

Volume 2, Issue 2 (Nov 2025)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion and Public Life

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Volume 2, Issue 2 of the Journal of Religion and Public Life

Canon Dr Chris Sugden¹

In this fourth issue (Volume 2, Issue 2) of our journal a doctoral graduate of OCRPL combines with a South African Scholar to bring insights from two different contexts in Latin America and South Africa to illuminate one another in studies of motherhood and fatherhood. A second study from South Africa reports on a programme to mentor men to be effective fathers as a vital contribution to social health. The Academic Lead of our Shepherd's Academy from North-east India reflects on the importance of and methods for ensuring that distance and online education is situated in and engages with the learners' contexts. A study from Ghana examines the history and current experience of churches from different backgrounds and denominations working together across their differences as a contribution to social cohesion.

A historical study of the great siege of Malta in 1565 between the Knights of St John and the Ottoman Empire is reviewed as are a survey of contextually situated education, a challenge to relate justice relate to research, teaching and institutional life, and a particular study on the moral and ethical dimensions of inflation and its effects on society.

¹ Canon Dr Chris Sugden is head of the Ph.D. programme at OCRPL, member of the OCRPL Academic Council, and a member of the JRPL Editorial Board.



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Missiology Through a Two-Eyed Lens: Epistemological and Practical Insights

Renee Rheinbolt-Urbe and Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks¹

Abstract: Employing a "two-eye" approach that integrates Indigenous and Western epistemologies, the study analyses two Global South-focused doctoral works. Rheinbolt-Urbe's Chapter 4 uses mixed methods and sentipensante logic to evaluate a Colombian congregation's resilience after an institutional crisis. Fazel's Chapter 5 examines a South African youth programme, advocating holistic mission that merges spiritual formation with social action. The studies, one explicit and one implicit, showcase the two-eye approach's versatility in bridging epistemological and geographical divides. By promoting cultural negotiation and ethical relationality, this cross-continental dialogue contributes to Indigenous, decolonial, and tribal theologies within South-South contexts, ensuring both methodological rigour and spiritually resonant outcomes.

Keywords: two-eye seeing, missiological empirical research, LIFEPLAN®, critical realism, missio Dei

1. Introduction

This paper argues for the two-eye approach as a vital methodological framework for contemporary missiology. As the epicentre of global Christianity shifts overwhelmingly to the Global South, and with the recognition that "The Bible is not a Western book" (Rohrbaugh 2007: ix), there is a pressing need for research methods that move beyond

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Prof. Fazel Ebrihiam Freeks, Ph.D., father of three, is an associate professor at North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa, in the Faculty of Theology and the Unit for Reformed Theology & Development of the South African Society. He serves as the Coordinator for Community Engagement and is a member of the editorial teams for the international *Pharos Journal of Theology* and the national *Journal for Christian Scholarship*. He also occasionally preaches at his home congregation.

Eurocentric paradigms.² The main research question addressed in the following paper is the following:

How does the two-eyed approach that integrates Indigenous and Western epistemologies enhance missiological research and practice in Global South contexts?

The two-eye approach, inspired by Chilisa (2020), offers such a model by integrating one eye grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and the other in Western critical realism. This epistemological stance aligns with Kritzing's (2013) seven-point praxis matrix for "missiological evaluation", which centres the spiritual dimension of research. It also resonates with Nel's (2019) vision of scholarship shaped by "an atmosphere of celebration and an ethos of prayer". Within this framework, knowledge is not merely produced but discerned—through listening, participation, and a theological commitment to justice within the unseen dimensions of the *missio Dei*.

At its core, this approach champions ***sentipensante logic***: a way of knowing that integrates thinking and feeling, formal knowledge, orality, and lived wisdom.³ The two doctoral chapters under examination embody this dynamic. One, a missiological evaluation from a Stellenbosch University dissertation, traces the ripple effects of internal fractures within a North American mission agency on its Latin American congregation (ICI-Colombia). The other, from a North-West University dissertation, confronts systemic challenges facing youth in Christiana, South Africa, through a biblical-theological evaluation of the LIFEPLAN® programme, while drawing inspiration from Global South stories of hope. As Priest (2012: n.p.) reminds us, missiology is not an "armchair activity" but an embodied engagement with God's redemptive work. By bringing these South African-based studies of Latin American and African contexts into a cross-continental dialogue, this paper explores how the two-eye approach can bridge not only epistemological divides but also geographic and cultural distances—linking Indigenous methodologies like ethnopoetics and duoethnography with critical theological reflection and connecting South-South mission praxis with a global theological imagination.

To give readers a clear point of entry, Table 1 below summarises the core details of each dissertation chapter:⁴

² Although "Eurocentric" and "Western" also include a United States-centric perspective, we will primarily use the term "Eurocentric" to convey this concept.

³ The concept of '*sentipensante*' is drawn from the work of Colombian sociologist and liberation theologian Fals-Borda, a key figure in the development of Participatory Action Research (PAR). As Robles Lomeli and Rappaport (2022:608) explain, Fals-Borda's notion of the *sentipensante* refers to the 'thinking-feeling' actor, whose sentiment is integral to political engagement and historical agency.

⁴ Table provided by TextCortex, May 21, 2025.

Table 1: Summary of Key Details of Each Dissertation Chapter

Information	Chapter 4: Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe	Chapter 5: Fazel Ebriham Freeks
1. Author	Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe	Fazel Ebriham Freeks
2. Title of Dissertation	<i>Transforming Mutuality in a Theology of Mission: A Missiological Evaluation of a Colombian Congregation Case Study</i>	<i>A Missional evaluation of the LIFEPLAN Training and Equipping Programme for youth in rural areas: A case study of its impact in the Christiana district of South Africa</i>
3. Main Research Question	In view of the collapse of an international USA-based RBO, how have shifts in self-understandings and practices of mutuality shaped the ministry and mission of the Colombian congregation?	To what extent does the LIFEPLAN® Training and Equipping programme for young people in the Christiana District of South Africa provide a tool for effective Christian missional outreach to the youth in disadvantaged communities?
4. Date of Graduation	December 2023	June 2018
5. University	Stellenbosch University, South Africa	North-West University, South Africa
6. Supervisor(s)	D. Xolile Simon, J. Andrew Kirk	Flip J. Buys
7. Chapter Title	"METHODOLOGY" (Chapter 4) pp. 99–129	"HOLISTIC MISSIONAL OUTREACH TO THE CONTEMPORARY YOUTH OF SOUTH AFRICA" (Chapter 5) pp. 102–159.
8. Research Population	ICI-Colombia congregation members (n = 12; 8 males, 4 females), all of whom were married and represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.	Youth in Christiana community, South Africa, who participated in LIFEPLAN® (n = 151; 87 males, 64 females), ranged in age from 21 to 62 years, with an average age of 35.8 years.
9. Two Main Authors Cited ⁵	A Motswana from Botswana Bagele Chilisa	South African Fazel E. Freeks (2004, 2007, 2008, 2011,

⁵ Speakai's response to the question: "Which author is cited the most?" (May 21, 2025).

	(2020) is cited 15 times, and South African David Bosch (1991) appears 8 times.	2013, 2015, 2016), including collaborations with co-authors such as South African George A. Lotter (2009, 2014, 2015), is cited 30 times; South African J.A. Van Rooy (1994) is cited 6 times.
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1.1 Duoethnographic Framing

While this article is structured around a thematic comparative analysis, it also draws on principles of duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris 2012).⁶ As co-authors reflecting on our own doctoral research, we engage in a dialogical, reflexive process—allowing our respective chapters to “speak to each other” across diverse cultural and theological contexts. This intersubjective engagement not only aligns with the two-eye approach but also deepens it by bringing relational accountability, mutual vulnerability, and co-constructed meaning to the fore. In doing so, we acknowledge our positionality not merely as Global South academics, but also as mission practitioners and parents—inviting readers into a shared space of critical reflection and contextual insight.

