction.

The task of knowing the flow of the God who has, is, and will continue to gather, sustain, perfect, and send the church in Africa for his own glory presents three clues. The first clue is that *Chiuta chinyetenyete* has been, is, and will eternally be efficaciously and indiscriminately present in Africa. God was present when Africa was classified a dark continent, is in Africa with all its strife and opportunities, and will forever be in Africa.

The second clue is that God has been, is, and will be actively involved in Africa and among Africans. The deep reflection evident in Tumbuka pre-missionary religious attributes of the supreme being such as *Chiuta chinyetenyete, kamanyimanyi* (all knowing*), wamuyirayira* (eternal), *chiyamwaka* (ancient of days) which are used as attributes for the Christian God in churches, shows the quality of pre-missionary contemplations on the divine. It is possible that missionaries theologically assessed the underlying reflections behind local names and attributes of God and adopted them after perceiving that they would aid the contextualisation of Christian faith. Scholars such as Bediako argue that ATR was a primal religion that God used to prepare Africa for the preaching of the gospel of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Therefore, reflection leading to the attribute of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* seem to indicate that God was actively preparing Africa for the gospel of his saving, sacrificial love in Christ (Moyo 2023:20). The church needs to know God's continuing activity in Africa with his effectual flow leading Africans until final consummation. This highlights the need for the church to keenly see, know, pay attention to, and serve God's interest for African communities in the interim before the final consummation.

The third clue is that since God has been, is, and will always be active in Africa, it is important for the church in its exercise of faith to know the direction of God's active presence in Africa. Osmer (2005:242-243), in relation to knowing God's direction, talks about reading with the Spirit and reading the Spirit. The Spirit is the Godhead guiding the church to what God is already doing in all contexts and leading it towards the final consummation.

Reading with the Spirit stresses the need for church to rely on the instructive companionship of the Holy Spirit in its task of interpreting and applying the gospel in its context (Moyo 2023:196). Reading the Spirit refers to the church discerning what God is already doing in, among, to, and through its context. Additionally, it is by reading with the Holy Spirit and reading the Holy Spirit that the church discerns its place and role in God's salvific plan. Therefore, discerning God's active presence and the place and role of the church in its context through active listening is an integral part of the process of knowing God's flow, flowing in and with God in contexts (Moyo 2023:196).

The task of flowing in God's presence

Since God has and will eternally be present and actively involved in Africa, the church is required to do more than just know the flow of his presence. The church has to actually flow in God's presence or direction. If it does not, knowing God and the flow of his presence are rendered irrelevant. Flowing in the presence of God means that the church follows God's direction, lead, and guidance, drawing the authenticity of its existence and service from him.

In John 15:4-5, Jesus said: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

The word abide refers to an inseparable relationship where the church permanently exists in Christ Jesus and Christ Jesus is ever-present in the church. The church, likened to branches, needs to remain ingrafted in Christ, the vine, for it to bear much fruit. Jesus Christ's statement that "apart from me you can do nothing" indicates that the life and fruitfulness of the church is dependent on its abiding in him. Therefore, it is imperative for the church to draw life, vision, and passion from Jesus Christ so that its existence and services

bear relevant fruit that reflect God's transforming grace within itself and its surrounding social settings. The church loses the essence of its existence and service if it departs from Christ.

The task of flowing with God's presence

Having faith in the God who is *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is a prescription for the church to flow in and with God (Gorman 2022:16). The aim of interpreting the Bible and contemporary context with the Spirit and of reading the Spirit is to flow with God's presence (Osmer 2005:242-243). Flowing with God's presence means more than God being a companion. It also entails that the church should be where God is and do what he is doing with the love and passion he has.

Here the phrase flowing with God connotes two meanings. The first meaning is being predisposed toward God in life and service. The church is called to live and move as God leads it. God is not only leading the church (and all of creation) toward the final consummation but is also leading it in specific transformational directions in particular contexts, such as ending poverty, mine-related conflicts, growing authoritarianism traits among some of democratically elected political leaders. It is important for the church to discern and flow with the presence of God in these specific directions of his transformation. Since the transforming flow of *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is intentionally non-segregative, the church in its quest to flow with God's presence should be prepared to be led to places, issues, and people outside its comfort zones.

The second meaning of flowing with God is that the church is called to emulate God's sacrificial love, especially as demonstrated in the birth, life, ministry, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ. The church's sacrificial service of love is important, especially in communities where hegemonic power structures perpetrate ravaging social vices. In such situations the church should be the source of hope for societies deprived of a sense of the significance of life by oppressive cultural, political, and social systems or structures. However, despite knowing its obligations to stand with those suffering under human-induced oppression, the church may resort to false neutrality, silence, pacification, or worse, support the perpetrators of social injustice (Moyo 2025:157). This is common especially in situations where authoritarian power

structures promise rewards to supporters or threaten to inflict pain on opposers of their oppressive activities.

Flowing with God's presence in this case, implies that the church has to sacrificially offer liberating services to the people and creation that Christ sacrificed himself to set free. Therefore, in its flow with *Chiuta chinyetenyete,* the church has to actively oppose oppressive systems, structures, and practices causing social and environmental injuries (Moyo 2025:157). This challenges the church to have and form its faith in words and deeds that evince the dynamic, efficacious, gentle, continuous, indiscriminate, and efficacious presence of God in its contexts (Bentley 2020:186).

Conclusion

The richness of underlying concept behind attributes of God in African languages such as *Chiuta chinyetenyete* in Chitumbuka are worth exploring for the formation of a contextual Christian faith. Studying the underlying meaning of Chitumbuka attribute *Chiuta chinyetenyete* challenges the church as a product of and ingraft into God's mission to form a faith that practically exhibits his indiscriminate and efficacious presence with traceable transformational impacts. For the church to play its role in the *missio Dei* it needs to know what God is doing and where he is leading. The church should exist and serve in tandem with the activity and direction of God's dynamic presence. As the body of Christ, the church needs to actively discern and participate in what God is doing within and its surrounding community (Moyo 2023:190). This article challenges the church to reflect theologically on the underlying meaning of local names and attributes of God in order to deepen the roots of the Christian faith in Africans' hearts. Finally, it opines that the implication of believing in *Chiuta chinyetenyete* is embodying the life-giving, invigorating, supporting, and transforming nature of God's presence in the world.

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Disrupted Devotion and Virtual Altars: Liturgical Dynamics in Full Gospel Church During COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic significantly altered religious traditions globally, compelling churches to swiftly transition from conventional in-person assemblies to digital platforms. The Full Gospel Church (FGC) congregants and leaders in Thohoyandou, South Africa, grounded in Pentecostal traditions that prioritise embodied worship, communal fellowship, and the theology of presence, encountered spiritual, technological, and theological obstacles throughout the shift to virtual worship. The research employed a qualitative case study design, collecting data via semi-structured interviews with twenty participants, comprising church leaders and members. The data indicates a dual response: although virtual liturgy maintained spiritual continuity throughout the lockdown, it concurrently led to a notable decrease in spiritual intimacy, particularly among rural and elderly individuals with restricted technological access. The theological ramifications, especially the cessation of sacraments like holy communion and baptism, prompted essential enquiries into the legitimacy and manifestation of digital worship. Church leaders utilised digital literacy and pastoral agility to maintain connections with members. The research ultimately contributes to ongoing theological

discussions over the future of worship in a post-pandemic society, especially within African Pentecostal congregations. It emphasises the significance of contextual theology in addressing the convergence of faith, technology, and crises.

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic disturbed global religious practices, compelling faith communities to rethink their methods of gathering, worshipping, and sustaining spiritual unity. In South Africa, churches were not immune to these transformations. The government implemented public health laws, including limitations on big gatherings, physical distance, and lockdowns, to mitigate the virus's transmission (Adichie 2021; Arasa et al. 2022). The policies significantly affected the Full Gospel Church (FGC) in the Thohoyandou District, a Pentecostal community recognised for its focus on physical presence, spontaneous spiritual expression, and communal worship traditions.

Terminology such as 'virtual worship', 'digital transformation', 'Pentecostal ecclesiology', and 'theology of presence' gained prominence as churches sought innovative methods to maintain spiritual connectivity during physical separation. *Virtual worship* denotes the execution of religious services through digital platforms, enabling remote participation by members (Arthur 2021:35). Pentecostal congregations, which prioritise the bodily experience of worship through singing, dancing, prophecy, and physical sacraments, faced intricate theological and practical challenges with the shift to digital platforms (Anderson 2020:58; Smith 2021). This research enhances the expanding domain of digital theology by offering a substantive, empirical examination of how a rural South African Pentecostal congregation adjusted to pandemic-related limitations on in-person worship (Arthur 2021:39; Smith 2021:103). These disturbances established both tangible and spiritual impediments that influenced the continuity and vigour of worship within the community. The study investigates the adaptation of church leaders and congregants to virtual worship, the maintenance or disruption of spiritual engagement, and the implications of these changes for the future of Pentecostal worship in rural settings.

Discussion of Critical Factors

The primary, crucial component shaping our study pertains to the significant technological infrastructure challenges encountered by rural South African congregations. Rural populations in Thohoyandou frequently experience limited access to high-speed internet and affordable digital equipment, resulting in significant obstacles to virtual worship engagement. In contrast to urban churches that rapidly adapted to livestreaming platforms, rural congregations faced challenges such as unreliable or absent internet connectivity, costly data rates, and a general lack of mobile phones or laptops among economically disadvantaged members. The infrastructural restrictions rendered virtual worship not generally accessible, profoundly compromising the inclusive community ethos vital to Pentecostal ecclesiology. The digital gap established a scenario in which geographical location and economic status dictated individuals' ability to sustain a spiritual connection during lockdown.

The second problem pertains to the age disparity in computer literacy, resulting in significantly unequal access to worship experiences. Individuals aged 18 to 40 exhibited proficiency and ease with social media platforms, mobile applications, and streaming technology. They swiftly acclimated to utilising Zoom for prayer sessions, WhatsApp groups for fellowship, and Facebook Live for Sunday services, preserving their spiritual connections through these digital platforms while individually addressing technical challenges. Elderly individuals aged 60 and above exhibited minimal or no familiarity with smartphones and internet applications, frequently necessitating assistance from family members to access religious services. Numerous senior members articulated feelings of technological alienation and spiritual neglect, with some conveying a sense of being 'forgotten' as the church transitioned to inaccessible digital platforms. This age-related inequality in internet engagement undermined the biblical tenet that all Christians should possess equal access to communal worship, and, instead of alleviating societal divides, the digital shift exacerbated pre-existing inequities across generational boundaries.

The third essential aspect pertains to the erosion of embodied Pentecostal rituals that are integral to this worship style. Pentecostal spirituality is fundamentally physical and sensory, depending significantly on tactile

demonstrations of faith that cannot be duplicated in digital media. Fundamental rites like anointing with oil, which symbolises healing, and consecration via physical contact proved unfeasible to execute remotely. The imposition of hands, perceived as a method for imparting blessings, healing, and transferring the power of the Holy Spirit, cannot transpire via screens. The community aspect of collective prayer, characterised by Christians physically gathering, touching, and kneeling together in supplication, diminished as participants were confined to their houses. Altar calls, wherein attendees physically come forward to receive prayer, deliverance, or salvation, could not be performed remotely. Furthermore, the communal worship experience, defined by coordinated singing, dancing, clapping, and physical expression, was diminished to mere passive screen observation. For Pentecostals, these rituals are not simply symbolic actions but are perceived as conduits of spiritual grace and the means through which believers experience God's presence. The virtual format eliminated the physical engagement crucial to Pentecostal spiritual formation, resulting in numerous worshippers feeling spiritually alienated and incapable of fully engaging in worship.

The fourth and last factor pertains to the significant ecclesiological and sacramental challenges that arose with the transition of worship to digital platforms. The transition compelled churches to confront essential theological enquiries including the essence of the church, sacraments, and spiritual validity. Pastors and theologians deliberated on the validity of administering holy communion when believers were dispersed in their homes rather than convened at a single table, the legitimacy of baptism without physical immersion observed by the congregation, and whether digital participation genuinely represented a 'gathering' of the church body in a significant theological context. These enquiries exposed profound ecclesiological difficulties stemming from the perception that the church is essentially a congregated community, or *ekklesia*, rather than merely a compilation of individuals linked by technology. Pentecostal theology notably highlights communal presence, asserting that God's Spirit operates most effectively among physically gathered believers who can collectively perceive and react to the Spirit's activities. Virtual worship contested this fundamental doctrine by proposing that spiritual interactions could transpire through mediated digital experiences. Moreover, enquiries emerged over spiritual authenticity. Can livestreamed services genuinely elicit the same spiritual fervour, intensity,

and experience of divine presence as in-person worship filled with the Spirit? Does virtual participation influence and develop believers in the same manner as physical participation? Should internet worshippers be regarded as complete members of the congregation with equal status, or are they only spectators witnessing from afar? These significant enquiries compelled leaders and members of the Full Gospel Church to reevaluate essential beliefs on the nature of authentic worship, legitimate sacramental administration, and true Christian community in an increasingly digital era.

Practical Theological Insights into Virtual Worship

Churches of all denominations worldwide contended with digital adaption. In North America and Europe, substantial congregations rapidly adopted livestreaming, social media, and Zoom-based services (Campbell 2020:267–284). Numerous African churches have adopted innovations such as WhatsApp, radio, and YouTube to engage their congregants regionally (Afolaranmi 2020; Eagle and Proeschold-Bell 2022). Nevertheless, the theological considerations surrounding these advances were frequently insufficiently developed, particularly within Pentecostal traditions.

In the South African environment, particularly in Limpopo's Thohoyandou District, these digital adaptations faced greater complications. A multitude of congregants perceived digital worship as a provisional compromise rather than a sustainable long-term plan. The Full Gospel Church, comprising twenty active congregations in the region, confronted the problem of maintaining continuity in spiritual care while upholding its fundamental theological principles and community framework (Full Gospel Church of God 2018:12).

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework is based on the convergence of digital transformation and spiritual formation. Digital transformation, characterised as the incorporation of digital technology into fundamental operations, has been extensively examined in business and education (Westerman, Bonnet, and McAfee 2014:34), although it remains comparatively underexplored within religious contexts. In Pentecostal communities, spiritual formation includes profound individual and collective involvement through prayer,

prophecy, sacraments, and charismatic expression (Anderson 2014:45). The conceptual contradiction emerges when this formation is mediated through screens, chat boxes, and pre-recorded sermon materials that may lack the vibrancy and unpredictability of Spirit-led worship. This study defines virtual worship not only as a technological shift but also as a spiritual upheaval and realignment. It enquires if digital platforms may genuinely reflect the theology and communal spirit of Pentecostalism, and under what circumstances they may thrive or falter in this endeavour.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the theoretical framework of the practical theology of worship, conceptualising worship as an embodied, communal, and spiritually formative experience (Smith 2016:55). James K. A. Smith (2016:62) asserts that worship transcends mere intellectual agreement with concepts; it is a ritual that 'shapes our loves and desires', aligning our identities with the kingdom of God. This theological perspective contests solely intellectual approaches to digital worship, emphasising the indispensable significance of physical presence, gesture, sound, and community in religious development. The theology of presence posits that God's immanence is most profoundly encountered within the assembled community (Snyder 2012:77). In Pentecostal settings, this presence is conveyed through prophecy, healing, communal singing, and the ritual of laying on of hands, which are rendered challenging, if not unfeasible, by virtual forms (Cartledge 2016:72; Vondey 2010:31). This theoretical framework offers a critical perspective for analysing the resistance or adaptability of Pentecostal congregations to digital worship environments. Ultimately, ecclesiology, the examination of the church, has a crucial theoretical position in assessing the transition to virtuality. The embodied assembly has historically been regarded as essential to church identity (Smith 2021:103). Consequently, some churches questioned whether digital involvement could genuinely meet the theological role of *ekklesia* (assembly of the saints).

Review of Literature

Liturgical Shifts and Digital Transformation in Religious Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic instigated an unparalleled global experiment in digital religion, compelling faith organisations to swiftly reconfigure age-old rituals of assembly, worship, and spiritual development. Empirical studies highlighting this change have emerged, demonstrating both the innovative potential and doctrinal conflicts within religious institutions. Campbell (2020) did a seminal study on digital ecclesiology, investigating how churches from many faiths swiftly adopted livestreaming, Zoom-based worship services, and social media platforms to preserve congregational unity during lockdowns. His extensive research uncovers a paradox: although churches exhibited significant technological innovation and adaptability, they concurrently faced substantial theological confusion while attempting to traverse unfamiliar digital landscapes without sufficient theological frameworks to inform their practices (Campbell 2020:15). Campbell's research indicates that numerous churches implemented digital tools pragmatically, addressing immediate needs rather than undertaking profound theological contemplation over the potential impact of these tools on ecclesial identity, liturgical practices, and spiritual development. The disparity between technology execution and religious thought signifies a significant deficiency in the initial pandemic reaction that this study aims to rectify.

Expanding upon Campbell's global viewpoint, regional studies have identified specific patterns of digital adaption in African contexts, where infrastructural deficiencies, economic limitations, and cultural influences provide particular hurdles. Eagle and Proeschold-Bell (2022) executed a comprehensive empirical investigation of the psychological and social effects of COVID-19 on South African congregations, utilising a mixed-methods approach that included surveys, interviews, and mental health evaluations. Their research uncovered concerning levels of spiritual isolation, emotional turmoil, and digital disparity, especially among elderly and rural demographics who were deficient in both technology resources and digital literacy necessary for engaging in virtual worship. Their research revealed that the psychological impact of isolation due to the epidemic was exacerbated by religious exclusion, as congregants lacking access to internet platforms faced both physical separation and spiritual estrangement. This discovery highlights the necessity of investigating how

digital transitions may unintentionally exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequities instead of alleviating them, especially in environments characterised by elevated poverty levels and inadequate technology infrastructure.

Afolaranmi's (2020) ethnographic research of Nigerian churches catalogued several techniques for sustaining worship continuity, illustrating how African churches innovatively utilised accessible technology like Facebook, WhatsApp, and radio broadcasts to engage their congregants. Afolaranmi's research revealed considerable differences in access and involvement, indicating that participation fluctuated significantly based on congregants' digital literacy, economic levels, urban or rural residence, and generational demographics (Afolaranmi 2020). Afolaranmi noted that, while churches celebrated their transition to digital platforms, they seldom recognised or addressed the significant segment of their membership that remained unengaged by their efforts. This critique corresponds with overarching apprehensions regarding digital religion study, which has been condemned for excessively emphasising successful digital adopters while overlooking the experiences of those disadvantaged or excluded by technological transitions.

Theological and Experiential Dimensions of Virtual Worship

Recent studies have progressed beyond mere descriptions of technological adoption to critically assess the theological sufficiency and experiential richness of virtual worship, especially in traditions that prioritise embodied spirituality. Cain's (2023) post-pandemic analysis examined changing attitudes towards digital worship, using longitudinal interviews to monitor the evolution of attendees' perceptions over time. His research uncovered a divided response: some congregants welcomed the flexibility and accessibility of digital worship, perceiving it as a valid enhancement of ministry opportunities, while others increasingly considered online worship a 'spiritually diluted substitute' incapable of fully replicating the depth of in-person gatherings (Cain 2023:19). Cain's research is notably significant in chronicling how initial fervour for digital innovation frequently transitioned into disillusionment and existential fatigue, indicating that crisis-driven emergency measures may not be viable or preferable in the long run. His findings pose essential queries on whether digital worship signifies a true evolution in Christian practice or is simply a transient adaptation prompted by exceptional circumstances.

Herring (2021) validated these apprehensions with empirical research that recorded pervasive digital tiredness and diminishing internet engagement rates following the opening months of pandemic restrictions. His longitudinal study monitored engagement measures across several churches, demonstrating that, although virtual attendance initially increased, it later plummeted significantly, especially when spiritual experiences could not properly transfer across screens. Herring's investigation indicates that the initial appeal of digital worship rapidly declined, leading attendees to voice growing discontent with the restricted interactivity, decreased sensory involvement, and weakened sense of social presence inherent in virtual services. Herring noted that the decline in engagement was not uniform across all demographic categories; it was particularly significant among traditions and individuals for whom physical presence, tactile ritual, and communal participation were theologically essential. This discovery holds significant importance for Pentecostal groups, whose worship traditions are fundamentally based on physical expressiveness and sensory experience.

These empirical studies collectively confirm that the digital transition, although essential and somewhat effective in preserving institutional continuity, failed to sufficiently engage the deep theological and experiential aspects of worship, especially in traditions such as Pentecostalism that do not easily adapt to virtual formats. The literature indicates a consistent trend: digital worship may fill practical roles like information dissemination and pastoral communication, yet it fails to maintain the spiritual vitality, emotional depth, sacramental effectiveness, and communal closeness that define vigorous Christian worship. This limitation is not only a technical issue to be addressed through improved technology but rather signifies profound theological conflicts between embodied and mediated religious experiences.

Critical Gaps and Contextual Limitations in Existing Research

An extensive examination of the existing literature identifies numerous significant deficiencies that this work seeks to rectify. Firstly, a significant geographical and contextual bias exists in the studies of digital religion. The predominant body of empirical study on pandemic worship has concentrated on Western contexts, notably North America and Europe, or on substantial metropolitan churches in the global south. Research conducted by Smith (2021) and Arthur (2021) offers significant theological insights into the

inadequacy of virtual platforms to replicate the spiritual weight of in-person services, particularly within traditions that prioritise embodiment, emotion, and spontaneity (Arthur 2021:35; Smith 2021:102–103). Nonetheless, their analyses predominantly originate from Western Pentecostal and evangelical contexts, prompting enquiries into the manifestation of similar processes within African Pentecostal communities, which exhibit unique theological emphases, cultural practices, and material limitations. The contextual deficiency is especially concerning as African Pentecostalism constitutes one of the most rapidly expanding and dynamic manifestations of global Christianity, yet is insufficiently examined in the realm of digital religion research.

The digital gap in rural areas is still insufficiently theorised and practically substantiated. Although scholars recognise that rural congregations have technical obstacles, limited research rigorously investigates how these impediments interact with religious principles, cultural traditions, and social disparities to influence the digital worship experience. Campbell and Osteen observe that digital access is restricted in rural regions and that technology literacy varies among demographic groups; nonetheless, their analysis is predominantly descriptive rather than critically analytical (2023:52). This study fills the gap by highlighting the perspectives and experiences of rural South African Pentecostal congregants, analysing the available technologies and how technological limitations intersected with theological beliefs, generational disparities, and economic constraints to influence worship experiences and spiritual outcomes.

Third, the current literature often adopts a functionalist or neutral perspective on technology, regarding digital platforms just as instruments that may be assessed based on their efficacy in fulfilling predetermined ministry objectives. This method, however practically beneficial, neglects to address profound theological and ethical enquiries regarding how digital mediation may profoundly alter religious subjectivity, spiritual practice, and ecclesial identity. The literature infrequently enquires whether virtual participation fosters the same qualities, dispositions, and spiritual sensibility as physical participation; is it possible to maintain sacramental life online without trivialising or commodifying sacred rituals; and in what ways do digital platforms include specific values, logic, and power dynamics that may contradict Christian

theological principles. This paper asserts that theology must rigorously examine both the practical outcomes and the moral and spiritual ramifications of digital worship, regarding technology not as a neutral medium but as a value-laden practice that influences the identity of worshipping communities.

The literature demonstrates a lack of focus on denominational and theological specificity. Numerous studies categorise 'churches' as a uniform entity, neglecting to acknowledge that various Christian traditions embody significantly distinct theologies of worship, sacrament, presence, and community, which influence their adaptability to digital translation. Pentecostal churches, characterised by their focus on spontaneity, emotional expression, physical healing, prophetic utterance, and Spirit-led worship, have unique obstacles in virtual settings that may not affect more liturgically structured or cognitively centred traditions. This study primarily examines Pentecostal ecclesiology and spirituality, evaluating how the theological convictions and worship practices of the Full Gospel Church influenced their experience and response to digital worship.

Theoretical Contributions and Empirical Positioning

This research tackles the highlighted deficiencies by exploring three interconnected contributions. Initially, it engages contextual theology in a meaningful dialogue with digital transformation, illustrating how African Pentecostal theological principles, cultural values, and material conditions must shape any evaluation of digital worship activities. This study formulates a contextually grounded theological analysis that rigorously considers the unique characteristics of African Pentecostalism, such as its focus on divine immanence, spiritual warfare, prophetic ministry, and communal solidarity, rather than merely applying Western theoretical frameworks to an African context.

The study examines the translation or lack thereof of theoretical frameworks from the theology of worship, namely James K. A. Smith's embodied liturgical theology and Howard Snyder's theology of presence, into virtual media. This research experimentally examines the applicability of theological ideas within these frameworks in digital contexts, contributing to current discussions regarding the sufficiency of virtual worship and the essential characteristics of

Christian assembly. This empirical-theological debate constitutes a methodological contribution, illustrating how practical theology can connect abstract theological reflection with lived religious experience.

Third, the research provides substantial empirical insights into the lived experience of digital worship in African Pentecostalism, a context that is notably under-represented in digital religion scholarship. This study enhances ethnographic depth and contextual specificity to broader discussions on religion, technology, and crises by focusing on the voices, experiences, and theological insights of congregations and leaders in the Thohoyandou District. The findings reveal that digital worship was perceived not just as a technological transition but also as a spiritual crisis that prompted essential enquiries regarding ecclesial identity, sacramental legitimacy, pastoral authority, and the essence of Christian community.
This study presents a methodologically rigorous and theologically informed paradigm that integrates global theoretical literature with localised experiences, demonstrating how future research might be anchored in Christian tradition while addressing contemporary practical demands. It additionally asserts that any substantial digital theological involvement must be contextually aware, spiritually reflective, and pastorally guided, rejecting both naïve technical zeal and reactionary opposition to technology in favour of discerning theological insight.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, informed by the ontological perspective that reality is socially produced and influenced by lived experiences. The research is based on interpretivism, which seeks to comprehend social phenomena from the viewpoints of those who experience them (Denzin and Lincoln 2018:23). This is particularly appropriate for theological and pastoral research, where subjective interpretation and spiritual significance are paramount. The research employs a case study methodology, concentrating on the Full Gospel Church (FGC) congregations within the Thohoyandou District. A case study facilitates a comprehensive examination of real-life experiences within a defined context, providing detailed descriptions of the phenomena being studied (Yin 2018:16). This methodology was optimally adapted to examine how congregations

experienced and reacted to the transition to virtual worship during the COVID-19 epidemic, given that worship rituals are intrinsically contextual and embodied.

The research design corresponds with narrative inquiry, which prioritises lived experiences, personal significance, and spiritual interpretation. This method facilitates the gathering of profound theological insights from both ecclesiastical leaders and worshippers (Creswell 2014:48). The study's population consisted of Full Gospel Church members and leaders from ten congregations in the Thohoyandou District. The churches were chosen for their active participation in Sunday worship and their accessibility through digital or in-person communication. The sample comprised twenty-two participants: twenty worshippers (two from each church) and two senior pastors. The sample size was considered adequate to achieve data saturation, the stage at which more interviews produce no substantially different information (Bryman 2016:123). Purposive sampling was employed to choose participants who had engaged in both real and virtual worship services throughout the lockdown period. The objective was to collect varied viewpoints considering age, gender, digital literacy, and ecclesiastical position. A stratified purposive method guaranteed representation of both older and younger persons, considering their varying degrees of internet participation (Creswell 2014:158).

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, performed in person when safe or via telephone and WhatsApp calls where required. Interview questions were prepared in accordance with the primary study objectives and consistent with the theoretical framework.

The interviews focused on five key areas:

- Experience of worship prior to and during the lockdown
- Access to and participation in virtual services
- Theological contemplations on virtual worship
- Obstacles encountered during digital transformation
- Suggestions for forthcoming worship practices

Each interview lasted roughly 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Observations were recorded to document non-verbal signals and emotional reactions.

Furthermore, ecclesiastical records including attendance logs and digital engagement measures, and sermon archives were examined to augment the interviews with documentary corroboration (Creswell 2014:198). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and evaluated through thematic analysis. This procedure entailed categorising the data sequentially to discern repeating concepts and patterns, thereafter categorised into overarching themes (Bryman 2016:370). The analysis proceeded via the following steps:

1. Acquaintance with data via iterative reading
2. Creation of preliminary codes
3. Identifying themes
4. Evaluating and enhancing themes
5. Establishing and designating themes

Research Instruments

The principal data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide, created in accordance with the study's aims and existing research. It comprised open-ended enquiries such as:

- 'Elucidate your experience of Sunday services during the lockdown.'
- 'In what manner did you experience spiritual connection or disconnection via virtual platforms?'
- 'In what manner did the lack of physical rituals such as communion or altar calls influence your faith?'
- 'What modifications would you suggest for next worship services?'

The supplementary instruments comprised observational notes and content records from digital church platforms. These tools corroborated interview data and offered a triangulated viewpoint on the digital transition.

Observations concentrated on the technical quality of services, leadership style during online preaching, and degree of interaction (e.g., greetings, sharing of testimonies).

Ethical Considerations

The research complied with the ethical criteria established by the University of Venda. All participants provided informed consent via a standardised form detailing the study's objective, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any point (Kumar 2011:120). Participants were guaranteed secrecy, and pseudonyms were employed in all transcripts and reports. Due to the digital format of many interviews, particular emphasis was placed on data security. All recordings and documentation were saved on encrypted discs, accessible solely to the researcher and supervisor (Smith 2020:52). Virtual interview settings were selected to guarantee confidentiality and ease.

The research acknowledged theological sensitivities, ensuring that enquiries regarding spiritual experience were conducted with sensitivity and pastoral consideration. Participants were urged to contemplate openly and were never compelled to respond to enquiries they deemed overly personal or emotionally challenging. Approval was secured from the University of Venda ethics review board, and COVID-19 health procedures were adhered to during in-person interactions.

Presentation of Data

Themes

The identified themes were 'digital exclusion and frustration', 'loss of embodied spirituality', 'adaptive leadership', 'community through technology', and 'the yearning for return'. This approach facilitated the integration of theological, emotional, and practical aspects of the digital worship experience. The study notably retained the spiritual lexicon and symbolic allusions employed by participants, including mentions of 'the presence of the Holy Spirit' and 'feeling disconnected from the altar'. Supplementary data from church social media platforms and WhatsApp groups were evaluated through content analysis to ascertain levels of

involvement (likes, comments, attendance) and recurring expressions of spiritual mood.

Theme 1: Digital Disconnection and the Theology of Presence

A salient topic that arose from the interviews was the sense of detachment from God's presence and the church community as worship transitioned to an online format. This was particularly pronounced among older congregations, rural members, and individuals with limited digital skills. Participants characterised virtual worship as 'viewing a performance' rather than 'engaging in the Spirit'. Numerous individuals expressed sorrow about the lack of physical rituals such as the laying on of hands, communal prayer, and altar calls, which they deemed essential to their perception of God's presence.

'When we convene physically, the Spirit descends like a conflagration. However, while watching online, I felt a sense of emptiness,' remarked a congregant from FGC Tshifulanani.

This perspective corresponds with theological literature that underscores the physical, participatory essence of Pentecostal worship, which is significantly dependent on sensory and communal experiences (Smith 2016:55). The theology of presence, fundamental to Pentecostal ecclesiology, asserts that God's presence is most profoundly revealed in the assembled congregation (Snyder 2012:77). Participants indicated a reduced sense of spiritual intensity when physically removed from the sanctuary.

The Disruption of Liturgical Embodiment

Liturgical rites such as holy communion and baptism, which are tactile and communal in nature, cannot be conducted online. A number of ecclesiastical leaders articulated theological unease regarding the administration of sacraments via digital channels.

'Baptism is not merely a symbol; it is an act that necessitates water, physical contact, and the presence of the church community,' elucidated one pastor.

This discovery substantiates the apprehensions articulated by Smith, who contends that the virtual environment diminishes sacramental worship by eliminating its tangible and communal aspects (Smith 2021:102–103).

Anderson contends that Pentecostalism flourishes on immediacy, spontaneity, and sensory involvement, elements that are diminished in a digital format (2020:58). A number of congregants lamented the absence of the tangible aspects of communal worship: singing collectively, weeping at the altar, and receiving prayers. These rituals are not merely expressive; they are perceived as conduits of grace and healing. Virtual alternatives, including taped sermons and WhatsApp prayer chains, were frequently regarded as inadequate.

Feelings of Isolation and Spiritual Decline

The lack of physical worship resulted in emotions of isolation and spiritual stagnation. Older participants particularly indicated difficulties in accessing services or comprehending the use of platforms such as Zoom and Facebook Live.

'I experienced a sense of neglect,' an older member from FGC Sibasa expressed. 'It felt as though the church had relocated to a place I could not access.'

This exemplifies the digital divide, a persistent concern in pandemic-era religion research. Rural populations frequently lack access to affordable data, reliable internet, or gadgets, rendering digital participation practically unattainable (Campbell and Osteen 2023:45). The technological transition, however beneficial for certain individuals, marginalised others, thereby compromising the Pentecostal focus on inclusivity and communal assistance (Adamo 2021:8). Campbell cautions against lauding the digital revolution without acknowledging its disparate impacts on various communities (2020:267). This was apparent in the Thohoyandou context: while younger, technologically-adept individuals maintained connectivity, the elderly and low-income demographics were disproportionately excluded from worship.

Implications for Ecclesiology

The disconnection encountered during virtual services prompted ecclesiological apprehensions. Congregants and leaders enquired about the implications of 'being the church' in a dispersed context. One pastor remarked:

> We proclaim that the church constitutes the body, rather than the edifice. However, in the absence of the structure, we encountered difficulties in maintaining cohesion as a group.

This phrase highlights the conflict between spiritual and physical ecclesiology. Pentecostal ecclesiology encompasses the concept of the church as both spiritually unified and physically assembled. The pandemic necessitated a division of these components, prompting enquiries on the capacity of digital worship to maintain theological identity and foster spiritual development. Arthur posits that although virtual places may function as transient refuges, they are devoid of the permanency and embodied community that define authentic ecclesial existence (2021:39). This observation was reiterated by worshippers who yearned for a resumption of in-person gatherings, not solely for social purposes but due to their conviction that spiritual experiences were less frequent or less potent online.

Counter-Narratives: Limited Spiritual Connection

Notwithstanding these limitations, several participants indicated experiencing a sense of God's presence during virtual worship, especially when sermons were conducted live and interactively. Some reported experiencing spiritual elevation during Zoom prayers or when pastors communicated directly over WhatsApp.

'Although it differed from traditional church, I still felt God's presence during those online services,' stated a youth leader from FGC Makwarela.

This indicates that, although digital platforms cannot completely emulate the embodied nature of Pentecostal worship, they can nonetheless serve as legitimate conduits for spiritual support, especially when utilised with intention and pastoral care (Campbell 2020:284).

Smith asserts that technology, when employed judiciously, can expand the church's ministry beyond its physical confines without compromising its spiritual goal, contingent upon intentionality and theological contemplation in its application (Smith 2021:103–104).

Theme 2: Adaptive Leadership and Pastoral Innovation

The COVID-19 epidemic exerted significant pressure on church leadership, compelling pastors and elders to reevaluate their duties, pastoral approaches, and technical proficiency almost instantaneously. Leaders at the Full Gospel Church in Thohoyandou addressed these issues through a combination of improvisation, theological fortitude, and digital innovation. This section analyses how church leadership adjusted to the pandemic by preserving spiritual care via technology, restructuring community frameworks, and upholding pastoral presence despite the lack of physical assemblies.

Digital Readiness and Theological Flexibility

Although certain pastors possessed limited expertise with digital technologies before the pandemic, the majority swiftly used social media channels like Facebook Live, WhatsApp, and YouTube to connect with their congregations. Interviews indicated that younger pastors or those with recent theological education adeptly manoeuvred internet platforms and engaged with congregations remotely.

'We were required to assume the roles of both technicians and theologians simultaneously,' stated one clergyman. 'I had to adapt to delivering sermons to a screen while envisioning the presence of the congregation.'

This assertion embodies what Campbell and Osteen describe as 'technological-pastoral hybridity' the integration of digital proficiency with theological contemplation to sustain spiritual guidance in virtual ministry (2023:54). It illustrates the expansion of the pastor's function beyond traditional pulpit ministry to encompass responsibilities in digital content development, virtual therapy, and real-time online participation. Furthermore, pastors exhibited theological adaptability, acknowledging the transient character of virtual media while maintaining fundamental Pentecostal principles. They organised prayer chains over WhatsApp, conducted midweek devotionals on Zoom, and promoted home-based communion for families willing to administer sacraments locally. This adaptability corresponds with Arthur's concept of crisis ecclesiology, wherein leadership must reconcile doctrinal consistency with responsive pastoral care in times of stress (2021:36).

Innovation in Pastoral Care

In addition to Sunday services, Full Gospel pastors employed innovative strategies to maintain pastoral care. For instance, some churches established digital 'care cells' where small groups convened weekly through WhatsApp or Zoom to pray, exchange testimony, and monitor each other's well-being. These groups were often directed by elders or deacons and operated as a decentralised style of pastoral supervision.

'Although we were unable to meet, I anticipated that my group leader would call to enquire about my well-being,' stated a female congregant.

This small-group strategy cultivated a sense of community and guaranteed that vulnerable individuals, especially the elderly, unemployed, and infirm, were not neglected. It demonstrates the adaptation of pastoral care from large assemblies to small communities, thereby strengthening the communal essence of Pentecostal spirituality (Anderson 2004:56). These advancements resonate with Cain's assertion that well-coordinated, decentralised pastoral models can enhance participation and theological contemplation, particularly in rural and resource-limited settings (2023:20).

Challenges in Leadership Adaptation

Notwithstanding these achievements, other problems arose. Firstly, digital tiredness emerged during six months of uninterrupted virtual ministering. Both pastors and congregations indicated that screen-based worship grew tedious and spiritually burdensome. Secondly, the expense of data and the unavailability of devices produced disparities in participation. Leaders needed to continually modify content distribution to accommodate members unable to attend live streams. Third, certain leaders encountered difficulties in sustaining authority and presence in digital environments. The absence of the conventional pulpit and church structure hindered the expression of pastoral charisma. A pastor remarked, 'When I deliver a sermon in church, I sense the Spirit's presence. I am uncertain whether the message is being interpreted consistently online.'

This conflict aligns with Smith's observations, which indicate that spiritual authority in Pentecostal contexts is frequently conveyed through physical presence, gestures, vocal modulation, and communal feedback, all of which

are constrained in virtual environments (Smith 2021:104). Additionally, several members challenged the spiritual validity of internet sessions. Theological doubt existed regarding whether God could 'move' through a screen as he does in a Spirit-filled assembly. This underscores a notable conflict between religion traditions and technical mediation, necessitating profound theological involvement from leadership.

Leadership Lessons for Post-Pandemic Ministry

Although numerous pastors regarded virtual worship as a provisional measure, the pandemic generated enduring considerations regarding hybrid ministry models. Numerous leaders indicated a desire to maintain specific digital activities, including weekly devotionals, digital counselling, and online youth involvement, even following the resumption of physical services. This indicates a possible paradigm change in pastoral ministry, wherein digital presence evolves into an extension of pastoral identity rather than a disruption of it. The experience prompted theological institutes and church boards to include media training, cyber-ethics, and digital theology in leadership development (Campbell 2020:284). These transitions establish church leaders as intermediaries in both physical and digital realms, in accordance with Vondey's advocacy for flexible Pentecostal leadership that addresses the spiritual requirements of congregants in evolving cultural environments (2010:18).

Theme 3: Reimagining Pentecostal Worship for a Digital Future

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled congregations and church leaders to address essential enquiries regarding the nature of true worship and the formation and maintenance of spiritual community. With the easing of physical constraints, numerous members of the Full Gospel Church in Thohoyandou experienced a conflict between their desire for the traditional, corporeal experience of Pentecostal worship and the acknowledgement of the convenience and accessibility offered by digital alternatives. This part examines how the epidemic accelerated a redesign of worship that integrates technology accessibility with spiritual purity.

Negotiating the Sacred and the Digital

Pentecostal spirituality is founded on what Cartledge characterises as 'narrative theology' a spirituality influenced by personal experience, divine encounters, and tangible manifestations of the Holy Spirit (2016:72).

Throughout the pandemic, numerous participants grappled with the dichotomy between the hallowed ambiance of the sanctuary and the comparative casualness of digital worship environments.

'Distractions were present at home': children, commotion, culinary activities. A youth worship leader remarked, 'I was unable to attain that sacred state as I do in church.'

This illustrates the difficulty of space sanctification in virtual worship. Without stained glass, altars, and musical ambiance, worship needed to be reimagined as an experience that could take place in kitchens, bedrooms, and automobiles. This was unsettling for many. However, others recounted experiencing profound moments of connection with God while kneeling near a phone or laptop. This duality corroborates Campbell's results, which indicate that digital worship can dismantle conventional concepts of sacred space and demonstrate that God's presence is not limited to physical edifices (2020:267). Nonetheless, it demonstrates that contextual factors like music, posture, and environment continue to significantly influence the manner in which Pentecostals experience spiritual transcendence.

Access, Inclusion, and Generational Shifts

One of the unforeseen advantages of digital worship was its capacity to engage unserved and underserved demographics. Numerous pastors indicated that internet services were viewed by former members residing in distant regions, along with inquisitive individuals from various denominations or lacking any church affiliation.

'One family in Gauteng began to follow our weekly livestreams,' a pastor from FGC Muledane stated. 'They subsequently submitted tithes and prayer requests.'

This outreach potential indicates that digital platforms can enhance the missional capabilities of local churches, especially in rural areas with constrained physical infrastructure. The effectiveness of such outreach was frequently contingent upon the digital literacy of the audience. Junior individuals acclimated more readily, though senior adults frequently relied on relatives for assistance in establishing connections. This corroborates Smith's

research, indicating that digital competency is inequitably allocated based on age and socioeconomic level (2015:1066). Churches aiming to sustain digital outreach after the pandemic must invest in digital discipleship training and provide support for people to confidently navigate the online faith environment.