2. Explanation of the Two-Eye Approach

The assertion that the biblical text is not set in the Western context serves as a critical starting point for decolonising theology, equally decolonizing missiology. While often interpreted through modern Western lenses of individualism and abstract rationalism, the biblical texts originated in a Middle Eastern, communal, and relational world. Scholars suggest that many Indigenous worldviews are, in fact, epistemologically closer to the ancient cultures that produced the Scriptures. Woodley (2012), a Keetoowah Cherokee theologian, argues that both Indigenous North American and ancient Hebrew thought share a relational, place-based cosmology, where the concept of *shalom* resonates deeply with Indigenous notions of harmony. Similarly, Goldingay (2016) notes that ancient Israelite epistemology was storied, performative, and communal; characteristics that align more with Indigenous oral traditions than with systematic Western theology. This cultural proximity is equally vital for understanding the New Testament. Bailey (2008) and a myriad of other scholars situate Jesus firmly within his first-century Jewish context, where teachings were shaped by honor-shame dynamics, covenantal narratives, and communal identity which are frameworks often muted in Western interpretations. Therefore, employing

⁶ **Duoethnography**, as developed by Sawyer and Norris (2012), is a qualitative research methodology in which two or more researchers place their personal narratives in dialogue to explore a shared topic. Unlike traditional comparative studies, duoethnography is reflexive and co-constructive focusing on how differences in researchers' identities, experiences, and perspectives can generate new insights. It challenges the notion of a single, fixed truth, instead emphasising dialogic inquiry and relational knowing. The goal is not consensus, but transformation—both personal and epistemological—through the act of “becoming together in conversation.”

a two-eyed approach that values an "Indigenous eye" is not merely an act of postcolonial inclusion, but an essential part of the wider project of decolonising theology (Ragui 2024), itself offering a path towards a more contextually authentic and relationally whole understanding of the biblical witness.

The work of Shoki Coe and the World Council of Churches (WCC) Theological Education Fund (TEF) significantly influenced the shift toward contextual theology by affirming self-theologising as central by the 1970s and 1980s (American Society of Missiology 2014). Building on this, Bosch (1991:451-52) further recognised the need to move beyond Eurocentric models. He proposed adding a 'fourth self' – self-theologising – to the classic missiological formula of the 'three-selves' (self-government, self-support, and self-propagation), acknowledging the shift away from Eurocentric approaches within Global South churches. This concept is further explored in a contemporary context by Trull (2013) Cathcart and Nichols (2009). Bosch's student, Kritzinger (2013), developed a 7-point praxis matrix (see Figure 5) as one method to approach 'self-theologising', but we propose that the two-eye approach builds on this trajectory.

This approach resonates with Samuel's South Asian viewpoint, as elaborated by Sugden (2011) in *Seeking the Asian Face of Jesus* (Sugden,1997). Samuel fundamentally challenges Eurocentric theological frameworks by advocating for contextual, culturally grounded interpretations of Christ and the Gospel. This work exemplifies the spirit of epistemological integration advanced by the two-eye approach, contributing to the broader project of decolonising theology by moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms. The following figure (Figure 1) illustrates the two-eye approach as a collaborative framework that centres Indigenous knowledge systems as essential partners in theological reflection and missional practice.

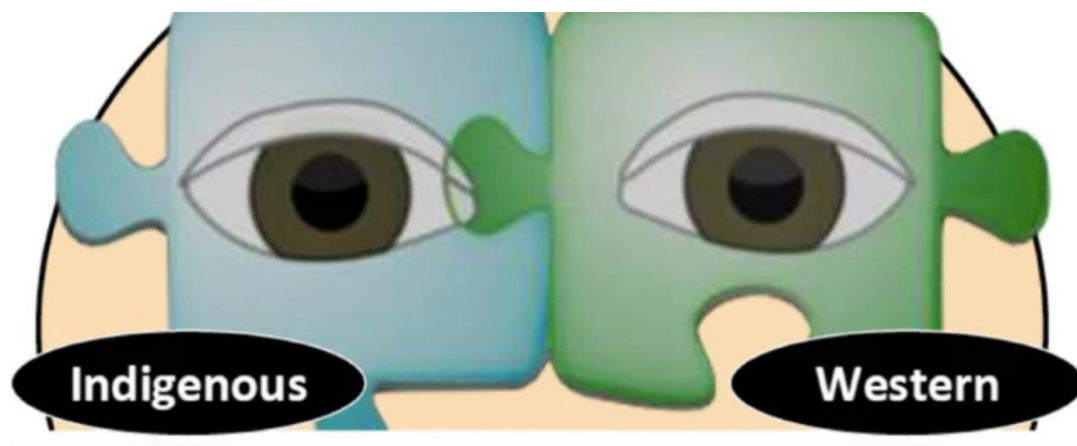


Figure 1: Two-Eyed Seeing (TES)⁷
(Source: Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall 2012)

⁷ The connection represents an informed vision using both eyes.

Chilisa's (2020) two-eye approach promotes a decolonial epistemology that values multiple knowledge systems—particularly Indigenous and Western paradigms—as complementary rather than conflicting. While Chilisa does not explicitly reference the Mi'kmaq Elders' concept of Etuaptmumk, or "Two-Eyed Seeing" (TES), in her major works, scholars—especially in the fields of education and participatory research—have drawn methodological and epistemological parallels (Kovach 2021). Both the two-eye approach and Two-Eyed Seeing advocate recognising the strengths of diverse ways of knowing, challenging mono-epistemic worldviews. As Bartlett et al. (2012:335) describe, "...learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all."

The two-eye approach described in Rheinbolt-Urbe's Chapter 4 refers to a research methodology that integrates both transformative postcolonial Indigenous research paradigms (Chilisa 2020) and Western critical realism (sub-section 4.1.2.8).⁸ This approach uses one "eye" to view the research through the lens of Indigenous methodologies—foregrounding relational accountability, spirituality, and communal understanding—and the other "eye" through Western critical realism, which understands reality as composed of both visible and invisible elements. The tree metaphor presented in Chapter 4 of the thesis illustrates this integration: the branches and trunk represent the empirical, the soil symbolises the actual, and the roots signify unseen realities. Together, this methodology bridges the visible and invisible dimensions of reality, offering a rigorous and spiritually attuned framework for research into themes of spirituality (section 4.1). Figure 2 below illustrates critical realism.

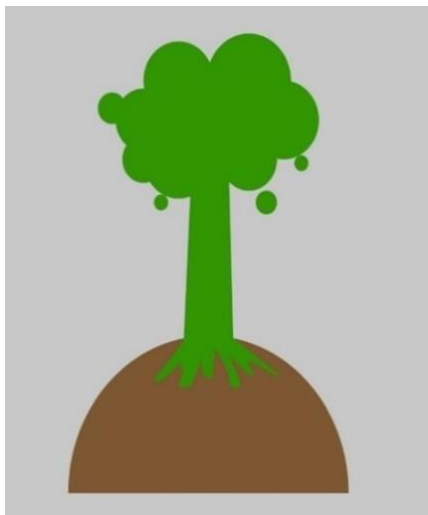


Figure 2: Illustration of critical realism (Source: Rheinbolt-Urbe 2023:370)

⁸ The section references are to both these chapters.

Taylor (2020) applies critical realism to explore the unseen dimensions of the *missio Dei*, drawing connections between Indigenous knowledge systems and the mission of God. She cites a Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) document that affirms, "God has been at work in nurturing and sustaining the First Peoples, people who had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonizers" (Taylor 2020:54). In unison, Bosch (1991:355) advocates for a holistic and interconnected worldview: "A basic reorientation is thus called for. One should, again, see oneself as a child of Mother Earth and as sister and brother to other human beings. One should think holistically, rather than analytically, emphasize togetherness rather than distance, break through the dualism of mind and body, subject and object, and emphasize 'symbiosis'" (sub-section 4.1.2.5).