The Future: Hybrid Models of Worship

With the relaxation of constraints, churches commenced the implementation of hybrid models, integrating in-person services with online streaming. Leaders observed that hybrid services

- ensured continuity for ill or touring members,
- enabled homebound seniors to maintain connectivity,
- developed digital repositories of sermons and lessons,
- facilitated international fellowship and witness exchange.

'Currently, some individuals attend church in person, while others participate through Facebook,' a preacher from FGC Shayandima stated. 'We have learnt to appreciate both.'

Nonetheless, hybridisation introduced novel theological and logistical enquiries. Should communion be administered online or just in person? Should digital viewers be regarded as full participants in the congregation? Who directs and facilitates online environments? Arthur (2021:38) warns that churches should not merely duplicate physical services on digital platforms; rather, they must contextualise worship for each media with theological purpose. This encompasses the creation of liturgies that are attuned to digital interaction, including virtual altar calls, digital testimonies, and live-stream chat ministry.

Findings and Discussion

Digital Disconnection and the Theology of Presence

Participants articulated a significant sense of spiritual dislocation stemming not only from physical absence but also from the disruption of what Smith (2016:33) refers to as 'liturgical embodiment', the formative activities that inscribe Pentecostal identity onto the body and soul. The research indicated

that sacraments, collective prayer, and altar ministry crucial components of Pentecostal life – were not merely lowered but radically transformed in their spiritual potency when conveyed through screens. Congregants consistently employed terminology related to absence, emptiness, and observation instead of engagement, indicating that digital forms could not elicit the sensory completeness and communal immediacy inherent in Spirit-filled worship. This discovery transcends mere technological annoyance to reveal a profound theological dilemma: if God's presence is most profoundly realised in the congregated assembly, as Snyder (2012) contends, then virtual dispersion jeopardises the fundamental nature of Pentecostal worship. The suspension of sacraments notably highlighted this issue, as pastors declined to administer baptism or communion online, citing religious beliefs regarding the tangible, witnessing, and communal essence of these rites. This choice, albeit theologically justified, caused spiritual distress among attendees who were deprived of grace during a period of significant need. The results affirm that, for Pentecostals, worship transcends mere informational material suitable for digital dissemination; it is a participatory experience necessitating physical presence, multisensory involvement, and direct spiritual interaction (Anderson 2020:58; Smith 2016:55; Snyder 2012:77).

Adaptive Leadership and Pastoral Innovation

In spite of considerable theological and practical obstacles, church leaders exhibited notable tenacity, ingenuity, and pastoral sensitivity in preserving spiritual care during lockdown. The study illustrates how pastors swiftly developed digital skills, evolving into what Campbell and Osteen (2023:52) refer to as 'technological-pastoral hybrids, adept at manoeuvring between both theological heritage and digital advancement. This adaptation extended beyond mere livestreaming of Sunday services; it included the establishment of digital care cells, WhatsApp prayer chains, Zoom counselling sessions, and individualised pastoral communication via phone calls and voice messages. These innovations demonstrate that successful digital ministry necessitates a deliberate reconfiguration of pastoral practices instead of just replicating physical offerings through technology. The results emphasised the significance of decentralised, small-group arrangements in which digital 'care cells', directed by elders and deacons, provided close pastoral supervision notwithstanding the impossibility of large assemblies. This micro-community strategy maintained the relational fabric of Pentecostal spirituality,

guaranteeing that vulnerable individuals, especially the aged, unemployed, and unwell, were not spiritually forsaken (Arthur 2021:36). Nonetheless, the studies revealed considerable difficulties in pastoral authority and spiritual validity. Numerous pastors expressed concerns that their preaching diminished in spiritual potency and immediacy when delivered via screens, prompting enquiries into the dynamics of charismatic authority in digital contexts where conventional indicators of presence, vocal modulation, and physical gestures are diminished. Furthermore, digital fatigue became a significant issue after many months, with both pastors and congregations indicating that screen-based worship had become tedious and spiritually exhausting. The findings indicate that although adaptive leadership can alleviate certain issues of digital worship, it cannot entirely address the fundamental theological conflicts between embodied spiritual authority and mediated religious experience. The epidemic prompted a critical re-evaluation of pastoral development, indicating that future ministerial education should incorporate digital theology, media literacy, and cyber-pastoral care in conjunction with conventional homiletics and sacramental theology (Campbell 2020:284; Vondey 2010:18).

Reimagining Pentecostal Worship for a Digital Future

The pandemic spurred not only a temporary adaptation but a fundamental reassessment of what constitutes real worship, sacred space, and spiritual community in an increasingly digital world. The results indicated an intricate debate between maintaining Pentecostal doctrinal distinctiveness and adopting the missional opportunities presented by digital media. Congregants indicated significant unease over the informality and domestic nature of home-based worship, observing that distractions, the absence of a sacred ambiance, and the inability to physically segregate the worship area from daily life compromised their ability to achieve spiritual transcendence. This discovery highlights the dependence of Pentecostal spirituality on environmental stimuli – such as music, architecture, social dynamics, and physical posture – to facilitate encounters with the Holy Spirit (Cartledge 2016:72). The research revealed unforeseen advantages of digital worship, such as an extended missional outreach to geographically remote former members, enhanced accessibility for homebound and ill individuals, and the establishment of digital sermon archives available for repeated reflection and instruction. The aforementioned advantages indicate that digital platforms,

when employed purposefully, can enhance rather than substitute physical ministry, operating as what Arthur (2021:23) refers to as 'digital parishes' that augment rather than displace tangible ecclesial existence. The advent of hybrid worship models combining in-person services with simultaneous internet broadcasting offers a pragmatic compromise that respects both the limitations and opportunities of digital mediation. However, hybridisation presents new theological concerns that necessitate careful discernment. Should communion be administered to online participants? Are digital viewers considered complete members of the congregation? How can churches reconcile investment in technical infrastructure with their need to serve digitally excluded members? The results demonstrate that churches cannot merely embrace technical solutionism, which presumes digital platforms are impartial instruments; instead, they must undertake critical theological contemplation regarding the influence of digital mediation on spiritual development, communal affiliation, and sacramental involvement. This necessitates building what can be called a 'contextual digital theology' that is anchored in African Pentecostal commitments to divine immanence, communal solidarity, and embodied spirituality while being responsive to the technological realities of contemporary life (Campbell 2020:267). The pandemic demonstrated that the future of Pentecostal worship will likely be a theologically informed hybrid, integrating both physical and digital elements, utilising digital tools to augment rather than supplant the embodied, communal, and sacramental aspects of Christian worship.

Synthesising the Findings: Toward a Pentecostal Digital Ecclesiology

Collectively, these three elements reveal a fundamental tension in modern Pentecostalism: the conflict between a theology of bodily presence and the practical requirement for digital mediation. The findings indicate that virtual worship effectively preserved institutional continuity and pastoral connection throughout crises, although it did not uphold the spiritual intensity, sacramental depth, and social closeness characteristic of vibrant Pentecostal spirituality. This paradox indicates that digital platforms are most efficacious when utilised as adjuncts rather than replacements for physical assembly, fulfilling evangelistic, pastoral, and educational roles while reserving the most sacred rites – sacraments, healing prayer, and ordination – for physical contexts. This research enhances practical theology by illustrating that successful ministry in the digital era necessitates not only technological

proficiency but also theological acumen to identify which elements of Christian practice can be digitally mediated and which are essential to embodied ecclesial existence. In African Pentecostal groups, this discernment must consider the contextual reality of infrastructural limitations, economic constraints, age variety, and cultural beliefs of communal belonging. The study advocates for a dual approach: churches should concurrently enhance their digital capabilities and reinforce their dedication to embodied worship, developing adaptable, hybrid models that respect Pentecostal theological principles while addressing current pastoral needs.

Recommendations

The Full Gospel Church requires a hybrid worship infrastructure that intentionally integrates digital accessibility with physical liturgical practices to ensure theological purity and congregational inclusivity. This necessitates the installation of permanent livestreaming apparatus in each church with reliable internet access and the formation of a 'Digital Ministry Team' including technologically proficient adolescents to oversee broadcasts, resolve technical difficulties, and supervise online interactions during services. Churches ought to establish a 'Digital Discipleship Programme' that provides elderly and low-income members with complimentary or subsidised smartphones and data packages, alongside monthly training sessions wherein younger members instruct senior members on utilising Facebook Live, WhatsApp, and YouTube. To maintain the theology of presence while engaging in digital outreach, churches should implement a 'Sacramental Reservation Policy' that restricts core sacraments – baptism, holy communion, ordination, and healing prayer with the laying on of hands – to in-person gatherings, designating digital platforms for preaching, teaching, testimony sharing, midweek devotionals, and pastoral counselling. Theological boundaries protect the physical, observable, and communal dimensions of sacraments while allowing digital tools to enhance worship. Pastors might develop 'Phygital Care Cells', small groups that convene in person monthly and online weekly to ensure all members, irrespective of technological proficiency, remain engaged by pastoral care. Digital worship leaders could use interactive elements in virtual sessions to enhance spiritual engagement: live chat, prayer requests, virtual altar calls for viewers to submit commitments, congregational testimonial videos, and post-service Zoom breakout rooms for fellowship. These strategies

transform passive observation into active participation, addressing the spiritual disconnection.

The Full Gospel Church ought to establish a 'Digital Inclusion Fund' financed by tithes and denominational grants to acquire devices, subsidise data expenses, and provide digital literacy training, with a focus on rural congregations, elderly members, and economically disadvantaged families to overcome infrastructural and generational obstacles. Churches should collaborate with local telecommunications providers to secure discounted data packages for worship streaming and partner with community libraries or schools to establish 'Digital Worship Hubs' where members lacking home internet can securely participate in services in small groups. Leaders should develop and instruct a 'Pentecostal Digital Theology Curriculum' in Bible studies and leadership training to facilitate congregants' comprehension of how God's Spirit can operate through technology without supplanting physical assembly. Indigenous principles such as *Ubuntu* should be employed to conceptualise digital communities as an extension of physical camaraderie. Pastors must clearly articulate the theology of presence, delineating the rationale behind reserving specific practices for in-person worship while acknowledging that digital participation is legitimate for certain ministry functions, to mitigate feelings of guilt or spiritual inferiority among congregants accessing services remotely due to illness, distance, or disability. 'Hybrid Liturgical Rhythms' must encompass in-person Sunday worship (with livestream), Tuesday evening digital prayer gatherings, Wednesday WhatsApp text-based devotionals, Thursday Zoom discipleship sessions, and Friday group fasting accompanied by voice note check-ins to sustain spiritual health. Denominational leadership must mandate that all theological training institutions incorporate digital theology, cyber-pastoral care, and media ethics into their curricula. This will equip the next generation of pastors to adeptly manage hybrid ministry contexts with both theological assurance and technological proficiency, thereby ensuring that African Pentecostalism remains theologically anchored and pastorally attuned to modern digital existence.

Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative-case-study methodology to examine the impact of COVID-19 on Sunday services at the Full Gospel Church in

Thohoyandou District, emphasising the shift to virtual worship. The study determined that African Pentecostal theology must fundamentally reassess the conceptualisation of divine presence and spiritual engagement in digital contexts. The results advocate the establishment of a 'Digital-Indigenous Theology of Presence' that preserves the importance of embodied worship while recognising that God's Spirit can operate through technological mediation, utilising indigenous concepts like the *Ubuntu* philosophy to perceive digital community as an extension rather than a substitute for physical assembly.

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Leadership Dynamics on Peaceful Transitions of Power During Elections in African Inland Church, Soy Sub-County, Uasin-Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of leadership dynamics on the peaceful transition of power in the Africa Inland Church (AIC) in Soy sub-county, Uasin-Gishu County, Kenya. The study looks at how leadership dynamics affect the transfer of elective power in the church. The following objectives guide the study: to evaluate biblical and theological foundations of leadership dynamics, to explore leadership dynamics that influences peaceful transitions of power in the AIC, to evaluate provisions in the church constitution on leadership dynamics in peaceful transitions of power in the AIC, and to find measures to enhance peaceful transitions of power in the AIC. The study was confined to AIC churches in Soy sub-county, Uasin-Gishu County. Servant leadership and conflict resolution theories are used to explain leadership dynamics and peaceful governance. The target population was 6400 and the sampling size was 238. A descriptive research design was used. Purposive and stratified sampling were used to select participants. Data collection instruments included

questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. Qualitative data was analysed using SPSS Version 21.0. The data was analysed, organised, and presented thematically according to the study's objectives. The study reveals that the church experience conflicts during the election of leaders and power transitions due to dynamisms in leadership. The researcher recommends that church leadership adopt a biblically acceptable model of leadership.

Introduction

Leadership within the church is inherently dynamic, as it operates within spiritual, organisational, and social contexts that are constantly evolving. Given that change is inevitable, effective church leadership must respond appropriately to transitions while remaining grounded in scriptural principles. Leadership approaches such as servant leadership emphasise humility, stewardship, and accountability. These are essential in guiding churches through periods of change. However, despite these ideals, leadership transitions within churches often generate conflict, raising concerns about how leadership dynamics influence the peaceful transfer of power.

Historical Foundations of Church Leadership and Transition

The dynamics of leadership in the church can be traced back to the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Even before the death of Jesus Christ, his disciples struggled over questions of succession and authority, highlighting that leadership transition has long been a contested issue. Early church leadership evolved through different forms, including charismatic leaders, familial leaders related to Jesus, and appointed leaders (Brown, 1993). Over time, appointed leadership became dominant, particularly during the post-apostolic period.

As the church developed, leadership structures became more institutionalised, with bishops emerging as central figures of authority. These leaders were regarded as custodians of doctrine and played key roles in maintaining unity and discipline within the church. However, the concentration of power in such offices also led to tensions and resistance, as evidenced during the Protestant Reformation, when reformers such as Martin Luther challenged the authority of the papacy. These historical developments demonstrate that leadership

transitions in the church have often been accompanied by conflict, particularly where governance structures are unclear or contested.

Leadership Succession and Conflict in Churches

Leadership succession remains a critical challenge in many church organisations. The absence of structured succession mechanisms often leads to uncertainty, competition, and conflict. The concept of leadership succession planning emphasises the importance of preparing for leadership transitions through deliberate and systematic processes. However, in many church contexts, such planning is either inadequate or absent.

Scholars such as Gangel and Canine (2000) note that conflict in churches frequently manifests through disagreements, unresolved disputes, and interpersonal tensions among members. Similarly, Halverstadt (1991) argues that conflicts are more likely to escalate in environments where power is unaccountable or unevenly distributed. These dynamics suggest that leadership styles and governance systems play a significant role in shaping whether transitions are peaceful or conflictual. Effective conflict management, grounded in principles of conflict resolution, is therefore essential in ensuring stability during leadership changes.

Leadership Dynamics in the African Church Context

In the African context, church leadership is influenced by a combination of cultural, historical, and institutional factors. Kalemba and Albert (2014) identify several contributors to weak leadership in African communities including colonial legacies, inadequate training, lack of ethical role models, and inappropriate applications of spirituality. These factors affect not only leadership effectiveness but also the management of transitions.

Studies in Uganda and Tanzania have highlighted challenges related to limited theological education and inconsistencies in leadership practice. In Uganda, insufficient formal training among pastors has contributed to doctrinal weaknesses and poor leadership decisions. In Tanzania, Williams (2009) emphasises the relevance of transformational leadership, a model that inspires followers to higher levels of commitment and growth. However, despite its potential, there is limited evidence that how such leadership models function during actual leadership transitions within African churches.

These findings indicate that while various leadership models exist, their application in facilitating peaceful transitions of power within African church contexts remains inadequately explored.

Church Leadership Conflicts in Kenya

In Kenya, leadership conflicts within churches are widespread and often linked to succession disputes. Reports indicate that many denominations experience internal wrangles over leadership positions and resource control. Organisations such as the National Council of Churches of Kenya have highlighted the prevalence of such disputes across both mainline and Pentecostal churches.

Empirical studies reveal the nature of these conflicts. Gikungu (2007), in his study of church governance in Kenya, identifies leadership disputes as a significant challenge affecting church growth and unity. Similarly, Magondu (2012) categorises conflicts in the Kenyan Catholic Church as substantive, interpersonal, and informational disputes. While these studies demonstrate that although conflict management strategies such as mediation, communication, and reconciliation are employed, they tend to focus on resolving conflicts after they occur rather than preventing conflicts during leadership transitions.

Leadership Transition and Conflict in the Africa Inland Church

The Africa Inland Church (AIC) has experienced notable leadership conflicts, particularly during periods of transition. Disputes arising from leadership elections have led to divisions, the formation of factions, and disruptions at both national and local levels. In some instances, these conflicts have escalated into legal battles and physical confrontations, affecting church unity and growth.

Such occurrences highlight the critical role of leadership dynamics including governance structures, electoral processes, and power distribution in determining the nature of leadership transitions. The recurrence of conflicts at both national and grassroots levels suggests that existing leadership frameworks may not adequately support peaceful transitions of power.

Research Gap

Although considerable literature exists on church leadership, conflict, and governance, limited attention has been given to how leadership dynamics specifically influence peaceful transitions of power within AICs. Most studies focus on conflict management after disputes arise, rather than on the leadership practices and structures that can prevent conflict and ensure smooth successions.

Furthermore, while research has explored leadership challenges in African churches more broadly, there has been an insufficient focus on the specific context of the AIC and similar institutions. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining how leadership dynamics shape peaceful transitions of power in the AIC in Soy sub-county, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

Methodology

To gather data and adequately characterise the research topic, a descriptive study design was employed. Three research instruments were used to collect data: (1) questionnaires for the church members, (2) in-depth interviews of clergy, and (3) focused group discussion with church leaders. The church members' quantitative responses to a semi-structured questionnaire were gathered. Questionnaires were returned from twenty churchgoers from each of seven congregations for a total number of respondents of 140. In-depth interviews were scheduled with all of the clergy in the seven congregations, who were purposively selected because they are custodians of church traditions and doctrines. Accordingly, a total of 14 clerics participated in the study. For the focus group discussions, seven groups of twelve persons each were organised, one in each congregation. The groups include such church leaders as: the chairpersons, secretaries, and treasurers of the church council and its three main departments—men, women, and youth. Thus, a total of 84 people participated in the focus group discussions.

The test-retest approach was employed by the researcher to determine the instrument's dependability. To assess the reliability of the main data collected, the researcher gave questionnaires. After gathering the data, a cross-examination was conducted to ensure its quality and completeness and to spot any incorrect responses, misspelled words, or blank areas. In order to analyse

quantitative data, SPSS Version 21.0, a statistical tool for social sciences, was used. Qualitative data was analysed using descriptive analysis according to the study's goals and theme.

Research Findings and Discussions

Biblical and theological foundations on church leadership dynamics

On the question of whether the Bible guides us on church leadership, 39.3% of the respondents strongly agreed, 43% agreed, while 9% were neutral, 6% disagreed and 2.6% strongly disagreed. A large majority of church members are aware of biblical teachings on leadership. This was also true of clergy, as reflected in their interview responses:

'Leadership is God-given and whenever leaders are chosen they should purpose to serve God not their personal gratification.'

'Leaders should also recognise their spiritual gifts under the call to serve God. They should honour and submit to God's authority.'

'Leadership is sovereign, it is God who sets up leaders and despise them according to Daniel 2:21: "[God] changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom and knowledge to the discerning" (NIV).'

'Character matters in leadership. Therefore, believers should elect people of good integrity who will rule with fairness and justice, who are hospitable, courageous, and who lead by example. Titus 1:6-9 states that "an elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife … not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy, and discipline' (NIV)."

'Leader should be proud of what they are doing and work diligently. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, "whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might', meaning that a leader should use every opportunity given well, because at the end he or she will give an account.'

‘Leader should rely on the mind of Christ because the mind of Christ can give discernment in spiritual matters. Therefore, we should rely on God’s guidance when electing church leaders.’

During the focused group discussions, respondents added that, ‘Leadership is sacrificing to serve others, avoiding selfishness, and prioritising oneself.’ ‘Leadership serves the interest of others, as Philippians 2:3 says: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (NIV).’

‘Leaders should stick in doing what is right despite opposition. They must by all means avoid doing what is evil. Leaders should also show humility, because Jesus taught his disciples that those who humble themselves are the greater’ (see Matthew 20:25-28).

‘Leaders should adopt the servant leadership model where they are servants, not masters. They should also be like shepherds who takes care of and watches over the people with whom they have been entrusted. In his first letter, Peter writes: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that are under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because yo are willing, as God wants you to be” (NIV).’

‘John Maxwell says that Jesus contrasted his servant leadership approach with the self-seeking and autocratic leadership style of others when his disciples James and John asked him to grant them the privilege of sitting on his right and left as rulers in his kingdom. Instead, Jesus said that those who express humility are greatest in the kingdom of God.’

Adherence to biblical teachings during election of leaders

When asked if they follow biblical guidance when electing leaders, the majority of respondents (69.7%) said that they do. Only 30.3% of respondents admitted that they do not follow biblical guidance. Interview respondents added that they always seek God’s guidance through prayers so that they will be guided by the Holy Spirit to choose the right leaders. They mentioned the need to check the character and maturity of one’s faith, because a leader should portray maturity at all times. Others stated that when voting is done fairly without coercing anyone, it brings about peaceful transitions of power and

good leadership in the church. But that those who fail to follow biblical teachings on leadership, who apply secular ways of campaigning, such as giving bribes, and who talk ill of others create splinter groups in the church. Some of these leaders are led by selfish ambitions, hidden motives, and discrimination, which ends up in chaos for the church.

In the focused group discussions, leaders mentioned the following biblical teachings that should guide elections: 'Choosing leaders who are selfless and value others above, as Philippians 2:3 says: "Do nothing out of selfish ambitions" (NIV).' 'Leaders should not fear but put their trust in God because Isaiah 41:10 says, "do not fear, for I am with you" (NIV), meaning God is the source of strength.' 'We need leaders who are self-disciplined to keep their ego in check and not making decisions with our own self-interest. If we struggle with self-discipline in leadership we can find God's help, for 2 Timothy 1:7 says that "the Spirit God gave us does not makes timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline" (NIV).'

'The Bible teaches leaders taught not to become weary in doing good, but instead to be steadfast and persevere, holding hope and pushing through the difficult times' (see Galatians 6:9)

'Wisdom in leadership is paramount. Just as we believe leadership comes from God, wisdom also comes from God and will enable one operate in justice. Psalms 37:30 says that "the mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak what is just" (NIV).'

'Paul Chappell says that when it comes to selecting and mentoring ministry leaders there seem to be two extremes. Some churches never train leaders because they don't have a vision for the equipping work of the ministry contrary to what is in Ephesians 4:11-12. Other churches are so desperate for help that there is no vetting process of serving in leadership at all.'

'The church stands by the guidelines in Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These two passages give us the qualifications of God's leader.'

'Napari Isaiah said that leadership disagreements can be lessened or resolved if people are prepared to accept the Holy Spirit to guide and direct their behaviour. It is up to each individual to find a way to align their interests with

what the Bible says. Pastors and leaders, especially those who want to rise to the top of the church leadership, should be sure their ambitions align with Scripture's teachings on leadership.'

Teachings on leadership before an election

The study found that the church does not offer teachings on leadership before elections. 52.27% of respondents said that there were no teachings on leadership, whereas 47.73% said that there are some teachings, particularly sermons on leadership that are preached when elections are due. This means that even if the church offers training, sermons and teachings on leadership are not enough and not efficient.

In the focused group discussions, had mixed reactions. One respondent said that they hear little church leadership in most sermons, even when elections are near. Another agreed, noting that they have never attended any seminar teaching on leadership. A third respondent alleged that some leaders who lobby for positions in the church when elections are close. Nevertheless, there were others who said that the church does offer teachings on leadership. For example, one respondent said that the church always announce the vacant seats and asks members to pray for new leadership. Another respondent described how the church organises days for special prayers prior to elections.

In the in-depth interviews, respondents claimed that the church gives clear guidelines on what to consider in choosing church leadership as indicated in the church constitution. They said that the church organises seminars to teach on the qualities of a good leader. But, contrary to these responses, others lamented on lack of awareness among church members about church requirements for becoming leaders and few teachings on matters related to leadership in the church.

Awojobi (2011) underscores the need for every church to have comprehensive guidelines about how people get into leadership positions and about what is expected of leaders in the church, because a blind man cannot lead another blind man. Both of them will fall into a pit.

Factors on leadership dynamics that influence peaceful transitions of power in the church

The research uncovered many factors that influence whether transitions of power in the church will be peaceful or not. These factors include money and other church resources, mentioned by 36.6% of respondents; selfish ambitions, selfish desires, and a desire for personal gratification, mentioned by 29.55% of respondents. 13.64% of respondents named the status quo as a factor, while 8.33% mentioned a desire for fame. 7.58% said that all of these factors contribute to conflict. And, finally, 4.55% of respondents identified a thirst for power as a leading factor.

In the in-depth interviews, when walkabout factors that influence whether transitions of power will be peaceful, respondents offered the following comments:

'Many people struggle for power through church leadership for material gain, money and other assets of the church. The Bible warns Christians not to be lovers of money or material things. Such things will drive them away from being effective leaders in the church.'

Another, reflecting how selfish ambitions, selfish desires, and a desire for personal gratification are primarily factors, noted that 'When you are a leader in the church, society will respect you, and when you look for other positions outside church, you will be preferred.' This statement shows how some leaders wants to use church leadership for their personal gains, rather than for serving God as intended.

A lack of transparency in the election of leaders has also contributed to conflict in the church. Some churches fail to follow the constitutional provisions of the church on how to conduct elections. Instead, they do things their own way. But when ballot counting is done secretly and results not announced immediately, the results will not be trusted by many.

Another factor is a lack of adequate training for church members and their leaders. When leaders are not trained on their areas of jurisdiction and church members are not trained on what to consider in the election of church leaders, expectations are not clear. A large number of respondents said that they are

not trained on what to consider during the election of leaders prior to the election exercise. As a result, they proceed based on their own judgement. This contributes to poor leadership. When leaders do not receive any leadership training, it brings about leadership incompetence. Whenever a leader is not matured spiritually, he or she can create conflicts. Mature people are able to agree and disagree without distress. They value the different views of others and also appreciate the diversity of spiritual gifts.

Pride and arrogance also create conflicts in leadership. Participants in the in-depth interviews noted that the absence of humility, which is one of the greatest character traits of a good leader, has created conflict in churches today. There are leaders who are after fame. They want to become famous through the position they hold in church for their personal gain. But this may not meet the will of God, and thus it affects the growth of the church.

Status quo as another factor that has created conflict. Those leaders who accept the status quo believe that the current situation is good and does not need to be improved. Therefore, there will be no change expected from such a leader. A final factor is the thirst to power where leaders struggle for power, becoming more concerned about who is the right man, rather than what is right. Leaders who are thirsty for power are basically loving themself more than others. All of these factors contribute in one way or another to conflict, disrupting the smooth running and peaceful co-existence in churches.

Effects of leadership conflict on the church

The study confirmed that as a result of conflict, the growth of the church is affected. The number of followers will reduce drastically. When the numbers are low, the church will eventually have poor infrastructure development and poor spiritual growth. It will never grow in all dimensions. Creating division in the church and forming splinter groups, negatively affects the church. The church, which is known as body of Christ, should be united. Instead, it will have separate groups inside the church. Or people will pull away from their main churches and opt to join other churches, or move as a group and start their own church.

These conflicts can cause other believers to lose their faith completely and stop going to church. Conflict can create hatred among the members. They no

longer greet one another, because of misunderstandings and ideological differences. The great commandment, to love one another, will no longer exist in the church. Instead, conflict brings an increase in gossip and misunderstandings between church members, even to the extent of physical fights. Mistrust among church members and church leaders grows. Some respondents noted court cases used to settle church disputes, which risk exposing the church to the public. All of these consequences conflict derail the church from its core mandate of being salt and light in the world and of winning lives to Christ.

The church's development is slowed and gospel initiatives gradually lose their spiritual potency. Masamba (2013) states that a pastor's leadership style affects the growth of the church. Every area of the church is impacted, including leadership conflict situations. The church may experience financial drift, because many individuals depart during times of conflict and turmoil. This can prevent souls from being gained to the kingdom of God.

According to Awojobi (2011), several churches have been shut down because the leadership only observed events without making a meaningful contribution. The result was despair and hopelessness that made members wander from church to church, seeking a place to identify themselves. Others became disappointed and lost their faith altogether.

Leaders must engage in conflict resolution. One respondent noted that leaders should be role models in the midst of conflict, able to manage and guide their family and the church, as well as role models in character in order to manage the church.

Measures to enhance peaceful transitions of power during elections of leaders in the church

The study sought to discover measures that can enhance peaceful transitions of power in the church. The first measure identified was the nature of elections: whether they were peaceful or not. The questionnaires revealed that 58.3% of church members believes that elections are conducted peacefully in their churches, while 41.7% of respondents said that elections are not conducted peacefully in their churches.

In the in-depth interviews, participants observed that the elections of leaders are conducted peaceful because the church announces in advance the vacancies and urges members to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that leaders that will be chosen will be ones guided by God. Other participants noted that there is strict adherence to the church constitution, such as the appointment of a returning officer to oversee the elections. Elections are done secretly and the ballots are counted aloud so that members can hear the results themselves. When the ballots are not counted aloud, the results are announced immediately to avoid any suspicion of an adjustment in the results. In addition, interviewees emphasised the importance of teaching about leadership prior to an election as a major reason why elections are conducted peacefully

In the focus group discussions, participants alleged that in churches where elections are not peaceful, the following factors are influential: There is lack of adequate training of church members on the guidelines for the election, which can create chaos during the election. There is a lack of transparency during the election whereby members lack confidence in the announced results. Failure to avail the constitution to church members was also noted as a major contributing factor to chaos during elections. One of the respondents said that he witnessed members insulting and fighting one another after one of them lost an election for chairman and that he had also experienced church members quitting the church because they lost an election to a leadership position in the church.

Resolving conflicts in the church

In terms of how to resolve conflict in the church, 50% of interview respondents indicated that conflicts are best solved through mediations and reconciliation. 37.12% believed that conflicts are better solved through prayers, and 12.88% said that conflicts can be solved well in the courts.

In the in-depth interviews, interviewees said that reconciliation is the best way of resolving issues because it consolidates peace and breaks the circle of violence. Reconciliation gives the two parties a chance to be heard, and motivates the parties to reach a solution that encourages justice. Another measure mentioned to resolve church conflict was mediation, since a neutral third party is involved who can assist the parties to understand each other and

identify solutions. The Bible encourages solving problems amicably with a spirit of meekness, keeping watch over oneself lest one also be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

Using a mediator as a third party in a dispute is also part of conflict resolution theory (Coleman 2014). Enlist the help of a neutral third party who is trained in mediation can help those in conflict reach an agreement. The role of the mediator is not to impose a solution on the parties, but rather to assist them in exploring the interests that underlie their disagreements. The mediator should work with both parties individually and together to find a mutually agreeable, non-binding, sustainable solution.

Focus group discussions reiterated that it is wise to resolve our conflicts by ourselves rather than taking them to the courts. Participants referred to 1 Corinthians 6:1: 'If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgement instead of before the Lord's people?' (NIV).

Others participants highlighted prayer as a weapon to resolve our differences, noting that Jesus advised his disciples to be persistent in prayers in order to overcome all the challenges. Jesus' command to forgiving one was also mentioned as another solution to conflict. But some suggested that 'if the church has failed to solve the conflict, then it's better we seek justice from the courts.' Others proposed putting aside differences in order to work toward superior goals as a means of promoting organisational commitment and fostering a spirit of tolerance and patience.

Measures taken by the church to enhance peaceful transition of power

In terms of measures that the church takes to enhance peaceful transfers of power, 32.58% of the respondents purported that prayer is the key solution to attain peaceful transition. 28.03% supported biblical teachings being followed during the election of church leaders. 23.48 % named training and educating the believers on the qualification of leaders based on the church constitution and biblical teachings as an important measure. 15.91% talked of forming a conflict resolution committee to handle conflicts whenever they arise.

In the in-depth interviews, some supported prayer as a key solution in enhancing peaceful transition of power. Through prayer and fasting, believers seek for God's guidance before elections. One cleric noted that before Jesus appointed his disciples, he had to seek guidance from God by praying. Therefore, prayer enables the church to make effective decisions since the Spirit of God will guide the church.

Another respondent emphasised adherence to the Bible's teachings on the qualities of a good leader. When leaders of good character are elected, there will be a peaceful transition of power. Another respondent also highlighted the importance of training and educating the believers on the qualification of leaders based on the church constitution and biblical teachings, because that will them to elect leaders of integrity who fear God. Another interviewee added that in order to enhance peaceful transitions of power, there is a need for enhancing transparency during elections. Another said that there is also a need to form committees to deal with conflicts when they arise. These committees should be able to handle matters before they escalate to higher levels, thus enhancing peaceful transitions of power.

The focus groups came up with the following measures to enhance peaceful transitions of power: avail the constitution to church members so that they can read in themselves, especially on the guidelines for electing leaders; having the church organise workshops, seminars, and sermons that emphasise biblical teachings on leadership; use mediation and reconciliation whenever there are disagreements on any issue so that issue are resolved amicably and peacefully. The groups also said that the church should teach its members that church leadership does not warrant a salary, but rather is a service to God, so that members vying for leadership positions would not be motivated by monetary values. One group members summed up discussion by insisting that all measures applied should be accompanied by humility and love, which are important Christian virtues in serving God.

The study's findings resonate with Magondu (2012),who says that many issues can be resolved in within the church, without going public. The Bible advises taking one or two others to address someone when a personal conversation is fruitless. By involving more witnesses, without making the situation public, a settlement is possible without making the issue obvious to everyone

Conclusion and Recommendations

Church leadership is undergoing a lot of dynamics and needs urgent attention. Society is changing drastically, but church leadership should not modify church doctrines to meet the secular changes. Only positive changes that are not contrary to biblical teachings should be adopted. There is a need for a biblical approach to leadership to be embraced and emphasised in the churches. This will not only solve issues of leadership in the church, but will also bring wholeness in leadership, which is God's ultimate purpose for any form of leadership. Church leaders should remain servants of God, not masters. Because leadership is ordained by God, selfish gain and personal gratification should not be part of the character of a leader in the church.

To encourage peaceful transitions of power in the church, church leadership should provide effective leadership to members. Whenever disagreement arises, leadership should find a way of resolving the issue amicably and peacefully in order to protect the mandate of the church to be salt and light in the world. Clergy should lead the congregation according to biblical teachings so that the church should not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the word of God.

Congregation need to be taught about the dynamics of church leadership so that they will be able to choose leaders well from well informed positions. The church faithful should be proactive in hold leaders accountable, making sure that they apply biblical teachings in their leadership endeavours.

Though this study focused on the African Inland Church in Uasin Gishua, its findings may help others churches know how to deal with drastic changes in our society that affect church leadership. All churches are encouraged to strictly follow biblical teachings so as to protect the mandate of the church. Additional research in other denominations and regions, particularly on leadership dynamics and transitions of powers, may confirm and will enhance this study's findings.

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Matrimonial Ring in the Catholic Rite of Marriage: Challenges and Opportunities for Alternative African Symbol

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Abstract

The exchange of the ring is the main explanatory rite in the Catholic Rite of Marriage. Yet the symbolism of the ring is not clearly understood by many people. One wonders whether it is a liturgical symbol or a marriage symbol presented at a liturgical function. Tracing the origin of the matrimonial ring and its subsequent use in the Catholic Rite of Marriage, the article explores the challenges related to the use of the ring in celebrating and living marriage. These challenges provide opportunities for inculturating Christian marriage celebrations by incorporating African marriage symbols. The article acknowledges that marriage symbols are not homogenous in many African societies, but they reflect similar values. Among such values are: fruitfulness, procreation, resilience, and communitarian nature of marriage. Any symbol that embodies these values together with love and fidelity could be incorporated into the Catholic rite of Marriage. It makes a contribution to the scholarship in Sacred Liturgy by proposing inclusion of these values in the formularies for the blessing and exchange of the matrimonial ring.

Introduction

A matrimonial ring is a conspicuous symbol of marriage, not only among Christians but also adherents of other religions. Whether it is a liturgical symbol or a marriage symbol presented at a liturgical function remains unresolved, given the fact that its symbolism is not well understood by many

people. In some African societies, the meaning of matrimonial ring is overshadowed by other symbols that are used to express the reality of marriage. The symbols are not homogenous. They vary from culture to culture or region to region. Among the Lugbara of Uganda, such symbols include *lemgbe* (bermuda grass) and *enve* (iron bangle). These symbols signify fruitfulness, procreation, resilience, permanence and communitarian nature of marriage. Incorporating them into the liturgical celebration of marriage in the Catholic faith gives a clear expression of being married. They could even replace the matrimonial ring. This article examines the symbolism of the matrimonial ring, challenges related to its use and available opportunities for enriching the Christian celebration of marriage with relevant African symbols. The first section examines the evolution of the matrimonial ring in the Bible and in church tradition. The second section analyses the use of the matrimonial ring in the current rite of marriage. This use definitely has challenges and loopholes which are explored in the third section. The last part discusses the opportunities for improvement of the rite of marriage with regard to the matrimonial ring, which sometimes is referred to as wedding ring.

The term "matrimonial" is derived from the Latin *matrimonium*, which is made up of two words: *mater* meaning mother or matron, and neuter suffix –*monium* which implies a "state of being" (Glare 2012:1191). From this etymology, *matrimonium* means state of being in motherhood. Adolf Berger translates *matrimonium* as marriage, and defines it as a "union of a man and a woman, an association for whole life, a community of human and divine life" (1968:578). This definition, though legalistic, expresses the basic truth about marriage, "factual union of a man and woman based on *affectio maritalis* (intention to be husband and wife)" (Berger 1968:578). The matrimoniality arises from that fact that the principle object which a woman should propose to herself, and fully to be supported by the man is to become a mother, because "it belongs to a mother to conceive, to bring forth and train herself" (Schlech 1964:1). Debates about such a definition of marriage may be the concern of another article. The focus here is on the ritual aspect of marriage which is enshrined in the term wedding. "Wedding" is derived from an old Anglo-Germanic word "*weldung*" which means "to pledge," "to wager" and "to espouse." It came to use when two parts of customary marriage celebrations (betrothal and nuptial) were combined and used in church marriage celebrations (Joyce 1933:50). Wedding commonly is understood as a ritual that

solemnises marriage which initially was a social and legal union of individuals in their families. The married status created by this union came to be called “wedlock.”

From this perspective, matrimonial ring is defined as a circular band worn by the spouses to express the fact of being bonded to one another one with prospects of motherhood and fatherhood. The one who is a father in this bond should portray maternal qualities of love, care, tenderness, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. An examination of the biblical and ecclesiological perspectives of matrimonial ring sheds more light on these maternal qualities.

Matrimonial Ring in the Bible and in Church Tradition

Use of Matrimonial Ring in the Bible

The biblical use of the ring in the context of marriage is found in Genesis 24. A ring was given to Rebecca by the servant of Abraham. It was fastened to Rebecca’s nose (verse 47). Nose rings seemed to have had no special use except for the decoration of the nasal area. Zvi Rosen describes three types of nose rings mainly used for decoration:

> One type was "*nezem*" as a small jewel or a golden ring of roughly six grammes of weight was worn through the dorsal part of the right nasal wing…A second type was a chain of golden jewels put in the region of the glabella, and covering the nasal dorsum, or strings of coins worn, by children in particular, on the forehead…A third type was the nasal ring in the mid-line, between the two nares, piercing the membranous and/or the cartilaginous septum (1971:79-80).

The three types are categorised according to the parts of the nose on which they are fixed. Rebecca’s betrothal story does not show on which part of the nose the *nezem* or golden ring was fixed. Definitely, the nasal décor reveals another meaning of nose ring which Rosen has not pointed out. A figurative reference made to nose rings in Ezekiel implies that they were given to girls who were old enough for love (Ezekiel 16:8,12). A nose ring was one of the special gifts that a lover (male) would give to the beloved (female) as a symbol of love.

Nose rings were also a symbol of wealth. According to Bridges, when presented to a young woman like Rebecca, it symbolised readiness to share one's wealth with her (2018). The servant of Abraham deputed Rebecca as the one with whom to share the wealth of the patriarch, through her being chosen as bride for Isaac. One could also take a nose ring as form of insurance against death and divorce, "should a woman's husband die or divorce her, she could sell the ring to provide for herself" (Bridges 2018). The practice of men giving nose rings at betrothal was not only limited to the Hebrews. It was also existent among other tribes, and to this day it is among the Bedouin tribes in the Middle East, and Berber and Beja tribes living in Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania (Bridges 2018; Marten 2012:40).

Ordinary finger rings, though common, were not used in the context of marriage. Finger rings were a sign of authority and restoration of dignity (Genesis 41:42; Esther 3:10; Job 42:11). This is also reflected in the New Testament where rings were used and placed on the fingers as a sign of authority, dignity and freedom (Luke 15:35). In the early Christian community depicted in the Letter of St. James, finger rings were a sign of wealth and fame. But their use led to discrimination and favouritism, prompting James to warn the Christians against partiality based on appearances (James 2:2).