Although Freeks' Chapter 5 does not explicitly reference Indigenous methods such as talking circles or orality, nor Western approaches like critical realism or thematic analysis, its focus and context suggest a blended methodology consistent with the two-eye approach. The chapter's focus on giving young people a voice and listening to their hopes and dreams reflects the spirit of Indigenous oral traditions (sub-section 5.9.4). While talking circles are not named, the participatory and communal ethos points to similar values. On the Western side, the interpretation of spiritual and social issues—such as ancestral beliefs, crime, violence, and fatherlessness—indicates a critical hermeneutical engagement with context (section 5.5). Additionally, themes like youth empowerment and church involvement imply the use of thematic analysis (section 5.3). Although these methods are not formally cited by the author, our interpretive reading of the chapter's structure and narrative focus suggests a practical application of the two-eye approach.

3. Overview of Both Chapters

3.1 Chapter 4: Methodology

Rheinbolt-Uribe's chapter explores methodological hybridity through what Chilisa (2020) describes as the "paradigm dance floor" (section 4.1) in a case study of a Colombian congregation during the aftermath of an international institutional collapse (2004–2021). The study centres on grassroots voices, primarily collected through virtual interviews (section 4.7) conducted between January 17 and May 26, 2021 (section 4.6). Its epistemological foundation is relational accountability (Wilson 2008; Chilisa 2020), interpreted through a *sentipensante* logic (section 4.2), and integrates critical realism with Indigenous research methodologies such as talking circles and orality (section 4.1).

The research employs a mixed-methods design, combining content analysis (Neuendorf 2019; Humble & Mozellus 2022) with reflective thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun 2014), resulting in a hybrid reflective thematic content analysis. Qualitative interview data are further enriched through quantitative keyword sentiment analysis using the Speakai.co platform (sections 4.2 and 4.8). The methodological framework

is also deepened by poetic inquiry (Faulkner 2019; sections 4.1, 4.8, and 4.11) and ethnographic techniques, including duoethnography (sections 4.8 and 4.11).

Ethical integrity is maintained using participant pseudonyms, member checking, and formal approval from the university's ethics committee (sections 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 4.9, and 4.10). The study is further shaped by a maternal-thinking logic (section 4.4) and informed by an ethics of care perspective, particularly evident in the bilingual negotiation of language and the emotional labour embedded throughout the research process (section 4.12).

3.2 Chapter 5: Holistic Missional Outreach to the Contemporary Youth of South Africa

Freeks' chapter presents a practical theology of holistic mission for South African youth, rooted in biblical and theological integration (sections 5.1 and 5.3). It challenges the common division between the redemptive and cultural mandates by proposing an interconnected, incarnational model (section 5.2). The chapter outlines the profound socio-economic, moral, and spiritual challenges confronting youth—including issues such as gangsterism and ancestral syncretism (sections 5.4 and 5.6). LIFEPLAN® is introduced as a biblically grounded training programme designed to support holistic development (section 5.8). It addresses physical, social, and psychological well-being while incorporating core Christian teachings. Churches use the programme as a missional tool to transform communities, focusing particularly on youth through modules on relationships and life skills. The LIFEPLAN® programme is analysed as a case study,⁹ revealing positive outcomes in life skills and psychosocial development, but also points to notable spiritual deficiencies (section 5.9). Recent missiological research spotlights the importance of community, health, and spiritual resilience (section 5.5), while real-world “stories of hope” from Brazil and South Africa illustrate the transformative potential of holistic mission (5.7). The chapter concludes with practical recommendations for church-based engagement and deeper spiritual integration (section 5.10).

⁹ The LIFEPLAN® Training and Equipping Programme was developed by North-West University to support youth in the Christiana District of South Africa's North-West Province in making healthy, high-quality life choices. Its mission is to strengthen, motivate, inspire, and develop young people—particularly in their decision-making around behavioural challenges.

The programme emerged from the FLAGH (Farm Labour and General Health) initiative, which resulted from research conducted between 1996 and 2000. This research identified farm dwellers in the North-West Province as a highly vulnerable group, facing poor nutritional status and compromised physical and mental health. FLAGH, one of the custodian projects at North-West University, began with a needs assessment study in 2001–2002. This was followed by in-depth, interdisciplinary research (2003–2007) on general health and its interconnected dimensions, including food insecurity, HIV/AIDS, and economic factors. Scholars from diverse fields—nutrition, social work, psychology, physiology, nursing, consumer sciences, economics, and theology—contributed to this work.

This research guided the development of LIFEPLAN® (Life Inequalities Amongst Persons Addressed by Means of Purposeful Living and Nutritional Interventions), which was officially launched in 2008 and has continued since. To date, the programme has reached over 5,000 participants, equipping them with a wide range of life skills. On September 14, 2010, LIFEPLAN® received accreditation from the Institutional Committee for Academic Standards (ICAS), where its goals and objectives were formally presented and approved (Freeks 2008; NWU: Institutional Committee for Academic Standards 2010).

4. Thematic Analysis

Before exploring the chapters thematically, the table below maps their key contributions across six core dimensions. This comparison draws attention to the distinct yet complementary ways in which each chapter engages the two-eye approach—explicitly in Chapter 4 and implicitly in Chapter 5. Together, they demonstrate how epistemological integration, spiritual depth, and methodological hybridity can enrich and strengthen missional praxis. Table 2 provides a comparison:¹⁰

Table 2: Comparison of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5

Aspect	Chapter 4 (Methodology)	Chapter 5 (Holistic missional outreach to the contemporary youth of South Africa)
Epistemological Alignment	Explicitly adopts Chilisa's (2020) two-eyed approach, integrating Indigenous methodologies with Western critical realism. The South African 7-point praxis matrix is applied.	Implicitly applies to a holistic missional lens that integrates spiritual formation and social engagement, without naming the two-eyed framework.
Methodological Tools	Employs mixed methods, including qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis using Speakai.co, alongside poetic inquiry and ethnography.	Draws on biblical-theological analysis and programmatic case studies (e.g., LIFEPLAN® evaluation).
Spiritual Integration	Spirituality is embedded through prayer rituals and maternal-thinking logic; foregrounding the unseen dimensions of <i>missio Dei</i> .	Identifies spiritual gaps in youth formation programmes and advocates for Christ-centred healing.
Relational Emphasis	Relational accountability (Chilisa 2020) and communal dialogue are prioritised as central to knowledge production, with a particular emphasis on motherhood.	Affirms unconditional love and restorative relationships as central to youth ministry, with a particular focus on fatherhood.
Cultural Negotiation	Spanish-English bilingual tensions are navigated, and Indigenous rituals—such as virtual talking circles—are contextually adapted.	Addresses tensions in African worldviews (e.g., ancestral spirits vs. Christianity), warning

¹⁰ Table provided by TextCortex, May 21, 2025.

		against syncretism in rural churches.
Outcome Orientation	Community resilience: rigorous missiological evaluation with two-eye approach.	Seeks transformative impact on youth through holistic mission (body, mind, and spirit).

The following sub-sections delve into these comparative insights found in Table 2.

4.1 Epistemological Alignment: Maternal-Paternal Integration Through Two-eyed Methodology

Chapter 4 explicitly adopts Chilisa's (2020) two-eye approach, blending Indigenous methodologies—such as relational accountability and communal dialogue—with Western critical realism and mixed methods, including qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis via Speakai.co. This creative integration fosters a comprehensive understanding of the research context, honoring both Indigenous and Western epistemologies.

4.1.1 Maternal-Thinking Logic and African Epistemological Foundations

The epistemological foundation of Chapter 4 is deeply rooted in maternal-thinking logic (Ruddick 1995), which serves as an epistemological lens linked to the African parallel concept of "thinking-with-the-womb" (Kiboko 2001). Chilisa (2020:306) describes African womanism as emphasizing the central role of motherhood in African households and family structures, accentuating the agency and power of mothers as foundational to communal solidarity. She further asserts that an endarkened feminist epistemology fosters a methodology rooted in healing (Chilisa 2020:308).

This approach recognizes that such situated forms of female knowledge often exist on the margins of mainstream feminism, which tends to universalize the Western experience as normative for all women. The maternal-thinking framework enables access to "unseen realities" through the integration of prayer, maternal-thinking logic, and African womanism, allowing researchers to document spiritual resources for community resilience that secular Western methodologies would systematically exclude.