The Egypto-Greco-Roman Influence on Matrimonial Ring

The origin of the use of matrimonial ring can be traced to Egypt, where the tradition began by 2800 BCE. Jessica VandenHouten observes that "the Egyptians twisted and braided sedges, rushes and reeds growing alongside the papyrus into a ring" (2021). The circular shape of the ring depicted that marriage was eternally binding, "a circle having no beginning or no end, signified eternity- for which marriage was binding" (Panati 2016:22). However, these materials were rudimentary and indurable. They were soon substituted for more durable and expensive ones like leather, bones or ivory. The more expensive the material, the more love shown to the receiver (Lichtheim 2006:181-193; VandenHouten 2021). Later, certain Egyptians began to wear golden rings on their fingers to demonstrate their wealth. On the wedding day, a man gave "one of the golden rings to his bride, symbolically conferring his worldly goods upon her…making a promise saying, 'With this ring all my worldly goods I thee endow'" (Davies 1996:1; see also VandenHouten 2021).

In this case, the rings symbolised a willingness to share one's material wealth with one's marriage partner.

For the Greeks, finger rings symbolised punishment and binding. A Greek fable claims that Prometheus was chained to a rock by the god Zeus in Scynthia for having stolen fire from heaven and delivering it human beings. Prometheus, after liberation, was still required to wear a link of the iron chain with which he was bound, together with a set of the fragment of the rock on which he was chained on one of his fingers as a ring so that he might still be considered bound to the Scythian rock (Methenthin and Shapiro 2017:205-207; Kunzu 2016:1-2).

Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) wrote about the Roman custom of wearing finger rings. The Romans "wear rings on a single finger, only the one, that is next to the little finger…in later times it became practice to put rings on the finger next to the thumb, …and recently again it has become the fashion to wear them on the little finger" (*Naturalis Historia*, 6:81-84). Roman rings were made of gold and iron-*ferreus.* The iron rings- *ferreus annulus*- served as a reminder of possession and belonging (Matz 2008:74). The term *annulus* is derived from *amnulus* (diminutive form of *amnis*-serpent) meaning a small serpent. A serpent was considered as a symbol of fecundity and virility (Dacquino 1984:133). A miniature key welded to the ring entitled the wife to half of her husband's wealth or whatever was in his storehouse (Panati 2016:22). The ring was given in a betrothal ceremony. The betrothed woman wore it on the second smallest finger of the left hand.

Greek influence accounts for the wearing of the ring on the said finger. Counting from the thumb, it would be the called the third finger. Greek physicians believed that a certain vein runs securely from this finger to the heart. This vein would later be romantically called *vena amoris* or vein of love (VandenHouten 2021; Lukwata 2010:82; Gilash and Arora 2022:119). The finger became a logical digit (*digitus logicus*) to carry a ring symbolising the affairs of the heart. The Romans, copying from the Greek anatomy charts, attempted to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the third finger by introducing the phrase "the finger next to the least" (Panati 2016:24). This became the Roman physicians' "healing finger" (*digitus sanandi*), used to stir mixtures of

drugs. The physician would sense the toxicity of the drug in his heart before administering it to the patient.

Influenced by the Egypto-Greco-Roman background, Christians continued the ring-finger practice, but worked out their way across the hand to the *vena amoris*, "a bridegroom first placed the ring on the top of the bride's index finger, with the words, '*In the name of the Father.'* Then, praying '*in the name of the Son*,' he moved the ring to the middle finger, and finally, with the concluding words, '*and of the Holy Spirit, Amen*,' to the third finger" (Panati 2016:25). This actually began the moment of theologising on the matrimonial ring.

Developing Theology of the Matrimonial Ring

Tertullian (155-220 CE) and St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) are among the early Christian writers to speak about the matrimonial ring. Tertullian observed that rings for marriage were made of iron, whereas gold rings were worn for adornment or make-up, "we know that rings are made of iron…the value of iron and brass are higher, since their usefulness has been determined in such a way that discharge functions…more necessary for human life" (*De cultu feminarium, Liber* 1, 5:20). Women would own two rings, gold ring for adornment and an iron ring for marriage (Nocent 1997:287). To St. Clement, the ring symbolised the trust the man had in the woman, who was placed in charge of the goods. She used the ring as a seal to mark the goods. Clement prescribed religious emblems for the rings of men, "men might lawfully wear a ring on the little finger, but should bear some religious emblem- a dove, a fish or an anchor" (*Paedagogus* 3,11,57: see also Francis 2003:179-180).

In the non-Roman West, the giving of a ring was a preamble to the betrothal. Philip Lyndon Reynolds tells about two aspects of betrothal. First, it was "a form of preliminary courtship rather than a case of a formal *subarrhatio cum anulo*- pledge with a ring. Secondly, there was a mutual exchange of rings between the bride and bridegroom" (1994:386). Reynolds provides evidence for the mutual exchange of rings in the account of the marriage of King Clovis to the Burgundian princess Clotilde in 493 CE. Through an intermediary, Aurilianus, Clovis sent a ring to Clotilde asking for her hand in marriage. Clotilde accepted the ring, and sent a different one in return to Clovis (Reynolds 1994:386; Martinez 1993:54). But in the Roman world, betrothal was a private

family affair celebrated at a family meal where the exchange of promises was followed by giving of an iron ring by the fiancé to the bride, which she wore on the fourth finger of her left hand (Jounel 1987:186). No rites indicated how the rings were exchanged. But it sets precedence for the practice of double-exchange of ring that in the succeeding centuries became prevalent in the Catholic rite of marriage.

During the patristic period, theological virtues like faith and love began to be attributed to the use of matrimonial ring. St. Ambrose of Milan (339-397 CE) associated a ring with faith. He spoke about the ring in relation to the response of St. Agnes on her feast day, "…I am already betrothed … he has placed his troth to me with a ring, the ring of his faith" (*De Virginibus* 1,6,12). He seems to point to situation where it was customary for the virgins consecrated to God to wear a ring in memory of the betrothal to their heavenly spouse (Thurston 1913).

Writing in the 7th century, Isidore of Seville (560–636 CE) linked the ring to marital faithfulness and love. He also made reference to the notion of *vena amoris,* the existence of which had become widely believed, "The fact that the man gives his fiancée a ring means that it is a sign of mutual faithfulness...it is placed on the fourth finger, for in that finger, it is said, there is a vein which carried blood to the heart *(De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* 2. 20. 5-8). Hence, the ring was given by the *sponsus* (bridegroom*)* to the *sponsa* (bride) as a sign of love, faithfulness and as a *pignus* (token).

Papal contributions on the theology of the matrimonial ring are not lacking. Pope Nicholas I (pope: 858-867 CE) in 860 CE decreed that engagement ring, given by the *sponsus* to the *sponsa* at a betrothal, become a required statement of nuptial intent. The betrothed man joined the bride to himself with vows through the finger marked with a ring of faith. Alongside being a symbol of faith, the ring was a sign of bonding between the *sponsus* and the *sponsa*. For Nicholas, a ring of any material or worth would not suffice. The engagement ring had to be a metal of high value, preferably gold, which represented financial sacrifices by the husband-to-be. Forfeiting a ring and breaking off an engagement would be punishable (Panati 2016:24). Up to this time of Pope Nicholas, it was only the engagement ring that was being

exchanged. Where then can origin of the custom of two rings- engagement ring and wedding ring be found?

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216 CE) is claimed to be responsible for the introduction of two-rings custom and that he proclaimed a compulsory waiting period to be observed between engagement and marriage (Cox and Franz 2007:61). However, there are no papal documents of his to support this claim. What perhaps is the "waiting period" is moment of three weeks of announcing the marriage banns that the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE) instituted (Denzinger, no. 817).

Pope Francis (2013-2025 CE) advised the couple to meditate on the meaningfulness of the rings that they exchange during the celebration of marriage. He also alludes that there are other signs that are part of the rite (*Amoris Laeticia*, no. 216). These "other signs" could be those varying from one culture to another. This meaningfulness is only realised within the context of marital love and fidelity.

Challenge from the Reformers in the 16th Century

The reformers did not have uniform views about the matrimonial ring. Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) tended to avoid any ceremonials associated with the matrimonial ring. According to the rite that he drew up for his pastors, the couple exchanged the rings at the church door without any blessing or formula. After the exchange of the consent, the booklet instructs, "let them [bride and the bridegroom] give the wedding rings to one another, and join their hands together and say, 'what God has joined together let no man put asunder'" (Karant-Nunn 2005:13-14).

John Calvin (1509-1564 CE) avoided the use of the ring. This was in accordance with his policy of eliminating all liturgical ceremonies, which he claimed could be interpreted by people in superstitious manners. There was no joining of the hands either. By his time, superstitions concerning the ring abounded in the popular cultures. It was thought that the matrimonial ring was endowed with magical and curative power, and women would carefully avoid ever removing their rings or even washing the finger with the ring (Bradshaw and Hoffman 1995:122; Monger 2004: 234-235).

Another reformer, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531 CE) used the analogy of the wedding ring to present his teaching on Christ's presence in the Eucharist. For him, the wedding ring is only a sign of the husband who gives the ring to the wife. However, it is only when the wife looks at the ring that it is a sign (Forrester 2003:156). Away from the sight, the ring ceases to portray the ever-enduring and eternal nature of marriage.

The multiplicity of rites reflecting different theologies and symbolisms of the matrimonial ring presented a challenge to the Catholic Church. There was a need to harmonise rites particularly for the celebration of marriage. The Council of Trent (1545-1563 CE) would be an important moment for harmonising and codifying the various existing rites, ushering in a new period in liturgical development.

Council of Trent on the Matrimonial Ring

Although the Council did not give expressive teaching on the ring, it issued the decree *Tametsi* (11 November, 1563) and recommended revision of liturgical books. In accordance with this recommendation, the *Rituale Romanum* was published in 1614 CE. In the *Rituale Romanum*, one ring is mentioned. It was given by the *sponsus* to the *sponsa* as a symbol of total fidelity and a pledge of noble love. This symbolism was embodied in the prayer of blessing the ring (*Rituale Romanum*, no. 236). The prayer reflected the incumbent and reciprocal duties of the spouses. The priest did all the talking while the couple performed the gestures.

The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965 CE) recommended that the rite of marriage found in the *Rituale Romanum* be revised and enriched so as to clearly signify the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, and to teach the spouses their duties and remind them of their equal obligation or commitment to each other (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 77-78). Implementation of this recommendation led to the publication of the current *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*- Rite of Marriage or Order for Celebrating Marriage. The first Latin edition (*Editio Typica*) of this rite of marriage was published in 1969. In 1991, another Latin edition (*Editio Typica Altera*) with the addition of alternative formulas was published.

Matrimonial Ring in the Current Rite of Marriage

Symbolism of the Ring in the Rite

The *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* (henceforth *OCM*) makes it clear that a ring is not a compulsory symbol in the celebration of marriage. It can be adapted or even omitted in situations where it does not fit in the local culture (*OCM,* nos. 15, 16). It can also be substituted with other rites deemed fit by the Conference of Bishops, as long as care and prudence is maintained. This positivity implies the willingness of the church to be accommodative and accept cultural practices that are not already part of the church's tradition. Through this,

> [the church] endorsed as part of the faith practices of a particular people based on the conviction that the spark of divine creativity animates every culture. It also affirms the fact that God can be encountered and worshiped in the myriad ways, many of which have not yet been realised by Christians brought up in the western tradition" (Magesa 2004:195).

The General Introduction or *Praenotanda* of the *OCM* recommends that the couple participate in the choice of the formula for blessing the ring. Three formulas for the blessing the ring are provided. The first is a prayer of a simple invocation over the rings, "*May the Lord bless these rings + which you give to each other as a sign of love and faith." (OCM,* nos. 27, 47, 62*; OCM altera,* nos. 66, 100, 135, 165*).* The symbolic meaning of the ring is directly expressed: it is a symbol of love and fidelity. As a prayer of benediction, the formula intensifies the solemnity of the exchange. God blesses the union signified. God's hand is present, guiding the love and fidelity between the spouses. This formula is short, simple, and easy to recite. It should not be a wonder if it is the most used. The second formula, adapted from 1614 *Rituale Romanum*, depicts the ring as a token of fidelity and love. The formula also expresses a longing that the spouses remain in God's peace and good will. The prayer underscores the equality between the bride and bridegroom and the mutual character of their relationship in which they take equal initiative. The third formula is a composition for the 1969 edition. The prayer entreats the Lord to make the rings symbols of spouses' faith and reminders of their mutual love. The *fidelitas* is the faith in God's action in the marriage.

The exchange of rings gives a visible expression of what has taken place, that is, the exchange of consent which is the central part of the rite of marriage. It also reinforces and intensifies that exchange. Accompanying the exchange of rings is the formula to be recited by each of the spouses, *"N., receive this ring as a sign of my love and faith. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"* (OCM, no. 48). This is the only formula provided in both editions of the *OCM* for all the formats of the celebration of marriage. This formula is attributed to Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims (802-886 CE), who composed it for the marriage of Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald, to Edilwulf, King of East Angalia in 856 CE (Reynold 1994:168). The formula presents a simple meaning of the ring, that is, "as a symbol of love and mutual fidelity" (Jounel 1987:204), while calling on the Holy Trinity to seal and consecrate the bond. It is notable that the spouses take turns in pronouncing the formula, in contrast to the 1614 ritual. This implies that marriage in its nature is a reciprocal action of the spouses (Antonio 30-31). However, the formula only expresses giving and petitioning the other to receive. The "I accept the ring" or "I receive the ring" is not stated in this formula. A statement of acceptance of the ring as a symbol of accepting the love given by the other would make the formula richer and deeper.

Matrimonial Ring in the Euchological Texts of the Current Rite

The theology of the matrimonial ring is reflected in some of the euchological texts of the rite. These texts are the collects, prayer over the gifts, preface, nuptial blessing and special inserts in the eucharistic prayers, prayer after communion and prayers for final blessing. The 1969 edition of *OCM* provides five collects, all of which have been taken over by the 1991 edition. In content, each of these collects calls to mind one or another aspect of marriage, such as unity, fecundity, mutual love and indissolubility of the sacramental bond. Unity and mutual love are expressed in the symbolism of the matrimonial ring. Love and fidelity are reiterated in the prayer over the gifts. The prayer over the gifts also expresses the relationship between marriage and eucharist, appreciating that marriage reflects the "mystery of Christ's unselfish love which we celebrate in this Eucharist" (*OCM*, no. 114).

The first special insert in the eucharistic prayers, composed for the 1969 edition and reserved for the Roman Canon in the 1991 edition, makes an appeal to God to bring the couple to the length of days. It also emphasises the

theme of procreation and gift of children. But words pertaining to this theme are put in parenthesis, "gladden them with your gift of children they desire…" (*OCM*, no. 118). This implies that they may be omitted if the couple is beyond the child-bearing age (*superadulti*) or is unable to have children biologically. The second and third inserts, to be used with eucharistic prayers II and III respectively, make reference to the themes embodied in the matrimonial ring. While the second insert prays that God be mindful of the couple so that it lives in mutual love and peace, the third insert petitions that the spouses under the protection of God may always be faithful in their lives to the covenant they have sealed in His presence. The covenant of marriage demands faithfulness from both the bride and bridegroom, while living in peace.

The concepts of love and covenant are expanded in the three proper prefaces provided in the rite (*OCM*, nos. 115,116 and 117). The purpose of love is for the increase of human race and the family of God which is the church. It underscores the fact that human beings were created to love and to share in God's love. The love between a husband and wife bears the imprint of God's love. Marriage covenant is a symbol of the new covenantal love that God through Jesus entered with his people (Ephesians 5:32). Whereas is it clear that the ring stands as a symbol of love, how it can be a symbol of covenant and fertility which is vital for the increment of the human family is a gap that can be filled with incorporation of an African marriage symbol that eloquently tells of covenant and fertility.

In the 1991 edition of *OCM*, four formulas are provided for nuptial blessing. Three of these formulas are carried from 1969 edition. A new formula is added for use when the rite is presided over by an officially delegated lay person (nos. 139-140). The blessings follow the tripartite structure of anamnesis, epiclesis and intercessions. It is rather the intercessions that show a relationship with the ring. The intercessions implore God's grace upon the couple, so that remaining in faith and love, they may fulfil their matrimonial commitments (*OCM*, nos. 33 and 120).

The 1969 edition of the *OCM* provides for a solemn blessing at the end of the mass, with three options. The theme of love and peace are noticeable in the first and second options. The third option gives reference to the presence of Jesus at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). This presence brought joy to the

couple. The prayer invokes that this joy fills the couple and instills in each spouse the joy of the resurrection of Jesus. This is proper when marriage is celebrated during Easter season. Whereas the theme of love is symbolised in the matrimonial ring, those of joy, peace and fecundity, are still to be given adequate reflection.

Challenges Regarding the Matrimonial Ring

Many vernacular languages in East Africa use the word *mbeta* or *mpeta* (from Kiswahili word *pete)* for the ring. The same word is used for both wedding rings and engagements rings. The phenomenon of "modern" engagement rings is new among many African peoples and not deeply rooted, although the elements that symbolised courtship did exist (Mbiti 1989:135). Those who receive engagement rings take it for granted that they are supposed to go for a wedding where they will exchange wedding rings. At a liturgical level the priests who are always invited to bless such rings are not sure what to say, since there are no ritual words used for the exchange of engagement rings. It is up to the priest to coin some words that he may use to bless these rings. After the "blessing," there are no ritual words that the couple may use for the exchange of engagement rings. Secondly, it is not clear on which finger this engagement ring is to be worn.

The rite does not designate which finger is the ring finger. It is observed that the dominant fingers for wearing the matrimonial ring are the second and third fingers of the left hand (counting from the thumb or even from the least finger). But one can also wear the ring on any finger as long as it fits and one is aware of its importance and meaning. However, some people may not have fingers or even the designated ring finger due to disability and inability. Others have been deprived of the ring finger from birth or due to an accident. The *OCM* does not make provision for cases where a person does not have fingers or hands. Such persons have entered marital unions. What liturgical symbol would be appropriate for them or even for couples who do not have ring fingers?

Rings are of different shapes, sold at different prices and procured from different sources. Some people buy rings on the streets, open shops, or in any place where they come across. They would not bother who is selling the rings,

whether the person believes in sacredness of marriage or not, whether Catholic or non-Catholic. In urban areas, matrimonial rings are sold together with other articles of devotion at church entrances, mostly on Sundays or holidays of obligation. For some people, the type and expense of the ring is a reflection of the amount of love that a person has for the spouse. The more expensive a ring is and the farther the place it is got from, the greater is considered to be the love. With this kind of mentality, noble simplicity of the symbols is put to challenge (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 34).

The rigid size of the ring is another challenge. The human body adjusts in shape and size. Eventually the rings may become narrow for the finger, causing pain. So one may not wear the ring all the time. Due to nature of work of some people, especially household chores or garden work, they prefer to remove the ring. This leads to the risk of it being forgotten or lost. Some people believe that the ring is an article of devotion, and so they wear it all the time. Positively, the ring reminds the wearers of their marital commitments.

There are various types of rings worn by various individuals. This creates difficulty to identify and recognise the true *coniugali,* that is, those who wear the rings for marital status. Many unmarried people are observed to be wearing rings on the fingers designated for matrimonial rings. For some unmarried individuals, it may be for decoration or smartness or pretence to avoid being bothered by those searching suitors. So how can one differentiate between the rings meant for married couples and those for decoration or smartness? If the couple has separated or divorced or one has been widowed, should they continue to wear the matrimonial ring? Pastoral agents need to give answers to such questions so as to help married people in their commitment.

Wearing the matrimonial ring also loses significance when one of the spouses, especially the male counterpart, enters a polygamous marriage which is a common feature among many African peoples. This is against the promise of fidelity which is taken by the spouses when exchanging rings. Whereas many women wear their matrimonial rings despite the husbands having entered polygyny, most men abandon wearing theirs as soon as they start polygynous affairs.

Opportunities for African Marriage Symbol

Universality of the Matrimonial Ring

Despite the challenges surrounding its use, the matrimonial ring is the most universal, visible and eloquent symbol of Christian marriage. Romano Guardini observes that a symbol must express in clear and precise terms that which is interior and spiritual and when it has fulfilled the usual conditions, it must be universally comprehensible and must rise above purely the individual plane (1998:57). This is true and applicable to the matrimonial ring, which in many religions and cultures is comprehensible, enjoying widespread currency and significance in marriage. Any alternative symbol proposed needs to express values that are pertinent to marriage as embodied by the matrimonial ring.

Among many Christians, the ring adds value and dignity to marriage and gives respect and liberty for one to participate freely in church activities and hold certain ecclesial responsibilities. The ring is openly seen by people and is a caution to those who want to be unfaithful to their marital commitment. During marriage celebrations, the moment of exchanging of rings is a moment of great excitement. It is greeted by clapping, ululations and yelling. Many are enthusiastic to carry about their matrimonial rings in the first months of marriage celebration.

Holding onto the universal significance, many adapted marriage rites in certain parts of Africa still maintained the ring. Benezeri Kisembo, Laurenti Magesa, and Aylward Shorter described examples of adapted marriage rites in Congo, Uganda, and Nigeria (1998:224-226). In these adapted rites, the matrimonial ring features as part of the rite symbolising love and commitment. Much as it is a reflection of the artificiality that these adapted marriage rites are trying to avoid, it shows that the African people have accepted the symbolisms which Christianity came with. Removing the matrimonial ring would deprive the celebration of marriage of such an important element. Yet addition of an African marriage symbol makes it both Christian and African. The marriage symbols to be used as an alternative or alongside the matrimonial ring may vary from one African culture to another. An illustration from an African society of the Lugbara will suffice.

Example of Symbols from Lugbara Traditional Marriage

The Lugbara are a Sudanic-speaking people living astride the Nile-Congo divide, in the northwestern part of Uganda and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (Middleton 1998:1; Aluma 2025). The majority of them subscribe to the Catholic faith, and a considerable number to the Anglican faith. The protagonists of the Christian evangelisation of the Lugbara, especially those in Uganda, were the Quakers and Comboni Missionaries. The two groups entered Lugbaraland between 1917 and 1918 CE (La Salandra 2004:26). Before a Christian Lugbara couple can have their marriage blessed in a Christian marriage ceremony and be given matrimonial rings, some symbols would have already been administered in their traditional marriage. Two symbols are prominent. These are the bermudagrass (*lemgbe*) and iron bangles (*enve*). For the Lugbara, bermudagrass stands as a symbol of resilience, fertility, openhandedness and generosity. The ritual of "tying grass" (*lemgbe a'diza*) is performed during traditional marriage arrangements. The grass is tied around the ankle of the bride. In this symbol, the link with nature and creation is emphasised by using plants and their characteristics. What grows around in their environment and vicinity is used. Administering the symbol is primarily the duty of the parents. The bride and the bridegroom are only to give their consent.

The second symbol is an iron bangle (*enve/mele*). The bangle is normally worn or tied at the ankle or the arms of the girl- the future bride. It is also a sign of beauty. It is fixed around the ankle of the bride to signify that she now has a prospective husband. The *inve* is kept around ankle of the girl until the first child is born. Bangles also serve as a symbol of the bond between two clans. It is placed on the arm of the bride-to-be and it proclaims openly that just as the she and bridegroom-to-be are allowed to meet freely, the members of their clans can interact freely.

These symbols may have their challenges, but they speak an eloquent language of generosity and openhandedness, procreation and fertility, resilience and permanence, family and community bonding. *Lemgbe* could be proposed as an optional symbol and the "tying of *lemgbe"* as an optional explanatory rite in the Christian celebration of marriage among the Lugbara. It pertains to the competent ecclesiastical authorities, that is, diocesan bishop and the Conference of Bishops (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 22 and 41) to

discuss the incorporation of the symbol and the rite in the celebration of marriage. This, of course, should be without neglecting liturgical catechesis.

Avenue for Liturgical Catechesis

Liturgical catechesis is such a broad term that a separate article is required for its exposition. In fact, Gilbert Ostediek advances that "there are as many understandings of liturgical catechesis as there are perspectives that constitute it" (quoted in Raiche 2020:20). Ostediek describes two forms of liturgical catechesis—liturgy itself and a preparation to participate in the liturgy (Raiche 2020:21; Ostediek 1986). These two forms are incorporated into the definition of liturgical catechesis given by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1075: "liturgical catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ [it is a 'mystagogy'] by proceeding from what is visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the sacrament to the mysteries" (see also Raiche 2020:25). This states the aim and method of liturgical catechesis. Liturgical catechesis should be understood as deliberate and explicit instruction about the meaning and purpose of words, symbols, signs and actions in the celebration of the liturgy.

In the celebration of marriage, liturgical catechesis is directed to the couple, relatives, friends and well-wishers. The homily provides an appropriate moment to explain the symbolism of matrimonial ring or a liturgical symbol that is considered as an alternative to the ring. In the homily, the meaning of the ring, the action of blessing and the exchange of the ring can be explained. Those who have the responsibility of delivering homilies or sermons during marriage celebrations ought to equip themselves with adequate and relevant information and knowledge about the matrimonial ring and cultural symbols.

Translation of the Latin Edition

Translation of the liturgical texts into the language of the people is a significant step in liturgical inculturation. Anscar Chupungco defines liturgical inculturation as "the process of inserting the texts and rites of the liturgy into the frame work of the local culture" (1992:30). The 1991 edition or the *OCM editio typical altera* has not been translated into many African languages, so its riches are still veiled to many African communities. Where the riches of the liturgical texts remained veiled to people, the people will fill the gap with symbols they have either created themselves or borrowed from elsewhere

with no cultural or even religious significance, hence mutilating the liturgy. Together with translation, incorporation of the possible adaptations can be made. Anomalies noted with the formula for the exchange of rings can also be corrected in this case.

Expanding the Formulas for Blessing and Exchange of Rings

As noted in the foregoing discussion, the second end of marriage, that is, procreation and education of children, is not captured in the formulas for the blessing of rings and their exchange (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, cans. 1055 & 1061 par 1). Those who consent to marriage also consent to both ends of marriage, each of which is "institutional end given by God when He instituted marriage, and each of them is personalistic in its nature, that is designed to draw each of the spouses out of self and grow, by learning to give that self to their spouse and to their children" (Burke 1999:83). As observed by John Mbiti, "procreation and marriage in African societies are a unity; without procreation, marriage is incomplete" (1989:130). Any proposed alternative symbol and formularies for blessing need to have elements of reciprocal giving and receiving, covenant, procreation, and education of children. The *Praenotanda* of the *OCM* support this kind of endeavour by stating that "when the Roman Ritual has several optional formularies, local rituals may add others of the same type" (*OCM*, no. 13).

Conclusion

The matrimonial ring is universal symbol in the celebration of marriage, but it is not a compulsory element in the Catholic rite of marriage. Its remote origins are traced from ancient Egypt where grass was shaped in form of a ring and used in contracting marriage. The Greco-Roman world has had a considerable influence on its use, especially wearing it on the second smallest finger of the left hand. Bringing the matrimonial ring into the liturgical celebration of marriage was itself an important step of inculturation undertaken by the Church. Although the symbolism of love and fidelity is enshrined in the current *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*, other values that are dear to the African people are not captured. An African marriage symbol that incorporates the values of values of love, covenant, fidelity, procreation, and fecundity could even be used instead of the matrimonial ring.

Two symbols, *lemgbe and enve*, from Lugbara traditional marriage are identified to be embodying these values. *Lemgbe* proposed as optional symbol for an optional explanatory rite of tying of *lembge*. It could even serve as an alternative to the matrimonial ring. But it is the responsibility of the competent ecclesiastical authority under which the Lugbara live to ascertain their incorporation in accordance with the standing principles. Any formularies suggested in the rite in an African context needs to take account of the matrimonial values that are dear to African peoples. In the case where the traditional use of matrimonial ring is retained, the way has to remain open for legitimate variations in the Christian celebration (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 23).

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The Dilemma of Polygamy in Nigerian Pentecostals' Theology of Marriage

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Abstract

This paper examines marriage and polygamy in the teachings of two Nigerian Pentecostal denominations. Prior to the advent of the nineteenth-century missionaries in Africa, Africans practised polygamous marriage for its economic and social benefits. The missionaries' ideal of Christian marriage was monogamous marriage. The missionaries did not hesitate to take up the battle against the traditional marriage system and impose their belief in monogamy on their African converts. Polygamists who were converted to Christianity were compelled to send away all their wives except only the first wives. While many Christian denominations founded by the missionaries have either abolished or amended this position, certain Pentecostal and charismatic churches still hold on to it. Moreover, existing studies on polygamy in African Christianity barely focus on Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Hence, this article examines the views of two leading Pentecostal denominations' leaders, Pastor W. F. Kumuyi of Deeper Christian Life Ministry and Dr D. O. Olukoya of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, on marriage and polygamy. The two denominations are chosen because of their pronounced viewpoints on polygamy and how widespread their branches are in Africa. By examining the denominations, this article does not only fill a gap in the studies of polygamy in African Christian theology, it also shifts the focus of studies on polygamy from the mainline protestant denominations to Pentecostal and charismatic denominations which have been overlooked in many studies. Using the content-analytical method, the paper identifies illogicality and incompatibility with

biblical teachings in any theology of marriage that encourages polygamists to 'divorce' all their wives except the first ones.

Introduction

In many traditional Yoruba societies, polygamous and monogamous marriages were commonly practised based on the choice and socio-economic statuses of the individuals (Johnson 1921:113). The precolonial Yoruba people believed that it was inappropriate for traditional rulers to be monogamous because of their position as leaders in society. This belief gave traditional rulers impetus to marry as many wives as they could. Wealthy members of society were also expected to be polygamous. Members of the communities usually offered their female children to the rich in exchange for gifts and friendship or settlement of debts. The poor who were incapable of handling many wives due to financial constraints would be contented with monogamy. It was a matter of choice and status. Besides, the traditional Yoruba society was agrarian; engaging in polygamy guaranteed having many children who would assist in farming. Ayandele (1966:335) highlights some of the reasons the indigenous societies in Africa practised polygamy, as follows: farming, high rate of infant mortality, social, economic, and political standing, and elaborate funeral rites. Marriage in such societies is communally construed and considered as a necessity and a major factor in building friendships among peers (Pearsall 2022). Men of status and reputation received wives as gifts from their friends. In some cases, parents arranged spouses for their children. Men who disliked such spouses were free to marry as many wives as they could afford (Fadipe 1970).

Theologians, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, among others, have documented how the European and American missionaries rid Africa of her values and cultural practices and imposed Western cultural values on their converts (Bascom 1953). One of the cultural practices that the missionaries contended against was polygamy. They believed that polygamy was incompatible with civilisation and Christianity. Their strong opposition to polygamy led to crises in some denominations. For instance, in 1917, Rev. G. O. Griffin, the Methodist chairman in Lagos, decided to expel ten church leaders who, according to him, were guilty of polygamy. Surprisingly, the ten leaders were joined by fifty-five others who openly admitted that they too

were polygamists. Nevertheless, undeterred by the number of the polygamists Griffin expelled all of them. Those who were expelled founded the United Methodist Church, Eleja, in Lagos (Sanneh 1983:179). The missionaries were almost successful in obliterating polygamy but for Islam in Yorubaland, African mission churches, and African independent churches founded by aggrieved Yoruba Christians who were amenable to certain cultural practices which included the practice of polygamy. The emergence of Pentecostal and charismatic movements in the 1970s heralded a return to the outright rejection of polygamy by their leaders, who were of Yoruba origin (Ojo 1997).

This paper focuses on the teachings of two general overseers of Nigerian Pentecostal churches on marriage and polygamy with a view to identifying and critiquing their positions on individuals who were polygamists before their conversion to Christianity. The church leaders are Pastor William Folorunsho Kumuyi of Deeper Christian Life Ministry (DCLM) and Pastor Dr Daniel K. Olukoya of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM). The paper argues that the practice of 'sending away' wives in polygamous relationships is not only strange to Yoruba culture but is based on faulty theological premises. Marriage in Africa is a cultural tradition and Christianity has not been able to totally disrobe it of its cultural garbs even though Christianity is a major defining factor of social change in the continent (Ojo 1997). This is not an attempt to validate and promote polygamy as a Christian form of marriage. The paper is guided by Sanneh's warning that 'There is nothing inherently African about the institution of plural marriages' (1983:248). That many people engaged in polygamy in certain traditional African societies does not mean that it was a universal rule that was applicable to all societies. The contention of this paper concerns the treatment Pentecostal and charismatic denominations usually mete out to those who were polygamists before their conversion.

Conceptualising Polygamy in Nigerian Christianity

Polygamy can be defined as a practice whereby a man marries multiple wives simultaneously, as opposed to monogamy which is having one wife (Zeitzen 2008:3). It is derived from two Greek words: *poly* (meaning 'many') and *gamos* (meaning 'marriage'). Together they mean plural marriage or being married to multiple spouses. Polygamy, in its broad sense, includes polyandry, that is, one

wife with many husbands, and polygyny, which is one husband with many wives.

Marriage means different things to various cultures even though it is a universal phenomenon. Pearsall's (2022:1) theory of marriage as an organising power states that 'for rulers across human history, marriages, including plural ones, have had particular significance, legitimating offspring, strengthening kingdoms, and ensuring takeovers'. This theory highlights the functional features of marriage and also traces the origin of polygamy to attempts by men to build and enforce patriarchal power structures. It explains why men benefit more than women in polygamy. Proponents of this view argue that polygamy gives men access to women and their bodies. It gives men more children upon which their kin connections are built. It 'supports men's public importance as well as their domestic potency' (Pearsall 2022:4). This does not mean that women in polygamous marriages do not have any benefits. However, whatever benefits they have are outweighed by men's interests. Women bear their husbands' names and are seen as parts of the properties of their spouses in some societies. They also have to contend with other women for the resources of their husbands. Advocates of polygamy, such as Mormons and some Islamic clerics, consider it a favourable avenue for all women to marry (Pearsall 2022). Those who hold this erroneous view believe that polygamy is in the interest of women as it affords them marriage because there are more women than men. There is no doubt that the view is based on wrong statistics. The United Nations World Population Prospects (United Nations 2024) estimates that there are 4.14 billion males and 4.09 billion females in the world.

Barash's (2016) research on polygamy reveals that human and non-human animals are polygamous in nature and it is very rare for animals to be sexually monogamous. Explaining the results of the research, Barash points out that evolution theory has subjugated the biblical account that Adam and Eve were monogamous. On the contrary, biological evidence shows that *Homo sapiens* have always been polygamous in nature from the onset. In other words, it is biologically wrong to hold the view that humans are monogamous in nature or have always been monogamous. They may be socially monogamous but, sexually, humans are intrinsically polygamous. While defining 'polygamy' Barash argues that the reason 'polygamy' is often used as a synonym for

'polygyny' is probably that polyandry is uncommon, so polygamy and polygyny are usually used interchangeably. That polyandry is rare in many cultures does not mean that women are sexually monogamous. Women are as polygamous as men but polyandry is frowned at in many societies. Barash admits that his theory is controversial and may be seen as 'politically incorrect' because of the Western preconceived notion of monogamy as a norm (2016:4).

Barash's theory which is based on the biological construct of humans' sexual behaviour raises some questions that cast doubt on its practicality and veracity. How does the theory account for the asexual or celibate? Are humans constrained to follow only their biological instincts? What of our social and psychological constructs? What of human values like self-control and discipline? Barash's theory does not take the complexity of human life into consideration. Having natural inclinations for a behaviour does not mean humans lack self-control over such behaviour. There are several people who, in spite of the sexual revolution, are celibate because of their religious commitments. It is no secret today that youths are delaying marital commitments because of social and economic reasons. Apart from this, studies have shown that women in polygamous marriages experience increased psychological distress and mental health issues compared to those who are in monogamous marriages. Not only that, men who are polygamists are prone to psychological problems which include depression, anxiety, and phychotism as well as lower marital satisfaction and more family conflicts. Polygamous marriages also have adverse effects on children's well-being and development. Other problems associated with polygamous marriages are sexual violence, bitter rivalry, and inequality (Riley 2015).

Relating Barash's theory to pre-colonial, traditional Yoruba society, it is pertinent to note that polygamy was more of a social and economic construct than biological. Men who were mostly farmers needed more hands in their farms; hence, they married as many wives as they could afford, to have numerous children who would assist them. Polygamy was not about having extramarital affairs, neither was it an alibi for marital infidelity (Caldwell, Orubuloye, and Caldwell 1991). In other words, polygamy, as practised by the traditional Yoruba, was not borne out of men's uncontrollable sexual drive.

Polygamy was widely practised in Africa, especially among the Yoruba before the advent of Islam and Christianity (Bolarinwa 2016:78). However, the Islamic practice of polygamy was similar to what the Yoruba were already practising except that the polygamy in Islam was for religious purposes. Muslim men were allowed to marry up to four wives if they had the wherewithal. This attracted many Yoruba people, including the traditional rulers, to Islam. Christian missionaries who came to preach the gospel to the Yoruba in the nineteenth century found polygamy inimical to the spread of the gospel. In his book, *Polygamy and the African Churches: a Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*, Andrew Olu Igenoza (2003:3) notes that

> polygamy has been at the very heart of the marriage debate within the churches in Africa from the mid-nineteenth century and onwards, in the face of the insistence of the white missionaries on monogamy.

Stanley H. Childs (1946), an expatriate in Nigeria in the early twentieth century, admitted that the missionaries held the strong position that Christian marriage must be monogamous for converts in Nigeria. Ojo and Adelakun (2016:474) trace the beginning of the polygamy controversy in African Christianity to the Lambeth Conference of 1868 where it was stated in Resolution 23 that 'polygamy poses one of the sharpest conflicts between the faith and particular culture'. The resolution further recognised monogamy as the will of God for humankind. Resolution 5 of the 1888 conference stated how the church was to handle polygamists. Polygamists were not to

> be admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such a time they shall be in position to accept the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ojo and Adelakun 2016:475)

This viewpoint was strongly promoted by the missionaries sent to Africa without any biblical justification for it. At the 1926 conference of the Protestant Missions in Belgium, participants blamed the failure of Christian missions in Africa on Africans' inability to do away with their cultural practices among which was polygamy (Ayandele 1966).

The missionaries' rigidity on monogamy led to dissensions and conflicts with African converts so that, when Africans later found freedom to establish indigenous churches, they admitted polygamists as members. They believed that polygamy was not inconsistent with Christianity and was both cultural and biblical (Ayandele 1966:197–202). They welcomed polygamists into their congregations unconditionally and those who could not join the African indigenous churches converted to Islam (Ojo and Adelakun 2016:477). However, the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, which emerged in the 1970s and are evangelical in their worldview, continue to uphold the nineteenth-century missionaries' teachings on marriage. Pearce (2012) and I (Adelakun 2017) have independently explored how leaders of Pentecostal and charismatic movements in Nigeria use human emotions such as fear, guilt, and shame to instil conservative sexual concepts in their members. Both the DCLM and MFM employ these emotions, rather than the Bible, in arguing for the inappropriateness of polygamy.

DCLM Teachings on Marriage and Polygamy

Deeper Christian Life Ministry was founded by Pastor W. O. Kumuyi, formerly a lecturer in the College of Education in Lagos, as a Bible study group in his residence, Flat 2, University of Lagos, in 1973 (Ojo 1988). Kumuyi stated from the onset that the group would not metamorphose to a denomination but this changed in 1982 when he declared that a church had sprung up. The church thereafter planted branches in major cities in Nigeria. The success of DCLM can be attributed to various factors. The factors include evangelism, publication of tracts and books, organisation of house fellowship, the personality and charisma of Kumuyi, and occasional programmes organised by the church (Ojo 1988).

Every branch of DCLM has a marriage committee which is saddled with the responsibilities of guiding members to abide by the teachings and practices of the church on marriage. DCLM regards marriage as a sacred institution created by God (Kumuyi 2020). It is a legal union of a mature man and a grown-up woman, which enables them to live together as husband and wife (Kumuyi 2010:13). The church also teaches that 'marriage is one of God's methods to keep men and women free from fornication and immorality' (Kumuyi 1998:101), and should be seen as 'shared life, shared love, shared joy, shared

responsibility and shared destiny' (Kumuyi 2009:3). To forestall engaged couples having sexual intercourse before marriage, DCLM advises unmarried couples to avoid living or staying together. They should not pay each other any visit without a third party who will be monitoring their conversation. Kumuyi (2010) encourages DCLM members to be serious with marriage because marital problems constitute the greatest cause of backsliding among Christians. Parents are to pray for their children and, as soon as the children become teenagers, parents must teach them how to seek and know the will of God 'in all areas of their life with a subtle hint at marriage at the beginning' (Kumuyi 2010:3). A vibrant relationship with the Lord, perception and discernment of God's guidance, a regular, dynamic, and effective prayer life, and active faith in God are the necessary spiritual preparations for marriage. Other preparations include physical, social, and mental preparations.

DCLM derives four marital principles from its interpretation of John 2:1–11 which contains the story of the wedding at Cana of Galilee. First, the wedding was not a joining of a man and a second woman. This is a reference to polygamy or marriage after divorce. Second, the wedding was not the marriage of a lady without the parent's consent. This is a reference to 1 Corinthians 7:38. Third, it was not the marriage of an Israelite with a heathen or an unbeliever; and lastly, it was not the wedding of a pregnant woman who was almost ready to deliver. This is a reference to premarital sex (Kumuyi 1998:116). These four points are the cardinal principles on which the teachings of DCLM on marriage are based. While it is true that John 2:1–11 is a narrative about a wedding ceremony that Jesus and his disciples attended, the four points highlighted by DCLM from the story are products of eisegesis. The passage says nothing about 'joining a man and a woman', or seeking the consent of the bride's parents. The aim of the author of John is to prove through signs and miracles that Jesus is the son of God (see also John 20:30–31).

DCLM forbids members to engage in polygamy because it is a sin. In a message Kumuyi preached on polygamy, he asserts that polygamy is against the Bible and traces the beginning of polygamous relationships to the desire of men to be in the company of more than one woman (Dalama 2022). The definition of polygamy, according to Kumuyi, is broader than its conventional definition. Polygamous relationships begin when married couples enjoy the company of

persons other than their spouses. Such persons can be marriage counsellors or pastors in their congregations.

DCLM states categorically that

> God expects those who are wrongly married (those joined to a man whose first wife is still alive) to make right their ways before God and come out of sin (Ezra 10:1–5). (Kumuyi 1998:108)

Kumuyi cites Genesis 29:29–32 and 30:1–2, Matthew 19:4–6, and Ephesians 5:31 to substantiate that polygamy is a wrong type of marriage and a sin against God which must be avoided by believers. In Ezra 10:1–5, the Israelites who returned from captivity were requested to send away their pagan wives. Interpreting Ezra 10:1–5, the DCLM equates polygamy with marrying foreign women. That is, women who are wives in a polygamous relationship are 'pagan' or 'foreign women' who must be sent away as it was done in Ezra's time.

It is to be noted that the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical churches in Nigeria do not support polygamy as an ideal marriage. The major contention is how to address converts who were polygamists before they converted to Christianity. The DCLM claims that no one can be a Christian and a polygamist at the same time. Married women who are not the first wives of their spouses are believed to be in adulterous relationships from which they need to repent. Thus, they are asked to separate from their spouses with their children. Such a separation is a necessary restitution which a godly man must do without delay. In DCLM, restitution is a core practice which must follow one's decision to believe in Jesus. It is defined as

> making amends for wrongs done against our fellow-men [*sic*], restoring stolen things to their rightful owners, paying debts, giving back where one has defrauded, making confessions to the offended and apologizing to those slandered so as to have a conscience void of offence toward God and man. (Deeper Christian Life Ministry 2021)

Applying this to marriage, DCLM believes that the restitution for a polygamist is to 'divorce' his numerous wives and retain the first wife who is believed to be the woman God wanted the polygamist to marry. A man can only have one wife. Other women living with him as 'wives' are not his wives. Both the polygamist and the other women are all in an adulterous relationship from which they must repent.

DCLM goes further to state that any Christian who remarries after divorce is a polygamist and such remarriage is invalid. Similarly, those who have had children with other persons before they married their current spouses are considered as polygamists. Such people must have had the children when they were teenagers but did not marry the partners through which they had the children. A DCLM member who impregnates a woman is advised to marry the woman after passing through some disciplinary measures (Adelakun 2022).[1] Curiously too, in Yorubaland, it is believed that a woman through whom one has a baby is more than a concubine. In other words, such a woman is more or less regarded as a wife. Probably, DCLM, founded by Kumuyi, being Yoruba, is influenced by this belief.

In summary, DCLM's concept of an ideal marriage is a union between a man and a woman who have never married or had children before coming together as husband and wife. Anything outside this is regarded as a deviation from the will of God. Such deviation includes polygamy. The church is silent about marrying single mothers. Pastor Kumuyi's remarriage after the demise of his first wife is an indication that widows are permitted to remarry.

MFM's Doctrinal Position on Marriage and Polygamy

Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries was founded by Dr Daniel K. Olukoya as a prayer group in his sitting room in 1989. The prayer group metamorphosed into a church on April 24, 1994. Dr Olukoya, a native of Ondo town in Ondo State, Nigeria, was born on July 15, 1956, to Mr and Mrs Amos Olukoya who were members of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) (Ajani 2013:80). He attended

[1] From an interview conducted with Bunmi Awojodu, former students' pastor. In the interview, Awojodu asserted that DCLM does not force such people into marriage. The church is interested in their repentance.

the University of Lagos in 1974 where he studied microbiology and the University of Reading, United Kingdom, where he got his Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD) in molecular genetics in 1984. He was a secondary school teacher before he became a research assistant at the National Institute of Medical Research, Yaba, Lagos, where he rose to the rank of deputy director before he resigned. He married Shade Adesanya in 1989 and the marriage was blessed with a child, Toluwani Elijah, after waiting for about fifteen years (Omotoye 2011:188).

Dr Olukoya belonged to the CAC before he founded MFM. Thus, his teachings, which constitute the beliefs and practices of MFM, reflect his conservative CAC background. He is well versed in using Yoruba traditional beliefs as the context for interpreting the Bible in order to attract his audience's attention and to arouse them to pray fervently. MFM is described on its website as

> an end-time church […] where a sinner enters with two options: he either repents or does not come back, contrary to the present day church where sinners are comfortable and find things so easy and convenient. (Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries 2021)

Olukoya boasts in one of this books that

> With all humility I want to declare that trained members of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries belong to the class of combatant spiritual soldiers. Other believers may decide to live like civilians in army uniform, but the kind of end-time believers which God had mandated me to raise up, cannot afford the luxury of living carelessly in the battle field. (1999b:9)

This is evident in the manner by which members engage in 'warfare prayer' which involves shouting and physical demonstrations such as jerking and swinging hands and legs as if in a physical battle.

Olukoya (2014) believes that outside a believer's decision to become a Christian, the next important decision is the decision to choose a marriage partner. The decision to marry determines one's destiny and it is critical. In

addition, the next worst thing after hellfire is problematic marriage. He encourages Christians to defend their marriages against the wicked arrows of the devil which can bring disharmony and intractable problems to Christian homes. MFM claims that marriage was instituted by God; therefore instructions on it must come from God. Likewise, one should not be influenced by the flesh in choosing a marriage partner (Olukoya 1999a). Marriage should be between a man and a woman, not a man and a man or a woman and a woman, and is meant for those who are physically, materially, and spiritually mature. The minimum age for one to get married as a man and woman is 21 and 18 respectively. Marriage is recommended as a panacea to lust and sexual sins especially, for those who are mature enough to marry. MFM believes that bachelors and spinsters must pray before choosing their partners as this will help them to avoid marrying witches and destiny destroyers. Sex outside marriage is seen as a destiny killer which has successfully destroyed millions of destinies (Olukoya 2012a:9). The church warns people to shun extramarital affairs because 'immorality and sexual intercourse outside marriage attract strange spirits that move from one person to the other' (Olukoya 2012b:91). In addition, Olukoya notes that

> any man or woman that you come across and he or she does not want to wait for marriage before sex is not a believer but a sex addict. (2014:1)

Pre-marital sex is a wrong foundation for marriage. Olukoya believes that many marital problems can be traced to lack of good foundation.

MFM defines polygamy in broad terms. It is a situation where a man has more than one wife. Polygamy also involves having extramarital affairs. For singles, polygamy is having multiple girlfriends and boyfriends concurrently. Women or men, whether married or unmarried, who enjoy being in the company of the opposite sex are polygamous, even when they do not have sex. Having 'strange women' and concubines is polygamy. MFM prohibits polygamy as a form of marriage (Debs Devotion 2020). Olukoya (1999a) notes that polygamy was common in Africa prior to the emergence of Christianity. He states further that polygamy is not the will of God and will never work as a form of Christian marriage. Like the DCLM, MFM demands that polygamists who are converted to Christianity must divorce all their wives except the first wives. Even with

that, such people cannot be allowed to hold any leadership position in the church. Dr Olukoya discourages MFM pastors from conducting naming ceremonies for children whose mothers are not the first wives of their husbands or children who were born out of wedlock because such children are regarded as 'bastards' (Olukoya 2009). 'Naming ceremonies' for newborn babies are usually conducted on the eighth day by religious leaders in many parts of Nigeria. The Yoruba stigmatise anyone who is regarded as *omo ale*, that is, a child born out of wedlock. A baby which is believed to be a bastard may not be christened in a naming ceremony. The Yoruba believe that such children always grow up to destroy family ties and the family image. This belief probably underlies the MFM's stance on children from polygamous families (Olukoya 2013).

MFM believes that polygamy has destructive effects which Christians who are from polygamous homes must pray against. People from polygamous families who are having difficulty having meaningful relationships are being inhibited by a manifestation of the spirit of polygamy. Such people must pray violent prayers to be detached from polygamy because it is a breeding ground for envy, rivalry, evil competition, and lack of peace. It is the major cause of female oppression, teenage pregnancy, promiscuity, premature death, high maternal mortality rate, mental illness, and suicide (Debs Devotion 2020). Some of these problems often extend to the third or fourth generation.

In addition, MFM considers polygamy as a manifestation of marine spirits (Olukoya 1999b:58-59):

> Polygamy is a common African practice, especially among riverine communities. Hardly can you find a man who practices monogamy among those who come from riverine areas. For people from those areas, monogamy is an abomination rather than the norm. What do you expect from a man who has six wives? You can be sure that at least one of them is a member of the marine kingdom. If you visit their homes, you will see that all the wives are sharing everything common. Their children also share everything in common. Such a situation is a breeding ground for multiple demonic bondages. As they

> share everything, they also become initiated (Olukoya 1999b:58-59).

In Yoruba cosmology, it is believed that there are spirits living in rivers, seas, and oceans. The abode of such spirits is known as the marine kingdom. Awolalu (1996:46) explains the Yoruba belief in 'marine spirit[s]' thus,

> As there are spirits in the earth, so the Yoruba believe that there are spirits dwelling in the rivers, lagoons and the sea. These spirits are revered principally by those who dwell near rivers, lagoons or the sea and who believe that the spirits, if suitably provided, can in return provide man's needs.

Awolalu (1996:47) notes further that

> the Ìjẹ̀bú and the Ìlàjẹ' who dwell along the rivers, and the Ijaw of the Niger Delta, firmly believe that there are divine creatures living under water, and that they have wonderful towns of their own; the creatures are thought to be light in complexion and gorgeously attired in coral beads and costly garments. People refer to them as 'Mammy-Water.' Stories abound among the Ìlàjẹ of brave men and women who have gone under water for a number of days together, have lived among the water-creatures and have returned home with some dried fish. We have also met Ìlàjẹ old men who bear on their bodies the mark of machete-cuts claimed to have been received from these water spirits.

It is clear from the above quotations that the Yoruba do not think of these spirits as evil. Marine spirits have nothing to do with the number of wives people marry. They are benevolent to people who seek their favour. They are part of the Yoruba ecosystem. Yet, MFM links them with polygamy. For this reason, polygamy which is generally considered a social issue is spiritualised by MFM. Any man who engages in polygamy is believed to be possessed by marine spirits. Olukoya believes that riverine spirits are also the cause of marital problems and that people from riverine areas are always tormented by polygamous spirits. He clarifies this further, thus:

> Take a look at an average family from riverine areas. How many of them have settled homes? How many of their marriages are stable? Have you not discovered that most of the men are polygamous? They hardly stay with one wife. It appears strange that these men are incurable polygamists. It is funny but strange, that the sexual organs of most of these men contain demonic deposits which make it difficult to stay with one woman. (Olukoya 1999b:8)

There is no doubt that this assertion is based on assumption and superstitious belief which is difficult to substantiate. Apart from the fact that there are no statistics to support the assertion, Olukoya does not disclose his sources of information. As a pastor and a scientist, he is expected to cite Bible passages and scientific data to support his claims. There is no place in the Bible or even the Yoruba cosmological belief where it is stated that 'demonic deposits' make it difficult for people to have monogamous relationships. Polygamy, as mentioned earlier, was a standard practice in Africa in the pre-colonial era. It was not instigated by evil spirits. It was practised because of economic, cultural, and social factors.

Related to the marine spirit phenomenon is the belief in spirit husbands and spirit wives. MFM believes that it is possible for people to be married and give birth to children in the spirit world. The church also claims that polygamy is a common practice in the spirit world. It is also believed that a spirit spouse is a spiritual problem which is responsible for many difficulties humans face in the physical world. People who are married to spirit spouses often have marital problems. The spirit spouses always prevent them from having settled homes. Apart from inflicting on their victims marital woes and barrenness, they also create polygamous tendencies in their victims (Olukoya 1999a). Without any statistical evidence, Olukoya claims that the spirit spouse problem is not limited to Africa but it is universal. The belief in spirit spouses is deeply rooted in Yoruba and Igbo cosmological beliefs. It is known as *Oko Orun* among the Yoruba while it is *Ogbannje* among the Igbo (Bastian 1997). Unlike the Igbo, the spirit wife (*aya orun*) is not well pronounced among the Yoruba. Olukoya's claim that Christians can suffer from spirit spouses is an example of the fusion of Yoruba mythological beliefs with the Christian message. It is one of the

reasons Olukoya's message is considered as a 'security gospel' (Ayegboyin 2005).

Olukoya (2011) is of the view that the polygamous home is a polluted home. Women in polygamous relationships are witches and their children are in bondage to evil spirits. Such women always look for diabolical means to protect the destinies of their children while suppressing the destinies of their stepchildren. Writing on witchcraft and family problems, Olukoya (2003:70) identifies rivalry among women in polygamous relationships as 'polygamous witchcraft' and explains further that witchcraft flourishes well in polygamy. He clarifies it thus,

> The time has come to raise a cry against the Pharaohs of family destruction. Unfortunately for Africa, the enemy has also vomited polygamy into our lives and this has given us what is called, polygamous witchcraft. More than any other spirit, this one has destroyed so many potentials in Africa. For instance, a man married seven wives, six of which were witches. All the six witches descended on the only one who was not a witch and were bent on making a mince-meat of her children. (Olukoya 2003:70)

Finally, MFM believes that God, who instituted marriage, did not intend it to be polygamous. Therefore, those who are polygamists have violated God's principle for marriage. Children from polygamous families have to say some 'deliverance prayers' after they have been born again to be set free from the bondage of polygamy (Olukoya 2012b). The following prayer points reflect MFM's disdain for polygamy:

> Every foundation of polygamy in my family line, break in the name of Jesus;
> I release my destiny from the evil grip of polygamous spirit, in the name of Jesus;
> I refuse to dance to the music of the polygamous spirit, in the name of Jesus;
> Every problem connected to polygamy in my life, receive solution by the blood of Jesus, in the name of Jesus;

> Every wicked spirit, sponsoring polygamy in my life, I bind you and cast you into the bottomless pit, in the name of Jesus (Olukoya 2012c:86-88).

It is clear from the prayer points that MFM believes that polygamy is imbedded with a powerful spirit that is capable of destroying destiny. Apart from saying these prayers, polygamists are expected to make restitution for their prayers to be answered. No woman is expected to be the second or third wife in a Christian home. Olukoya (1999a:78) states this categorically, that

> It does not make any sense to pray fervent prayers while holding tenaciously to adulterous or polygamous relationships. A man is not supposed to have more than one wife, while a woman is not supposed to be the second, third or fourth wife.

Appraisal of DCLM and MFM's Teachings on Marriage and Polygamy

It is clear from the foregoing that DCLM and MFM share some similarities in their views on marriage and polygamy. The two denominations are conservative in their worldviews. They both define marriage as an institution established by God and a union between a man and a woman. They both aggressively reject deviation from their 'biblical' understanding of marriage. They also condemn polygamy as incompatible with Christian marriage, just like the nineteenth-century European and American missionaries. They both define *polygamy* broadly, to include sexual relationships among singles and polyamorous relationships.

Although DCLM and MFM agree that polygamy is unchristian, they differ in their conceptions of what constitutes polygamy. While DCLM regards polygamy just as a sin and disobedience to God, MFM goes beyond this by identifying polygamy as a demonic manifestation. To MFM, polygamy is spiritual. It goes beyond the ordinary. While the DCLM comprehends polygamy from a holiness point of view, MFM considers it from the security gospel perspective – people who want their future and destinies secure must avoid polygamy. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that the Bible neither explicitly

sanctions nor condemns polygamy as sin and does not call it a demonic manifestation. Without obscuring the fact, the Bible presents monogamy as God's original plan for marriage but also accommodates polygamy. Evangelical Christians generally believe that polygamy is a product of Adam and Eve's disobedience in Genesis 3 (Loader 2012).

Does the Bible recognise women who are in polygamous relationships as legitimate wives? The answer is in the affirmative if we consider the question from the Old Testament's perspective. The women married by Moses, David, Solomon, and other Bible characters, who were polygamists, are recognised as 'wives' and even distinguished from 'concubines' in some cases. (For example, Solomon married 700 wives, 1 Kings 11:3.) The Jewish patriarchs practised polygamy which was not forbidden in the Torah. The Ashkenazi Jews were forbidden to marry multiple wives in the eleventh century while the Sephardic Jews persisted in it till the modern era (Bennion and Joffe 2016). There are indications that polygamy was common among the Jews during the time of Jesus (Jeffer 1999). The New Testament authors recognised that there were polygamists among the believers. Such people were exempted from leadership positions. For example, 'The husband of one wife' (RSV) is mentioned in the criteria for bishops and deacons in Titus 1:5–9 and 1 Timothy 3:1–10. This phrase ('the husband of one wife') suggests that there were believers with more than one wife. Besides, the New Testament is silent on the children and wives of the polygamists probably because of the authors' understanding of the Old Testament stance on such women and children.

It has to be pointed out that neither Ezra 10 nor John 2, as well as other passages cited by DCLM, explicitly condemns polygamy. In fact, none of them address it. The foreign women in Ezra 10 were sent out of their homes because they were not Jews. They were pagans who did not worship Yahweh, God of Israel. The Israelites had been warned to avoid contracting mixed marriage with those who did not worship Yahweh (Exodus 34:15–16). This was done to prevent them from worshipping other gods. The Jewish returnees from the Babylonian captivity were mindful of this (Becking 2011:48; Myers 1965:55–56). On the other hand, there is a racial tone in the story. The Jewish returnees considered the gentiles 'unclean'. Marrying the gentile women amounted to 'contamination' of the Jewish race. Hence, the need to send away foreigners and their children who were regarded as mixed-blood children.

Both biblical and Yoruba traditions show that children from polygamous families are to be treated as blessings and not as nuisances or outcasts. Based on this background, this researcher believes that it is improper for a church that is supposed to be a harbinger of hope for vulnerable children and women to cast them away from parental and spousal cares respectively. As noted above, there is no biblical account to support this practice. Arising from this is that the theology of marriage among Pentecostal and charismatic movements is sometimes not a product of sound biblical interpretation but is based on their leaders' understanding and theological dispositions (Adelakun 2016).

Finally, women and children are not only subjugated in communities in religious gatherings where patriarchal rules are enforced, they are also always demonised. DCLM and MFM are two of the few Pentecostal and charismatic denominations where women are not allowed to take leadership roles. Women are viewed as potential sources of distraction and temptation during worship services; thus, they are guarded by rules which are meant to mutilate their beauties so that sons of God will not be lured and be polluted. They must dress according to the dress code enforced by the church (Marshall-Fratani 1998:294). They cannot wear jewellery (Ojo 1988:158). They cannot preach. They cannot serve as pastors in the same capacity as men (Olademo 2003, 2009, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper is neither an advocacy for polygamy nor an argument for monogamy. It is an assessment of the positions of two Nigerian Pentecostal churches on marriage and polygamy. Their positions, as highlighted in this paper, reflect a popular view among Pentecostals in Nigeria. It has created a dilemma which Pentecostals have not been able to resolve. The position, as pointed out earlier, is estranged from biblical teaching on marriage. It is a relic of the imposition of the Western culture of the colonialists and missionaries of the nineteenth century on African people which has continued to affect family values in the continent. It is the submission of this paper that people who were polygamists before their conversion to Christianity should not be forced to send away their wives and children. This submission is in tandem with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:24 which says, 'So brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God' (RSV). Suffice it to say that there

are many unfounded claims in the teachings of the two Pentecostal leaders under consideration in this paper. There is no boundary between their personal opinions and what the Bible says. Pastor Kumuyi is reported to have started correcting some of the measures he imposed on the members of his church at the inception of his ministry. He promised in a sermon that he would remove certain Deeper Life doctrines he himself set up (Ojo 2022). One can only hope that the concern of this paper will be addressed someday by not only Kumuyi, but Olukoya and other Christian leaders. The recounting and removal of certain doctrines which many people held as the word of God when they were first preached raises an issue of hermeneutical trust. How far can religious adherents trust the interpretation of the Bible by their leaders?

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Pre-colonial West African Christianity in the Senegal River Valley

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Abstract

Historical scholarship has often documented that Christianity was not present in West Africa until Europeans introduced it to West Africans around the fifteenth century. Yet history speaks differently. Many centuries before Europeans arrived on the West African coast to build economic alliances and to colonise West Africa, West Africans were introduced to Christianity from other Africans via trade and migration. This paper focuses on the presence of Christianity in the Senegal River Valley in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. It also shows the contemporary consequences of the often-said statement that Christianity was brought to West Africa solely through Europeans and presents the implications of sharing the truth of pre-colonial Christianity existing in the West African Senegal River Valley region with hopes that this rich history will advance Christianity among unbelieving African diasporic populations.

Introduction

As a result of millions of displaced Africans trafficked to the United States of America during the transatlantic slave trade, a number of things were stolen from them by European colonisers. Their land, history, languages, and culture—their entire African identity—was ripped away. Ramifications of this enslavement include many twenty-first century African descendants of the enslaved yearning to be connected to their ancestral culture and religion. In a 2023 Pew Research survey 61% of black Americans shared that they feel a strong connection to their roots as opposed to only 36% of white Americans (Cohn et. al. 2021). Additionally, according to another Pew Research survey,

43% of Black adults used a method to determine their African ancestry (Cox & Tamir 2022). Knowledge of one's ancestral history is important for many African Americans.

Yet regarding religion, Christianity is sometimes disregarded among unbelieving Black Americans because they associate Christianity with white supremacy and enslavement since European colonisers enslaved millions of Africans in the name of their perverted form of Christianity. In his book *Is Christianity the White Man's Religion? How the Bible Is Good News for People of Color,* Antipas Harris (2020:19) shares that African American unbelievers argue that Christianity is the white man's religion because the 'church is quickly becoming more of a symbol of conflict, oppression, and hypocrisy'. These Eurocentric ungodly symbols have stood for centuries. However, what some unbelieving Black Americans fail to realise, as a result of incomplete or untrue historical scholarship, is that some of their West African ancestors may have been Christians before Europeans came to colonise West Africa and that they worshipped the Lord according to their African culture. I am not arguing that Christianity was widespread in pre-colonial West Africa, but rather that it did indeed exist in rural areas with nomads settling there, possibly only in small pockets[1]. There were African Christians in West Africa before European colonisation. Since Christianity was present in West Africa prior to European colonisation, this should be taught as a missiological bridge for God to redeem the lost amongst unbelieving African American populations.

The non-Christian population is growing in the United States. In 2008 19.5% of African Americans were the religious nones or religiously unaffiliated, but that number has risen to but that has risen to 34.9% in 2020 (Burge 2022). Black Americans that are religiously unaffiliated has risen 'more dramatically than whites, Hispanics or Asians' (Burge 2022). Luna Malbroux is an African American millennial blogger and former Christian. She shares why she has left the Christian faith: 'Steadily, it seems like when we move away from the Christian church, we move towards less organized spiritual practices based on

[1] The entirety of my doctoral research on the presence of Christianity in pre-colonial West Africa is not complete. As of April 2026, I have only found small pockets of Christianity in this region. My hope and prayer is to uncover more of this evidence to debunk the lie that Christianity was introduced to Africans residing in pre-colonial West Africa by Europeans.

African spirituality. There have been no knocks on the door, no pamphlets, no billboards, no late-night hotlines, no viral video campaigns. And yet, unnamed spiritual movement reimagining African tradition and nature-centered spirituality has been growing among young black Americans' (Harris 2020).

Steadily, it seems like when we move away from the Christian church, we move towards less organised spiritual practices based on African spirituality. There have been no knocks on the door, no pamphlets, no billboards, no late-night hotlines, no viral video campaigns. Yet, an unnamed spiritual movement that reimagines African tradition and nature-centred spirituality has been growing among young black Americans (Harris 2020:22). The church has evangelistic work to do here; therefore, this article will first show the contemporary consequences of the often-said statement that Christianity was brought to West Africa solely through Europeans. It will then highlight the presence of Christianity in the Senegal River Valley before European colonisation. And lastly, it will present the implications of sharing the truth of pre-colonial Christianity in the West African region of the Senegal River Valley.

The Misinformation of West African Christianity Being Established by Europeans

There is a dominant false Eurocentric narrative that Christianity did not arrive in West Africa until the fifteenth century when it was brought by Europeans. This narrative has been told by historical scholars such as Elizabeth Isichei. In *A History of Christianity in Africa: From antiquity to present*, Isichei (1995:141-142, 172-201) highlights that Christianity only penetrated West Africa in the fifteenth century in Kongo. Before the fifteenth century she primarily highlights the presence of Islam in West Africa without digging into evidence of indigenous Christianity or other Africans bringing the gospel to West Africa.

In his essay 'Historical perspectives on West African Christianity' in the *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, Robert Baum (2015:79) asserts that West Africa had no contact with Christianity until the fifteenth century when the Portuguese arrived. Baum shares that from the fifteenth to nineteenth century Christian communities existed from Saint-Louis in Senegal to the Gold Coast, Dahomey, Nigeria, and Cape Verde due to the mission of Europeans. For example, the Diola in southern Senegal were met by the

Portuguese who tried to convert them to Christianity in the sixteenth century. The provincial Chief was one of the first Diola to convert to Christianity. Baum (2015:85) says that most conversions to Christianity occurred in West Africa after Europe colonised the region. Baum (2015:80) goes on to emphasise that after European missions, West Africans had the task of trying to adopt Christianity within their existing West African culture, however he does not share any exploration or adoption of Christianity before the Portuguese colonised these West African regions.

Additional historians and theologians who advance the narrative that Christianity was introduced to West Africa by European colonisers are Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed. In *A History of the Church in Africa*, Sundkler and Steed (2000:45) write about African Christian converts throughout the continent and their development through African kings and courts for the predominate church denominations of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. They (2000:45) commence their West Africa section by writing that when Portugal had heard that Islamic Arabs were taking hold of West African trade and spreading their religion, the European powers stood up to 'not preach the gospel but to induce foreign peoples to accept Christianity as found and formed in the West'.

Sundkler and Steed (2000:45) share that the Gambia was first introduced to Christianity via their king who begged to be baptised in 1458. In the fifteenth century, Portuguese settlers married into the Gambian community and built churches there. The Portuguese also built forts and chapels on the Gold Coast of Ghana at that time. Sundkler and Steed appear to have not investigated non-European pre-colonial accounts of Christianity in this African region. Additionally, as European colonisers arrived in West Africa, many were not looking for evidence of Christianity in this West African region since their supremacist ways sought to conquer and enslave West Africans.

A Pre-colonial Agenda of European Missions to the Senegal River Valley

Historically we find that the Portuguese were the first large European group to arrive in the Senegal River Valley region around the 1440s, yet they did not to come to solely share the good news of Jesus Christ but rather to engage in

trade and colonisation. Prince Henry of Portugal and the Pope heard about the gold flourishing in West Africa and sent missionaries to establish political and economic monopolies, and then eventually to colonise these West African regions. In *Prelude to Empire: Portugal Overseas before Henry the Navigator*, Bailey Diffie (1960:89) wrote that during this time, 'Portugal now launched on the imperial road from which there was no point of voluntary return… the hope for profit, the conquest of souls, the cutting off of Castile were identified with Portugal's national spirit'.

Concerning Senegal, the Portuguese established trading posts in towns such as Goree, Saint-Louis, and Rufisque around 1444 and encouraged slave trade. Later the Dutch took over Senegalese trade, then, in the seventeenth century, the imperial power of the French assumed control over trade, Senegal, and the region from the Dutch (Turner 2014:1075). Regarding Malian European colonisation, the Portuguese navigator Diogo Gomez reached Mali in 1457 with the hopes of converting the king. One vassal king, Nomimansa, converted to the Christian faith and the Portuguese *conquista* was launched (Shaw & Gitau 2020:68). Lastly, in Mauritania, the Portuguese landed on the coast of Mauritania in 1441 in hopes of conquering the region. Later on, the French seized colonial power after much fight. The French had no Christian witness in mind when they made Mauritania their colonial territory. Evangelism was never a primary effort by these European colonisers. If it was, their actions would speak for it. This, of course, has identity and salvific consequences for unbelieving African Americans, historically and today.

Consequences of the Narrative of West African Christianity Being Established by Europeans

Identity and salvific consequences emerge as a result of the false narrative that Europeans established West African Christianity. These consequences arise especially as it relates to racial oppression and the many other injustices African Americans experience.

Personal Identity. The transatlantic slave trade has numerous residual effects on African Americans historically and today. One of the main effects are African Americans' questions about their ethnic and cultural identity: Who are we? Where did we come from? Sentiments of Christianity being the white man's

religion can propel some unbelieving Black people to put their hope in false identities such as their African ancestry.

For the purposes of my research, I will highlight Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1993) relational research on the immersion/emersion stage of Black identity development invented by Dr. William E. Cross (1972) where this stage defines a Black individual's desire to surround themselves around visible symbols of their racial identity while actively rejecting symbols of whiteness. When individuals arrive at the immersion stage, they actively seek opportunities to explore their own roots and the culture from which they believe they originated. For the scope of my research this stage is key as it highlights why some unbelieving African Americans have demonised Christianity due to the sin of white oppression. Dr. Tatum (1993) finds that once a person enters the immersion stage healing can take place as the individual is connected to others from their racial or ethnic group. This serves as a corrective relational experience. The shared experiences of one's racial group are a source of empowerment and contribute to the racial identity for which one is longing in this stage. Dr. Tatum's research assists my scope of work in that it confirms that African Americans connecting and identifying with their racial or ethnic groups allows individuals to feel heard, understood, and accepted. This is a missiological bridge for the Black church.

Salvific consequences. An unbeliever's soul is on the line as it relates to the persistent narrative that Christianity was introduced to West Africa via Europeans. Yet there are some liberative entry points for the church for this misinformation. In 'Is Liberation the Starting Point for an African-American Theology of Evangelism?' F. Douglas Powe, Jr. (2009) argues that when it comes to the Black community and the history of enslavement and oppression in the United States of America, for some Black unbelievers a liberative scope should be considered as a starting point for evangelism. Ways in which Powe encourages his readers to embrace liberation as a starting point for African American evangelism include reaching back to retrieve negro spirituals to sing and teach today, as well as taping into Black worship services and Black preaching that 'testified to Jesus' liberating presence in the struggle for freedom' (Powe 2009:3) Powe argues for holistic evangelism, rather than a dualistic evangelism that neglects the spiritual but focuses on the physical or vice versa.

I would like to expand Dr. Powe's liberation entry point and help to quench immense thirst in some African Americans to know and understand their West African heritage and what was lost through American chattel slavery. Concentrated Black worship experiences that highlight the struggle of Black Americans in the United States under the umbrella of white oppression is not what Black people want to be reminded of. I have witnessed in my local church outreach and missions ministry that what some unbelieving Black people thirst for can only be fully quenched placing their faith Jesus Christ and being fully known and appreciated according to their ethnic identity.

Today Senegal is a majority Muslim nation. One would think that when some medieval West African kings converting to Islam, the common citizen would have followed their leadership, but that was not the case. In fact, Islam only made small strides during the medieval period among people groups such as the Wolof of the Senegambia region when they were exposed to Islam in the eleventh century. It was not until the nineteenth century that this people group largely adopted Islam as an anti-European movement in response to colonisation. Senegal did not want to have anything do with any European religion (and I believe many aren't aware that Christianity existed in their region in the medieval period without European introduction, but we will dive more into that later).

This, amongst many other examples, can have salvific consequences for unbelieving African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the transatlantic slave trade. The church's salvific hope allows believers to eagerly await the Lord Jesus Christ to deliver the church from the sin, bondage, and corruption in this world. Hope is a persistent expectation of an unseen reality, and the content of the church's hope is the return of Christ in all of his glory with a complete deliverance from believers sinful natures in this present world. Believers should value this eschatological hope because currently we live in a world where false sources of hope are being widely proclaimed. Believers are called to counter these false sources of hope with the gospel.

Some of the false sources of hope some unbelieving African Americans put their faith in is ancestral veneration or worship as they believe their ancestors are the link between the living and the universal being that exists outside of the realm of human understanding (Sibani & Edosa 2020:176). When some call

on their deceased ancestors for divine involvement, they believe that their departed ancestors have the power to intervene in their current affairs, provide authoritative direction, and, in some cases, bestow on them blessings or curses. They call on their ancestors to appease them, or because they need insight, and they are assured that their ancestors know how to help them deal with the questions and conflicts they are facing. In some instances, if the unbelieving perform the prescribed rituals, formulas, and festivals with music to honour and provoke their ancestors to join them, they can greatly influence their lives.

Yet God's Word speaks differently. First, the Bible condemns divination or mediums (Ezekiel 13:9, Acts 16:16-18), which is how some of those who worship their deceased ancestors treat them. Second, Scripture tells us that when a human being dies then they are completely broken off from earthly existence (Luke 16:19-30). Thus, no living human being can talk to the dead. Third, Jesus Christ is the only one that conquered death through his sacrificial death and resurrection for all of humanity. Jesus is still alive, and he is intervening in lives today. Lastly, because our Triune God is the creator and controls all of the universe , he is the only true guide for humanity. The world values and prioritises things that do not please God, such as idolising themselves or their culture, loving money, and simply adoring sin. For Christians, seeing unbelieving African Americans embrace their false sense of hope should propel the believing to declare to them that they should hope in someone who is solid and eternal. The centre of our solid hope is the one that lives in us—Jesus Christ (Col 1:27). The solution to this false narrative and injustice is to share pre-colonial West African Christianity with unbelieving African Americans and to prayerfully ask the Lord to save.

Evidence of Pre-colonial Christianity in the Senegal River Valley

The Senegal River valley exists in the West Africa Sahel region. In late antiquity and the medieval period, it was a prime area for settlement and development by Africans from other regions of the continent. Today it flows through countries such as Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, but in antiquity and the medieval period it was the home of the Kingdom of Ghana, Mali, and other major West African empires.

The method by which I determined that pre-colonial Christianity existed in the Senegal River Valley was by validating the commencement of European colonisation within the transatlantic slave trade and then working back to study the origins of West African kingdoms and people groups, as well as studying trade and migration from other parts of the African continent to this West African region. The Portuguese looked to secure slaves and goods from northern Senegal in the 1440s. Thus, my research will work back from fifteenth century to identify Christians in this West African region. As it stands today, due to the lack of published, written West African history in West African languages, most of the evidence to conclude that Christianity existed before European colonisation includes written Arabic accounts, oral accounts, and ethnological and archeological finds. It is important to also highlight that Islam did not assume full control over the entire West African region after its invasions in North and West Africa in late antiquity and the medieval period. Rather, Islam was largely confined to trading centres in pre-colonial West Africa and did not affect the majority of rural populations.

The Senegal River was a major river route that created links for those in West Africa to trade goods with North Africa in what we call trans-Saharan trade. The scope of my research covers the Senegal River valley from third to fourteenth century, which include the ancient historical kingdom of Ghana, established around the third century BCE[2], and the Mali kingdom, established around thirteenth century. The main locations of these ancient and medieval kingdoms are modern day Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, the Gambia, and Guinea. The dominant ethnic people group during the kingdom of Ghana's reign were the Soninke.

Around the third century, though some would argue in first or second century, the camel became the animal that could be packed with goods and travel long distances for days or weeks without water. Hence trans-Saharan trade between North Africa and West Africa was in full gear during the Christian era in North Africa. Gold was exported from West Africa to North Africa to be used for items such as gold coinage issued in Carthage in the fourth century. A desire for gold

[2] The ancient kingdom of Ghana should not be confused with the present-day country of Ghana. The ancient kingdom of Ghana existed on the Senegal and Niger Rivers and included present-day Mauritania and Mali regions. Additionally, the name Ghana was generally applied to the ruler or king, but the country itself is called Awkar.

led Carthage and other Byzantine African cities to establish trade relations with Djenne-Djenno (modern day Mali), and Aoudahgost (modern day Mauritania) (Achi 2023:204).

Trade between North Africa and West Africa was flourishing before the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Before the Arab conquest, most North African populations were Christian. Christianity was firmly rooted in North Africa and East Africa before, during, and, for many centuries, after the Arab invasion. According to Egyptian Christian historical texts, even in the tenth century Alexandria's patriarch was the head of Christians in Kairouan (Tunisia), Tripoli (Libya), Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nubia. Christianity spread across North Africa, reaching all the way to Morocco, in the first six hundred years of the Common Era. Other examples of the spread of North African Christianity include Coptic book production in the ninth century, primarily used for Egyptian monasteries, beginning to grow even after the Islamic conquest in Egypt.

The Arab invasion in Egypt forced some Christian Copts to migrate west. Those who did preserved their religion, culture, and language. Around 650 new expulsions were made by troops of the Calif Omar Ibn Al-Aziz. According to old Ghanaian tradition, Egyptians migrating to Ghana. The migration is confirmed by the languages in the ancient Ghanaian region, such as the language of the Wolof on the Senegal River, which contain many Egyptian words (El Fasi 1988:472). The eleventh century Arabic writer Al-Zuhri (2000:98) documents the profession of Christianity in Ghana when he shares that 'caravans from the land of the farthest Sus and Maghrib [northwestern Africa] go there' and that in former years they 'professed Christianity until the year of 469/1076'. Arab scholar Al-Bakri wrote in 1137 that the inhabitants of Ghana were Christians in 1076/1077' (Captivating History 2020:473). Al-Zhuri, an Arab chronicler, also writes that slaves are imported into Ghana and in the towns of Tadimakka and NSLA, and that the people in these towns were Christians (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981:98). Moreover, we find that during the early medieval period Zavilah was a major port along the North African coast where slaves were forced to migrate to the Sahel. As Africans migrated, they brought their religion and culture with them.

In *Early Christianity in Africa: North Africa, The Sahara, The Sudan, Central and East Africa: A Contribution to Ethnohistory*, Ludwig Brandl (1975:495) writes

that many Christians wandered in the Sahara, the Sudan, and Central Africa in small groups with their herds. Since they struggled for existence, they were not ecclesiastically organised. Communication with Rome and Byzantium were interrupted by the Arabs. History tends to favour the number of West African courtships that converted to Islam, however some of these courtships converted to Islam just to establish good trading relationships with the Arabs for economic and political gain. Yet the common citizens of these West African kingdoms did not feel obligated to convert to Islam like the royal courts.

From third to ninth century, Senegal and the Gambia valley were especially home to many scattered or migrated African communities. This migration occurred for reasons such as desiccation and economic and religious pressure to move from one's homeland. Since the Senegal River valley was fertile, saturated with water, a safe haven for nomads that faced regional attacks—the Senegal River Valley attracted many North Africans. As the nomads migrated to this West African region, they brought their knowledge, culture, and religion with them.

In *Saharan Myth and Saga*, H.T. Norris (1972:152-153) shares a translated account of an Adrar writer that provides us with details of Christians in Mauritania in the beginning of fifth century. The Adrar writer tells the story of when Abu Bakr (a caliph or Muslim leader) came to the Adrar region in Mauritania, he found two groups: the ones that settled in towns or villages, and the nomads or herders. The Adrar writer states that: 'As for the settled folk, they were Christians'. Not only did the Christians occupy the bulk of the land, the Adrar writer goes on to say that 'each of the two groups was ruled by Christians who possessed the bulk of the land and property, owing to their number and wealth and authority' (in Norris 1972:153). Abu Bakr fought the Christians and wanted them to submit to him, but they refused. In the end the Abu Bakr made peace with the Christians. In order to remain in their land, they could pay a poll-tax and still practice their religion, or they could leave their country in peace. The Christians were out-powered, so they left the country. Not only does this Adrar text confirm that Christians were present in West Africa before European colonisation, it also confirms Christian leadership and perseverance in their faith; these Christians refused to convert to Islam.

Additionally, as Christians migrated to West Africa they intermarried with the indigenous peoples of the West African region, creating new people groups such as the Tukolor (or the people of Takrur or Tekrur), Fulani, Wolof, and Serer peoples. With these intermarriages the customs of the indigenous West Africans tended to be more influential than the customs of those who had immigrated. Thus, we have many ethnically heterogeneous societies. Yet the North Africans were also very influential. Archeology finds the Wolof on the Senegal River having the cross as an ethnological symbol and the Bambara (another West African ethnic group) having it on their dugout-canoes (Brandl 1975:480).

The Lembtuna in the Sahara desert brought Christian thoughts to the Wolof as we see in a number of words in that language that can be traced back to words in Tamashec (the language of the Sanhaya-Ama), such as the expression *fahaske dya* derived from the Tamashec *afasko* (or *tafisko*) meaning 'spring', once derived from the Latin *pasqua* meaning 'Easter'. And *bakar* meaning 'fault' which is taken from the Latin *peccatum*, meaning 'sin'. In the religion of the Bambara, there is the expression 'angel' which, in the same way, may be traced back to Christian influence due to the Sanhaya-Amazigh in about 850 (Brandl 1975:480). Language speaks to the beliefs and expression of the culture.

In the middle of the Senegal Valley, the trading empire of Takrur was well established. Takrur resided in the Senegambia regions (modern-day Poder or Saint-Louis region) and was one of the first West African regions to profit from their exportation of gold. Takrur also touches the south of modern-day Mauritania. The Takrur empire was formed at the beginning of the Common Era. By the ninth century, the Takrur empire was a major trading centre. One could find gold and slaves being traded for wool, copper, and beads from North Africa. Takrur was founded by the ancestors of the Tukolor people. One can find the North African Fulani people group residing in Takrur during the Common Era (El Fasi 1988:127).

The kingdom of Ghana fizzled around the eleventh century. The next powerful kingdom that dominated its territory was the Mali kingdom, established in the thirteenth century. Mali was one of the richest and greatest African kingdoms in history. Because of this, it gained and monopolised the caravan trade in gold.