4.1.2 Duoethnographic Design: Creating Unified Maternal-Paternal Perspectives

The duoethnographical design and two-eye approach leads to creating a vital unified perspective of both maternal and paternal aspects transformative mission. Each of the authors speaks from the locus of their own parenting perspective; one eye is on Rheinbolt-Uribe's maternal-thinking, whereas another eye focuses on Freeks' missional fatherhood, each from the locus of their own parenting experience and perspective.

This integration creates a methodological innovation where relational accountability (Chilisa 2020) and communal dialogue are prioritized as central to knowledge production, with a particular emphasis on motherhood in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 affirms unconditional love and restorative relationships as central to youth ministry, with a particular focus on fatherhood. The concept of "missional fatherhood" is introduced as a corrective response to the problem of absent fathers, where missional fathers are described as those who lead sacrificial lives for their families, instilling a love for Christ in their children and engaging with them on matters of significance.

4.1.3 Biblical-Theological Grounding Versus Indigenous Methodological Grounding

The epistemological alignment reveals a crucial distinction between approaches. Chapter 5's epistemological alignment is primarily theological and missiological (section 5.2). Grounded in a Christian theological framework, this chapter focuses on holistic mission as derived from biblical teachings. It stresses the integration of evangelism and social responsibility, viewing them as inseparable aspects of the mission of God. Scriptural references and theological interpretations support its arguments, reflecting an epistemology that draws on religious texts and theological scholarship.

In contrast, Chapter 4's Indigenous methodological grounding prioritizes relational accountability (Wilson 2008; Chilisa 2020), interpreted through a *sentipensante* logic, integrating critical realism with Indigenous research methodologies such as talking circles and orality. The research employs a mixed-methods design, combining content analysis with reflective thematic analysis, resulting in a hybrid reflective thematic content analysis.

4.1.4 Integrated Spiritual-Academic Framework

Both approaches converge in their commitment to spiritual integration. Chapter 4 adopts a 7-point praxis matrix that places spirituality at the heart of the research process and supports the inclusion of practices such as active prayer during interviews. Chapter 5 places spirituality at the foundation of its missiological work, critiquing the lack of spiritual formation in existing youth outreach programmes.

Although Chapter 5 does not explicitly reference the two-eye approach, this integration reflects the *sentipensante* principle and affirms the framework's holistic orientation. This convergence demonstrates how African relational and spiritual frameworks can enhance rather than contradict Western analytical tools, creating methodological innovations that neither purely Indigenous nor Western approaches could achieve alone.

4.2 Methodological Tools

Chapter 4's methodological design incorporates mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, poetic inquiry, and a *sentipensante* approach. In contrast, Chapter 5 relies primarily on biblical-theological analysis, but could benefit from incorporating some of

Chapter 4's hybrid tools—such as Speakai.co sentiment analysis—to quantify spiritual dissonance and strengthen its methodological rigour.

An example of hybrid tools, such as poetic inquiry detailed by Rheinbolt-Urbe in section 4.11, identified an 'ethnopoetic rhythm' in the participants' narratives. This distinct poetic quality, frequently observed during the interviews, is interpreted as a manifestation of the study's *sentipensante* logic. This finding stresses the persistence of ethnopoetic expression in oral-based cultures (Hymes 2003, 2016) and its accessibility through attuned research practices.

The following is a specific example of poetic inquiry, namely ethnopoetics,¹¹ as noted in section 4.11:

Poem – Ethnopoetic Evidence (Participant 115)

*Que en medio del desmoronamiento yo estaba firme,
en medio del vacío yo estaba lleno,
en medio de la desesperación yo estaba en paz.*
(‘In the midst of the collapse,
I was firm In the midst of the emptiness,
I was full In the midst of the despair, I was at peace’).

The two-eye approach embraces several methodological tools and yields rich findings, such as the above poem.

4.2.1 Digital Tools as Two-Eyed Integration

The two-eyed approach's integration of Indigenous and Western epistemologies was practically demonstrated through the strategic use of AI-assisted digital tools, which enabled methodological innovations that neither purely Indigenous nor Western approaches could achieve alone. As both authors critically engage with their respective doctoral research, we intentionally incorporated these tools to support analytical objectivity while maintaining the relational accountability and spiritual depth central to Indigenous methodologies.

AI platforms supported the Indigenous *sentipensante* logic that "integrates thinking and feeling, formal knowledge, orality, and lived wisdom" by preserving the relational and spiritual dimensions of participant narratives. ChatGPT's cross-analysis of thematic patterns honored the communal dialogue processes essential to Indigenous research, while maintaining the "ethical relationality" and "cultural negotiation" that characterizes African epistemologies.

¹¹ Hymes (2016:178) points out the presence of rhythm and structural order in non-Western texts and forms of verbal communication. Furthermore, Hymes (2003:223–224) asserts the value of ethnopoetics as a tool for exploring the cognitive frameworks embedded in these texts. This involves analysing verse structures and identifying patterned relationships by segmenting the text into lines—an approach that reveals variations in emphasis, form, and interpretation (section 4.11).

The systematic documentation and quantitative validation, a priority of Western scholarship, required for broader academic credibility was enhanced through:

- **SpeakAi.co:** Applied for sentiment and keyword analysis in Chapter 4 and this paper, enabling the quantification of spiritual and emotional dimensions in participant responses (Figures 3 and 4)
- **TextCortex:** Used for content comparison and generating analytical tables (Table 1 and Table 2), supporting the systematic analysis required for academic rigor
- **ChatGPT (OpenAI):** Used for cross-analyzing and refining thematic patterns across both Colombian and South African contexts, facilitating the duoethnographic dialogue

This digital integration demonstrates how "African relational and spiritual frameworks can enhance rather than contradict Western analytical tools". The tools served three primary functions that directly support the two-eyed approach: (i) increasing transparency around digital methods in theological research; (ii) providing a replicable, scalable model for interdisciplinary scholarship; and (iii) fostering critical distance and reflexive depth while maintaining relational accountability.

4.3 Spiritual Integration

Chapter 4 embeds spirituality not as an afterthought but as a core epistemological commitment. The text reflects spiritual integration through a rich synthesis of theological, Indigenous, and relational elements. At its centre is a deeply personal connection to the Divine, often framed in terms of a child–parent relationship—a metaphor shared by both Christian and Indigenous spiritualities, in which the Creator is viewed as nurturing and relational. This theme is further grounded in the concept of *missio Dei*, understood here through a Trinitarian lens as the mission of God expressed through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mission, therefore, is not limited to institutional church activity but is conceived as a broader spiritual movement embedded in everyday life. Bosch's holistic vision reinforces this by rejecting dualisms such as mind/body and subject/object in favour of relational interconnectedness—an idea that resonates with Indigenous spiritual frameworks centred on wholeness.

Spiritual integration also informs the research methodology itself. Chapter 4 adopts a 7-point praxis matrix that places spirituality at the heart of the research process (as seen below in Figure 5) and supports the inclusion of practices such as active prayer during interviews (section 4.3).

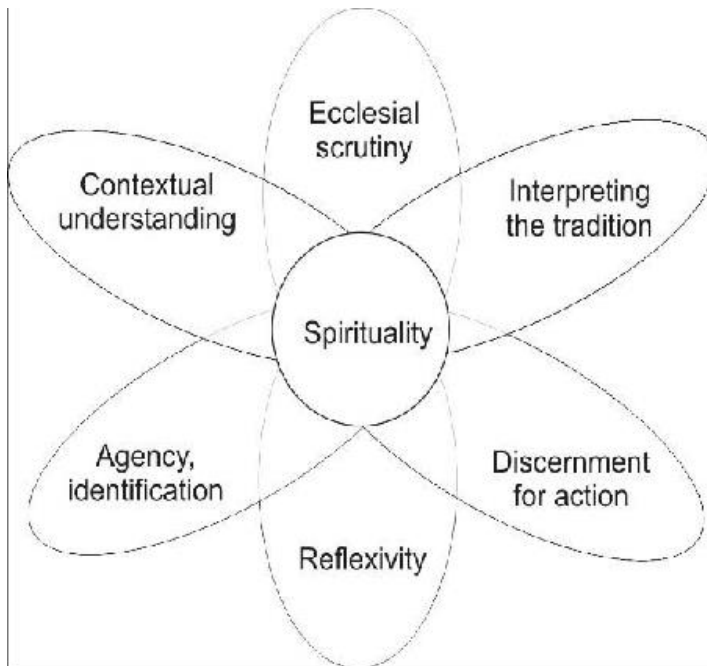


Figure 5: Graphical overview of the 7-point praxis matrix
(Source: Kritzinger 2013:37)