The Mali kingdom started in 1235 when Sundiata proclaiming himself as king (leader of the Mande people group). The Mali empire included the Atlantic coasts of Senegal and the Gambia as well as the Sahelian zone of the Niger Bend and even extended as the trading centres of Walata in the western desert and Tadmekka in the south-central Sahara.[3]

Around the fourteenth century, Mansa Musa, one of the kingdom's most powerful kings, adopted Islam. But there were in fact Christians that existed in this Mali empire that maintained the gold, hence Christianity existed in West Africa. When Ibn al-Dawadarim, an Arabic explorer from Egypt, asked how about details of where the gold grows in Mansa Musa's kingdom, the king replied, 'It is not in that part of our land which belongs to the Muslims, but in the land which belongs to the Christians of Takrur' (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981:250). Mansa Musa did not force those within his empire to convert to Islam. When asked why the Muslims did not take the land from the Christians, Mansa Musa shared with Ibn al-Dawadarim that they have tried, but when they do the gold does not produce, yet when the gold stays with the Christians, gold is produced (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981:250). Ibn al-Dawadarim's account corroborates with the account of Al-Umari, an Arab historian, who in the fourteenth century documented that Mansa Musa did not make non-Muslim (Christian) areas pay the *jizya* or Muslim tribute tax, because these neighbouring countries were employed to extract gold from the mines, and gold increased when they managed it (Captivating History 2020:110). Both of these Arabic traveler accounts speak not only to Christianity in Takrur, but also of the favour of the Lord over the Christians' labour.

Additional evidence of Christians in Mauritania and Mali surfaced from archeological and ethnological finds. Some anthropologists and archaeologists excavated a variety of ornamental crosses in the artwork of the Tuareg, a tribal people of the Sahara, some of whom still live in the countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Phiri et al. 2016:206.). Some scholars hold that the crosses discovered are a resounding corroboration of an early Christian presence in West Africa (Phiri et al. 2016:206,). The Tuareg tribe migrated from North Africa to West Africa in the seventh century to avoid submitting to Arab conquerors

[3] This includes the modern-day African states of the Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Mali, and portions of Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger

and to not convert to Islam. The Tuareg were nomads that descended from the Christian Garamantes from the Libya region (Norris 1972:230).

Another African group that migrated to West Africa were the Donatists. Christianity was popular in North Africa since second century. Due to their controversial doctrinal beliefs and opposition to the Catholic church, the Donatists gradually founded a kind of Amazigh National Church. Around 375 the Donatists suffered severe persecution and were defeated around 405. Some Donatist refugees went to Mauritania in West Africa where history has found ethnological symbols of the cross with the Tuareg.

A final observation about how Christianity is not 'the white man's religion' is that there would be no European Christian missions to West Africa without the Christian theology birthed out of North Africa which heavily influencing Europe in the second and third century. Many in the Western world have ignored early African church history and the fact that Africa had established Christian nations and developed Christian theology long before Europeans did. Yet in spite of this dismissiveness of early African theology, Christian theology clearly moved from Africa to Europe. This move came in oral and written forms through many North African theologians and church fathers such as Tertullian, Athanasius, Cyril, and Augustine. A plethora of the so-called Western theological concepts started in Africa. Both the Greek and Latin Bibles were products or African. Africans started studying and getting consensus in community with ecumenical councils (Oden 2007:45-49).

Liturgical, exegetical, doctrinal, and social teachings all stemmed from North Africans to Europeans. For example, Tertullian from Carthage writes on prayer, patience, baptism, repentance, fasting, idolatry, the resurrection of the dead, and much more from 200-213, all of which have influenced Europeans and the West. Cassiodorus, who was a monk and statesmen, founded a monastery in Italy that included a scriptorium which included many texts from fourth century African intellectuals which became known to Europeans at that time (Oden 2007:190). In fact, while Rome was persecuting Christians for their faith in the 250s-305, Christianity notably grew in North Africa and Egypt in the 270s-300s. Christianity was not fully accepted in Rome until Constantine came to power in 311. Europe's early medieval formation was rooted in African penitential tradition. Pope Gregory the Great adopted Augustinian theology for

the West from 590-604 (Oden 2007:191). John of Damascus could not have written his orthodox systematic theology in 743 without inclusion of many Egyptian and African sources (Oden 2007:191). Shall I go on? The point I am trying to make is that there are many instances where Christian theology and thought was transferred from Africa to Europe, inter alia, academia, exegesis, dogmatics, ecumenism, teaching on justification, monastic communities, apologetics, philosophy, and dialectics.

The reason the theology of Athanasius, Cyprian, Augustine, Tertullian, and many more African theologians was accepted by Europeans is that these African theologians taught in a way or language that was accepted by Rome. African Christianity also spread in Europe through refugees being exiled in Spain, Gaul, Sardinia, Sicily, Italy, and Britain during the Vandal and Arab invasions around the seventh to ninth centuries (Oden 2007:73). It is clear that early African Christianity highly influenced European and Western theology and thought. Although some forms of Western Christianity may be tainted by white supremacy, Christianity is not solely 'the white man's religion'. The roots of pure, untainted orthodox Christian theology lie in. Africa. It was African Christian intellectualism and the African church that developed the European Christianity which still stands today.

Summary

In summary, pre-colonial West African Christianity in the Senegal River valley did indeed exist before the trans-Atlantic slave trade administered by European colonisation. Direct evidenced presents that trade and migration from North Africa appear to be the fulcrum of the spread of Christianity to this West African region. Through trans-Saharan trade, North Africans intermarried and intermixed Christianity with the culture of West Africans. That European Christianity would not exist without the theology birthed in North Africa further confirms that Christianity is not 'the white man's religion'. These findings have personal identity and salvific consequences as they communicate to unbelieving African Americans that some West African people groups were Christian before European colonisation. For diasporic Africans and African Americans to convert to the Christian faith is not necessarily an abandonment of their African identity and culture. Rather, they can convert to the Christian faith while still embracing their African ancestry and traditions.

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Violence against Children Accused of Witchcraft in Nigeria and its Impact on Their Wellbeing: an Empirical Analysis of Cases in Akwa Ibom and Lagos States

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Abstract

Witchcraft accusations have been on the rise across various regions of Nigeria. Unfortunately, those often accused are not just the adults, but also children. Rather than being protected, provided for, and loved, these children are accused and dehumanised. Some of these children have been abandoned on the streets, tortured with hot objects, had acid poured on them, and even been killed. Shockingly, their accusers are often not strangers, but close family members including parents, step-parents, siblings, and cousins. This study analyses three accounts of witchcraft accusations against children, the horrendous violence it attracted to the accused, and its impact on their wellbeing in order to identify factors responsible for witchcraft accusations and violence against children. A qualitative research method was adopted through face-to-face interviews and empirical analysis of documented cases of witchcraft accusations in Nigeria. The findings reveal that cultural beliefs, the portrayal of children as witches in movies, a prevailing witchcraft mentality, the teachings of religious institutions on witchcraft, and ignorance are key factors responsible for witchcraft accusations and violence against children. Furthermore, the findings

show that witchcraft accusations and violence against children affect them in five domains: their health, material wellbeing, education, risk, and relationships. The study recommends that the biblical passages that Nigerian pastors use to validate witchcraft accusations be interpreted within the context intended by the original writers, that movies depicting children as witches be banned or strictly regulated, and that those who interact with children in the five domains be trained and equipped to reduce the effects of accusation and violence on the children.

Introduction

The birth of a child in Africa is sacred and treasured. When a child is born to a family, parents and the people living in the community celebrate and praise God for the blessing given to the community. In West Africa, people value children for several reasons: They keep the family memory alive after they die. They are blessings that elevate parents' social status in the community. They help in farming activities like planting, harvesting, and managing households. And they grow into responsible adults who help care for their parents in old age.

Given that children are blessing to parents and the community, why is there an increasing rate of violence against children accused of witchcraft in contemporary times. Several studies on witchcraft accusations in Africa have revealed cases where husbands killed their wives; fathers, their children; children, their parents; and siblings, their sisters or brothers. Religious institutions have given false prophecies to accuse vulnerable children and women of witchcraft in order to take advantage of them for money, fame, molestation, and self-gratification. It has affected the well-being of the accused and caused the loss of many lives in Nigeria. (Salihu 2021, Eboiyehi 2017; Onuzulike 2013; Priest 2017).

Witchcraft accusations in Nigeria have affected the well-being of children. There is a need for both the government and members of the communities to rescue children who are violated by their accusers so that they may find relief and fulfil their destinies. The National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria (n.d.), saddled with the responsibility to ensure total compliance with the

Child's Rights Act (2003), recently reported that '24 out of 36 states of Nigeria have adopted the CRA as a state law. Therefore, twelve (12) states in Nigeria have yet to adopt the CRA in their laws of the 36 federation states'. The Child's Rights Act (2003) defines a child as any person under 18, who has the right to be protected and be free from discrimination, who is not to be subjected to any physical or emotional harm by parents and other members of the family, who should not be sexually harassed, and who should not be subjected to torture under any circumstances. Children have the right to be protected under Nigeria's legal framework. All citizens are expected to comply with the Child's Rights Act to save the lives of children.

Violence against children accused of Witchcraft is against the biblical understanding of children a a blessing from God: 'Children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; they will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate' (Ps. 127:3-5 NIV). Such violence is also contrary to the cultural and moral values of the African people. It defies the Child's Rights Act (2003), which was enacted in compliance with the provisions of the United Nations and the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of Child.

This paper seeks to respond to the problem of witchcraft accusations against children by examining the concept of witchcraft and the factors responsible for witchcraft accusations and violence against children, by discussing how witchcraft accusations and violence affect children's well-being, and by suggesting appropriate measures on how to deal with witchcraft accusations to protect the lives of children. According to Salihu (2021:2):

> Witchcraft allegations and violence in Nigeria are under-researched. Therefore, urgent attention from the government, security agencies, civil society organisations, religious bodies, and academic researchers is needed to explore this phenomenon, understand the contributory factors to witchcraft-related violence, and recommend policies and approaches to address the issue.

The need to address witchcraft allegations and violence against children prompted this study to raise awareness of its effects on the children accused and recommend ways to tackle the challenges.

The methodology adopted in this study is a case study approach, which primarily focuses on three cases of witchcraft accusations against children in Nigeria. Both primary and secondary data were collected. Two of the three cases analysed were from online sources, while one was retrieved through face-to-face interviews. In the literature review, the researchers consulted relevant articles, textbooks, and online materials via Google Scholar to examine the various aspects of witchcraft accusations. Content and thematic analyses were adopted to interpret data appropriately on the subject of witchcraft accusations against children.

Explaining Witchcraft

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the term *Amosu* refers to a witch. There are two types of *Amosu*: a black and a white witch. Black witches are described as evil, antisocial, and malicious to people. In contrast, 'white witches are known in Igbo societies to be benevolent. In the Igbo worldview, white witches are believed to usually use their own vision and wisdom in different talents and in different fields to help neighbours and the community' (Ejeh and Ugwu 2021:19).

In Igbo cosmology, witchcraft is perceived as 'an art of those who have the "second sight". It refers to perceiving things hidden from the ordinary person through a spirit's power. It may be negative or positive depending on the individuals possessing such second sight and the use of it' (Ejeh and Ugwu 2021:19). Although a witch could be classified as good or bad, the indigenous logic about them is that they cause supernatural harm. Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell (2020:6) explain that the word 'witch' refers to something that is 'malevolent and powerful, the mysterious cause of misfortune and death in those around them. A related term for their practice or power is witchcraft, while "bewitch" describes their harmful act'. Thus, 'witch', 'witchcraft', and 'bewitch' are accusatory words used for those who harm others through diabolical means.

Witchcraft is associated with 'supernatural activities believed to bring about negative or evil consequences for individuals and families' (Akrong 2007:53). It is the skill or craft of usurping power to manipulate and control people, events, or situations through sorcery or magic. Mbiti (1975:165) defines witchcraft as 'a manifestation of mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various ways'. Evans-Pritchard (1937:347) describes it as 'the belief that humans are capable of invoking, practising and exercising a psychic force for the primary purpose of hurting or killing other humans, and engaging in other malevolent activities'. These definitions portray witchcraft as being evil and harmful. Because witchcraft is deemed harmful, it enables Africans to explain why evil occurs. Kunhiyop (2008:377) state that the idea of witchcraft is 'a serious philosophical attempt to deal with the question of evil'.

The Concept of Witchcraft in the Bible

In the Bible witchcraft is consistently presented as something opposed to God's will. Both the Old and New Testaments address witchcraft explicitly, warning against practices like sorcery, divination, and seeking supernatural power outside of God. Some biblical passages are used to validate violence against children accused for witchcraft. For example, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' (Exod. 22:18, KJV). This passage has been misused as social justification for the destruction of persons accused of witchcraft. But as Madueme (2020:84) writes: 'the biblical passages often cited by Africans do not support witch-demonology, i.e., the idea that the devil empowers witches to inflict harm on others and, therefore, that Christians should engage in deliverance ministries to liberate those in demonic captivity … None of the standard passages support the distinctive African concept of witch causality (e.g., Exod. 7:11;22:18; Lev. 19:31, etc)'. A careful analysis of each of these passages shows that none of them sanctions the idea of an 'evil person (male or female) said to harm others through inborn psychic power' (Madueme 2020:84).

Cookey's (2015) work provides a helpful analysis of Exodus 22:18, which is commonly misused. He provided the meaning of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin words for 'witch'. In Hebrew, the word, which is feminine, refers to a woman who practices evil, a sorceress or a magician. The Greek work, a masculine plural, including diviners, enchanters, wizards, sorcerers, spell-casters, and

magicians. The Latin word, which is also a masculine plural, means 'evildoers, those who do evil, obnoxious, and vile things' (Cookey 2015:5) Cookey (2015:8) argues that the Hebrew term does not imply someone harming others through evil powers—an idea held by Nigerians and other Africans, but foreign to Biblical Hebrew culture and worldview—but rather refers to 'magico-religious professionals, who, among other things, divine dreams and perform power display."(Cookey 2015, 8) The magico-religious professionals were not hidden entities but public entities known and consulted. For example, they were part of Pharaoh's entourage of magico-religious professionals invited to display their power in Exodus 7:11. In Daniel 2:2, King Nebuchadnezzar asked his magicians to interpret his dream.

> It is important to note that those referred to as 'witches 'in the KJV and some other English Bible translations are … never portray[ed] … as causing misfortune, death, infertility, sickness, barrenness, and other types of physical harm to others through the use of invisible power, as Nigerians believe witches do (Priest 2017:55).

The Concept of Witchcraft in Nigeria

According to Priest (2017:53), many Nigerians define a witch as 'someone assumed to possess and exercise an invisible power to kill or harm. Such persons are feared, avoided, condemned, punished, or even killed'. Children are not excluded from the definition of witches as evil. Stobart (2009) states that 'witch means a child invested with evil forces to harm others'. These definitions show that some Nigerians believe that evil forces can empower children to perpetrate harm on people. Therefore, they should be severely punished upon exposure.

Witchcraft is further conceptualised as using 'magic or enchantment to cause harm to another person, often invoked by making a pact with the devil or manipulating natural elements, like herbs and plants. Magic or witchcraft can be described as a practice that uses charms, spells, and rituals, to disrupt the natural order of events to achieve a desired outcome' (Ally and Yew-Siong 2020:52). Magic is synonymous with witchcraft, and it involves the use of charms to harm innocent people.

Nyirongo (2018:86) notes how Africans 'ascribe all the ills, misfortunes, sickness, accidents, tragedies, sorrows, dangers and confusing mysteries they encounter or experience to the mystical power in the hands of a sorcerer, witch or wizard'. We can conclude that in Nigeria, and much of Africa, witchcraft is seen as a means of altering the course of nature through the use of evil powers to accomplish personal gain and desire. A witchcraft accusation involves accusing a person of harming others through diabolical means. Those accused of witchcraft are often alleged to cause misfortune, illness, death, accidents, unemployment, and other adverse events.

Violence against Children accused of witchcraft in Nigeria

Violence against children is a global phenomenon that is attracting the attention of scholars, human rights activists, non-governmental organisations, Christian leaders, educators, and those concerned with children's welfare (Isioma 2019). The children targeted are not often from wealthy backgrounds. They are often not education, nor do they have educated parents. Instead, the accused are often those unable to defend themselves, the vulnerable, the poor, and those with uneducated parents.

Historically, women were often accused of being witches and wizards. But in recent times, children have also been accused of witchcraft. This is a relatively new phenomenon. When child-witches are discovered, they are subjected to excruciating violence such as rubbing chilli pepper in their eyes, being beating or abandoned, experiencing verbal abuse, psychological traumatisation, sexual molestation, and emotional abuse. Many are exploited and neglected. Some even die. (Secker 2013; Onuzulike 2013; Isioma 2019; Adinkrah 2004).

Ally and Yew-Siong (2020) tell the story of Jeremiah, a young boy accused of witchcraft when the pastor's wife's claimed that he was responsible for the family's difficulties because he caused a loss of job and evil happenings in the home. At first, Jeremiah was locked up and starved for days in the pastor's house as part of the way of casting the evil spirit. When he returned home, his parents subjected him to another punishment: they tied a rope around him, dragged him to the school compound, and flogged him. For several weeks, Jeremiah was tortured by his father. His father, not satisfied with the torture, decided to pour fuel on his face to set him ablaze. Although Jeremiah escaped

death, he was left with permanent scars that will forever remind him of the witchcraft accusation from his parents.

Child abuse related to witchcraft accusations is not limited to Africa, but has also been documented among the African diaspora. Briggs and Whittaker (2018:4-6) narrate various horrific instances of violence against children related to witchcraft accusations in the UK. The abuse includes starvation to death, beating with sticks and metal bars, cuts with objects, rubbing chilli in the eyes, scrubbing their skin with sandpaper, forcing them to drink dangerous substances including their own their faeces, and drowning them. The perpetrators of this violence are often African migrants, including Christians, Muslims, and mixed religionists, residing in the UK.

Accusers of children of witchcraft include parents, relatives, pastors, and native doctors (Salihu 2021; Priest 2017; Ally and Yew-Siong 2020). Alleged child-witches are often accused of being stubborn, deceptive, withdrawn, manipulative, of talking in their sleep, of making a blood covenant with the devil, and of causing sickness, misfortune, death, or the loss of a job (Briggs 2002; Roper 2000).

Research reveals several factors that are responsible for violence against children including 'deformity, twins, premature infant, family structure, resources, poverty, family size, parental stress, history of abuse and violence in the home, culture, social conflicts, and even wars' (Ally and Yew-Siong 2020:51). These factors are often misunderstood and used to stigmatise children, leading people to suspect supernatural causes for unfortunate events. When families struggle with poverty or conflict, their children may receive less protection or support, making them easy scapegoats. In a culture that contains beliefs associating unusual traits or events with witchcraft., communities tend to accuse these vulnerable children of being witches, blaming them for misfortune as a way to explain things they cannot otherwise understand. This damages the children's reputation and often leads to further isolation, discrimination, or even violence against them.

Other factors that contribute to accusations against children include cultural beliefs that evil spirits can easily possess women and children due to their feeble nature (Afigbo 1991; Okonkwo et al. 2021). Furthermore, it is culturally

believed that children are prone to various forms of sickness and often demonstrate anti-social behaviours such as laziness, mood swings, stubbornness, withdrawal from people, sleepwalking, bed wetting, and soliloquy. Children who depict such behaviours are alleged to be witches. Isioma (2019:44) notes that 'it responds to changes and challenges in the social system that upsets and destabilises social order. Such challenges include political instability, economic regression, unhealthy challenges, family breakups, religious profiteering, ignorance, poverty, natural disasters, and individual and systemic failures, all of which are usually explained by people through the idiom of witchcraft'.

Other factors responsible for violence against children include religious institutions that label children as witches and validate suspicions and accusations of children as witches. (Priest 2017) Depiction of children as witches in Nigerian movies validates the witchcraft belief and charge against children, resulting in violence against them. (Eboiyehi 2017; Onuzulike 2013) Furthermore, a book by Helen Ukabio in which she detailed several indicators of a child-witch has greatly influenced witchcraft accusations against children. Ukabio's indicators include 'screaming at night, always feverish, lack of appetite, unusual boldness, lying, stubbornness, being destructive like spoiling electrical appliances in the house' (Ukpabio 1996:76).

Reasons for witchcraft accusations include ignorance, governance, and inadequate health services (Onuzulike 2013), as well as 'failure of the churches in authentic prophetic ministry, unemployment, youths restiveness, as well as the proliferation of churches which equal commercialisation of religion and the self-enrichment) of the purveyors of prayers and miracles for money and prosperity in Southeast Nigeria' (Essien and Ben 2011:48).

Evidence of witchcraft accusations and violence against children in Nigeria

This section describes three cases of witchcraft accusations against children from River and Lagos states in Nigeria.

Case 1—'They Flogged Us with Hot Machete to Admit We're Witches': 3 Orphans

Imabong, the eldest of the siblings, a 13-year-old girl, explained that she and her sisters are not witches, but that their grandmother forced them to confess that they were. After their parents died—their father in 2014 and their mother in 2016—they dropped out of school. Imabong said that they did not belong to any witchcraft world but are just normal children. Their grandmother made them sell sachet water each day, and they were only allowed to eat once a day after selling.

According to Imabong, their grandmother would bring people, including a man called Uncle Aniekan, to punish them with a hot machete. He would heat the machete in the fire and then flog them with it. They were beaten and pressured to admit that they were responsible for their grandmother's sickness, even though they were not. Out of fear and intimidation, they eventually said they were witches. (Uchechukwu 2018).

Case 2—Child-witches' parents severely tortured

A 40-year-old man named John Friday Akpan from Akwa Ibom State was arrested after allegedly acting on the advice of an herbalist called Okokon. The herbalist had branded Akpan's two children, 12-year-old Elisha and 6-year-old Esther, as witches responsible for his poverty. Believing this, Akpan subjected the children to horrific abuse. He nailed them to a plank and locked them in a thatched hut, leaving them without food for days.

Akpan said that the herbalist told him that his children had taken his money to their master in the witchcraft world and therefore did not deserve mercy. After weeks of starvation, the children were left emaciated and filthy, resembling starving children in famine-stricken regions. They later explained that they survived only because one of their half-sisters, Peace, secretly brought water to the hut whenever their father and stepmother were away from home.

Akpan believed that his children were blocking his progress in life. He claimed that they had tied his prosperity to the witchcraft world and complained that since he started working in his workshop, he had achieved nothing.

The children said the family had lived in Akpabuyo, where their father had initially enrolled them in a private school in Ikot Nkanda. But after their mother died and Akpan married a new wife, Iquo, things turned for the worse. According to the children, their stepmother told them that a herbalist had revealed that a former neighbour in Akpabuyo had once given them food laced with something that turned them into birds at night, allowing them to steal their father's money and deliver it to their master in the witchcraft world.

Elisha was accused of taking 4,000 Naira, while Esther was accused of taking 2,000 Naira. Their father and stepmother became furious, insisting the children had taken the money to their supposed master. From that point, the beatings intensified, and the children were frequently denied food as punishment for an alleged crime rooted in fear and superstition rather than fact. (Unah 2018).

Case 3—Babalawos (traditional healers or native doctors)

Ife is an 11-year-old girl who lives with her parents in Lagos. Her body carries many scars from years of beatings by her parents, pastors, and *babalawo* (a traditional healer or native doctor). She explains that her father and mother regularly beat her and gave her the marks all over her body. They often took her to spiritual churches or to the *babalawo* where she was also beaten because they believed she was a witch.

When asked how she came to see herself as a witch, Ife said she believed she was born that way. From the time she was very small, she heard voices in her head telling her to hurt people. Her parents constantly called her a witch, and whenever anything goes wrong in the family, they blamed her. They accused her of killing her two brothers and her sister, even though she is not sure what really happened to them. When her father's business started failing and her mother's work became unstable, they told her it was her witchcraft activities that were destroying their livelihoods. She did not deny their accusations, because each time she tried to resist, they would either beat her severely or take her back to the *babalawo* who flogged her and tied her to a tree without food for days.

Ife went through a brutal ordeal at the hands of both pastors and *babalawo* who claimed that they were trying to cast out the witchcraft spirit from her.

She describes the experience as terrible. Her parents threatened to send her back to these pastors and *babalawo* if she refused to do whatever they wanted. At one spiritual church, the pastor declared that she was a powerful witch who controlled many others. She was kept there for two weeks. On some days, they tied her with ropes and flogged her with canes. They gave her black substances to drink, saying it would drive out the witches. Sometimes she was denied food for almost three days and still beaten relentlessly.

She recalls that the time with the *babalawo* was the worst. The man repeatedly beat her and tied her to a tree at night, leaving her terrified. At times, he touched her breasts and put his hand on her private parts. When she resisted, he threatened to beat her so badly that if she died, no one would question him. Ife felt unable to tell her parents, believing they would not trust her or would simply say that her witchcraft was responsible for what was happening. The abuse and hopelessness pushed her to contemplate killing herself just to escape the suffering.

When asked directly whether, deep inside, she truly believed she was a witch, Ife's answer showed deep confusion and distress. She said she does not know whether she is a witch or not. The constant accusations, beatings, and repeated labelling by her parents made her feel as though she must be a witch, even though she had never consciously done anything that would prove it to her. Many of the things of which she was accused sound strange to her, and she cannot remember doing them. Yet she has learned to accept the label to avoid further beatings and being taken back to the pastors and *babalawo* who hurt her. **(**Akpata, 2015)

Case Analysis and Discussion

Profile of children accused of witchcraft

The children accused of witchcraft ranged from three to thirteen years of age. All were living in precarious situations. The children in the first case study where orphaned. They began to live with their HIV-positive grandmother who accused them grandchildren of being responsible for her sickness. They were forced to drop out of school.

In the second case study, the children lived with their stepmother and father after the loss of their mother at a tender age. The stepmother claimed that a herbalist revealed to her that a neighbour had offered the children food contaminated with witchcraft. After eating the food, the children metamorphosed into birds and took their father's money to their master in the witchcraft world, who made their father poor.

Although the child in the final case study lived with both parents, their lives were precarious. The parents had lost two sons and a daughter, the father had lost his job, and the mother's business was shaky. The child was accused of all the unfortunate incidents in the family.

The profile of children accused of witchcraft from the data concurs with the literature that the 'children accused of witchcraft are often pre-adolescent or adolescent, vulnerable and living in socially precarious circumstances' (Cimpric 2010:16). Furthermore, it aligns with several studies and surveys that identify indicators of children who are particularly accused of witchcraft. These indicators include:

- Children who have lost both parents and are sent to live with another relative.

- Children who have lost one parent and whose surviving parent has remarried. Disagreements with the step-parent may be the origin of an accusation.

- Children who live with a physical disability (any physical abnormality: large head, swollen belly, red eyes, etc.), those with a physical illness (epilepsy, tuberculosis, etc.) or psychological disorder (autism or Down Syndrome, etc., even those who stutter) or exceptionally gifted children.

- Children who show any unusual behaviour, such as stubbornness, aggression, thoughtfulness, withdrawal, or laziness. Witchcraft discourse defines a range of behaviours that appear unusual or abnormal within a specific context. (Cimpric 2010:17)

Unsurprisingly, in the case studies all of the accused children are from economically-challenged backgrounds, which is a Bartholomew notes (2023:4): 'Accusations and abuse often took place in socio-economically challenging circumstances, coupled with highly enmeshed hierarchical relationships between the family, faith and other connected communities'.

Theme 1: Propagators of Child Witch Accusations

The data revealed that protagonists of witchcraft accusations and violence against children are often family members or religious leaders. Family members included both parents, a father and stepmother, a grandmother, and other relatives. Religious leaders included a pastor and a Babalawo (native doctor). This finding agrees with the literature that those who accuse children of witchcraft are often family members or religious leaders. The actions of mothers accusing their children of witchcraft and harming them are a radical shift from 'a deeply rooted cultural model where women are considered creators, mothers, child-raisers, and by extension, as forces of regeneration for the socio-cultural fabric' (Cimpric 2010:56).

Children are vulnerable and powerless because they are unable to protect and defend themselves. In Africa, they cannot stand up to their parents or talk back to them, because it is culturally unacceptable and considered disrespectful. When the accused children tried denying the accusations, they were beaten until they confessed to being witches or wizards. Sadly, their accusers were those who should have defended and protected the children. Instead, they became the children's worst nightmare. These children, as Briggs and Whittaker (2018) write, were from complex family structures where unhealthy, weak, hostile, and distant relationships existed between them and their primary caregivers.

The data equally demonstrates that some pastors and native doctors label children witches to explain family misfortune, hardship, poverty, or even death. These actions can be described as opportunistic, evil, unkind, negligent, and carefree. 'Witchcraft accusations are exploited by revivalist, charismatic, or Pentecostal churches. Their pastor-prophets fight against witchcraft in the name of God, identifying witches through visions and dreams and then offering treatment – divine healing and exorcism – to the supposed witches. This "spiritual" work, often of a violent nature, reinforces beliefs in witchcraft and

increases accusations.' (Cookey 2015:12) This was observed in the third case study where the pastor diagnosed Ife as a witch through a vision and offered treatment via exorcism by beating and flogging the child.

Witchcraft accusations and persecution of those accused have become sources of income generation for both some pastors and native doctors. Cookey (2015:12) argues that 'the persecution of witches has become a lucrative "business" for many pastor-prophets. The actions of the pastor-prophets "complement" those of traditional healers who also fight against the malevolent forces of witchcraft by detecting supposed witches'. There is no biblical account in which children, elderly widows, or anyone else has been accused of being responsible for the misfortunes of others through supernatural evil powers. This serves as a critical test to determine whether small children or elderly widows are genuinely responsible for the evils of which they are accused.

Theme 2: Description of violence experienced by accused child-witches

In the case studies, different kinds of violence were carried out against the children accused of being witches. This included being beaten with a red-hot machete, flogged with kiboko and sharp objects, starved, threatened with death, forced to drink harmful potions, held captive, neglected, physical restrained, abandoned, separated from relatives, and abused sexually. Ife narrated how the Babalawo (native doctor) who meant to exorcise the witchcraft spirit from her would touch her breast and insert his finger in her private part. If she protested, he would threaten her and beat her, claiming that if she dies, nobody will question him. She was an 11-year-old child. Such abuse is physical, emotional, and sexual (Bartholomew 2023:100).

The violence described in the case studies agrees with other studies that revealed similar and more violence faced by children accused of witchcraft (BBC 2005; Barker, 2009; Dein, 2009). Briggs and Whittaker (2018:6) describe similar violence against children accused of witchcraft, including being 'inflicted neglect and physical abuse, beating, burning, starvation and cutting, semi-strangulation, being tied up, and having to sleep in a bath… Children were isolated, not being allowed to eat meals with the rest of the family, and abandoned'. Though their work was conducted in the United Kingdom, the findings are similar to those of this study. It implies that cultural and religious

beliefs, including worldviews, may not be altered simply by migration. These diaspora Africans, although they live in a culture different from their own, still practice acts unacceptable in their host country. One encouragement is that such practices are outlawed in the UK and, whereas they are often accepted and even empowered in Africa.

Theme 3: Effects of Witchcraft accusation on children's well-being

The study data showed that witchcraft accusations and violence affect children's well-being and has a lasting impact on their development and lives. These effects include physical abuse, psychological and emotional abuse, discrimination, neglect, increased vulnerability, and self-doubt (Stop Child Witch Accusations, n.d.).

Physical abuse includes 'severe beatings, burns caused by fire or acid, poisoning, attempts to bury the child alive, having nails driven into their heads, cutting and imprisonment. In some cases, the extreme nature of this abuse means that it amounts to torture'(Stop Child Witch Accusations, n.d.). In this study, the children were whipped with a cane and sharp objectives and tied to a tree in a bid to exorcise the witchcraft spirit from them. These actions left several marks on the children's bodies, including swollen faces. The effects of this kind of violence on a child's physical appearance can result in low self-esteem.

Psychological and emotional abuse. All the children in the case studies were isolated from family and from society for weeks in an attempt to exorcise the witchcraft spirit. They were labeled witches and stigmatised, which affected their psychological and emotional well-being. One child stated that she was confused by the accusations and no longer willed to live. 'Due to the exclusion and isolation of the children from their family and community and the labelling of them as "evil" and "destructive", and the lack of respect and the lack of dignity experienced by the children', their psychology of self-esteem and emotional well-being were affected (Stop Child Witch Accusations, n.d.).

Discrimination includes denying children access to medical treatment, education, social welfare services, and to religious and family or social life. In the case studies, children dropped out of school to hawk sachets water on the street, were denied access to medical treatment after being injured with a hot

machete, and were denied access to family and social life while locked up in a room by a pastor and tied to a tree by a native doctor. This violence affected their outlook on life, creating doubt, fear, and loneliness.

Neglect includes withholding food, water, sanitation facilities, and clothing. All of the children in the case studies were denied food and water for many days, accompanied by beatings. It resulted in emaciation, sickness, and malnourishment, affecting their health. It also created a lack of sense of belonging, acceptance, trust, protection, and love. The child in the this case study could not inform her parents of her experiences with the native doctor and pastor for fear of being beaten again and accused further. She blurted out sadly, 'I could not tell my daddy and mummy because they would not believe me, or they would say that it is my witchcraft that is causing it'

Increased vulnerability. The children accused of witchcraft were vulnerable and, therefore, were easily taken advantage of. The native doctor sexually abused one, a father and stepmother abandoned two, and three were hawking on the street. Witchcraft accusations increase the vulnerability of children as they are left unprotected, defenceless, and not provided for, which can lead them to the streets and to join gangs. Stop Child Witch Accusations (n.d.) affirms this finding, stating that 'many children who are accused of witchcraft end up on the streets, as they are either abandoned by their parents or other caregivers or run away from home to escape the abuse. Once on the streets, they are vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape, involvement in gangs, trafficking, drugs and child labour'.

Self-doubt. Witchcraft accusations and violence against children breeds self-doubt and confusion. The child in the third case study reported feeling confused about her life: she did not know whether she was a witch. Her parents' frequent accusations of killing her siblings and causing financial difficulties in the family led her to believe that she was a witch. As a result, she started acting like one, claiming to hear voices in her head telling her to harm people. However, most of the things of which she was accused were strange, and she could not remember doing them. This resonates with Anane-Agyei's (2009) research, where 14-year-old Sebastian who was charged with spirit possession over and over started behaving like a possessed person, throwing himself against the wall.

Conclusion

Witchcraft accusations and violence against children in Nigeria is disturbing. Gifted children are being subjected to unethical treatment that affects their well-being. The accusations and violence are often caused by cultural beliefs, misinterpretation of behaviour, and self-interest to gratify desires. Children are the future of the nation. The damage to their mental health and physical bodies is substantial, which has a significant impact on the country's development and progress. The witchcraft ideology must be discredited through proper education and advocacy, and the perpetrators of these accusations and violence must be punished.

Recommendation

Based on the outcome of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Institutions, such as churches, family homes, hospitals, counselling centres, and police stations, should be places of refuge for children with spiritual problems and mental and physical health issues. All institutions should collaborate to rehabilitate and rescue children with difficulties. The family is the first contact for children. Parents and siblings should protect children. They should desist from labelling any family member a as witch or a wizard and torturing them unlawfully. Those with spiritual problems should be prayed for so that the power of Christ may free them. Some children may be suffering from health challenges that require medical attention. Pastors should send such cases to medical practitioners for medical help rather than taking the law into their own hands to maltreat innocent children with any form of violence.

2. Movies depicting children as witches should be banned by the National Film and Video Censors Board that regulates film production in Nigeria because what people watch can influence their actions in real life. Some of these movies promote violence against those accused of witchcraft. Also, academics specialising in media studies should research the impact of films portraying children as witches. They can

advocate for policy changes with regulatory bodies to promote responsible content that does not incite violence or perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

3. Governments are instituted to protect and care for all citizens. Cruel treatment against children, such as torture, starvation, verbal abuse, sexual molestation, exploitation, abandonment, and death should be condemned. Nigeria's leaders should rise to the task of defending the marginalised and persecuted individuals and religious institutions that perpetrate evil against children. They should implement the laws on domestic violence against children.

4. Academia – Theological education plays a major role in training pastors, missionaries, and evangelists in accurate interpretations of scripture. This is accomplished by incorporating critical studies of biblical hermeneutics and addressing misinterpretations of scriptural texts in curricula. Educators who train pastors and church leaders must teach them to interpret scripture responsibly. Workshops, seminars, and courses can be organised to raise awareness about the harmful implications of misusing religious texts, especially passages that Nigerian pastors use in validating witchcraft accusations.

   In addressing these issues, academics can also collaborate with local churches to develop programs that promote children's rights, protect children, and ensure appropriate consequences for violations of government law. These efforts will keep everyone informed about the dangers of witchcraft accusations and encourage proactive measures to combat injustice, fostering an environment of peace and human dignity.

   Furthermore, academia plays an important role in raising awareness about witchcraft accusations among children through distributing educational materials and pamphlets on how to protect children and how to seek government intervention to rescue children unfairly accused of witchcraft. More research on witchcraft involving children should be supported financially by higher institutions. This support can lead to greater community awareness, encouraging legal measures to

help children experiencing psychological trauma caused by witchcraft accusations, allowing them to find relief and healing through medical intervention.

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Peace Initiative for African Contexts: a Theological Thinking Beyond the Culture of Violence

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Abstract

This article presents a theological reflection on the contribution of David H. Kajom's *Violence and Peace Initiative in Nigeria* (2015). This conversation is meant to closely read Kajom's work and present it to other readers in order to further reflect on the urgency of peace in the world of violence. Kajom's major contribution to the church in the aforementioned work is to stir the interest of his readers, especially from West African Evangelical circles, to rethink their relationship with the World Council of Churches (WCC). This he did in terms of having a closer look at the projection of the WCC on 'the Decade to Overcome Violence'. This is a hopeful projection, not only for Africa, but more so for the entire world. This article does not argue that violence can be overcome within a certain decade, nor does Kajom present such argument. But rather the possibility of self-critique and reorientation in a world full of violent actions is possible. We must beyond the culture of violence to the life-giving project of the church of Jesus Christ as the community of peace and love in the world. This reflection is offered as a memorial on the passing of Dr. David H. Kajom whose memory would continue to challenge us in the years to come.

Introduction

Let me begin with some personal reflections on my encounters with the late ECWA Trustee, Rev. Dr. David H. Kajom.[1] My first encounter with him was during a choir day service in Katsina State to which he had been invited as the guest speaker. It was a great time of wonder and encounter. I never thought he would speak the way he spoke; his diction and seriousness were telling as he exposed the biblical text according to the theme of the occasion.

Later, we met at Stellenbosch just one year before his doctoral graduation. It was a good place and a creative moment in which he and his friend and colleague Dr. Nathan Chiroma stood by us as great parents and mentors from the early stages of our higher theological education onwards. Dr. Kajom has been a great voice with which to be reckoned in all manner of Christian leadership and theological engagement. During our last meeting in Kaduna, we had a very vibrant discussion on how to continue the liaison of good relationships between seminaries and public universities in Nigeria. Dr. Kajom was very enthusiastic and was at the fore in suggesting very useful ways in which we can continue to create and maintain useful relationships across different social and ecclesial boundaries.

In what follows, I try to further listen to the voice of Kajom through his magnum opus, namely, *Violence and Peace Initiative in Nigeria* (2015). In this seminal book, his major research at Stellenbosch University is given a wider circulation and articulation. Kajom focuses his systematic theological contribution in search of viable applications more than just abstract argumentation. His dissertation provides a theological assessment of the World Council of Churches '(WCC) 'decade to overcome violence 'hope and strategy in order that the church may reorient the world on how to learn to live differently in an age of violence. In this article I will engage in conversation with Kajom in order to allow his voice to be heard again and to see how to take

[1] This article is to honour the memory of late ECWA Trustee Revd. Dr. David H. Kajom. Before his death he was elected and sworn in on 22nd August, 2020 as an ECWA Trustee.

his passion further through our own passions and thoughts in doing theology in a very critical situation.

The passing of Dr. Kajom came as a serious shock. Many may understand that the illness prior to his demise was some kind of preparation toward that final exit, yet at every death there is the thought of loss and the pain of separation. Nevertheless, in the hope and trust we have in Christ who is our life hidden in God (Col. 3:1), we shall continue to remember Kajom's good legacies, especially his ideas and teachings that call us into good action and deeper reflections.

Violence and Peace are Kajom's major contribution and testament. Just as Byang H. Kato left us a legacy and memory in his published research, *The Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975), the testament of Kajom is a clarion call for a new orientation of life for a culture of peace over and against a culture of violence. Just as Kato called for the rootedness of evangelical theology in Africa, Kajom left a legacy of creative peace initiative for a global world. This was majorly influenced by the research interest of Stellenbosch University in the promotion of peace and justice from the churches to the societies in Africa and the wider world.

In Kajom's contribution we are called into direct contact and dialogue with the WCC and the ecumenical church movement. The ecumenical initiative met serious resistance in many instances of African missionary enterprise and the rise of the indigenous churches in Africa. The suspicion of the infiltration of pluralism or universalism to destabilise the truth of the church and make it liberal and irresponsible did not deter Kajom. Rather, he ventured into a very creative and intentional ecumenical dialogue that we need to revisit in order to find ways for creative discourse and living as a united church in the world under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Every true church must be the church of Jesus Christ. Thus, every church must accept his lordship and submit to his command to the glory of God. Any church that defines itself based on its denominational identity has missed the urgency of the call of Jesus Christ to be the one body which he prayed for and established at his earthly advent (John 17). The being of the church as the body of Christ must be maintained and promoted in Africa and beyond.

In order to further see how Kajom's quest to dialogue with the WCC's initiative for peace and development can be further received in our Protestant church context in Africa we shall briefly explore his discussion of the dream of the ecumenical church to overcome violence and create a new culture of peace and solidarity by designation the 'decade to overcome violence' (DOV). The DOV can be seen as a novel action plan for churches and other social organisations to seek peace and to promote its meaning and function for the gift of life, not death.