This matrix bridges critical realism with liberation theology, ensuring that spiritual discernment informs both data collection and ethical engagement. The *praxis matrix* comprises seven interrelated dimensions—agency, contextual understanding, ecclesial scrutiny, interpreting the tradition, discernment for action, reflexivity, and spirituality. The use of communal spirituality and a maternal-thinking lens further brings to the fore nurturing, relational, and embodied knowing—paralleling Indigenous and feminist spiritualities that value connection and care. Bosch’s embrace of critical realism introduces a dimension of theological openness, allowing for evolving understandings of truth. Together, these elements reflect a spirituality that is neither theoretical nor peripheral but deeply integrated into every layer of the research and missional engagement—connecting thought, feeling, action, and prayer. The text utilises maternal-thinking logic (section 4.7), poetic inquiry, and ritual-inflected research practices (sub-section 4.4.3), treating the unseen dimensions of *missio Dei*—prayer, presence, and relational discernment—as valid forms of knowledge.

Likewise, Chapter 5 places spirituality at the foundation of its missiological work, critiquing the lack of spiritual formation in existing youth outreach programmes (sub-section 5.5.6). While the LIFEPLAN® initiative yields positive social and psychological outcomes, participants report limited engagement with prayer, Scripture, and church life (sub-section 5.6.6). The chapter responds by advocating for intentional spiritual integration—through practices such as worship, Bible study, and communal prayer—to address what it identifies as “God’s greater plan and purpose to restore humanity’s brokenness, which is caused mainly by sin” (Freeks 2018:104-05). This emphasis on integration reflects a broader vision of holistic transformation that addresses not only physical and social needs but also the spiritual dimension of human life. Freeks

(2018:128) further affirms this point: "The programme should also be amended to give the youth a platform which allows them to partake in discussions about the importance of God, church life, and youth impact in South Africa."

Spiritual integration in Chapter 5 is framed around the concept of holistic mission, where transformation encompasses body, mind, and spirit. The text stresses that the LIFEPLAN® programme should incorporate spirituality as a core component—alongside values such as hope, faith, and love—to deepen its impact (sub-section 5.9.3). The church is positioned as instrumental in deploying the programme as a missional tool to reach those outside the Christian community, merging practical life skills with spiritual growth. Additionally, the chapter displays the role of spirituality in positive youth development, suggesting that experiences of transcendence and personal connection with God foster purpose, resilience, and healing. This integration of spirituality into everyday life aligns with the overarching mission of God to restore wholeness through Christ and affirms the theological foundation of holistic transformation.

4.4 Relational Emphasis

Chapter 4 prioritises relational accountability, engaging in ongoing dialogue with participants for validation and employing member-checking processes to ensure research integrity and community engagement (section 4.9). Reality is understood as interrelated—both seen and unseen—as illustrated by the tree analogy (Figure 2). Chapter 5, meanwhile, accentuates unconditional love as central to youth ministry, addressing systemic issues such as father absenteeism (5.6.13), gangsterism (sub-section 5.6.5), poverty (sub-section 5.3.1) and employment (sub-section 5.4.7) through relational healing.

Both chapters indicate the importance of togetherness. Chapter 4 fosters this through virtual talking circles (due to pandemic restrictions) and active prayer during each interview (sub-section 4.1.2.7). Chapter 5 reflects togetherness through fellowship and shared meals, drawing inspiration from Acts 2:42–47 (sub-section 5.2.1).

The concept of "missional fatherhood" is introduced as a corrective response to the problem of absent fathers (sub-sections 5.6.13 and 5.9.7). Missional fathers are described as those who lead sacrificial lives for their families, instilling a love for Christ in their children and engaging with them on matters of significance. These fathers are seen as disciple-makers within their homes and communities, shaping their children's worldviews and passing on the mission of doing good to others. The text pinpoints the importance of a father's presence in a child's life to guide decision-making and suggests that the LIFEPLAN® programme should incorporate teachings on missional fatherhood to counteract the negative impact of father absenteeism.

Both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 emphasise relational dynamics between parents and children, drawing parallels to God as a nurturing Parent. As Bosch (1991:493–494)

writes: “It is mediating the love of God the Father who is the Parent of all people, whoever and wherever they may be” (cf. sub-section 4.1.2.5).

4.5 Cultural Negotiation

Both chapters demonstrate cultural sensitivity and theological clarity. Chapter 4 seeks to balance Western and Indigenous methodologies and perspectives, as seen in its application of the two-eye approach. The text stresses the importance of understanding and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems—which are inherently relational and interconnected—while also engaging with Western academic frameworks.

The research process reflects cultural negotiation through practices such as member checking, where participants are actively involved in verifying the accuracy of their voices and perspectives (section 4.11). The use of ethnopoetics (sections 4.8 and 4.11) and oral histories gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews further calls attention to the value placed on Indigenous ways of knowing and communicating (section 4.7).¹²

Additionally, the text acknowledges the challenges posed by language barriers and accentuates the need for cultural sensitivity when presenting data, as many participants speak English as a second or third language (section 4.7). The researcher’s reflexivity and engagement with participants’ cultural contexts demonstrate an ongoing negotiation between differing cultural paradigms, aiming to achieve a more holistic and inclusive understanding of the research subject.

Chapter 5 explores cultural negotiation through the interaction and tension between traditional African beliefs and Christian teachings (sub-section 5.6.12). It points to how animistic religions—which include beliefs in spiritual beings, ancestors, and witchcraft—coexist with, and sometimes conflict with, Christian doctrine. This syncretism can be evident in some congregations, such as in African Initiated Churches, where Christian beliefs are blended with African Traditional Religion, for instance, the veneration of ancestral spirits (sub-section 5.6.12).

The text further examines how these traditional beliefs shape social practices and perceptions, such as attributing prosperity to witchcraft or seeking ancestral intervention during hardship. Cultural negotiation becomes even more complex for the youth, who are caught between traditional belief systems and the Christian faith promoted by the church.

In response, the text frames the church’s role as offering a holistic mission that addresses both spiritual and social needs. It encourages the youth to discover their

¹² The interviews (talking circles) encompassed three key life cycles: (i) **family history**, with special emphasis on the participants’ relationships with their mothers and grandmothers; (ii) personal walk of **spirituality history**; and (iii) **congregational history**, with particular emphasis on the period surrounding the congregation’s collapse. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

identity and purpose within the Christian faith while navigating the broader cultural landscape of traditional beliefs (section 5.3). The text proposes that the church should engage these cultural elements thoughtfully and respectfully, aiming to transform and integrate them into a Christian worldview that offers hope and guidance to the youth (section 5.9).

4.6 Outcome Orientation

Outcome orientation, as demonstrated in both chapters, refers to a deliberate focus on achieving transformative, real-world impact through research. It involves designing methodologies that not only generate insight but also lead to measurable change, aligning practical interventions with theoretical and spiritual frameworks. Chapter 4's outcome orientation centres on fostering transformative mutuality within a Colombian congregational context through rigorous and ethical missiological evaluation, strategically using a 7-point praxis matrix, a two-eye approach, *sentipensante* logic, and arts-based methods to achieve actionable insights that strengthen community resilience and address global-local crises.

Chapter 5 similarly gives centre stage to a transformative vision, focusing on holistic outcomes that nurture the body, mind, and spirit of South African youth (section 5.2). It critiques the LIFEPLAN® programme for prioritising relational and psychosocial skills while neglecting deeper spiritual formation, and advocates for a more integrated model that combines prayer, Scripture, and service (section 5.9). Both chapters accentuate ethical accountability by grounding their outcome orientation in relational responsibility. Whether through Chapter 4's communal dialogue processes or Chapter 5's sensitivity to African worldviews, each study prioritises the dignity, voice, and cultural context of its participants as essential to meaningful transformation.

In essence, outcome orientation bridges methodological rigour (Chapter 4) and missional efficacy (Chapter 5), ensuring that research and practice lead to ethical, culturally grounded, and spiritually resonant solutions.

5.6.1 Returning the Knowledge: Community-Centred Research Dissemination

A central tenet of transformative postcolonial Indigenous research paradigms, particularly as articulated by Chilisa (2020), is the ethical imperative to both conduct research with the community and to share the findings in meaningful, accessible ways—a principle also closely aligned with PAR (sections 4.0, 4.1.1, and 4.5). In line with this commitment, Rheinbolt-Uribe pledged to deliver a copy of the dissertation to the gatekeeper of ICI-Colombia, who would then distribute the findings within the community (section 4.11). Inspired by the participatory values of PAR, she also chose to create an arts-based narrative to present the results in a format more accessible to the majority of community members—many of whom do not speak English, and for whom even a scholarly Spanish translation of the dissertation might pose a barrier (section 4.8). This approach culminated in Figure 6, which is presented below.

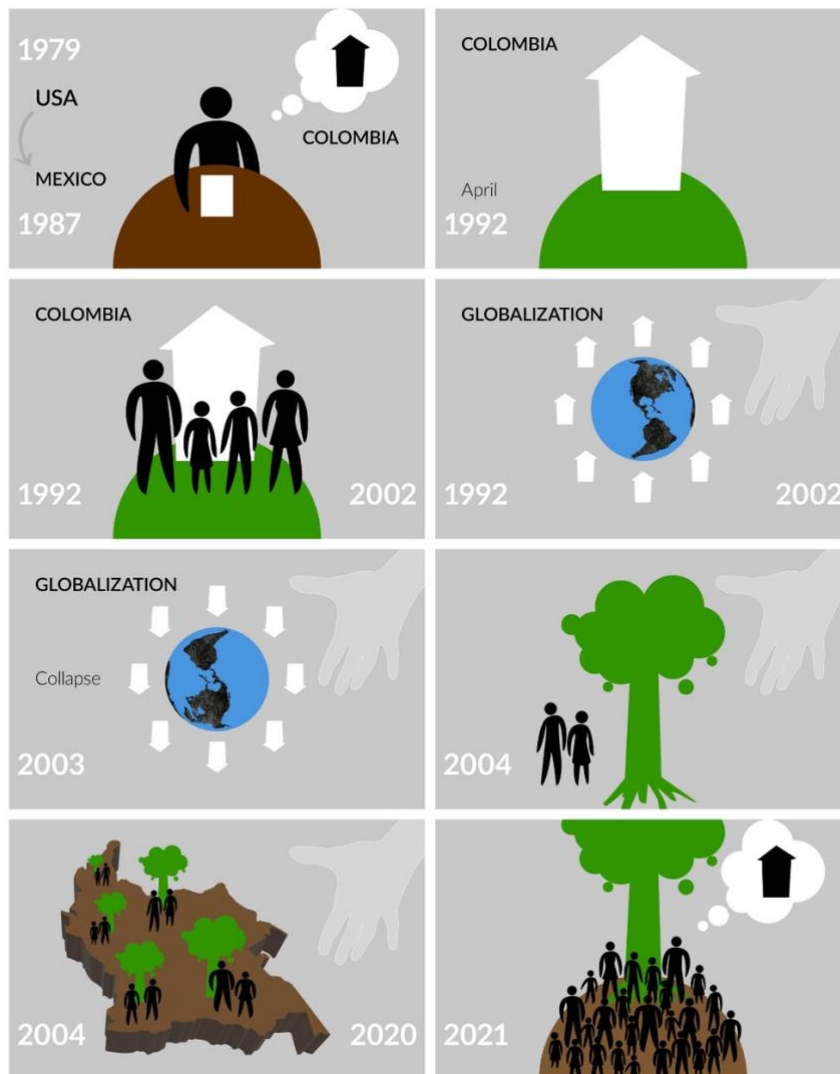


Figure 6: Vignette – ICI Colombia Narrative
(Source: Rheinbolt-Urbe 2023:370)

The eight-scene vignette works as both methodological output and community engagement tool because it transforms the 'deep listening' process into a visual narrative that honors the *sentipensante* logic of the two-eyed approach. By presenting the 'other side of the collapse narrative' through accessible scenes rather than academic analysis, the graphic enables the broader ICI-Colombia community to engage with research findings in a format that respects both their oral tradition strengths and the systematic insights of Western research methodology. The visual format ensures that the voices of those who 'experienced it first-hand' reach beyond academic gatekeepers to create the potential of genuine community dialogue about transformation and resilience.

The data revealed a critical 2021 juncture: whether the congregation would pursue a regressive path toward past governance structures (house symbol = USA-based

control) or advance with local autonomy (soil and trees = local governance). Rheinbolt-Uribe's (2023:242) missiological evaluation accurately predicted participant resistance to institutional regression. This prediction materialized by 2025, with several participants departing the congregation. The vignette successfully captured participant clarity regarding the USA-based denomination's systemic dysfunction, revealing their collective understanding of it as an irreparably compromised institutional framework.

The research population in Chapter 5 gained knowledge through training, equipping, and empowering sessions, which included a manual and workbook to enhance learning and capacity building. These sessions featured open discussions and effective communication, promoting community engagement, shared experiences, and mutual growth, ultimately ensuring that knowledge is accessible, applicable, and sustained within the community context, in line with the central tenet of *transformative postcolonial Indigenous research paradigms*.

Despite a shared commitment to community-centred knowledge dissemination, the researchers report divergent outcomes. Rheinbolt-Uribe observes that, to date, knowledge has largely remained concentrated with the main gatekeeper (the president of the church board), limiting broader community access. In contrast, Freeks spotlights the transformative impact of LIFEPLAN®, both within the original community and through the transfer of this knowledge to neighbouring communities. Testimonials such as "*LIFEPLAN® changed my life*" and "*LIFEPLAN® has changed my family*," frequently expressed during assessment interviews, indicate the programme's profound influence and far-reaching effects.

5. Distinctive Findings Enabled by the Two-Eyed Approach: A Summary of Practical Outcomes

Without the Indigenous eye informed by African scholarship and spiritual practices, standard Western methodology would have missed the ethnopoeitic expressions emerging from the interviews, relational accountability insights rooted in African womanism, communal spiritual resources, and the deep cultural negotiations that sustained both the Colombian congregation and South African youth communities. The inclusion of prayer and spiritual discernment in the research process was essential for accessing these unseen dimensions. Without the Western eye, pure Indigenous methodology would have lacked the systematic analysis and quantitative validation necessary for broader academic credibility. The integration of these perspectives through African scholarly frameworks, enhanced by spiritual practices, enabled what the authors term "cultural negotiation" and "ethical relationality", producing transformative outcomes evidenced in community testimonials such as "*LIFEPLAN® changed my life*" and "*LIFEPLAN® has changed my family*".

5.1 Grounding in African and Global South Scholarship

A foundational strength of both chapters is their deliberate grounding in African scholarship, as evidenced in Table 1 in the Row 9: Two Main Authors Cited. Chapter 4 prominently cites Bagele Chilisa, a Motswana scholar from Botswana, 15 times alongside South African missiologist David Bosch 8 times. Chapter 5 extensively draws on South African scholarship, with Fazel E. Freeks cited 30 times and collaborations with South African George A. Lotter, while South African J.A. Van Rooy appears 6 times. Chapter 5's evaluation of the LIFEPLAN® programme is a priority as it was developed in South Africa by South African scholars not imported from the United States or Europe as in common practice. This African epistemological foundation ensures that the two-eyed approach is not simply an overlay of Western and Indigenous perspectives but is authentically rooted in African scholarly traditions that inherently understand the integration of multiple knowledge systems.