On Remembering Violence

The theme of violence is so complex and pervasive that no age can be innocent of it in terms of its perpetration and the actual experience of its effects. Hannah Arendt (1969) wrote about violence as a systemic evil. The idea of evil as a creative way for creative destruction has been multiplied in the many different technological devices that are being used today to hold our world captive. The rise of European enlightenment popularised the polarity between man and himself. The separation of life from its essence has been the age-old project for human mastery of the earth. The identity of the object by the subject has made the subject dominate and destroy the object. The interconnection of life has been relegated to fetishism and the glorification of nature. This became possible because of the acquisition of new power of man.

Francis Bacon said, 'Knowledge is power' (quoted in Azamfirei 2016:65). This became the wisdom of the age and a danger to life which is constantly vulnerable. The knowledge of man as domination has been variously justified by the misappropriation God's mandate to man to dominate the earth in Genesis 1:28. But the mandate was given, not in order that man may destroy the earth and consequently destroy himself, but so that man may discern the order of nature and respect it for its further growth and flourishing. In what has become 'culture of violence' (Kajom 2015:78), Kajom and others with a passion for life in the midst of the threat of death and the darkness of the age have raised their voices from Africa to call out for a new possibility. It is the task of Christian theology to stand in the midst of the fray and never to recede to the shadows.

The culture of violence is the creative action of those who have made themselves violent by choice. God did not create man as a man of violence. Even the devil became the devil, falling from his initial angelic status, by the choice of arrogance and pride. No matter how violent a culture has become within any given community, it can never be accepted as normal. Violence is the creative mechanism of power that denies the space given to man and all things to live in the beauty of freedom. Violence is the arrogance of power by which life is denied of its essence and systemically relinquished into the dread and horror of nothingness. The culture of violence eats the fabric of our society. It is the ghetto response to which many young people have been subjected. That is why we have many terrorists today who claim to be 'freedom fighters'. The culture of violence is the horror of our time. We live without thoroughly reading the times. That is why many human beings today obey the orders of Antichrist in the name of Christ and why pious people who claim the religion of peace unleash terror by their passionate actions.

Remembering violence is both the goodness and the badness of our creatureliness. We are good when we remember and our remembering makes violence always new. We may seek to forget the pain and the horror, but must never forget the faces and the names of those that violence has consumed. The terror of our time is that human life has been greatly conspired against. 'The modern time regime '(Assmann 2020) has become the age of terror and anxiety. Paul Tillich (1980) discovered the meaninglessness of life once the atmosphere of peace and freedom has been turned into the atmosphere of anxiety. Jürgen Moltmann (1975:114-117, 314) called attention to the nature of the church in the friendship of Jesus. Friendship is the key to freedom in the world. Thus as the church that embodies the life and mission of Jesus Christ we must learn to live in ways that promotes that 'culture of life' even in the 'dangers of our time' (Moltmann 2019:3).

In this conversation it will be argued that a true human being will not willing turn him- or herself into a beast against other human being. A true human being is one who loves life, not death. It is through the love of life that we lead a life that gives freedom and space for joy for others and for ourselves. We cannot be true to ourselves when we embrace a culture of violence over a culture of peace. We may justify the culture of violence in our quest for self-protection and the protection of our families and properties, but deep down

what keeps us open and yearning for the future is the unsettling question of life, not death.

Kajom (2015:79) sees violence as a 'complex social phenomenon' in our modern world. In modern acts of violence and its relation to either religion or politics, 'Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?' (I Cor. 1:20, NIV). In selfish human wisdom the generosity of life is denied and the horror of death is embraced and shared. Not all violence leads to death, but in all violence there are images of death and the horror thereof is the pain that lingers. We cannot say that we are safe from violence or that we cannot be perpetrators of evil. This is a confession from the vulnerability and fragility of our creatureliness and our openness to act according to our will. As seen in Nietzsche (1968:500-508), the human will to power is the arrogant human creation of him- or herself into a god. In this power, called terror, there is nothing that matters except that power. The cry of the destitute, the gasping of a dying child or mother does nothing to move the cold heart and hand out-stretched with a knife or a cold finger against a gun's trigger.

The complexity of our societies can be seen in the waves of violence coming out of them. There is no longer a safe port in the world. Everywhere and everyone is exposed to the danger and horror of a quick and even violent death. The sights and stories of 'violence against girls and women' (Kajom 2015: 98) being heard across the world today only makes us cold within ourselves. The incessant kidnapping atrocities of Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen terrorists in Nigeria only make the country another veil of tears. Horror is everywhere, and ears which hear about that today almost accept it as normal in the age of terror.

The fading story of Leah Sharibu (Dayil and Chi 2021:307-314)has made the Nigerian government cold against the freedom of the entire country. Leah is a metaphor for Nigeria. The pain of her captivity is felt and suffered in every house. Every school girl is a potential Leah, every mother is a mother of a Leah, and the entire country harbours the perpetrators of such inhumane acts that make our women and children people who live with the taste of tears. The pain and bloodiness of Nigeria turns us to a serious search, not only for God, but also for ourselves.

Violence is experienced even in the context of the church. All churches who call on the name of Christ must learn to speak peace in his name. The church of the Christ does not speak only for the culture of peace but also for that of love. It is from the love of Christ that the peace of Christ flows into our hearts and forms the words we speak in his name. The social adulteration of the sanctity of the church may not be hurriedly blamed on society. Rather we can argue that the church has often neglected her place and identity, which is why the cultures of evil are creeping into it. The wisdom of spiritual enlightenment is the discernment of evil in all its guises and moving away from it. 'For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and to move away from evil is understanding' (Job 28:28).

The problem of violence in our time has been further discussed in what Kajom (2015:101) calls 'cultural violence'. This is the situation in which a certain culture unleashes violence against another because of hatred. This is where tribalism gives rise to ethnic cleansing and all kinds of systemic violence. Hatred of others is the breeding ground for cultural violence. This happens, not only in terms of physical attack and the use of high-tech mechanisms, but also in our inner attitudes and the actual words we speak. Thus we can unleash enormous terror and do violence against and upon those who hear us.

There is also 'cross-cultural violence' (Kajom 2015:101), which is the movement of hatred and violence from one culture to another. This happens in the wrong kind of solidarity, against the positive solidarity of peace. The solidarity of violence is justified in the name of freedom fighting or in retaliation of the evil done to a brother or friend. The tendency to repay evil with evil takes place even across cultures in which their beauty should be seen as attractive diversities that should make them friends and members of the same families. The evil of cultural violence may the fight of the older generation for the sake of the younger, but the fact that it is driven by a self-serving notion of having been there before others breaks the spirit of positive solidarity and renders itself useless for the formation of peace and order in any context. There is no shame greater than a church that turns itself into a tribal stronghold. The name of the church is *ecclesia*, one called out of the systems of the world into the new light and life of Jesus Christ in which all members are one with each other and with Christ (John 15-17). The new spirit of the age (*zeitgeist*) is a spirit of divisiveness and self-service even at the expense of the

others. The culture of Christianity must be the life-giving nature of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Where there is goodness and life in the righteousness of Christ, the Kingdom of God is realised among us and grows with us.

Another serious form of violence that has also become systemic in Africa is that which is done to our environment. This is what Kajom (2015:102) calls 'environmental violence'. Moltmann (1985:20) had described it as earlier 'ecological crisis'. This is seen in human greed and careless use of creation which displays the idea of the 'crisis of domination' (Moltmann, 1985:23). This is the systemic destruction of the environment in which we live. It is the pollution of the ecosystem by the bio-waste we release into the air to make it toxic, and the violence of cutting down trees and pouring poisons out onto the ecosystem. The dying of trees and other lesser seen and known living things only tells the future how irresponsible many of the present generation are to them and to their future. Our destruction of the environment is also an indirect way of our own self-destruction. We need to understand the idea of a careful and God-honouring way of receiving of our environment as the given place for our dwelling and flourishing. This has implications not only on ourselves as those who live today, but also and especially on 'tomorrow's children '(Alves 1972).

The 'proliferation of arms' and ongoing 'militarisation' (Kajom 2015:104) may be justified by nation-states as a sure way of keeping themselves safe. But internally all these arms that are circulating, whether small or large, only demonstrate more about the depth of decadence, fear, and mistrust in our world. They do not speak the call for peace and love amongst ourselves. The proliferation of arms in the hands of a few has become the major bulwark behind the rising tide of terrorism in our contexts. The person who deliberately attacks another person does so in the power of his arms. He attacks the other he hates and wants to kill who was totally unknown before, being seen just because the attacker wants to taste his arm.

The focus of people in both the developed and developing worlds today has been the collection of arms and the kinds of bombs they can control. The more ammunition a nation or group of people own, the more others fear them. Nobody can boast of controlling the other without the possession of

sophisticated weapons to use against them in case of any misbehaviour. The actual lives of human beings have been reduced to being more like animals in the forest. What should be a community of life has become a competitive game of hunt and kill. Militarism is on the increase in order to keep the political elites and their structures safe, even at the expense of the safety of the people. The new propaganda of more-military-power-equals-more-security has been overtaken by the power of money in the realm of politics. Partisan politics has turned the military into a power to own and control, not forces for peace and security.

Militarism has grown to such an extent that the general citizenry often live with great suspicion and discomfort. For example, many instances of guerrilla attacks on innocent villages in Nigeria that have left serious human and property destruction have indicated the use of military uniforms and arms, whether given or stolen, tells a lot about the violence people can do to their fellow citizens in the ongoing sad situations in which we live.

The post-colonial era has not been innocent of the ongoing violence that seeks to see and destroy people, because of the vested interests of those who rule over those being ruled. Up to now the emancipation of developing countries such as those in Africa is still a far cry from what it should be. Systemic racism and intimidation have been an ongoing crisis between the West and the rest (Terreblanche 2002:2012). The rise of superpower nations has not made the world safer than it was before their rise. The quest for power seems to be solely about the acquisition of nuclear warheads and the intensification of the forces of control to destroy lesser powers. 'Might is right' has been the ongoing marching orders of the superpowers. The need for democratisation and healthy negotiation has become only the talks of lips, not the passion or commitment of hearts. Such behaviours makes the world superpowers more ambiguous to understand and to rely upon.

In the midst of the ugliness of violence and its increasing tide, the WCC has been optimistic that the possibility of peace is still open. The call for peace must be shifted to the task for peace. To have peace now in the context of world violence and chaos requires a new sense of creativity in which the way things have been must change to become new ways of doing them. The WCC

works for a decade to overcome violence (Kajom 2015:104). This is the main issue that would occupy our thoughts in the following segment.

The Decade to Overcome Violence?

There is no doubt that many people are desperate to see an end to the culture of violence in our world. The WCC's project of the DOV is equally stimulating and demanding. The hopeful thought that violence cannot reign in the world of God forever gives us the hope of a new dawn. In this faith that we live and hope that one day there would be a world without violence, but with only the peace and righteousness of God (Mal. 4; Rev. 22). No doubt whoever hears about the coming of this new world will think of a utopia that is the perfect world in which everyone is happy and satisfied.

But what matters in Kajom's view, as inspired by the WCC, is not to raise people's hope for a certain utopia in this world, but rather to call attention to the necessity of the church working together as a body to ensure the application of the ethics of the Kingdom of God on earth, ethics that cares for all people and for the whole earth. This would be an important contribution for the preservation of God's creation and the right attitude in waiting for the coming of his Kingdom.

It is interesting to note how our cultures and various traditions 'play roles' in sustaining the culture of violence (Kajom 2015:79). The irony is that it is only within the same cultures and traditions that we can reflect and work together in order to produce a new sense of life together that will better represent our humanity and our ecclesial nature. The colonial cultures of human domination, whether from the West, the Arabs, or even fellow Africans, have been supporting factors in the backwardness of Africa and the wide gulf between its people. The traditions of prestige and the ownership of territories in which no stranger or newcomer is welcomed make us live in likeminded ghettos and seem to push away or even kill those who seek to come near us. There have been clashes of interests and historic realities in many African communities in which those who were given asylum or shelter to rest and flourish for a time have become the major occupants of those areas. The culture and traditions of self-imposed interests and fabricated histories must be closely scrutinised and addressed if we are to be restored to our true history and our true selves.

The kinds of technological devices we use more often than not end up reorienting us differently and negatively. The 'movies which teach violence to children' are watched in our homes (Kajom 2015:79). If we are to raise children with a new value system, especially with the values of human life and the beauty of creation in the presence of God, we must be intentional in analysing the movies our children watch and in providing healthy commentaries that will help them see the blind spots and even seeming conspiracies in the movies that they have otherwise not seen.

According to Kajom's (2015:82) observation, 'The Decade to Overcome Violence was timed to coincide with the UN's Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010'. This move came with great responsibility and with the feeling of life for the coming generation. If we continue to be careless about the future, we have closed it to those to whom it rightfully belongs. Thus, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010:42) argues, the responsible person is not one who wishes to extricate him- or herself from the situation, but rather one who thinks and works hard in order to provide a better space and condition of life for the coming generation (see also Huber 2014:978). The contribution of Kajom in conversation with WCC was not meant to polarise opinions. Rather Kajom sought ways to pave the way for the creation of a new Africa, an Africa that would be more free and just than the present conditions in which we currently live.

The idea of a decade to overcome violence (2001-2010) was creatively outlined with visionary goals in order to actualise the dreams of its founders (Kajom 2015:77). These are good dreams of hope and gratitude in unity and progress of all the churches. In Kajom's survey, he (2015:83) presents the following point: 'The goals are predicated on the conviction that peace making must be at the core of the life and witness of the churches'. Furthermore, the goals include, 'holistic address, to challenge the churches to non-justification of violence, promote community not competition, to learn to pursuit peace with the others, challenge militarisation etc' (Kajom 2015: 83-84). The character of DOV, as created by the WCC, is that 'by directing international attention both to the challenges of overcoming violence and of building cultures of peace and to initiatives being taken in this regard by the churches' (Kajom 2015: 89). Kajom's research does not promise to 'overcome violence completely'

(2015:128). Rather it projects the significance of faith and hope into a very deplorable situation like that of violence.

In Kajom's (2015:128) perspective, 'An important motivation for this commitment is the determination to stand alongside certain groups of people who always seem to be the victims of most forms of violence on account of the unjust values that dominate structures of human relationships in our world today'. The call for the reconstruction of the culture of violence into a new culture of just, peaceful, and rational relationality is urgent. Human beings as creatures of God who bear the image of God, thus their dignity should be respected and cherished. To deny or violate human dignity to dishonour God the creator. Working for peace and the dignity of people and creation is part of the call of 'the ethics of responsibility' (Huber 2014: 973). This does not mean that the human beings who suffer violence are God themselves, but rather that God's presence in solidarity with them and their bearing the image of God in their being makes them sacred people in all places and at all times. Persecuting God's people is persecuting God himself. In the book of Acts, when Jesus appears to Saul, a persecutor of the church, he says, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?' (Acts 9:4, NIV, emphasis added). There is no one who should be isolated and despised from the company of human beings, because all human beings are created in the image of the same God.

Having seen the perspectives of Kajom in conversation to the WCC in outlining the need for and possibility of a new culture of life against death, we now turn to discuss some key issues that surround our calling and duties for the provision of peace and unity in the church and in society.

Seeking Cultures of Peace

It is the calling and mandate of the church to cultivate and nurture a culture that seeks peace among all peoples. Enns (2011:9) describes what we the ecumenical church has come through and what it has learned from its shared experience: 'We have learned so much—about ourselves and others, about the ugliness of violence and the beauty of reconciliation. And we discovered how the unity of the church—in reconciled diversity—is itself a credible sing of peace'. He calls the church to a peace-giving life rooted in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. True peace is found in the unity of Christ as reflected in the

high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 (Enns 2005:8). The peace-giving life and message of Jesus Christ are pivotal for all Christians and church communities to be people and communities of God's peace. This peace is not the absence of suffering in the world, but rather is the turning of human life toward the light of life in the presence of God. We steal, kill, and destroy when tempted and pushed by the evil one whose mission is the annihilation of all life and goodness. The culture of violence cannot be condoned in the church of Jesus Christ. Rather it must be critically opposed and actively resisted. When one suffers, all suffer. When one unleashes violence, he or she has betrayed him- or herself from his or her actual humanity.

Overcoming violence in our time and local places remains a serious challenge for the church. The search for peace must begin from the self. This is why Kajom (2015:80) has a heading in which he discussed 'Self-critique and ministry of peace'. The best critique is self-critique. The arrogance of human freedom always tries to convince one that he or she does not need any further correction from others. This sense of self-sufficiency only leads to self-service and arrogance. The act of self-critique unveils the truth of our being truly human in our own eyes and in relation to other human beings. The discipline to come into conversation with oneself is the actual manifestation of human maturity. If we sit tight and think through issues in our minds we will be led to better options than the rashness of empty zeal, which leads to violence and the extinction of the strength that could have been deployed in the building of lives rather than in their destruction.

Kajom (2015:93) explores some models for peace building in ecclesia and social contexts. His ideas have to do with identity formation and a spirituality of forgiveness and reconciliation. When people learn the courage to come together and discuss their situation, they will find the strength to work together to combat the problems that are challenging them. The church must always be bridge-building by means of true forgiveness and the restoration of good relationships between persons and communities. There is no denying the fact that there have been serious inhumane crimes committed in different places that seem beyond the human power to forgive. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) studied the problem of apartheid crimes against humanity. She calls different people to attend to the need for forgiveness and the restoration of good relationships. This is the only sure path to a good and

secure future. As the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) wrote, there is 'no future without forgiveness'. To have any meaningful future life in church and communities, there is need to discover and apply the power of forgiving love and reconciliation.

Kajom (2015:83) argues that the churches today must be 'churches seeking reconciliation and peace.' This is seen in the discipleship of Jesus Christ. In his *Sanctorum Communio,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1998:208-15) sees the church as the embodiment of Jesus Christ in actual communities by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Russel Botman (1997:30-39) calls this paradigmatic to contextual Christianity. One cannot see Jesus apart from the church or the church apart from Jesus. Rather, one must see the Church as reflective of Jesus , the mirror through which or by which the reality of Christ is made manifest to the world. This is the new sociality of the church in the world (Green 1999). In this regard, we may see the church as the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ in the world. The promises of Jesus to his disciples and, by extension, to all believers that he will never leave nor forsake them (John 14:18; Heb. 13:5) reminds us of the constant presence of Jesus Christ in the world through the church. This marks the church as a distinctive community, born at the cross and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. It would be an ecclesial naiveté to see the church as a merely a cultural or political organisation. That is a degeneration of the church as the sanctified body of Jesus Christ to being merely a human-made organisation. All the structures of the church cannot rise beyond the framework of being brothers and sisters in the fellowship of Jesus Christ. We will only overcome the culture of violence and surely celebrate an age of peace in our world when we change our perspectives of life and ethics. We will live together in the goodness of life and harmony when we live together as family, brothers and sisters, in the fellowship of Jesus Christ. To all unbelievers who are outside the church, we can help them overcome their fears and the self-negation of life when we extend to them the hands of fellowship as the ambassadors of God's peace, sent in the name and power of Christ.

Conclusion: Justice for Peace

In conclusion, for the church to be an active agent of God's peace in the world it needs to be serious about providing good pastoral care. Pastor care is an important model for the growth of Christian influence in the world today

(Magezi 2016:1, Waruta & Kinoti 2000). The need for pastoral care as a framework for peace in order to bring hope and reconciliation to war-torn countries and divided societies cannot be overemphasised. Kajom (2015:129) calls us to build a consensus for peace. Ecumenically speaking, this could cut across many boundaries among people and provide them good access to one another and to God.

In the midst of religious crises, intolerance, and many instances of social injustice , we are called to learn to negotiate for peace as a just cause (Moltmann 1997:189; 2012; Holung 2008). This negotiation is not the search for blame, but rather a move toward the healing of the wounded and the comfort of all those in affliction. Then we shall see how we can be creative in organising ourselves and our communities for growth toward life, rather than resigning ourselves to despair and death.

Kajom (2015:129) argues that, 'The part which violence and war play in our present societies is a sin against God and a degradation of humankind.' The main foundation that Kajom envisages for building a new culture of peace is that of justice. No one can build peace without justice. There is a slogan which says, 'No justice, no peace'. This is a cry from the soul of all humanity and from the earth itself to be given justice as its due. It cuts across all strata of life in which people live and suffer. The restoration of life is only possible with the restoration of justice in God's love. 'Peace requires a new international order based on justice for and within all nations, and respect for God-given humanity and dignity of every person' (Kajom 2015:129). The call goes beyond mere human toleration to actual acknowledgement of the creative actions of God to help us to be more like God in our being more human in the world. For this to be possible, 'what is required is a critical re-appropriation of the age-old wisdom, if you want peace, prepare for peace (not for war)' (Kajom 2015: 131).

Dr. David Kajom was well celebrated at his funeral as a great man of God, a man of great determination, friendship, and steadfastness. His book *Violence and Peace Initiative in Nigeria* can only be interpreted now as his major testament for the church and society. It echoes the words of Jesus at his own earthly departure from his disciples: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give you' (John 14:27 NIV).

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Poverty Alleviation in Churches in Africa: a Case for a Strategy Steeped in Christian Discipleship

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical and theological examination of behavioural poverty, arguing that the underlying theories used to explain poverty often shape the nature of the solutions proposed. It contends that addressing behavioural poverty should be central to the church's poverty alleviation efforts, as it can generate significant impact independent of state or societal cooperation. The study proposes a philosophical reorientation that situates ministry to the poor within the church's disciple-making mandate, employing a two-tiered strategy that prioritises transformation within the faith community while extending compassion to others. The model integrates context-sensitive strategies, structural and accountability systems, renewal of the mind, and objectives that transcend self-interest, portraying poverty alleviation as a transformative discipleship journey that turns former receivers into self-sustainers and givers.

Introduction

There is broad agreement that poverty is a critical problem that demands solutions. Theories used to explain poverty, however, often determine the types of solutions that are proposed. Some scholars favour a unidimensional (or hybrid) measurement of poverty, defining it mainly as falling below the poverty line that reflects the average income level of a community (Ravallion,

2020:185). Others, however, prefer a multidimensional approach that views poverty as the result of multiple forms of deprivation (Fragoso, 2025:248). The multidimensional perspective attempts to capture and analyse a wide range of variables that contribute to poverty, though this can be complex and difficult to manage. This is because, as argued by Duclos and Tiberti (2016:1–3), some of the features of multidimensional studies, such as the way poverty and inequality are linked, may work well in a one-dimensional context but not in a multidimensional one.

Another perspective emphasises vulnerable communities. Here, poverty is understood as powerlessness in the face of misfortune or crime, leaving individuals and groups dysfunctional, ill, damaged, exploitable, and deprived in many ways (Tucker 2021:146). This view stresses how a person's social context can condition them into a state of deep helplessness, creating a poverty trap in which both the conditioning and its environment reinforce deprivation (Barrientos 2007). In this sense, poverty produces vulnerability, but vulnerability also prevents individuals or households from escaping poverty, perpetuating the cycle (Iorhen 2021:188).

Brady (2019:155–175) offers a more structured framework by grouping poverty's contributors into three broad categories: behavioural, structural, and political. Behavioural theories stress individual responsibility and decision-making. Structural theories highlight demographic patterns and labor market dynamics that shape both behaviour and poverty. Political theories focus on the influence of power and institutions in generating poverty and regulating the interdependent relationship between poverty and individual behaviour.

Though everything contributing to poverty matters, contributions of behaviour appear to be within the power of the individual to overcome with support from the church. Additionally, helping people to change values and behaviour through Christian discipleship accord with the mission of the Church (Matt 28:18–20). It is, therefore, plausible for the Church to make helping the poor to overcome behavioural issues associated with poverty its focus, without withdrawing its voice from solutions discernible from other causes of poverty. However, in order to do this, the church must get beyond the impasse produced by the debate as to whether values and behaviour do play a significant role in poverty entrenchment.

Why Values and Behaviour Matter in Poverty Alleviation

There have been questions about whether behaviour and values contribute to poverty. Some scholars see no relationship between behaviour, values, and poverty, arguing that such associations "blame the victim" for conditions produced by unjust social structures. Dorey (2010:333–343), for instance, rejects attributing any responsibility to the poor, seeing it as undermining compassion. Jones and Ye (1999:439–458) similarly argue that there is little evidence connecting values or choices of the poor to their poverty.

However, the Book of Proverbs often link poverty to behavioural choices such as laziness (6:9–11, 10:4, 19:15, 20:13), rash or unwise actions (11:24, 14:23, 21:5, 28:19), failure to heed instruction (13:18), and drunkenness (23:20–21) rather than purely external circumstances. When individuals and families are plagued by these dysfunctions, they sometimes become a deficit passed down through generations. This transfer of values perpetuates a culture where opportunities for learning and behavioural changes are scorned, leaving individuals and families less empowered to succeed.

Doss (2011:148–152) identified three categories of poverty causes: (1) those due to individual choices, (2) those partly linked to choices, and (3) those beyond individual control. This suggests that if bad choices are minimised or eliminated, the economic situation of the people would be positively impacted. Kakwata (2020:101–119) put it differently by referring to poverty as having individualistic, structural, and beliefs components. These descriptions locate poverty not only externally but also in what happens inside of a person's mind, which may also be passed from generation to generation.

One of the ways in which values and behaviour help entrench poverty is highlighted in the theory of Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty (IGT). Bird and Higgins (2011:9) described IGT as "the private and public transfer of deficits in assets and resources from one generation to another." They clarify that such transfer is not a simple "package" but occurs through a complex interplay of unhelpful and harmful influences that shape people's likelihood of becoming poor. Harmful influences include a fatalistic worldview that demotivates a strong work ethic, values that prioritize for magical solutions

and living for the moment, wrong attitude to knowledge, and the belief that government owns the responsibility for their welfare.

The importance of addressing behaviours, wrong values and practices, and poor decision-making extends beyond individuals to leadership at all levels. Burnham (2007:617–619) argues that corruption-driven choices by community and national leaders often explain why intervention programs fail. DeLisi and Wright (2019) also highlight more than fifty years of social science evidence showing that behaviour is a key predictor of life outcomes. They warn that denying the role of behaviour deprives the poor of opportunities to break free from poverty. Similarly, Vass Gal (2015) identifies destructive cultural values as drivers of generational poverty and social exclusion.

Some argue that social exclusion is the problem and not behaviour. Umeji (2020:16–17) considers it not only the major cause of poverty but also the determinant of its severity, defining it as the denial of participation in society despite one's willingness to be included. Yet, willingness may not suffice if individuals refuse to conform to community or workplace norms. Althammer (2014:1–2) reinforces this by noting that social inclusion is largely contingent on adapting to dominant cultural values, since societies function within shared norms and attitudes.

My observations suggest that antisocial values, destructive behaviours, and poor choices contribute significantly to both social exclusion and poverty among the informal settlement dwellers of Mende, Lagos. As Powledge (2011:558) explains, repetitive behaviours form learned patterns with generational consequences, creating social and even epigenetic conditions that align with Bird and Higgins's (2011:9) concept of transferred deficits. These deficits pose major challenges to the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs that consist mainly of giving things or money to the poor. Unless churches confront and transform the underlying worldview and values contributing to poverty entrenchment in communities, their interventions are likely to create dependencies rather than lead to exit from poverty.

Another significant issue among some poor people is the philosophy of fate which aligns with a fatalistic worldview. Wu, Chen, and Ng (2020:3) describe a belief in fate as embracing a life in which event outcomes are already

predetermined by external forces. According to this description, those who believe in fate are likely to think that power outside of themselves already determined for them a destiny of poverty in a way that they can do nothing about either to prevent or change it. This is the case with some poor people I have personally interacted with in Lagos. Hakim (2019:150) found a correlation between the fatalistic attitude of a fishing community in the Philippines to their "weak instrumental values," that is, weakness in their commitment to and pursuit of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that would have improved outcomes. Additionally, fatalism or belief in fate makes people see themselves as victims. Victim mentality is known to produce in people attitudes of distrust, aggressiveness, destruction, egoistic choices, and anti-team spirit (Gollwitzer, Süssenbach, and Hannuschke 2015:2). These characteristics are presented as the building blocks of social exclusion, the lack of agency, and the wait for outside forces to fix everything.

How will any church poverty alleviation program that does not address the worldview and values of a people crippled by these pathologies succeed? Samir (2019) makes the case that alleviation practices based on simple handouts to the poor treat the poor as an object rather than the subject of development, eventually creating dependencies. Studies suggest that some sub-Saharan African countries conditioned by over-reliant on aid have slipped into dependency, corruption, market distortion, and deepening poverty, with nothing left except the need for more aid (Ogundipe, Ojeaga and Ogundipe 2014:301). It does appear that the same reasoning is true of both individuals and families that live on handouts and churches must extend help to the poor in ways that discourage dependence.

Correspondingly, Sunshine (2012) presented a biblical approach to poverty alleviation as that of a partnership in which those who have, help the needy with context-sensitive opportunities to improve their lot. The poor also have the responsibility of utilising efficiently such opportunities given to them. Efficient utilisation of such opportunities by the poor would require among other essentials, a right belief system that encourages the right choices and a strong work ethic. Such a correlation between beliefs and behaviours has been shown by Davis-Kean et al (2008) to be increasingly important as responsibility grows.

The Bible contains ample promises that the Lord intends to prosper his children by blessing the work of their hands (Deut 2:7, 14:26, 15:10, 16:15, 24:19, 28:12, 30:9). It, therefore, follows that a view of God as one who will bless without work is a challenge to the churches attempts to alleviate poverty. Unfortunately, where work is not embraced as God's primary means of providing for people, the resulting inefficient use of opportunities and recurring failure might sometimes be wrongly interpreted by the poor as fate.

Biblical Principles on Poverty Alleviation

Ephesians 4:17-32

This passage may be said to have three broad outlines. First, the Ephesian Christians were not to walk any longer as the rest of the gentiles walk: with a futile mind, spiritual death, hardened conscience, and bodily sensuality (vv. 17–19). Second, they were to follow Christ as one that has learned Christ by replacing the old with the new (vv. 20–24). Third, specific examples of negatives to put off and positives to put on are listed. The Ephesians were to lay aside falsehood and speak truthfully to each other because they have become members of one another. They were to be angry but not sin and not let the sun go down in their anger because the anger that stays long will give place to the devil. They were to stop stealing and begin working what is good with their own hands so they can support others who do not have. They were also to put off unwholesome talk and speak what is edifying to others because unwholesome talk grieves the Holy Spirit. And lastly, they were to put off all kinds of vices and be kind to one another, forgiving one another because that is how God forgave us in Christ (vv. 25–32).

The principle taught here is that for Christians, "living this new life means turning our backs on our former life of sin and embracing the new self that has made us a part of Christ's new creation" (Osborne 2017:51). When this principle is applied specifically to stealing as a former way in which some Ephesian Christians met their needs, the change will be working with their hands what is good (v. 28).

The need to put off wrong behaviour

It is said that stealing was normal and characteristic of that time and because many jobs were seasonal, during off-seasons people would steal to survive (Merida, Platt, and Akin 2014:112). Edward (2005:168) agrees and presents stealing as a persistent sin for which correction was applied by the Apostle. For Kitchen (2002:87), the expression, "let him that stole steal no more" does not necessarily mean that there were thieves among them; it could be a way of speaking to inspire industry. Cohick (2010:66) on his own part asserts that the instruction to stop stealing implies that some of them were stealing from their employers, but he suggests that a selfish craving for a life of ease and not poverty may have been the motive. Osborne (2017:56) disagrees with the motive put forward by Cohick and suggests that the poor most likely yielded to the temptation to make ends meet through theft and asserts that "the solution is to work, doing something useful."

It seems most probable that stealing was a means employed by some people in order to have what they lacked. To the Christian converts within this population Paul wrote, urging them to practically disengage from the old habit of stealing to meet needs. The consequence of faith in Christ is a new life that manifests in the abandonment of the old ways and embracing the new. The change commanded was not based on transformed external circumstances but on transformed life in Christ.

The argument by Haque and Muniruzzaman (2020) that changed circumstances must precede changed lives is not supported by Paul's instructions to the Ephesians. Rather, the new ethic of working to meet needs instead of stealing is simply a result of one becoming a new person in Christ (Neufeld 2002:213).

The need for a new work ethic

What were the poor to do? The answer is "working with his hands what is good" (Ephesians 4:28, NKJV). Again, Osborne (2017) point to the term "good" as signifying the benefit of the work for the community with the implication that it is such work that glorifies God and benefits the church. Merida et al (2014:111) however does not link it directly with benefit for the community but with the morality of the worker as an honest and good steward. Both views seem to be intended by the apostle when he instructed the former thieves to

work with their hands what is good. The poor should engage in honest labor that is beneficial to themselves and the community in ways that demonstrate proper stewardship of God-given resources.

The apostle's instruction to work may have been a reminder that we were created for good works and that work is a gift from God. Merida et al (2014) assert that people should work, not just because we were created for good work, but also because of the practical need to work. Paul showed this need to work when he refused to be a burden to others but rather worked to meet his needs (1 Cor 9:15, 18; 1 Thess 2:9) ,and also when he said, "the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 NIV).

The practical need to work also reveals the real-world implications of not working. The writer of Proverbs captured this real-world implication:" those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies will have their fill of poverty" (Proverbs 28:19 NIV). Not working is likely to result in poverty, which may also induce a temptation to steal to make ends meet.

Hoppe (2006:5) alleges that "it is the wealthy who create and maintain their poverty". Admittedly some wealthy people do oppress the poor and keep them in poverty, but not all poverty situations are like that. In many cases, it appears that the poor could begin the journey out of poverty by making a few quality choices. Kakwata (2020:101–119) observes that poverty has individualistic, structural, and belief components. The Apostle Paul's command that people start working with their own hands seems to be predicated on the fact that the poor have the capacity to do something for themselves.

The need for right motivation

The command to work with their hands seems to transcend the need to only meet one's own needs. Most importantly, it reflect the duties of the new life of doing good (Edward 2005:165). Such good consist of embracing the fact that humans were created to work. It is good to work, and work is God's way of meeting people's needs (Merida et al 2014:112–113). In this way the motivation will transcend self to "have something to give him who has need" (Ephesians 4:28 NKJV). Ambrose is quoted as saying that God's command to the Christian goes beyond refusing to steal to a life of care for the poor from

his own hard work. (Edward 2005:168–169). Such a heart disposition may place the poor in a position to make efficient use of opportunities that may abound.

It is God's will that the poor who have become a new creation in Christ should shed the old ways of stealing to meet needs and embrace a new way of honest labor doing works that benefit society. This should be done with a motivation that transcends meeting one's own needs to caring for the poor.

In a nutshell, the Ephesian Christians were instructed to no longer live as the rest of the Gentiles live because they have become new persons in Christ. They were to put off the old life and put on the new in line with how they have learned Christ. Doing this called for intentionality on the part of the believer to practically put off what is of the old life and put on what is of the new life. It is within this context that former thieves were commanded to steal no more but rather to engage in honest labor and participate in taking care of others. However, as expected in every community of people, there may be people who might not take the command to work seriously. What should a community of faith do in such a case?

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, Paul sets out to prescribe how to treat the unruly (v. 6), a revisit of previous instructions and renewed charge (vv. 7–12), and how to discipline in love (vv. 13–15) (Elias 1995:317–328).

The Thessalonian Christians were commanded to discontinue associating with the unruly (v. 6). This command is given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, signifying the authority back of this command (Menken 1994:129). The call to stay away is also repeated in the fourteenth verse. The King James Version identifies this group as the"disorderly", while the English Standard Version identifies them with "idleness." The New International Version combines the attitudes represented by these two translations and renders it "believer who is idle and disruptive." One of the important facts about this group is that they did not follow the previous instructions and teachings of the apostles on proper work ethics.

The apostle and his companions, by neither being idle nor eating others 'food without paying for it, but by working hard that they might not be a burden to others, taught the Thessalonians how to live (vv. 6b-9). In their earlier times in Thessalonica, the apostle and his companions had modelled a lifestyle of discipline and sacrifice. The expression "for you yourselves know" (2 Thess 3:7 ESV), suggests an intimacy with the facts presented and is intended to jog the memory of the community (Elias 1995:320). The Thessalonian Christians were expected to follow this example (vv. 7, 9).

Apart from instructing them through his lifestyle, the apostle had also taught them with words. He referred them to instructions he had given before that, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 ESV). Another previous instruction concerning an attitude to work is also evident in Paul's first epistle.

> But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one (1 Thess 4:10b-12 ESV).

Inferences drawn from both 2 Thess 3:10 and 1 Thess 4:10b-12, suggest that the apostle and his companions may have discovered during their first visit a serious need to correct the work ethics of the people (Elias 1995:322). Consequently, concrete actions to correct this indiscipline had to be applied as implied by the apostolic instructions, "keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness" (2 Thess 3:6 ESV), "have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14 ESV), and "if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10 ESV).

Such actions were to be implemented in an atmosphere of love and not vengeance because the erring people are not enemies but brothers and sisters (v. 15). The obedient ones were encouraged to persevere in their adherence to the apostle's instructions in the atmosphere of love without becoming weary (vv. 13–15).

Second Thessalonians 3:6–15, therefore, point out the fact that Christians ought not possess attitudes that could be described as disruptive and unruly. Such attitudes negatively impact on one's work ethics and must not be encouraged. And the community of faith has the duty to lovingly discipline those who persist in disobedience (Howell et al 2015:246). What is the implication of this lesson in a local assembly and how might it help us discern the will of God for the poor?

Refusing to work is wrong

First of all, Howell et al (2015:249) note that Paul's use of the imperfect verbal tense in the injunction "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat," suggesting a repeated issuance of this command in previous times. "Those who refuse this directive must be subject to the discipline of the church." (Howell et all 2015:249) Osborne (2018:72) notes that this set of people have been warned severally in the past and that the apostle is now calling on not just the leaders but the whole congregation to enforce accountability. Holding people to account does not in any way preclude the need to care for the poor within the church. For Osborne (2018), the idlers with whom Paul was concerned were not poor but indolent. Not only do they produce nothing while consuming what others produce, but they also negatively impact the productivity of others by be busybodies (2 Thess 3:11). Their idleness has become the proverbial "devil's workshop" in ways that made the apostle forbid orderly brethren from associating with them (2 Thess 3:6, 14–15).

Some have acknowledged that we can't know for sure what precipitated this bad behaviour since Paul does not mention of the origin of the problem (Osborne 2018). Giszczak (2021:97) observes that "the connection between idleness and eschatology is not made anywhere in the Thessalonian correspondence" and should therefore be discarded. Bridges (2008:254) agrees but contends that it might have been a social problem within a professional body of artisans in which if one fails to work, it negatively impacts all the others. Elias (1995:322) disagrees with Bridges position and assert that evidence from First and Second Thessalonians suggest that Paul noticed the need among the populace for a direct teaching on a change of attitude about work and even saw the need to model it for them right from their first encounter. Consequently, the exhortation to work in his second epistle is a

revisiting of an old problem of bad work ethics already captured in 1 Thess 4:11 (Adeyemo 2006:1466).

It, therefore, seems more likely that Paul met an appreciable number of Thessalonians in a disorderly state and commanded them to change (Elias 1995:322). Having become new creations through the gospel preached by Paul, he now demands that they live by Christian ethics and work to earn a living. Should they refuse to heed the apostolic command and continue to be idle and unruly, the church was supposed to hold them to account by withholding from them the fruit of others' labour.

The church must hold idlers to account

The command to deny food (2 Thess 3:10) and even friendship (2 Thess 3:6) have been considered by some as too harsh. Bridges (2008:193) refers to the change in the tone of the second epistle when compared to the first epistle as a reason to dispute Paul's authorship of the book. But, as observed by Adeyemo (2006:1468),"laziness is such a serious matter that it necessitates disciplinary action on the part of the church." This may account for the change in tone.

What was so serious about the situation in the church in Thessalonica that the apostle prescribed such a disciplinary action? Bridges (2008:255) says it is because the unproductive lifestyle of the unruly affects the well-being of the whole group. Osborne (2018) agrees that the unproductive lifestyle of the unruly affects the whole church, but disagrees on why they should be disciplined. For Osborne, they are to be disciplined because they are disobedient to an official teaching of the church for which they have been reprimanded severally. Adeyemo (2006:1468), however, views the issue of laziness as so serious that it warrants a drastic action of discipline to help encourage change.

Whatever may have been the reason for the call for discipline, Paul considered it serious enough to model a counterculture from the beginning, labouring to supply his own needs in order to give them an example to follow (2 Thess 3:7–9; Acts 20:35).

Paul's instructions in 2 Thess 3:6–15 clearly suggest that idle and unruly people in the church are deserving of a different kind of support, that is, discipline borne out of love. Though those who refused to work were not described as poor, the practical implication of not working is poverty (Elias 1995:326). The discipline commanded by the apostle could therefore be seen as a loving corrective measure that may help to prevent the poverty that could result from their lifestyle.

Galatians 6:1–10

Some scholars see Galatians 6:1–10 as a loose collection of instructions that are unrelated to preceding chapters (Soards and Pursiful 2015:305). But Platt et al (2014:121) disagree. To them, Gal 6:1-10 is a continuation of the discussion on the Spirit-filled life in chapter five, outlining practical steps for Spirit-filled living within the faith communities. The first ten verses of Gal 6 details how Christians should live out the Spirit-filled life in their congregations (Brunk III 2015:168).

A Spirit-filled person should help restore one overtaken in a fault in the spirit of gentleness and humility (v.1). In this way they fulfil the "law of Christ" by helping to bear one another's burden (v. 2). Spirit-filled persons are to avoid prideful thinking about self (v. 3). Rather than comparing their works with others, they should compare them with what their best effort could have produced (v. 4). Everyone needs to be mindful of their duties and take responsibility for them (v. 5).

Spirit-filled living within the community also means that members of the community support their ministers by catering for their needs (v. 6). Sowing to the Spirit is bearing one another's burden as prescribed by the apostle and going against it is sowing to the flesh. Either practice is sure to receive a just recompense from God (vv. 7–8).