Global South scholarship is highlighted in Chapter 4 as the *sentipensante* logic is borrowed from the Colombian Orlando Fals-Borda as well as the use of his Participatory Research Method (PAR). The 7-point praxis matrix is from South African J. N. J. (Klippiess) Kritzing. The approach resonates with South Asian Vinay Samuel's (Sugden 2021:xii) context-based theology, a Global South focus on 'theology of mission as transformation,' which defines transformation as enabling 'God's vision of society to be actualized in all relationships, social, economic and spiritual'."

5.2 Spiritual Integration as Core Methodology

Due to spirituality being a part of indigenous research, Rheinbolt-Urbe included prayer rituals during interviews and applied maternal-thinking logic, foregrounding the unseen dimensions of *missio Dei*. This is crucial because Chapter 4 adopts a 7-step praxis matrix that places spirituality at the heart of the research process.

5.3 Methodological Discoveries Through Spiritual Integration

The explicit application of the two-eyed approach in Chapter 4 revealed findings that would have been invisible through traditional Western methodologies alone. Most significantly, the integration of Indigenous methodologies with Western critical realism, enhanced by spiritual practices, uncovered an "ethnopoetic rhythm" in participants' narratives. This spiritual integration enabled the discovery of spontaneous poetic expressions such as: "In the midst of the collapse, I was firm / In the midst of the emptiness, I was full / In the midst of the despair, I was at peace". This finding, emerging from the study's *sentipensante* logic that integrates thinking and feeling, would have been completely overlooked by standard Western content analysis that excludes spiritual dimensions.

5.5 Spiritual and Relational Insights Through African-Informed Integration

The two-eyed approach, grounded in African scholarship and enhanced by spiritual practices, enabled access to "unseen realities". Chilisa's concept of "thinking-with-the-womb" parallels African epistemologies that emphasize motherhood as foundational to communal solidarity. The critical realism "tree metaphor" illustrated how reality encompasses both visible empirical dimensions and invisible spiritual realities, allowing researchers to document spiritual resources for community resilience that secular Western methodologies would systematically exclude. This spiritually-informed framework enabled quantitative validation through sentiment analysis using Speakai.co, demonstrating how African relational and spiritual frameworks can enhance rather than contradict Western analytical tools.

5.6 Holistic Missional Discoveries and Stories of Hope from Chapter 5

Chapter 5's implicit application of the two-eyed approach, deeply rooted in South African theological scholarship, revealed critical gaps in youth ministry programming that neither purely Western program evaluation nor traditional approaches alone could have identified. The study discovered that while LIFEPLAN® achieved positive social and psychological outcomes, it failed significantly in spiritual formation, with participants reporting "limited engagement with prayer, Scripture, and church life". This finding was substantiated by detailed quantitative analysis revealing concerning spiritual disconnection: 21.6% of participants perceived God as impersonal and indifferent to their lives, 25.3% reported not deriving personal strength from God, 6.0% lacked a personally significant relationship with God, and notably, 50.3% continued to venerate and seek blessings from ancestor spirits (Badimo), while 35.1% consulted traditional healers regarding their lives and futures. This finding emerged specifically from integrating Western program assessment methodologies with African communal values and Christian theological frameworks developed by South African scholars, highlighting the essential role of spiritual integration in holistic mission.

Chapter 5 underlines stories of hope by showcasing individuals and communities that have fostered transformation despite adversity (section 5.7). In São Paulo, Abel, a child from a favela, experiences renewed hope through the ministry of Sonia Costa (sub-section 5.7.1). Similarly, P.J. Buys' outreach in KwaNdebele offers mentoring and training for vulnerable youth (sub-section 5.7.3). In Christiana, Anna Samane leads a community initiative to provide food, shelter, and developmental opportunities for youth (sub-section 5.7.4). These narratives illustrate the power of holistic mission in action.

5.7 Cultural Negotiation and Contextual Solutions

The African scholarly foundation, enhanced by spiritual sensitivity, enabled sophisticated cultural negotiation around tensions between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, particularly regarding ancestral veneration. The two-eyed approach quantified this tension, revealing that 50.3% of LIFEPLAN® participants continued to venerate ancestor spirits (Badimo) and 35.1% consulted traditional

healers, despite 96.0% expressing belief in God's love and 87.2% reporting a personally significant relationship with God. This integration revealed the need for "missional fatherhood" as a response to father absenteeism, a solution that emerged specifically from bridging Indigenous African family structures with biblical theology as understood through African scholarship. The spiritual dimension was crucial in addressing syncretism and offering culturally grounded yet theologically informed solutions that honor both African worldviews and Christian faith.

5.8 Community-Centred Knowledge Dissemination Through Two-Eyed Integration

The African-grounded, spiritually-informed two-eyed approach fundamentally transformed how research findings were returned to communities. Without the Indigenous eye informed by Chilisa's (2020) transformative postcolonial Indigenous research paradigms, standard Western academic dissemination would have missed the ethical imperative to conduct research with communities and share findings in accessible ways aligned with participatory action research principles. Rheinbolt-Urbe's creation of an arts-based narrative (Figure 6) for community members who do not speak English exemplifies how Indigenous methodological commitments shaped practical outcomes. Without the Western eye, pure Indigenous approaches would have lacked the systematic documentation necessary for broader scholarly impact. The integration enabled meaningful outcomes: while knowledge transfer in the Colombian context remained concentrated with gatekeepers, the South African LIFEPLAN® programme achieved transformative community impact with testimonials such as "LIFEPLAN® changed my life" and successful knowledge transfer to neighbouring communities. This approach ensured research served both academic purposes and fostered "community engagement, shared experiences, and mutual growth" while honoring methodological rigor and relational accountability.

5.9 Evidence of Transformative Impact Through South-South Dialogue

The practical value of this African-grounded, spiritually informed two-eye approach is evidenced by concrete community transformations and the effective transfer of knowledge to neighboring communities. These outcomes are not merely theoretical insights but actionable discoveries that bridge epistemological divides while remaining firmly rooted in African scholarship and Global South contexts.

The cross-continental dialogue between Colombian and South African contexts, mediated through African epistemological frameworks and enriched by spiritual integration, contributes to Indigenous, decolonial, and tribal theologies within South–South engagements.

By adopting a two-eye perspective, this study actively contributes to decolonising theology, challenging traditional power dynamics and promoting self-determination within missiological empirical research. It amplifies grassroots voices, prioritises cultural negotiation, and recognises the inherent value of diverse perspectives

6. Conclusion

The pairing of Chapters 4 and 5 exemplifies the versatility of the two-eye approach across methodological and practical domains, directly answering how Indigenous-Western epistemological integration enhances missiological research and practice in Global South contexts. Drawing on principles of duoethnography, this research engages in a dialogical, reflexive process that allows the respective chapters to "speak to each other" across diverse cultural and theological contexts, bringing relational accountability, mutual vulnerability, and co-constructed meaning to the fore. The duoethnographic design creates a vital unified perspective of both maternal and paternal aspects of transformative mission, with one eye on Rheinbolt-Uribe's maternal-thinking framework that enables access to "unseen realities" through prayer and African community-centred womanism, and another eye focusing on Freeks' missional fatherhood perspective. This methodological innovation demonstrates that the two-eye approach enhances missiological research by enabling outcome-oriented methodologies that achieve both academic rigor and community transformation.

Grounded in the recognition that "The Bible is not a Western book" and that Indigenous worldviews are epistemologically closer to the ancient cultures that produced the Scriptures, this cross-continental dialogue between Colombian and South African contexts builds upon Bosch's call for 'self-theologising' and contributes to the broader project of decolonising theology. The research yields rich findings through ethnopoetic discoveries and strategic use of AI-assisted digital tools that enable methodological innovations neither purely Indigenous nor Western approaches could achieve alone. By promoting cultural negotiation and ethical relationality, this duoethnographic engagement contributes to Indigenous, decolonial, and tribal theologies, ensuring both methodological rigor and spiritually resonant outcomes that represent a priority in South-South academic and ecclesial discourse and praxis.