Paul ends with an encouragement to the Galatian Christians to persevere in giving, knowing that there will be a reward in due season. Platt et al (2014:133) note that the phrase "for in due season we shall reap" (Gal 6:9 NKJV), though largely eschatological, may also be fittingly applied to this life. This would mean that individuals and congregations that keep on doing good can both expect

earthly, as well as eternal, blessing from God. Soards and Pursiful (2015:319) disagree that the blessing refers to anything material, arguing that refers only to a harvest of the fruit of the Spirit. Judging that God has promised both material and spiritual blessings in this life, the harvest promised in this scripture could refer to both.

The apostle also instructs:“ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10 NKJV). This instruction from the apostle is both general and specific. It connotes that generally we should do good to all. Dorcas ’ministry to the widows at Joppa (Acts 9:36–43) is a good example of doing good to all, as Paul directs. According to Martin (2006:114), Saints Bede and Chrysostom present Dorcas ’acts of mercy as an intercession beyond words and a monument beyond any physical memorial respectively. In other words, such good done to all within the society is in itself a towering witness to the love of Christ towards all members of the society.

Others, like Chance (2007:163), consider the beneficiaries of Dorcas' charity to be only other disciples of Christ. Bradly opines that the statement “when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive” (Acts 9:41b NKJV) does not “imply that the widows are not saints, but brings attention to the fact that these women who had relied on Dorcas now have her back.” It seems most likely that the use of the expression “saints and widows” instead of “widows” underscored a lack of total homogeneity in the group. This would mean that Dorcas served non-Christians as well, thereby fulfilling Paul’s call to do good to all while also paying a special attention to fellow believers.

The apostle was also specific; in addition to doing good to all, more careful attention should be paid by Christians to their own faith community (Platt et al 2014:134). Some scholars see the universality in the call to do good and the specific focus on the household of faith as a mark of Paul’s inconsistency (Soards and Pursiful 2015:319). Similarly, Esler (1998:233) is not sure how much weight should be given to Paul’s call for generosity towards people outside the community “given his preoccupation with life inside the communities and the heavily negative stereotypes he applies to all those outside.”

On the other hand, Brunk III (2015:174) argues that the apostle's instruction to prioritise the faith community in doing good is not just because the church has such limited resources so it cannot take care of everyone all at once, but also because it is consistent with the New Testament picture of the church as a city on a hill and, therefore, an example to the nations. In other words, the church's ministry to the world begins by being a model of the good that the world can see and copy. In this case, the church has the duty of giving a "high priority to the quality of its internal life and practice" as a way of modelling community as God intended. Following the same line of thought, Osborne (2017:73) calls it "two levels of giving" and argues that "though we are to love every neighbour," the image of the church as a family demands a "retention of a special affection for our brothers and sisters in Christ."

We may, however, conclude that the idea that the church should seek to aid all irrespective of their disposition to God is taught by scripture and that it may be expressed in a general giving as we seek to love our neighbour as ourselves. Yet, the scripture also calls for special attention to members of the faith family and this may be carried out within a local congregation as a part of general Christian discipleship.

The study of Galatians 6:1–10 can be summed up with these words. Spirit-filled living is expressed by bearing one another's burden in humility and sharing what we have with others without getting tired. However, when it comes to how we should share with others, the apostle gave a clear call for the church to prioritise the members of the church family over the general public (vv. 9–10). This priority must be captured in any strategy for poverty alleviation adopted by the church.

Proposed Strategy: How the Churches may Respond

Drawing from Scripture's teachings on poverty alleviation, along with insights on how worldview, values, and behaviour contribute to the persistence of poverty, a biblically aligned strategy is proposed to address the underlying causes. This strategy is presented in two parts: a general framework and an implementation plan.

General strategy

Reframe poverty alleviation as a disciple-making ministry

Churches care for the poor has been largely on humanitarian grounds. While this is commendable, there must be an equal emphasis on the discipleship component. This is a significant gap because Paul's instructions that the church "do good to all, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10) and to hold members accountable points to discipleship rather than mere charity. It also aligns with Christ's mandate to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20).

Kraft (2016:419) questions the prevailing idea of "impartiality" in faith-based humanitarian work, noting that evangelical Christians working among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found it difficult to separate material aid from the refugees 'spiritual needs. Their conviction was that while material needs are temporary, spiritual needs are eternal. Therefore, if poverty alleviation is not designed with the recipients 'spiritual needs in mind, transformation of beliefs and behaviours necessary for lasting development may be limited. For example, a fatalistic worldview, negative attitudes toward knowledge, and poverty-reinforcing behaviours often present among the poor can be challenged and corrected through intentional discipleship.

Therefore, churches should pursue poverty alleviation as an integral part of Christian discipleship—one that fosters both belief transformation and behavioural change. Practical steps include restructuring poverty alleviation programs as sub-departments of the church's discipleship ministries, preaching sermons about work and poverty alleviation, producing discipleship manuals that address poverty-related issues (e.g., work ethics, financial discipline, self-control, choices, faith, and family responsibilities), and ensuring that accountability is embedded in the process. In this way, poverty alleviation moves beyond temporary relief to become a transformative disciple-making process. However, such a shift requires not only a new philosophy but also a restructured system of implementation.

Build structures for discipleship-oriented poverty alleviation

Most churches have a welfare committee or department, but these are generally focused on short-term relief—receiving donations and distributing

them to those in crisis. By contrast, the apostles in Jerusalem emphasised remembering the poor (Gal 2:10) and established structures to ensure fairness in food distribution among widows (Acts 6:1–7).

For sustainability, welfare ministries must therefore function as part of a church's discipleship or Christian education ministry. When repositioned this way, volunteers and leaders see themselves not just as relief workers but as ministers engaged in a permanent and strategic arm of the church discipleship infrastructure. This perspective warrants specialised training tailored to poverty alleviation within a disciple-making context. Such training builds capacity for producing context-sensitive discipleship resources and promotes expertise that can be shared with other churches. Given the limited time and human resources available in many churches, this structural shift is necessary to guarantee continuity, effectiveness, and replicability in ministry to the poor.

A two-tier model with clear goals

In the early church, ministry to the poor focused primarily on believers (Acts 2–6; Gal. 6:10). By the fourth century, however, churches had achieved sufficient stability to extend their ministry to non-believers as well. This reflects Paul's principle of "doing good to all, especially to the household of faith." Following this biblical model, churches today should adopt a two-tier approach. A short-term goal of meeting urgent needs in the wider community (e.g., distributing food or clothing) and a long-term goal discipling and empowering poor members of the faith community to rise from poverty and, eventually, to help others do the same.

Short-term outreach can also serve as a "filtering" strategy, identifying those willing to embrace discipleship for spiritual and material growth. Long-term goals, however, require clear expectations of commitment—regular attendance at discipleship sessions, completing assignments, responsible financial behaviour, positive feedback from employers, and an overall disposition toward learning. This two-tiered approach ensures both compassion for all and intentional investment in those who demonstrate readiness for holistic transformation.

Invest in the renewal of the mind

Sustainable transformation begins with a renewed mind (Rom 12:2). In informal settlements in Lagos, common obstacles to addressing poverty include fatalism, victim mentality, misplaced reliance on magical solutions, and poverty-reinforcing habits. Church-based discipleship must therefore incorporate biblical teaching that directly confronts these mindsets. Poverty alleviation committees should research community worldviews, identify gaps, and develop Christian education resources that emphasise biblical perspectives on work, justice, ethics, family, humility, endurance, and integrity.

Since poverty affects not only material circumstances but also mental and spiritual outlooks, the poor may require intensified discipleship to overcome the compounded effects of poverty. This process also serves as a filter, distinguishing those willing to submit to accountability and transformation from those unwilling to engage.

Establish accountability systems

Discipleship is both relational and accountable (Hull 2006). Relationships without accountability lack fruit, while accountability without love becomes harsh. Effective discipleship balances both. Schedler (1999:17) defines accountability as the obligation to report actions, justify decisions, and accept consequences for misconduct. Similarly, Grant and Keohane (2005:29) emphasises the need for standards, judgment, and sanctions. Applied to poverty alleviation, churches must establish policies and procedures that govern their ministries and communicate clear expectations for participants and enforce them consistently.

This aligns with Paul's directive to the Thessalonians to deny support to idle members while encouraging the weak (2 Thess 3:10–15). Accountability ensures that limited resources are directed toward those committed to transformation, while success stories inspire others to follow suit.

Context-sensitive engagement for sustainable growth

Effective poverty alleviation must adapt to context (Paffenholz and Jütersonke 2008:8). Context-sensitivity does not compromise biblical principles but applies them wisely to unique local realities. Many poor families struggle with

basic needs such as food, healthcare, rent, school fees, etc. If these needs are unmet, micro credit loans from the church intended for business may instead be diverted, undermining training outcomes. A context-sensitive strategy might involve providing temporary allowances for essentials while simultaneously supporting business development. During this period, all business income could be supervised and saved until the allowance is phased out.

This approach addresses three issues. It prevents misuse of business funds for household survival, safeguards family stability and health, and instills frugality and financial discipline in beneficiaries. Though seemingly costly, the filtering process ensures that resources are invested only in committed participants. Over time, churches can celebrate "graduates" who move from being recipients to givers—helping others exit poverty.

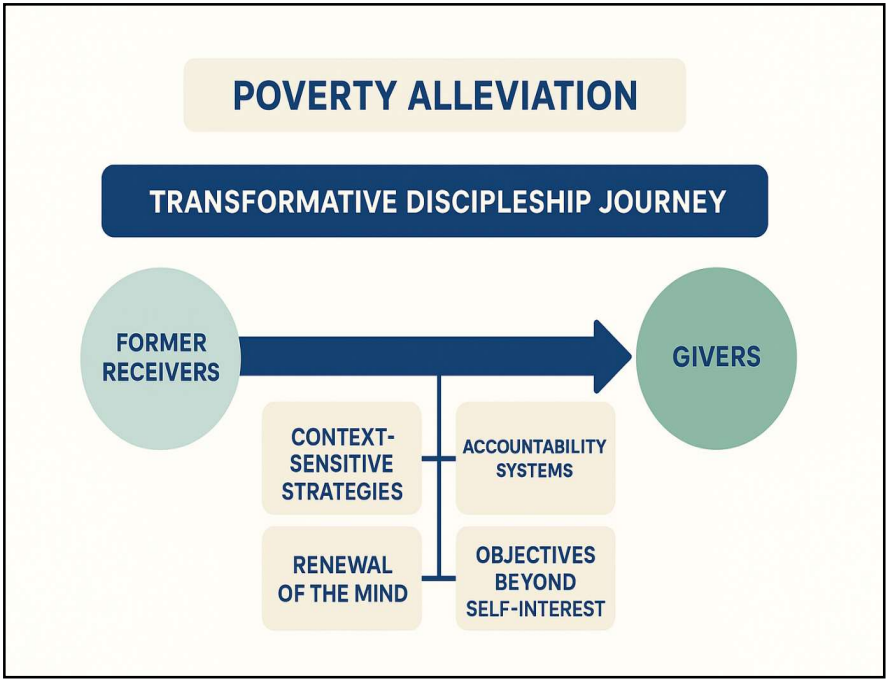

Figure 1

Implementation Strategies

Vision casting for the whole congregation

For a poverty alleviation program to succeed, the entire church—not just the wealthy few—must be mobilised. In the New Testament, giving was a shared responsibility across social classes: Jesus praised the poor widow's gift (Mark 12:41–44), believers in Antioch gave collectively (Acts 11:27–30), the Macedonians contributed despite "extreme poverty" (2 Cor 8:1–5), and the rich were instructed to be generous (1 Tim 6:17–19).

A practical way to inspire broad participation is by instituting an annual Wealth Creation Sunday Service. The term wealth creation is intentionally chosen to signal a shift from dependency on receiving to purposeful work that meets needs and creates value. On this Sunday, the pastor or the individual responsible for poverty alleviation can articulate God's intention to bless the work of his children, enabling them not only to achieve self-sustenance but also to become a blessing to others.

The service could also provide an opportunity to present the church's poverty alleviation program, including its objectives, methods, and impact, while clearly communicating the need for congregational support. Members would be invited to participate through prayers, skills, and financial pledges toward the program.

Subsequent Wealth Creation Sunday services can serve as graduation ceremonies for beneficiaries who have successfully exited poverty. These gatherings can celebrate achievements, share testimonies of transformed lives, and renew calls for partnership and donor support, reinforcing a culture of productivity and shared responsibility within the church community. These events not only reinforce congregational commitment but also attract other poor community members to enrol and persevere in the program. For credibility, success stories must be validated against transparent, objective criteria, ensuring both accountability and integrity.

Establish objectives beyond self

Another critical strategy is cultivating an outward-looking vision among participants. When Paul instructed Ephesians to "work with their own hands,"

his goal was not self-sufficiency but generosity: “that he may have something to share with those in need” (Eph 4:28).

Christian love, described as the greatest enduring virtue (1 Cor. 13:13), naturally expresses itself in seeking the good of others (John 15:13). Moreover, scripture consistently links generosity with spiritual and material blessing (Gal. 6:9; Luke 6:38; 2 Cor. 9:6).

Thus, participants must be encouraged not only to exit poverty themselves but also to contribute to helping others. This creates a self-sustaining discipleship movement where beneficiaries become benefactors. Asking those just emerging from poverty to give is not unreasonable—Paul commended the Macedonian churches, who gave generously despite deep poverty, as models for others (2 Cor 8:1–7).

In this way, the program instills Christian love, fosters faith in God’s provision, and perpetuates a cycle of transformation that involves the whole congregation.

Define success criteria

Clear criteria for success must be established from the outset. Scholars distinguish between success criteria (what defines success) and success factors (what enables success) (Lamprou and Vagiona 2018:227). Success criteria should be based not on conventional project management metrics (time, cost, quality) but on alignment with the program’s ultimate goals: assisting the poor to permanently exit poverty and enabling them to contribute toward helping others out of poverty. These goals reflect biblical teaching that believers should work productively, live responsibly, and have resources to share (Eph 4:17–32; 2 Thess 3:6–15; Prov 6:6–11; Gal 6:1–10).

Key success factors include two essential elements: (1) privileges - adequate financial and material resources made available to participants and (2) responsibilities - participants ’commitment to training, accountability, and discipleship. While resource availability can be objectively measured, assessing participants ’growth requires evaluating their beliefs, values, habits, and character. Ultimately, observable fruit—consistent with Jesus ’standard in Matt 7:15–23—must serve as the measure of success.

Make periodic evaluation

Evaluation is necessary to determine whether the program is being implemented as designed, whether objectives are being met, and how improvements can be made. Fleischman and Williams (1996:2) framed this with three guiding questions: Are we doing what we said we would do? Are participants learning what we set out to teach? How can we improve curriculum and processes?

The Stufflebeam (2007) CIPP model—Context, Input, Process, Product—is especially useful here. Context: assess whether program goals align with the needs of the poor in their specific context. Input: evaluate whether resources (time, funds, curriculum, personnel) are sufficient and well used. Process: examine how effectively activities are implemented (e.g., attendance, feedback, follow-through). Product: measure outcomes against success criteria—have participants exited poverty, adopted new behaviours, and begun helping others? This model ensures evaluation is not only summative (judging outcomes) but also formative, providing feedback at every stage for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

The proposed model for church-based poverty alleviation begins with a philosophical shift: placing ministry to the poor firmly within the disciple-making mandate of the church. This requires a two-tiered approach that prioritises the faith community while still extending compassion to outsiders. The model emphasises context-sensitive strategies, accountability systems, renewal of the mind, and objectives that go beyond self-interest. It envisions poverty alleviation as a transformative discipleship journey that produces givers out of former receivers.

Implementation involves mobilising the whole congregation through vision casting, setting clear success criteria, and maintaining rigorous evaluation. Ultimately, effectiveness depends on aligning privileges (support given) with responsibilities (discipleship commitments), ensuring that outcomes reflect both biblical values and sustainable development.

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A Challenge to Christian Unity and Witnessing in the Context of the Government of National Unity

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Abstract

Although 85.3% of South Africans claim affiliation to the Christian religion, they are not united on how to live out the moral values central to the teachings of Christ. There are in society manifestations of corruption, high levels of crime, and other social ills. This social condition influenced the outcome of the 2024 national election, leading to the formation of a government of national unity (GNU). This article endeavours to answer the question: how does the GNU expose the weakness of Christian faith formation towards a moral conscience and witnessing of gospel values? Data was collected by observing South African citizens' actions in their everyday lives, and from scholarly writings and journals relevant to this study. The data was analysed using a systematic literature review. The findings reveal that politics and Christianity divided the family unit and adversely affected the mindset of Africans. The study recommends a rethinking of the holistic faith-formation framework and the values of Christian unity in witnessing that identify Christians as followers of Christ.

Introduction and Background

'The people of South Africa have spoken.' These words are a summary of the national election's outcome that forced the African National Congress (ANC) to rethink governance in South Africa.
(https://stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/gnu-summary.pdf). The failure of the ANC to achieve a majority vote, therefore, required formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). This affirmed that South Africans'

votes determined that power-sharing among political parties was necessary to address the country's challenges. Political parties had to set aside their political ideologies and policies, compromise their interests, and agree to unite to tackle the challenges facing the country (Ofusori 2024:135).

Governments of national unity are coalitions of political parties that address a political crisis, war, or transition. The aim is to defuse political violence, restore peace, gain majority support, foster national unity, exercise collective responsibility, govern effectively, and take ownership of the country (Thusi 2024:687). In South Africa, the first GNU was for transition from the apartheid regime to democracy from 1994 to 1997. In 2024, a second GNU was established to tackle the country's challenges, including corruption, crime, and economic stagnation, which led to a high level of unemployment.

According to Thwala and Vilakazi (2024:4) the multiparty coalition, formed after the 2024 South African national election, is a vehicle to achieve national unity, where different groups that are divided by culture, political ideology, economic status, and region are committed to national unity based on the constitution and national interest. This unity focuses more on the interests of the country than on party interests (Hairsine 2024:3). Ragolane and Khoza (2024:15) identify this form of governance as citizen-centred governance, based not on power ambition but on power consolidation.

The 1994–1997 GNU in South Africa was the result of a coalition government formed by the majority party to include other parties in the cabinet (Thwala 2023:41). The ANC won a majority of votes in 1994, with the right to rule the country on its own. Nonetheless, the ANC opted to invite other parties to form a GNU with the aims of promoting national unity, having a smooth transition, formulating the new constitution, and seeing to its implementation (Ofusori 2024:165–167). Ethnic groups were to abandon the homeland independence system of apartheid, unite to form a rainbow nation, and develop a new culture based on trust and brotherhood.

Since 1997, the ANC has ruled the country single-handedly with opposition parties too weak to challenge it (Moosa 2020:7). According to Thusi (2024:690), this led to a lack of accountability and openness, a weak service delivery, a high level of corruption within the party, crime, and the collapse of

the economic system. This situation led to the outcome of the 2024 national elections that collapsed the ANC and led to the formation of a GNU.

The formation of the 2024 GNU devised three objectives different from those of the 1994 GNU. These objectives include, first, to drive inclusive growth and create jobs, second, to reduce poverty and tackle the high cost of living, and third, to build a capable, ethical, and developmental state. According to Levinson (2025:1), the 2024 GNU is a sign that democracy is fully embedded in South Africa, with the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA) forgetting their differences and agreeing on a coalition in respect of the constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the rule of law. However, Terblanche (2024) argues that differences in political policies, historical backgrounds, and outlooks, and a lack of common purpose, complicate the issues for the 2024 GNU to achieve positive results.

South Africa is not the only country in Africa to experience a GNU. In 2007–2013, Kenya established a GNU to curb the violence that occurred after disputed presidential elections. The aim was to stabilise the country and initiate constitutional reform (Thusi 2024:689). In Zimbabwe (2009–2013), a GNU was formed after the collapse of its economy and the disputed 2008 elections. Its main objectives were to stabilise the power struggle, increase cooperation between parties, and institute genuine reform (Thusi 2024:688). Lesotho had six GNUs between 2012 and 2022 due to a lack of trust, lack of equal distribution of power, and non-adherence to partnership arrangements (Thusi 2024:689; Thwala and Vilakazi 2024:9–10). In Libya, a GNU was established to resolve conflict between guerrilla groups and to establish peace and national unity (Thwala and Vilakazi 2024:10–11).

85.3% of South Africa's population claims affiliation with the Christian religion in its rainbow expressions (Forster 2024:1). This majority affiliation of South African citizens to Christian faith ought to work as a vehicle towards unity in witnessing Christian values, and ought to influence the GNU in its function of tackling the challenges facing the country. Due to the history of South Africa, the affiliation of the majority of its citizens to the Christian religion does not necessarily mean upholding the same sentiments in living and practising those values.

The 2024 GNU in South Africa poses a challenge to Christian denominations to work towards unity in witnessing to Christ (John 17:20–23). Unity can be demonstrated by having a new ecumenical body to devise strategies to help fulfil the church's mandate and mission in society. The main strategy would be to empower members to be the church on every level of society. By living out Christian values, members of the GNU could solve the political challenges faced by the country in the spirit of Christ. The responsibility to confront the ills of society should not be left to ecumenical bodies and church leadership. On the contrary, the mission of the lay faithful is to fulfil their calling as salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16) in their own context. With the vast majority of South Africans claiming affiliation with the Christian religion, there should not be a difference between Christian living and social life.

Scripture challenges Christians to live out gospel values to establish kingdom perspectives, to fight for peace, reconciliation, and justice for all, and to transform society (Micah 6:8, Ephesians 4:1–5:17, James 1:22–27, 2:8–17) (Kumalo 2009:248). With corruption and a high level of crime, scriptural values are not visible in society. Personal freedom and political affiliation dominate individuals' behaviours and choices. Unity among Christians could play a major part in building a bridge for unity in witnessing moral values in the GNU and in society (Forster and Oostenbrink 2015:1). The Christian religion ought to play its part in people's lives. But, from observation, initial faith formation tends to prepare converts for membership, not for missionary discipleship. Denominations ought to rethink faith-formation frameworks and assess whether they empower faith in action and instil unity among Christians, whether they form moral consciousness and spiritual discernment as a way of life for the body of Christ.

Due to historical political developments and Christian denominational diversity, South African Christians are divided in their understanding of their calling and mission in society. Each denomination, concerned with its own doctrine and internal ministries, fails in outreach and the transformation of society (Kumalo 2009:250). The Christian calling demands unity among followers of Christ to witness to Jesus as the one sent by God (John 17:21–23), unity in mission (Matthew 18:15, Ephesians 5:1–2), and a commitment to work for justice and peace (Isaiah 1:17, Micah 6:8, Luke 18:1–8). Unity is not an

option. It is a mark of belonging to Jesus and fulfils the requirements of missionary discipleship.

Christianity is a religion to be lived as individuals and as a community of believers. Faith in Christ ought to be fed at the breast (Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference 2000), from the domestic church, the family. Faith needs to become the culture that distinguishes Christians from those of other religions. Christianity cannot be reduced to Sunday worship (Forster and Oostenbrink 2015). The Christian calling demands that all become missionary disciples on every level of society, and that no one be left out (Paul VI 1965:2).

The mission of Christians in the South African context, therefore, is to live out gospel values on every level of society. Many of the members of the political parties that form the GNU are members of churches. This challenges churches' leadership to assess their context, to read the signs of the time, and to train and form all the baptised to carry out their mission within their respective political parties. Members who do not live out their calling as Christians are to be held accountable. There ought to be a re-evangelisation of those who have lapsed and ongoing formation for those who attend church. From observation, Sunday preaching is not enough to build a firm expression of faith. Christians must be reminded of their calling and mission to establish kingdom perspectives in a political system that has sidelined God and has put personal freedom above obedience to him.

Research Question, Theory, and Methodology

The research question of this study is: how does the GNU expose the weakness of Christian faith formation towards a moral conscience and witnessing of the gospel values? To answer this question, the study is divided into five sections. The first section deals with the mission of Christ and the gospel values. The second section discusses the political influence on Christianity and the formation of mindset. The third section presents the role of Christian unity and witnessing. The fourth section considers the faith-formation framework. The fifth section is the conclusion.

This study uses a hermeneutical theory that values the biblical text, the local South African context, the global context, and church traditions and history.

The purpose of this hermeneutical theory is to develop a relevant church that discerns God's will and can engage its mission of peace, reconciliation, and justice in its given context. This study uses a qualitative literature research approach. Data was collected through observations of South African citizens' actions in their everyday lives. Furthermore, data was collected from literature such as church documents, scripture, articles, and books. The collected data from the literature research and the observations was analysed using a systemic review. Scholarly books and journals relevant to this study were collected, organised, and reviewed. The aim of the study is to challenge Christian denominations to consider unity a priority in carrying out the mission of Christ.

The Mission of Christ and the Gospel Values

The mission of Jesus is based on the mission of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God loved the world so much that he sent his son on the mission of the redemption of the world (John 3:16).

The birth of Jesus inaugurated the mission of God, which was manifest in his life and actualised in his suffering, death, and resurrection. At the baptism of Jesus, the Father revealed who Jesus was: the beloved Son (Luke 3:21–22). At the transfiguration, the Father reiterated who Jesus was and commanded that he be listened to (Matthew 17:5). The mission of Jesus is, therefore, intertwined with the mission of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus fulfilled this mission and, in turn, entrusted it to his disciples (Matthew 10:1–42, 28:19–20, John 20:21–23), who were strengthened by the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son (Acts 1:5–8). All those who are baptised in the name of the triune God are incorporated into the life of Christ to bear witness to him, by walking in his footsteps according to their state of life, context, and gifts bestowed on each of them (Acts 11:19–26, Ephesians 4:11–16) (Obiorah 2020:2; Paul VI 1964:31, 33). The living out of gospel values is a duty and responsibility for Christians to challenge social perceptions and to bring transformation (Amos 5:24; Romans 12:2; Galatians 3:28; 1 Peter 2:12).

According to Pillay (2017:1), the church always had the concept of transformation in its mission and ministry. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Paul VI 1965:2) and Formicola (2012:106) view this concept of transformation as having two notions: a spiritual notion and a social notion. The spiritual side of transformation, however, is often emphasised above the social aspect without any linking of the two. Nonetheless, a truly spiritual person will realise the evils in society and address them (Micah 6:8, 1 Peter 2:11–12, James 1:22–27).

Christian mission in South Africa is determined by the context and challenges that require transformation in the country. How, then, ought the churches' leadership respond to the inconsistency of members who do not live what they confess? Church leadership ought to offer a balanced faith formation that informs and forms the spirituality of its members and their concern and involvement in societal transformation. This is the mission of the lay faithful. During the era of apartheid, Christians were united to fight the apartheid system with all its evil laws of racism and oppression. To fight the present evils such as autocracy, corruption, selfishness, economic oppression, lack of service delivery, high levels of crime, and social ills that degrade human dignity in a democratic dispensation, churches need to unite and rethink the faith-formation framework that empowers for faith in action (James 2:14–26).

Christians need to know their identity and understand the demands of their calling (1 Peter 2:9–12, James 2:8–17). Christian identity influences Christian action for the glory of God. Schoeman (2015:106) identified three aspects of the religious identity of congregational membership: believe, belong, and engage. These concepts are affected by changes in the context and leadership (Schoeman 2015:120). Ruben (2011:228) asserts that 'national or civic identities are usually not sufficient for enhancing social cohesive relationships'. He states that 'reliance on religious values can provide a possible pathway for creating new and shared identities' in society.

The great challenge is that although the church played a significant part during apartheid and the transition to democracy, the government sidelined the church, declaring the country a neutral-religious state (Kumalo 2009:149). Christians need to intensify their prayer lives, understand their calling, and witness to Christ in the secularised country in words and deeds to restore the country under God's control (James 4:8, 10).

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) is one amongst many ecumenical organisations that represent the unity and collaboration of churches from different denominational backgrounds. Regrettably, there are many ecumenical Christian organisations in the country. This proliferation of ecumenical organisations is a hindrance to the unity of the church to speak with one voice and to engage with social challenges. Pillay (2017:2) stresses that, under democracy, the SACC lacked a clear vision, cooperate identity, and theological rationale, and, thus, the ecumenical vision has dwindled. This was the outcome of mainline churches retreating to 'denominational enclaves' and internal ministries (Kumalo 2009:250).

Kumalo (2009:250–256) further discusses the factors that inhibit the participation of the church in the political life of the country. First, there is a parliamentary democracy that is centralised around the presidency and bars other groups from liaising with him. Second, there is no socio-ecclesial analysis of society that informs the church of the social context. Therefore, the church has no voice to criticise the government. Third, there is a lack of contextual theology to prepare Christians to involve themselves in the political sphere. Fourth, the spirit of camaraderie shared by church leadership and politicians prevents critical involvement of the church. Fifth, there is no education for critical thinking that might establish a new approach to church-state relations. The state needs to view the church as 'an important critical and honest friend of the democratic state' (Kumalo 2009:255). And sixth is the lack of a multi-faith approach to church-state relations. The church needs to cooperate with faith-based and multi-religious organisations to approach the state with one voice (Kumalo 2009:256).

Although these factors are valid, they reduce the church to an institution. This study advocates for the church as all the baptised to live what they profess by running the government according to Christian values. This is the challenge for church denominations to unite and form their members to integrate, make Christian values their culture, and to not compartmentalise their lives. The people of God, as the church in every structure of society, ought to carry out their duties and responsibilities as active Christian citizens (Pali 2024b:4). All Christians are called to bring about the reign of God and peace, and to establish a kingdom perspective in society. What is lacking in churches is the inclusion of the lay faithful in the mission of Christ by offering them proper faith

formation that prepares and empowers them to protect their rights and the rights of others (Kumalo 2009:248). Historical church-state relations influenced the present situation of Christianity in South Africa, as the following section explains.

Political Influence on Christianity and the African Mindset

According to Pali (2024a:3), from 1652 to 1994, South Africa suffered slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. These atrocities manifested themselves through macroeconomic policies, colonial laws, and the superiority of white culture through religion and education. The consequences of these affected the relationships between family members who belonged to different denominations and religions, relations between blacks and whites, and adversely formed the mindset of South African society. This is the context of South African society today.

South Africa under Colonialism

The Christianity that came to South Africa was already divided into denominations. Members of African families accepted Christianity from different denominations to pursue educational benefits. According to Bate (1999:20), Africans regarded Western education as an opportunity to participate in the emerging new culture, but not without paying the price of suppressing their own culture and religion. This dismantled the fabric and core of the African family that no longer shared the same sentiments and value system that had glued the family together under traditional religion. The nuclear family, the clan, and the tribe were divided, and the same value system was no longer possible. Parents lost their duty and responsibility to form their children's moral conscience. The colonialists' use of Christianity and Western education as vehicles for indoctrination changed the mindset of Africans (Pali 2024a:3). The common African worldview was destroyed and replaced by a multifaceted worldview that lacked a common understanding of social and spiritual life (Luzbetak 1988:284).

Pali (2024a:4) further states that the African mindset was conquered through teaching, training, and the distribution of literature from colonial states. This form of imperialism confused the understanding of Christianity and its mission in South Africa. These choices clouded the Christian calling: the mission of all

the baptised, the church. Zwane (1982:120) and Bate (1999:21) attest that the use of education for evangelisation within the Roman Catholic Church was not an effective means for human transformation. Evangelisation through education did not build a sense of truly belonging to the church and taking responsibility for its mission. For these reasons, the vast majority of African Christians never accepted Christianity as their culture, except for Nehemiah Tile (Millard 2025:1–2), Mokone Mangena (South African History Online 2019:1–2), and a few others who accepted the Christian religion and spearheaded the founding of their own churches. Bate (1999:21) attests that Africans were made followers rather than active leaders in the Roman Catholic Church headed by white missionaries.

During the era of apartheid, Christianity was used to support the apartheid system, but other churches were on the side of liberation fighters, confusing the mission of the church (Kumalo 2009:252). The same religion was used to support both oppression and the liberation movement. African traditional religion and culture were suppressed, but not destroyed, in this process. For these reasons, Africans mimicked Christianity in the marketplace and continued to practise their African religion in safe spaces (Forster and Oostenbrink 2015:3). This introduced the concept of the compartmentalisation of life, separating Sunday worship from daily living.

The vast majority of Africans were 'the object of the process' of colonisation and were prevented from being owners of the Christian faith (Bate 1999:21; see also Kumalo 2009:248). In this study, owning the Christian faith means accepting it as one's culture, being influenced by it to observe all that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:20). The impact of observing all that Jesus commanded needs to be displayed in every stage and on every level of society, including basing the constitution on Christian values. This means not only putting them on paper, but also living them out in everyday life. Secularisation is the result of not making Christianity one's culture.

Education for Political Segregation

In the political realm, education was used for institutional segregation between blacks and whites. Under the apartheid regime, Africans received Bantu education that did not empower them to participate in either politics or the economy of the country (Pali 2024b:3). Education only prepared them to

become cheap labour for the comfort of the whites. According to Buntu (2013:2), South Africa is still struggling to devise an education system that liberates Africans from dependence on Western ways of learning and thinking about themselves and the world.

The National Party (NP) introduced two sets of apartheid laws. The Population Registration Act (1950) was introduced to register people according to their national and ethnic groups. The Bantu Self-Government Act (1959) created separate homelands or settlements (South African History Online 2017). Vast amounts of land were allocated to whites, while Africans were made foreigners in their own land, beggars in their own country, and enemies to each other, especially in urban areas (Abel 2016:6). According to Vosloo (2023:2), some missionaries and Christian churches advocated for such racial separation and justified it on scriptural and theological grounds.

Employment in the homelands was poor, forcing eligible men and women to leave their families behind and move to urban areas for employment where they provided cheap labour for whites (Abel 2016:6; Pali 2024a:3). These developments resulted in families being broken, children becoming orphans through migrant labour, political persecution and exile, and an increase in single parenting (Abel 2016:7). The bond of children with their parents weakened at an early age when children normally need direction, moral formation, support, and love from their own parents. This caused moral degeneration among African families.

African males were accommodated in male-only hostels and were allowed to go home twice a year (Abel 2016:7). Townships such as Soshanguve, Soweto, and Khayelitsha were developed as labour reserves where new families were formed. Poverty increased as working men and women could not provide material support for families in homelands and at their places of work. This kind of slavery destroyed the African family structure and moral conscience and continued to divide members of the family unit.

The development of homelands strengthened ethnicity. In the homelands, each ethnic group rebuilt its lost culture and regained its dignity and semi-independence. Each ethnic group practised its African traditional religion without fear of the white missionaries. Each ethnic group recalled and revived

its culture and customs and celebrated its former kings. In Qwaqwa homeland, for example, Basotho celebrated Moshoeshoe's Day with pride, wearing their different attire, dancing, and singing songs of praise in honour of Moshoeshoe, their king. This system intensified cultural diversity and rooted ethnic groups in their own traditional cultures, which Western education and Christianity had partly abandoned or suppressed.

During the apartheid era, the ANC addressed the evils of the apartheid system with the aim of uniting, strengthening, and restoring Africans' pride, dignity, and integrity (Abel 2016:6). Due to retaliation from the NP, men and women left their homes and went into exile where they were united, not by religion but by the political ideology of liberation.

The release of political activists and the return of the exiled in 1990 created another tension within the family and society. Two separate cultures had developed. The exiled were united through the political ideology of liberation, but the majority who had stayed in homelands had intensified their cultural differences. It was not easy for most families to integrate with those coming back from exile. These developments affected and divided the family structure and formed the mindset of Africans. During this time, the relationship of church and state was one of intensive resistance. Faith formation in mainline churches focused on the reception of sacraments, justice, and peace (Kumalo 2009:247). Internal ministries were minimised.

Christianity and apartheid in South Africa divided families, ethnic groups, and blacks and whites. Some denominations under apartheid were united under SACC with a 'strong sense of purpose and direction embedded in an authentic prophetic voice of the oppressed and voiceless' (Pillay 2017:2). With the dawn of democracy, each denomination, however, reverted to its internal ministries and they lost their unity in their external ministry in society (Kumalo 2009:247).

The Role of Christian Unity and Witnessing

Mainline churches came to South Africa already divided. For them to unite could set an example for unity amongst churches in learning two general lessons from the GNU. First, the GNU symbolises maturity on the side of political parties by demonstrating unity in diversity. The GNU incorporates

different political parties to address the challenges facing society. Political parties agree to bend their ideologies under the constitution and compromise their own interests to serve the country. The lesson for mainline churches in South Africa is that they need to mature in their faith and evaluate their purpose and mission in society. They must assess past differences that led to separation, mend what was wrong, and focus on God's mission for the church (John 17:20–26). Mainline churches could then incorporate newly formed congregations that believe in fulfilling the mission of Christ. As one body, members could live a virtuous life in society and fulfil the mission of the church in the South African context. Pali (2024b:5) states that, denominational unity would allow learning from each other, allow collaboration on issues that concern human well-being, and help fight the system that degrades human dignity.

A second lesson for the church from the GNU is that the GNU was formed to represent the voice of the voters and to respect it. Denominational leadership ought to accept the place, status, and voice of the lay faithful in the church's mission. The great commission (Matthew 28:19–20) sets the purpose of apostleship (leadership), namely, to make disciples. Church leadership ought to make use of the lay faithful. Their voices, struggles, and aspirations ought to be listened to, heard, and included in decision-making to carry out the mission of the church. The lay faithful live in society. They, together with the leadership, are the church. Together they ought to be disciples within their own context. The lay faithful are called to be salt, light, and leaven within their families and society (Matthew 5:13–16). Their mission is to transform their contexts from within in their different professions, status, mission, and ministry.

In the Roman Catholic Church, much is written about the place of the lay faithful in the church since the Second Vatican Council, for example in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Paul VI 1965), *Christifideles Laici* (John Paul II 1988), and *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council 2004). These documents stipulate the rights, duties, and responsibilities of every baptised person within the church. All the baptised ought to claim their status as being the church on every level of society (Appiah-Kubi and Bonsu 2020:29). Unfortunately, for many the social doctrine of the church remains a closed book. It does not form part of the formation for ministerial priesthood

in South Africa (Mokone 2022:151). Material for formation is available, but formation and implementation are a challenge. Ministerial priestly formation is viewed by priests as academic and Eurocentric, not addressing the South African context (Mokone 2022:145). With this background, the lay faithful remain passive for lack of proper formation.

The mission and place of the lay faithful must not be only acknowledged and discussed in church documents. The hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church puts the lay faithful at the bottom of the pyramid with no voice in the running of the church. According to *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Paul VI 1965:5) the lay faithful are not there to simply follow detailed instructions from the hierarchy. They are called for a specific apostolate in the church and society. Where faith formation does not prepare and empower the lay faithful for their apostolate, they become followers of instructions from the hierarchy. This process leads to the continued compartmentalisation of Christian life, rather than Christians being active as Christians in society (Kumalo 2009:252; Pali 2024a:4). The voice of the lay faithful needs to not only be heard but be part of discussions and resolutions, and the implementation of their apostolate to help them own the Christian faith to become their culture and for them to become missionary disciples in their own contexts (Paul VI 1965:6, 7).

To rebuild a spirituality of unity among mainline churches, the Christian moral conscience ought to form the centre of ongoing formation in order to attain social cohesion and to witness to Christ (Mark 12:30–31, Galatians 5:14) (Pali 2024a:4). The moral conscience, duties, and responsibilities of the Christian calling need to be adjusted to form active citizens (Mokone 2022:113; Pali 2024b:8).

Factors mentioned by Kumalo (2009:250–256) that inhibit church participation in political issues could be solved by initiating faith formation that empowers the lay faithful to be the church in society. First, the church leadership's role should provide a spirituality of presence, which allows for attending to others with openness, attentiveness, and prayerfulness (Osmer 2008:34). Second, priestly listening calls all members to accommodate each other, pray for each other, forgive each other, and bear each other's burden (Osmer 2008:35). If these were done, there would be no question of where the church is on Monday. The withdrawal of church leadership from the political arena left

political leadership without spiritual guidance to build the country in the spirit of Christ. The democratic South African society lacks the values to spearhead a new culture of a rainbow nation, facilitate reconciliation, and change the mindset of South Africans to embrace each other in brotherhood.

Through baptism, Christians share in the priesthood, prophetic office, and kingship of Christ (Obiorah 2020:2; Paul VI 1965:2). As priests, the first duty for Christians is to pray for political leaders to attain peace and prosperity in the land (1 Timothy 2:1–4). As prophets, Christians are to hold politicians accountable for service delivery, to end corruption, and to live their faith manifesting gospel values. Christians fail to fulfil this responsibility for lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, and exclusion from the mission of the church (Kumalo 2009:248). As kings, Christians ought to advocate for justice for all to protect the dignity of each person created in the image of God. The Christian calling demands that the disciple of Christ further his mission and protect the poor and the vulnerable in society. Christian denominations have a role to play in forming active citizens who incorporate democratic values, mutual respect, human rights, and social cohesion and embrace community interests (Pali 2024b:4). Due to the historical background of Christianity and political structures in South Africa, the transformation of Christian mission and ministry under democracy causes the lay faithful to fail to fulfil their Christian calling and become missionary disciples within their homes and society.

According to Pali (2024a:4), '[c]onquering the mindset usually occurs through the teachings, training, and distribution of literature from the colonial state' (see also Mokone 2022:145–147). Continuing frameworks, used before democracy, perpetuate the mindset of the colonial system and a lack of involvement in the mission of the church. When faith formation and theological ministerial formation remain Eurocentric (Mokone 2022:145), colonisation of the mind is sustained. For Pali (2024a:3), colonisation of the mind is a stumbling block to the decolonisation of the academy and knowledge and the facilitation of social transformation, political progress, and economic development.

Terreblanche (2015:7) states that poverty and a lack of education left Africans only one choice in life: 'how to stay alive'. This reality has led Africans to seek solace in religion in order to cope with frustration, pain, and suffering. The vast

majority of Africans are not involved in programmes for societal transformation. This unfortunate situation led to the blossoming of ecclesiology of the prosperity gospel (Palakeel 2022:311). This blossoming of ecclesiology has been identified as a mile wide and an inch deep (Enyinnaya 2020:100). Congregants are promised wealth, health, and success through faith, without learning about God or how to stand for their rights, justice, and the transformation of policies (Barron 2023:326).

The faith-formation framework should 'transform the lives that will transform the society' (Enyinnaya 2020:101). Faith formation should empower Christians to fully understand their Christian calling, integrate moral values as part of their culture, and live within society as disciples of Jesus. Participants in the GNU would then advocate for justice, inclusive development, and care for others. Basing the solution to the challenges faced by the country on Christian or religious values would give participants in the GNU a common point of departure, a platform based on love for God and love for one's neighbour (Mark 12:30–31). They would have a common worldview that would enable them to unite as a rainbow nation, to build a nation focused on societal transformation rather than personal materialism. The next section offers a holistic faith-formation framework that would holistically integrate Christians, transform their lives, decolonise their mindsets, and empower them to witness Christ in the marketplace.

Considering the Ecumenical Faith-Formation Framework

The 1994 South African election and the inauguration of democracy gave hope for justice, economic development, the alleviation of poverty, and equality among South Africans. The withdrawal of the NP from the GNU in 1996 left the ANC-led government struggling to implement the new constitution against the backdrop of a stagnant economy, unemployment, inequality, and poverty (South African History Online 2020). The ANC governed the country with impaired knowledge of the nuances of the country and of how to restructure institutions that they did not institute. A post-apartheid faith-formation framework is necessary to build and anchor South Africans in gospel values. In order to achieve this, faith needs to become a culture by holistically integrating Christian thinking, communication, and actions. Faith should form Christians'

conscience in such a way that their minds are not influenced against their inner self-realisation and Christian identity. Faith formation needs to integrate a person towards wholeness and holiness. An unintegrated person cannot be fully alive and cannot be held responsible for his or her actions. A holistic faith-formation framework ought to integrate a person to be fully alive, to love and accept him- or herself as a creature created for a purpose and mission. Restoration of family life ministry is crucial for moulding a new generation that lives and practises what it believes in private and in public spheres.

Kumalo (2009:250) states that, after the inauguration of the democratic government, prominent church leaders, Bishops Desmond Tutu and Manas Buthelezi, announced their departure from politics to do the real business of the church. This should have given church leadership the opportunity to remodel their faith-formation frameworks to re-evangelise the South African population, to assess the context, to teach scripture to empower the rainbow nation to practise what it believes, and to mould Christians to become missionary disciples in their own country. Thoughtfulness and reading the signs of the times and the new political sphere of democracy (Osmer 2008:82–83) ought to have informed church leadership to make contextual decisions. The formulation of a holistic faith-formation framework is based on informed knowledge of the present situation. A holistic faith formation encompasses four dimensions that address the person as a whole: human, spiritual, intellectual, and skilful (John Paul II 1992:43–56). Each dimension should have both informative and formative objectives to bring about integration. Each of these dimensions will be discussed separately to highlight important elements.

First, the content for the human-formation framework must include the prospects of Genesis 1:26 – a human being created in the image of God for God's purpose. This should include the concept of sin, brokenness, and humanity's rebellion against God and his divine will for humanity. This should include mental, emotional, and psychological healing of all South Africans. It should restore the mindset by building a common human identity of the body of Christ, the people of God in the South African rainbow nation. Human formation would build character, moral conscience, and attitudes, and would restore the dignity lost through different political and religious changes that affected relationships in society. A fully integrated person would gain his or her dignity and integrity.

Second, spiritual formation is the core of Christian formation. Using scripture, spiritual formation must centre on kingdom perspectives. It should centre on God who has revealed himself in the person of Jesus (John 17:3). This ought to lead to a personal encounter with the triune God through personal prayer and communion in worship (John 15:15), and encourage living one's faith in Christ in the community of believers (John 10:30). Spiritual formation must lead to repentance from sin (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15), conversion of the heart (Luke 15:11–31), and a determination to live out gospel values as a disciple of Jesus Christ (John 14:15). Prayer, meditation, and worship should help Christians learn Christ as a role model and follow in his footsteps (Matthew 4:19) (Moyo and Pali 2023:170). This process requires that church leadership believe what they read, teach what they believe, and practise what they teach (Delillio 2021:1). Catechesis ought to address current issues and lead to repentance and conversion. Preaching should be in the context of the place, and offer ongoing formation to provide all the baptised with skills to live as followers of Christ (Ephesians 4:12). Seminary formation ought to equip the ministerial priesthood for the formation of the lay faithful for discipleship (Mokone 2022:9–10; Nel and Schoeman 2019:2).

Third, intellectual formation should enlighten and integrate human and spiritual formation. Making disciples demands that faith in Christ be practical, be lived in everyday life. Christian concepts must be taught and understood from the African cultural perspective and South African background. The objective of teaching ought to be informative and formative. Central to intellectual formation should be Christian calling, missionary discipleship, and living out gospel values within the context of one's life in society. The life of faith is from the womb to the tomb. Parents and godparents must journey with their children as spiritual guides or mentors and unite them in the domestic church, the family, to witness to Christ. The concept of the trinity ought to replace the ancestral belief system. Christians are to adhere to Christ who brought salvation and reconciliation with God.

Fourth, missionary discipleship formation ought to integrate three dimensions, namely the human, the spiritual, and the intellectual. These formations ought to prepare, empower, and lead to witnessing. Unless what is learned can be practically lived, the knowledge acquired did not address the core of the person's life, culture, and context. A person who cannot practically live what is

taught could be classified as a believer who is not yet ready to follow in the footsteps of Christ as a disciple (Luke 9:23–26, John 14:21–31). The word of God ought to transform those who hear it, and they ought to be prepared to die for it. Missionary discipleship should offer skills that empower Christians to live what they profess at home, in the neighbourhood, and in every structure of society (Acts 11:25–26). Christianity is not a private society; it is a call to holiness and the transformation of social structures.

To achieve what is discussed above, appropriate concepts, strategies, and methods are necessary for a positive outcome. Moulding disciples for the South African context requires that they be skilled at discerning the signs of the times and that they know what to say and do in whatever life presents them. Pali (2024a:8) states that Afrocentric, holistic education strives to build a person spiritually, intellectually, and physically to serve the community in various dimensions. The classroom setting imparts faith at the level of knowledge, but does not necessarily lead to repentance and conversion. It does not necessarily form disciples and instil Christian values by which one is to live. A homely atmosphere conducive to learning and assimilating Christian faith and values would facilitate practising what is professed. Faith ought to be handed over as a lived experience of a relationship with the triune God who is actively involved in a mission. Family ministry would facilitate unity within ecumenical family structures as a vehicle for the unity of denominations.

Sacraments are to be taught and understood as a stepping stone in the journey of faith. United in *missio Dei*, Christians would bring about change in the GNU led by the spirit of God. The Holy Spirit empowers with gifts for the service of others (1 Corinthians 12:4–11), manifested through the fruits of the Spirit of peace, transformation, and the prosperity of society (Galatians 5:22–23). Unity in diversity would allow the lay faithful to join together to carry out their mission of witnessing to the kingdom perspectives and to continue to worship separately in their own denominations.

Conclusion

Christians are to model themselves into the image of Christ as his followers to carry out *missio Dei*. The church and political parties share the same people. Formed in morals and missionary discipleship, they would not separate Sunday

from the rest of the week. The lay faithful would understand their Christian calling and its demand to represent Christ in the marketplace. They would understand that faith and actions are inseparable; they are two sides of the same coin (James 2:14–17).

Considering a new faith formation framework under the GNU would unite Christians in witnessing Christian values and restore the country under the protection of God. The question Jesus asked needs to be taken into consideration: RSV Catholic Edition (1966), 'when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Luke 18:8). The success or failure of the GNU rests on Christian unity in their mission in society. This is the second reformation, to get 'the *mission* into the hands of the laity', where the first reformation was handing the Bible to the laity (Henrichsen and Garrison 1983:8).

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Yohannes, M 2026, Review of *Paul as a Prototype and Entrepreneur of Christian Identity: an Investigation into Leadership and Identity in 1 Corinthians 1-4*, VS Sindo, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 260-263

Review

Sindo, Vuyani Stanley, *Paul as a Prototype and Entrepreneur of Christian Identity: an Investigation into Leadership and Identity in 1 Corinthians 1-4*. Carlisle: Langham Publishing, 2024. ISBN 9781839739699, 322 pp.

Reviewed by Mulatua Yohannes[1]

Paul as a Prototype and Entrepreneur of Christian Identity is a revision of Vuyani Sindo's PhD dissertation. The book examines the connection between leadership and identity with a particular focus on 1 Corinthians 1-4. By integrating social identity theory, a social scientific approach, and a historical critical grammatical approach, Sindo skilfully examines the 'how and why of Paul's leadership patterns' in shaping Christian identity in Corinth (13). Sindo particularly describes Paul as an entrepreneur of Christian identity who uses 'in Christ' and 'calling' idiom as a strategic tool to re-establish his authority and unify the divided church in Corinth. The book is structured into six chapters, appendixes, and a comprehensive bibliography.

The first chapter serves as the introductory stage for the dissertation structured to move from a broad problem statement to a specific research hypothesis, and includes the aims, motivations, and contributions of the study. The chapter highlights the existing gap by noting that modern leadership studies are anthropocentric (human-centred), focusing on leader's influence and competence. Sindo argues that the anthropocentric model of leadership is 'foreign to Paul's understanding of leadership, which is theocentric (God-centred)' (4) that seeks to emphasize God's role. The chapter aligns Pauline communal identity and the African philosophy of Ubuntu, noting that the African understanding of identity provides a helpful lens for understanding Paul's group-based leadership model. Sindo suggests that his African

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contribution will be implicit but since his work aims to contribute to leadership studies in terms of African experience, it would be better if his contribution was more explicit, particularly by utilising the philosophy of Ubuntu in the analytical sections of his work.

In chapter two, Sindo offers a comprehensive outline of his methodology in order to address objections regarding the use of a social scientific approach and social identity theory in New Testament studies. The chapter defines each approach and examines the pros and cons of each. Sindo evaluates the critiques against the use of social-scientific approaches to biblical studies, and acknowledges the anachronistic tendencies (i.e. imposing modern worldviews to first-century contexts) when using social-scientific approaches. To overcome the danger of anachronism, Sindo offers an incorporation of socio-historical approach.

In chapter three, Sindo carefully investigates the historical and literary context of 1 Corinthians to avoid the danger of anachronism. Sindo evaluates the social environment of Corinth during the community's inception and its subsequent development after Paul's departure. This assessment includes the pre-existing identities of Roman-Corinth, and the factors that might have resulted in the rejection of Paul's leadership by some. In doing so, Sindo frames the causes of the problems in Corinth with identity issues— 'their continuing identification with their previous identities' (150), and thus, their failure to reconcile with their new identity in-Christ.

Chapter four focuses on how Paul establishes his legitimacy as a leader by presenting himself as a group prototype whose life and ministry embody in-Christ identity. Sindo specifies that when he labels Paul as a 'prototype', he is describing the apostle's self-perception as a leader who embodied group norms and values, rather than the idea of 'archetype'— 'an original model on which something is patterned' (163). Sindo argues that the primary issue in Corinth was a fundamental identity crisis regarding where the believers derived their sense of social belonging. Thus, Paul presents his apostleship and his evangelical strategy as a typical example of the group's values, thereby making himself the prototype of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The chapter also links prototypicality with the ancient mimesis (imitation) tradition

where Paul calls the Corinthians to imitate him not to exert power, but to provide a visible prototypical example of how to live out their new identity.

Chapter five presents a detailed exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1-4 with a particular emphasis on 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, which Sindo sees as the tone-setter for the entire letter. A significant portion of the chapter is dedicated to the analysis of 'in-Christ' and 'calling' idioms as key terminologies to manage the group social identity through consensualisation (a common psychological process that focuses on the effort to reach a consensus within a group) where Paul frames his argument around the group shared spiritual foundations. In this chapter, Sindo also includes the 'sibling language' as a third identity descriptor Paul used to reshape the community; however it is not developed throughout the dissertation. The chapter also highlights that Paul's use of the term 'calling' has both theological and social implications: it emphasises God's initiative in forming the community, and it functions as a social boundary marker that distinguishes believers from the out-group.

Finally, chapter six offers a comprehensive summary and the study findings. The author suggests that the 'in-Christ' and 'calling' terminologies can help counter divisive political rhetoric that underscore racial differences. Sindo notes that most leadership studies are dominated by anthropocentric attitude because of western (particularly American) influence; however, to offer a theocentric approach, Sindo relies heavily on social identity theory, which can also be seen a western psychological construct. The framework Sindo uses to deconstruct the western approach can be critiqued for being a product of western model. Thus, a more explicit employment of the philosophy of Ubuntu alongside social identity theory, would have offered a more uniquely African contribution.

Nevertheless, in the factional society in which we are living, which is similar to the church of Corinth, Sindo's work serves as a remarkable resource that can serve as a tool to understand the challenges in leadership and identity. Sindo offered a powerful blueprint for the contemporary church, which is facing a leadership and identity crisis. Sindo also opens the door to further additional dialogue regarding the use of social identity theory in New Testament studies and in leadership studies in general. Students, scholars, and church leaders who are particularly interested in the applicability of social identity theory to

New Testament studies, identity, and leadership issues will benefit from this exceptional work.

Lowery, SA 2026, Review of *Reading Revelation Missiologically: the Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Revelation*, AG Urga, MP Naylor & EL Smither (eds.), *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 264-266

Review

Urga, Abeneazer G., Naylor, Michael P., and Smither, Edward L. (eds), *Reading Revelation Missiologically: the Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Revelation*, William Carey Publishing, Littleton, Colorado: 2025, ISBN 9781645086802, 250pp.

Review by Dr Stephanie A. Lowery[1]

Revelation is often considered an obscure and divisive book; thankfully, the chapters in this volume demystify some of its key aspects. Part 1 explores the missionary motives in Revelation, including a study on the Holy Spirit's person and role, the nature of God's mission to reveal God's love, and the glorious promise to which Christians cling: the future of God's eternal presence with the redeemed. In part 2, the message of Revelation is interrogated, exploring the importance of both judgment and salvation in God's message, how suffering connects to effective witness, and Revelation's political import. Part 3 discusses missionary methods, including inter alia the role of translation, hospitality, and worship.

The various authors take care to explain the rationale for discerning which themes are incorporated into God's mission, to ensure that the mission of God is derived from the text, and to note ways in which Revelation both responds to its initial context and applies to God's people today. Rather than getting caught in debates about the timeline of specific events mentioned or of the identity of figures mentioned, the authors have freedom to examine larger questions.

For example, Cornelia van Deventer's chapter explores the Holy Spirit's presence and role in the book, revealing that he is both the send and sending

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Spirit who directs worship to God and who strengthens God's people for witness. Thus, Revelation deepens one's understanding of the Spirit's nature and role in the divine mission, as the Spirit speaks alongside Father and Son to bring revelation to the churches. Andrea L. Robinson's chapter, "Subversive Suffering", examines the two witnesses of Rev. 11:3-13, demonstrating how God transforms their suffering, using it as a means to guide unbelievers to salvation. As Robinson explains, "More than consolation, John calls the church to radical reformation and courageous witness" (95), to trust that just like the Lamb who was slain, God will work through the suffering of faithful saints to bring about the promised salvation. God's mission clearly calls for the participation of the church. Considering missionary methods, Kwa Kiem-Kiok's contribution asks difficult questions about discipleship and politics, drawing from an Asian context. His chapter explores how worship can shape God's people to be disciples in every aspect of their lives, including how to engage faithfully with the political realm, such as by providing social services to all people without discrimination.

Commendably, the editors manage to maintain a fairly consistent writing style throughout the volume. The division of the book into three parts helps organise and display the unity of the chapters. One reason this volume is valuable is that Revelation provides a vision of the results of God's mission, giving direction from where the church currently is to where it will finally find itself. Therefore, Revelation has a unique place in missiological considerations, and the volume provides a perspective that is often overlooked in missiological discussions and in studies of Revelation.

This volume is valuable to a range of audiences: missiologists wanting to deepen their theological rooting, New Testament scholars curious to see how a missional hermeneutic is applied to a notoriously difficult book, and readers who have been exposed to missional theology and are looking for concrete examples with which to better understand the approach. There are one or two weaker essays, but overall the quality is well-maintained. The volume is affordable, and therefore it can easily be added to one's personal library, rather than being limited to university libraries. The volume offers wise insights into how Revelation calls God's people to participate in divine mission, as well as highlighting particular contours of it. *Reading Revelation Missiologically* is a

strong example of a missional hermeneutic, drawing forth riches from the biblical text while keeping those insights framed by God's mission.

The diverse voices in this volume repeatedly demonstrate that the missional roots of Revelation are worthy of deep contemplation, and this contemplation will profoundly impact the Christian understanding of the mission of God's people. It is easy to make much of certain details in Revelation, while missing the larger picture and key points about God and God's mission; this book rectifies that error and restores the beauty, wonder, and clarion call of the final book of the Bible.

Faber, R 2026, Review of *Ecclesiology in Africa*, DK Ngaruiya & RL Reed (eds.), *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 267-269

Review

Ngaruiya, David K., and Reed, Rodney L. (eds), *Ecclesiology in Africa*, Langham Global Library, Carlisle: 2024, ISBN 9781786410245, xvi, 413pp.

Review by Dr Ryan Faber[1]

Ecclesiology in Africa, the ninth volume in Langham's Africa Society of Evangelical Theology (ASET) series, reflects the maturation of the ASET. The volume includes eighteen papers from ASET's thirteenth annual conference, which was themed 'On this rock I will build my church: Ecclesiology in Africa', and includes contributions from all regions of sub-Saharan Africa, the African diaspora, and North American, European, and Australian expatriates.

Although the volume does not provide an systematic African ecclesiology—key aspects of ecclesiological studies such as church government, the attributes and marks of the church, holy orders or ordination, and the sacraments or ordinances are not discussed—it makes an important contribution to understanding the African church today.

One strength of the volume is the contextual nature of its contributions. Appealing to the example of the Johannine community in the New Testament, Catherine W. Chege considers how traditional African religious beliefs can (and cannot) be incorporated into Christianity today. She argues for a balanced approach that carefully scrutinises cultural elements with the lens of Scripture. Robert Falconer advocates for church architecture in the vernacular, that is, architecture that employs indigenous building technology and local resources and that responds appropriately to its landscape and climate. Edward Buertley and Abraham Nana Opare Kwakye recount the ministry of Rev. E. N. Amin, a

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twentieth-century Ghanaian revivalist, as a model for contextual Christian ministry today.

Theological contextualisation is evident in several contributions that consider kinship and the church. Contra the youth church trend, that is, churches exclusively for young people, Isaac Ampong promotes the image of church as household. His argument relies primarily on the African expression of household, which is multi-generational. He concludes that youth churches are inappropriate in the African context. Because he relies on African households, which also tend to be tribal or clannish, his argument that the image also addresses the challenges of ethnocentrism and tribalism is less clear or persuasive.

The solution may not be appeal to the African household as a model for the church, but a redefinition of the church as a new household or family, as Paul N. Mwangi does in his chapter, 'The Church as Family Writ Large'. Mwangi describes 'how adopting family characteristics and patterns helped CITAM Valley Road overcome and thrive in a [multi-ethnic, multi-tribal] urban context' (268).

E. Okelloh Ogera also explores the church as a new family. He focuses on spiritual parenthood or the tendency to refer to pastors as 'daddy' or 'mommy'. Ogera notes how the model may be susceptible to inordinate control of congregants' thoughts or behaviours by pastors. He also observes the irony of pastors who claim to be spiritual parents to their congregants yet have never met many of them one-on-one.

Another strength of *Ecclesiology in Africa* is its attention to relevant issues for the African church today, including prosperity preaching and use of the title Apostle. Florah M. Kidula reflects on false prosperity pronouncements 1 Kings 22:1-18 and their lessons for the church today. Diedonne Komla Nuekpe makes a case for the continuing gift of apostleship and for use of the title Apostle. The argument for a continuing gift is compelling, but the wisdom of using the title today is less clear. Nuekpe acknowledges the unique foundational role of the Twelve (Eph. 2:20) and laments the abusive use of the title in some churches. His contribution fails to provide safeguards that would ensure responsible use of the title today.

Another relevant issue for the African church is the role of women. Given the disproportionate percentage of women in African churches, these are important considerations. Cornelia van Deventer and Jesse Fungwa Kipimo explore ministry of 'single' women in John's gospel and its implications for the church today, concluding that their survey 'leaves the church in Africa with a biblical mandate to intentionally include single women in the life and ministry of the church' (89). Practical examples of or suggestions for such inclusion would strengthen their contribution.

Marike Blok-Sijtsma explores the contribution of the Women's Fellowship in the Reformed Church in Zambia, both for the women who participate and for their congregations. The essay reflects ambivalence between the spiritual benefit of participation in the fellowship and the significant financial pressures placed on members. Tamie Davies analyses the 'mama voice' of Tanzanian women preachers, noting how female experiences shape the content of women's sermons and female attributes affect the sermon's delivery. Though Davies' contribution is primarily descriptive, there are lessons here for all preachers, especially males, whose audiences are predominantly female.

Other contributions consider ministry in the midst of pandemics and war, ministry in the midst of insecurity, recovery of the Word in Christian worship, the necessity of cross-cultural missions, and balanced church growth strategies.

Ecclesiology in Africa is a good introduction to and representation of the evangelical church in Africa. However, given the prevalence of the Pentecostalism, growing charismatic movements, and the increasing influence of African Indigenous Churches, some consideration of these movements, their ecclesiology, and their impact on the ecclesiology of the evangelical church in Africa would strengthen the volume. Even so, for those who seek to better understand the evangelical church in Africa today, this volume is highly recommended.

Akano, BI 2026, Review of *Church Growth in African Diaspora Communities: Yoruba Shaped Ecclesiology and Mission*, AP Ayokunle, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 270-272

Review

Ayokunle, AraOluwa Paul, *Church Growth in African Diaspora Communities: Yoruba Shaped Ecclesiology and Mission*, Langham Academic, Carlisle: 2025, ISBN: 9781839739712, xx, 291 pp.

Reviewed by Dr Benjamin Isola Akano[1]

In *Church Growth in African Diaspora Communities: Yoruba Shaped Ecclesiology and Mission*, AraOluwa Paul Ayokunle, PhD (Liverpool Hope University), a UK-based Nigerian Baptist minister, aims to identify the dynamics surrounding migration among African Diaspora Congregations (ADCs). Ayokunle argues that meaningful church growth among Africans in the UK must pay attention to these dynamics. He is particularly concerned that little attention has been paid to identity change as a factor in church growth among Africans in the UK. He ably demonstrates that contextual realities affect people's identity and their response to church operation.

In the first three chapters, Ayokunle provides the background of his concern and surveys present literature on African diaspora Christianity in Europe. The next three chapters leverage missiological ideas to investigate church growth among ADCs in Liverpool. Discussion of research findings centres on three dominant themes: ecclesiological dispositions and praxis, contextual realities of the UK, and leadership. The final four chapters argue for "the need for ADCs to reimagine their way of being church in the UK" (151). Engaging adaptive leadership strategy, Ayokunle proposes *Omoluabi*-shaped ecclesiology as a viable tool for fostering cross-cultural missions. *Omoluabi* is a Yoruba philosophical and cultural concept depicting the peak of personhood in African thought. Apart from helping ADCs present the holistic nature of salvation, it will help them "to be meaningful to the 2GM [second generation migrants]

[1] Dr Benjamin Akan lectures at Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso.

population of ADCs and their Western host" (220). Ayokunle also emphasises the need for ADCs to collaborate with the UK churches and Christians.

There are four missiological imports in *Church Growth in African Diaspora Communities*. The first is the fact that the theme of contextualisation runs through the book, culminating in its engagement of adaptive leadership and the proposal of *Omoluabi*-shaped ecclesiology for engaging migrants and their hosts. The second is its identification of the centrality of the Great Commission as the root and aim of any lasting ecclesiology, irrespective of contexts. The third is that missional impacts are better made through collaboration. The author notes that African Christian leaders in the UK are now more cordial in perspective, approach, and engagements with their host partners. The fourth is the convergence of migration and *missio Dei* in light of the biblical witness that affirms that Christian mission should be both centrifugal and centripetal. Mission mechanism, whether attractive or expansive, should be determined by the location of the target people.

Ayokunle emphasises the primary attributes of *Omoluabi*, which is about the character that summarises all virtues desired in personhood. This authenticates the point that *Omoluabi*-shaped ecclesiology is a viable tool for fostering cross-cultural missions. Africans see the formation of such character as enculturation and a communal task, as may be seen in many African proverbs. The author did not need to engage nuances of meaning that would demolish what he is building for the purpose of contextualisation. For instance, rendering *Omoluabi* as "a child that [biblical] Noah birthed" (156), as Ayokunle does, assumes that the Yoruba people did not have a sense of moral identity until their exposure to the Noah in the Biblical narrative Bible. Instead, Ayokunle should have leveraged the spiritual nature of things among Yoruba people. Thus, *Omoluabi* would be one birthed by 'the Master of character' (156), whom the Yoruba often consider a spiritual personality.

For a book on ecclesiology and mission, as its subtitle indicates, there is a noticeable deviation from the current scholarship in studying the church and its mission; namely, church health and the missional dimension of the church. Instead, Ayokunle focuses too much on church growth, and thus relies so much on dated sources (primarily from 1981-1993). Where he refers to relatively recent sources, such as Stetzer (2006), his discussion does not reflect an

awareness of the transition from an emphasis on church growth to an emphasis on church health and the missional dimension of the church. Consequently, Ayokunle's proposed definition for church growth does not reflect the current *missio Dei* perspective of the field. Additionally, in trying to expand the scope of church growth to include the missional essence of the church, Ayokunle treats expansion, extension, and bridging growths as "other typologies" (98). This approach may lead to a tendency to view the local church as inward focused, pushing community impact and world missions to the margin. This is a departure from the purpose-identity nature that defines the church as missional.

There are a few areas in *Church Growth in African Diaspora Communities* that warrant further attention in future editions. The expression ". . . people occasionally exhibit their cultural stereotypes, traditions and biases as they go through life" does not specify who may be victimised by these stereotypes. More importantly, the misuse of missiological terms, such as erroneously equating indigenisation with contextualisation, and the incorrect use of the term "missional" without reflecting the missional paradigm of the church as may be found in current scholarship may mislead some readers. Finally, though the book is commended for its practicality, its academic structure — following the format of Ayokunle's PhD dissertation — renders it less accessible to non-academics. Reworking the structure and format of the will enhance its readability for a more popular audience.

Given the increasing rate of migration from Africa to the West, Ayokunle's focus on healthy growth of ADCs in the UK is of great missiological importance. Justifiably, he has established that most of these congregations are finding it difficult to engage the African migrants, especially the second generation, because of their unique identity resulting from a blend of their home and diaspora contextual realities. Ayokunle proposes an ecclesiology which, when pursued with its adaptive structure, will result in missional churches that will be healthy and growing. The book is valuable for ecclesiological and missiological studies. It is recommended for theological educators, church leaders, policy makers and other stakeholders of missions, including host faith communities who have an interest in ministry among migrants, living in their communities.

Maritim, GC 2026, Review of *Youth Ministry After the Pandemic: a Practical Theology from the Global South*, KM Ndereba, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 273-276

Review

Ndereba, Kevin Muriithi, *Youth Ministry After the Pandemic: a Practical Theology from the Global South,* Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon: 2025, ISBN: 9781666756609, xiv, 159 pp.

Reviewed by Gladys Cheptoo Maritim[1]

Kevin Muriithi Ndereba's *Youth Ministry After the Pandemic* presents a compelling case that youth voices should be at the table of decision-making. He argues that theological circles must engage both practical and lived theology. Past colonial influences need to be met with a contemporary decolonized outlook. Across eleven compelling chapters, Ndereba articulates what various scholars have postulated for consideration in the post-COVID pandemic era.

Ndereba argues that youth ministry should include global voices, where in-depth theological reflections include church, society, and academy rather than being dichotomised, spiritualised, and privatised. He emphasises that, in the post-COVID era, young people are agents of change while navigating sociopolitical turmoil. Ndereba calls for theological reflection that incorporates contributions from African scholars, particularly from East and southern Africa. Their contributions are helpful for disenfranchised youth as they find meaning in a world of misperception. The growth of Christianity in the global South anticipates the inclusion of a broader worldview and the utilisation of the digital space for building bridges between theory and practice. Because, as Ndereba rightly notes, 'Christianity traverses cultures, contexts, and continents' (4).

Ndereba highlights the lack of comprehensive theological resources for faith formation in Africa, despite the fact that the continent's youth population is vast. Thus, he deliberately calls for an integrative approach to faith formation

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and for contextualised faith formation, rather than the compartmentalised manner in which it is often undertaken. Ndereba points out the significance 'four theological voices' to help understand youths' implicit understanding and to guide our engagement in faith formation (18).

Ndereba insists that community is central to the transmission of faith. He underscores the importance of clan and tribe in faith transmission, reminding us that our heritage is rooted in the Abrahamic covenant. The family is vital in shaping youth spirituality. Authority is vested in different individuals with specific roles; therefore, the next generation is empowered to carry on the task of faith. Ndereba put it well that 'communal linkages' must not be neglected in the spiritual formation of youth in the post-pandemic era, and that spiritual formation needs to utilise an intergenerational approach and capitalise on 'social capital' for progressive spiritual influence (32-33).

Ndereba critiques Contemporary Christian Music for being shallow and suggests that worship should transcend 'individualism, emotionalism, and performance to include prayer, singing, preaching, and the sacraments. Contextualising worship to engage youth popular culture must be thoughtful, relevant, and ultimately biblical' (41). He notes that technology advancements are a necessary evil, influencing church protocols. Rather than demonise them, we should embrace and integrate them wisely, bearing in mind the tech-savviness of many youth. Digital ecclesiology, Ndereba argues, must be navigated with discernment, balancing cultural context with theological tradition. Despite its challenges, the digital space offers opportunities for missional engagement in the pastoral care of young people in the aftermath of the pandemic (54).

Cura Pastoral, or the care given to God's people, is essential for youth ministry. According to Ndereba it must include empathy and listening, understanding, presence, and guidance. Practical care includes supporting grieving families, empowering youth, and addressing socio-economic needs. Ndereba advocates for narrative approaches that expand young people's imagination and embed African epistemologies into pastoral frameworks, while leveraging digital platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok for ministry.

Ndereba posits that generational differences shape political outlooks; older generations tend to prioritise order and religion, while youth emphasise justice, equity, and freedom. Social media, serves as a mobilisation site for political moves by the youth because it provides a transformed place-based community with 'networked individualism' (77). Youth must be equipped for restorative justice and holistic discipleship that prepares them for societal transformation.

Ndereba argues that the faith-science debate is one major challenge youth face in the process of individuation. He goes on to categorise youth as nomads, prodigals, exiles, insiders, and outsiders, noting that identity is fluid across atheists, agnostics, and humanists. He calls for safe spaces where science-faith dialogue can flourish, countering dichotomous worldviews with practical theological approaches.

Environmental theology and climate justice require going beyond an emerging awareness of the challenges in ecology to being teachers, preachers, content creators, and mobilisers of environmental conservation. Ndereba articulates the need to develop a theology of environment, adopting the use of green energy, electric cars, etc., as advocated by youth voices. Indeed, we should give youth a chance to lead change.

In addition to ecological concern, Ndereba enunciates a triple pandemic facing youth: health, socio-cultural, and political challenges, and proposes ways that the ecclesial community is expected to offer solutions. Ndereba argues that economic justice must be pursued through theological reflection and institutional partnerships. Changing family dynamics, such as fatherlessness, single-parent homes, and child-headed households, demand renewed models of youth engagement. Advocacy, empowerment, and collaboration with state and private actors are essential to bridge gaps and link youth to opportunities.

Finally, Ndereba envisages a youth ministry that balances 'spiritual and material realities, gospel presentation and gospel deeds' (141). He calls for revitalised approaches that address sexual identity, unemployment, inequality, and ecological concerns. Faith remains the anchor amid shifting dynamics, and youth demographics are central to shaping the future.

This book is a must-read for all youth workers, particularly those in Africa, as we engage in practical theology. Youth ministry after the pandemic should embrace global perspectives, digital realities, ecological justice, and economic empowerment. Worship and discipleship should transcend the sacred-secular divide, equipping young people to be agents of restorative justice and holistic transformation. Restorative justice and worship must transcend cultures and generations.

Munamati, S 2026, Review of *Empowering Voices: African Women in Theological Education*, FC Priest, V Schafroth & M Naidoo (eds.), *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 277-279

Review

Priest, Felicia C., Schafroth, Verena, & Naidoo, Marilyn, (eds.), *Empowering Voices: African Women in Theological Education*, Langham Global Library, Carlisle: 2025, ISBN 9781786410825, 224pp.

Reviewed by Simbarashe Munamati[1]

Empowering Voices: African Women in Theological Education advocates for greater inclusion of women in theological education in Africa. It achieves its objective in three parts. The first part offers a biblical rationale for the inclusion of women in theological leadership and focusses on the changing roles of women in the African society vis-à-vis their experiences in theological education, unpacking how African theological institutions can be critical in undoing epistemic injustice against women. The first contributor, Sophia Chirongoma utilises African women's leadership as a lens for unpacking the status of women in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa. The second, Marilyn Naidoo, engages the theological task in unpacking hindrances to inclusivity and equitable opportunities for women and men in theological education. The third, Mecry Uwaezuoke Chukweudo, proffers the Bible as a panacea for women in leadership, presenting them as a critical part of the pool of leaders for both the church and society. The fourth, Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, advocates for a mutual reading the cardinal human creation text Genesis 1:26-28 to correct the interpretive quandary of several New Testament texts on women and men.

The second part of the book deals with issues of gender equity, work-life balance among women faculty, and lessons that societies can learn from biblical women who transformed the course of history. In this section, Verena Schafroth identifies the maleness of African theological institutions that make it difficult for women to fit in and advocates for tailor-made, gender-inclusive

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mentoring opportunities for women in theological institutions. Victor Priest Chukwuma and Felicia Chinyerer Priest explore the relationship between work-life balance and job satisfaction among female faculty in theological education in Africa, identifying teaching and research, achievement and recognition, and autonomy and responsibility as some of the stressors, which are often exacerbated by workplace issues to do with salaries, tenure, and promotion, creating an imbalanced work-life for women faculty. John K. Jusu recommends an objective support mechanism for women in theological education that includes social life, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and reflective and cognitive skills.

The third and final part of the book concludes the argument by focussing on career development opportunities for female faculty in theological education, policies and guidelines that will support women faculty, publication challenges women faculty face, and opportunities available for women faculty in theological education. Nathan Chiroma conceptualises mentoring in institutions of higher learning as aimed at fostering enduring relations between faculty members, cultivating career knowledge, self-identity, and professional transformation of individuals. Chiroma identifies mentorship as a great resource that should be utilised in theological institutions for female faculty members to achieve their full potential. David Tarus and Elkanah K. Cheboi argue that the continued underrepresentation of women in theological institutions in Africa is exacerbated by a lack of policies and guidelines for their inclusion for the purpose of achieving gender equity and inclusion. The contributors proffer the crafting of women-friendly policies to support of the flourishing of women in Africa's institutions of theological education. These an be brokered through the establishment of boards tasked with superintending efforts on the continent. Sibonokuhle and Martine Audeoud conclude that African female theologians face numerous challenges in unlocking publishing opportunities. These include finding publication venues, the lack of computers and reliable internet, the need for academic resources, a lack of finances, a lack of contextual themes, and the need for balance between work, family, and other tasks. The contributors identify mentorship, networking, multimedia opportunities, collaborations, advocacy, institutional support mechanisms, and targeted funding opportunities as some of the many ways African women theologians can utilise to leverage themselves in publishing their works.

The book singles out a tradition, evangelicalism. A more comprehensive account of African women in theological education would include other traditions, such as Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Pentecostalism, and African initiated churches. The book identifies available tools for the empowerment the African women's voices in theological institutions. These tools include utilisation of gender equity, exploring the relationship between work balance and job satisfaction among female faculty, and lessons from women in the Bible who managed to transform the course of history. Part 3 of the book is critical for it focus on the impact of mentoring, policies and guidelines for support of women, as well as challenges and opportunities for African female theologians regarding publications. The crafting of policies and guidelines in support of women is critical in creating a conducive environment for women flourishing in publications. The book is a critical advocacy tool for the promotion of gender equity and inclusion in African theological institutions. It is a welcome resource for a critical conversation.

Hoogbaard, RM 2026, Review of *Understanding and Developing Theological Education*, B Ott, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 280-283

Review

Ott, Bernhard, *Understanding and Developing Theological Education*, Langham Global Library, Carlisle: 2016, ISBN 9781907713880, 475pp.

Reviewed by Rachell Mary Hoogbaard[1]

In *Understanding and Developing Theological Education*, Bernhard Ott, a theologian, former rector, president of a theological seminary, and former academic dean reflects on his vast experience and lessons learnt about leadership and curriculum development in the field of theological education. The contents of the book are intended to be a valuable resource not only for leaders at any level in theological schools and training institutions, but also for students and seminarians who need direction in terms of their intended studies. Ott offers a global perspective, incorporating, among other things, studies from North America and England, and international networks in Switzerland, Germany, and India.

The book contains eight chapters. After an introduction chapter, chapters 2-4 elaborate on foundational and skill competencies while chapters 5-8 elaborate on practicalities, including include models and strategies. The first foundational competency (chapter 2) is the struggle for reform and renewal in theological education, historical influences, and the changes that have shaped current theological education. Ott begins at the Second World War, then reflects on the efforts of the World Council of Churches and the Association for Theological Schools, the missionary work of International Council for Evangelical Theological Education and universities and theological schools in Switzerland and German-speaking Europe, and provides deep insights into the history of educational reform.

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In the third chapter, Ott discusses the foundation of educational theory in-depth. He explains the various forms and models that exist and are spread across institutions, seminaries, and training facilities. He discusses catechistic, monastic, scholastic, and seminary models. He highlights and speaks favourably about the seminary model, which aims to bring renewal or transformation to the church. These models also include institutions called Theological Education by Extension. Ott elaborates on the various traditions that forms the bases for the current models, and states that institutions should consider the past, the present, and their effectiveness in the current context.

Ott elaborates on the theological foundation for theological education in chapter 4. Cites theologians such as Richard Niebuhr, David Kelsey, and Edward Farley, Ott insists that theological education must be grounded in theology. The aforementioned gleaned their stance from the examples of Jesus and Paul. Ott maintains that it is important for hermeneutical assumptions to be shaped by the Bible and be underpinned by the impact of systematic theology. He argues that the church as the primary place for theological education. A connectedness, therefore, exists based on the responsibility between church and educational institutions. This relationship cannot be underestimated. Ott reiterates that theological education exists to serve the church and not the other way round.

In chapter 5, Ott argues for the importance of integrating theory and practice. Ott cites Gerald Ebeling who claimed that there is a disruption in the subject matter related to theology, an estrangement in spirituality and intellectual works, and tension between theory and practice. Integration allows for a thorough assessment of "Theory, Praxis and *Poiesis*" (202-203), which relate to the various competencies of reason, virtue, and ability.

Curriculum development is examined in chapter 6. Ott states that curriculums are at risk if they are maintained over the years without consideration of current demands (church and mission), and the concerns of students and instructors, which include inadequacies in the curriculum such as behavioural competency, training in missions, and pastoral theology.

In chapter seven, Ott stresses the need for quality control. Delivering what is promised versus acquiring competencies and skills as per accreditation

standards is of great importance. The use of various, appropriate tools, as well as constant reviews, are vital for educational institutions. The question of who is responsible in terms of support, what are the goals, and how the process should unfold aid execution and development of curriculum design. Partnerships with volunteers and agencies increase effectiveness and the practical opportunities and exposure that enable an integrated curriculum.

Ott focuses on various leadership models in chapter 8, but particularly highlights the work of Peter Thomas Senn who introduced head (strategy/orientation), hands (structures/coordination), and heart (culture/motivation) model. This model also clarifies the administrative leadership model versus an entrepreneurial leadership role. Ott argues that the role of a leader at a theological school requires more than just following a job description. Effective leaders must execute a combination of leadership tasks, theories, and organisational models to address the demands and variables of the theological arena.

Although Ott does not present an African perspective on theological education, his experience in the field of theological education, views on a wide range of leadership models, and involvement in curriculum development and international platforms including the World Council of Churches demonstrate valuable lessons for leaders at any institution. Ott's emphasis on the Bible, church context, partnerships with other agencies, and the demand to prepare students and seminarians for the challenges of the world are applicable to international and African leaders. Yet many of the institutions, models, and scholars quoted by Ott relate to Switzerland specifically. The opportunity to hear forth African context is missed.

Ott recommends his book to leaders and students. But the book's lengthy historical discussions and overwhelming number of scholarly perspectives, may make it cumbersome for busy leaders with significant time constraints. Ott tends to discusses basic concepts at length, which may prove unnecessary for experienced leaders. Concepts such as the Word of God, praxis, and curriculum do not warrant the extensive definitions and explanations that Ott provides. Concise summaries, especially at the end of each chapter, would be helpful. Ott also recommends his book for students, but the heft of the value may render it inaccessible to students who want to see relevant information

immediately. Ott's book may not be as suitable for that target group as he hopes.

I do, however, strongly recommend the book to new leaders in the field of theological education field. New leaders at African institutes will benefit from deeper understanding of the history and international development of theological education. The book may also inspire an African scholar to write about a similar volume about theological education from an African perspective, specifically for the African context.

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