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To cite (Harvard):

R. R. Uribe and F. E. Freeks. (2025) 'Missiology through a two-eyed lens: Epistemological and practical insights'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 4-31.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Iron Sharpens Iron: Mentoring and Equipping Faith-Based Dads for Community Impact

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Abstract: *Iron sharpens iron* – just as one man sharpens another. Through intentional mentorship, dads acquire the insight, confidence and fortitude to lead with purpose. Equipping dads in this manner cultivates development, accountability and resilience – moulding men who contribute positively to their families and communities. However, paternal absence is a detrimental social issue embedded in larger societal frameworks, perpetuating cycles of poverty, emotional instability and fragile family systems, thereby eroding community cohesiveness and generational welfare. Dads are increasingly experiencing this as a social crisis, also known as the fatherhood dilemma, and are often misrepresented in studies and theories aimed at elucidating the dynamics between mothers and children. Moreover, while dads were historically seen as the cornerstone of the family, society has increasingly acknowledged paternal absence as a familial concern. Unfortunately, the absence of dads is a detrimental occurrence and trend that society confronts on a worldwide scale. Therefore, the paternal role has been diminished and undermined owing to paternal absence. This issue has resulted in a deterioration of the role and prestige of dads. The reduction in active fatherhood is a significant contributing factor to several societal challenges, including crime, violence and poverty.

Keywords: community engagement, equipping, faith-based dads, fatherhood, father absence, iron sharpens iron, mentoring

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Rationale

The biblical phrase ‘iron sharpens iron’ (Prov 27:17) signifies that through connection and collaboration, individuals enhance one another’s character, abilities and general well-being. Similar to the way two pieces of iron can refine each other, individuals can enhance one another via reciprocal support, constructive comments, challenges and mentoring. Proximity to positive individuals fosters mental acuity. A convergence of intellects may enhance individuals’ understanding of their concepts, polish them and transform them into profound discoveries. Two individuals who collaborate by sharing ideas and expertise can assist and mentor each other to enhance their abilities and become sharper.

This paper aims to provide mentoring elements for faith-based men to correct the issue of absent dads. Clutterbuck (2013) poses the question, ‘What is the validity of mentoring?’ For millennia, mentoring and related processes have been used to transmit tradition and to encourage, lead, care for, model to and advise individuals to achieve their full potential (Fourie & Van den Berg, 2007:94-95; Hendricks & Hendricks, 1995:17-18). Mentoring has emerged as a central theme in education, organisations, the healthcare sector, practical theology and familial contexts (Masango, 2011). While mentoring is used in higher education, nursing, psychology, medicine, business and research, it has also emerged as a significant concern inside families. This emerging trend can serve as an optimal platform to teach dads who face familial challenges. Moreover, mentorship is a crucial and successful approach to help men comprehend the responsibilities of parenting.

A significant contemporary issue in family dynamics is the absence of paternal involvement. The reduction in active fatherhood is a significant societal driving force and a prominent contemporary trend (Popenoe, 1996). Paternal absence is a substantial challenge in fatherhood. The challenges and trends in fatherhood (see Carstens, 2014:9-11; Dobbs, 2013:2; Freeks, 2011:4; Popenoe, 1996; Williams, 2014) can be addressed through a Christian perspective rooted in the Bible. A potential resolution of issues of fatherhood can be found in God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to confront social problems such as father hunger, paternal absence, fatherlessness and disengaged dads (Carstens, 2014:9-11; McGee, 1993:15; Popenoe, 1996). The concept of biblical fatherhood encompasses connection, instruction, training and preparation, while also offering principles that affirm the distinctiveness of God as a Father and highlight the significance of an earthly dad within a familial structure (Smail, 1980:10).

Problem Statement

South Africa is experiencing substantial transformations in family structure, resulting in a marked rise in fractured relationships. For instance, the absence of a parent from the family unit creates a deficiency in the parenting role, adversely affecting the overall functioning of the family. The absence of fathers, exacerbated by factors such as violence, alterations in family structure and fractured relationships, has significantly influenced the incidence of father absence (Freeks & De Jager, 2023:1-3; Kesebonye & P'Olak, 2020:383). Father absence includes the physical, social, economic and psychological non-presence of a biological father in his child's life. Physically absent dads are neither present nor accessible to their children. Fathers who are socially absent do not cohabit with their children and neglect to offer emotional and psychological support (Freeks, 2024:319-322). Father absence pertains to dads who infrequently engage with their children and lack a substantial influence on their development (Makofane, 2015:22-23).

Eddy, Thomson-de Boor and Mphaka (2013) explain that a father who does not cohabit with his children, fails to connect with them and neglects to offer financial support is classified as an absent father. Recognising the adverse impact of paternal absence on societal welfare, it is essential to acknowledge that dads who are present in their families can also harm family well-being, comparable to absent fathers (Meyer, 2018). Furthermore, the consequences of paternal absence impede children's ability to both receive and convey love, resulting in lasting behavioural problems (Freeks, 2022:1-3). Consequently, paternal absence should be seen as a social determinant that exacerbates the adversities encountered by many families in South Africa. The absence of a father exacerbates strained relationships and increases dysfunctional family dynamics, marked by a deficiency in affection (Ellis, Schlomer, Tilley & Butler, 2012:317-319).

This paper examines the research question: *How do mentoring and equipping practices influence the community to mitigate the increasing and socially destructive ill of paternal absence?* This inquiry is made from a Christian perspective, significantly shaped by the concept of Christian or biblical fatherhood (Dobbs, 2013; Nicolaides, 2003; Steensma, 1995; also see 2 Tim 6-17). Moreover, this paper aims to propose mentorship as a distinctive approach to assist faith-based dads facing challenges in parenthood. I examined potential mentoring concepts as a method and solution to mitigate the issue of absent dads in families, communities and society. This paper advocates Christian perspectives to reconceptualise masculinity and fatherhood as a cohesive, faith-orientated duty that seeks to nurture earthly dads in the likeness of God the Creator. Men are frequently misrepresented as inconsequential, and they

ought not to experience guilt or shame regarding their identity, despite societal and familial disrespect.

The primary objective of this paper is to emphasise the significance of the dad's role as a mentor and to advocate mentorship as a vital approach within the family structure. Secondly, my objective is to use this technique to contemplate dads who contend with familial challenges. The familial concerns addressed in this context include absent dads, fatherlessness, father hunger, paternal non-involvement and dads' lack of familial responsibility. The material referenced in this paper delineates that father absence is a consequence of separation and divorce, which are primary factors contributing to familial poverty and challenges. The term 'father absence' signifies that dads do not reside in the same domicile as their partners and offspring. 'Fatherless' denotes that the dad is deceased or does not reside with his family, specifically not with his offspring. Furthermore, 'fatherless' denotes a family or household devoid of a dad or lacking paternal protection, as well as a household that is unaware of the dad's identity. 'Father hunger' refers to an insufficiency of paternal involvement resulting from emotional unavailability, death or abandonment. This phenomenon is also observed in children who grow up without a dad owing to his death from sickness or an accident, or owing to separation following a divorce. 'Father hunger' refers to the mental suffering individuals endure as a result of paternal absence.

Uninvolved dads are neglectful parents who respond to few or no requests from their children. They exhibit minimal emotional engagement with their children, and while they may provide fundamental necessities, such as food and shelter, they remain disengaged from their children's lives. Children who endure paternal absence face an elevated risk of succumbing to substance abuse, violence, criminal activity, hazardous sexual behaviour and acquiring acquired immune deficiency syndrome (Gould & Ward, 2015; Makusha & Richter, 2015). Scholarly focus is being directed towards the issue of paternal absence, especially the lack of father engagement (Salami & Okeke, 2018:1). A multitude of scientists in the fields of early development, education, psychology, sociology and social work have investigated the issue of paternal absence and the reduction in engaged fatherhood. This decrease is characterised by a deterioration in the societal standing of fatherhood and a culture devoid of dads (Cohen, Ooms & Hutchins, 1995; Okeke, 2014; Popenoe, 1996; Richter, Chikovore & Makusha, 2010; United Nations, 2011). The reduction in engaged fatherhood contributes significantly to several global issues, including crime, early sexual activity and pregnancy, despair, drug abuse and poverty (Popenoe, 1996).

This decline in engaged fatherhood represents one of the most unforeseen, fundamental and significant trends of our era (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001:254). Numerous

nations, including South Africa, are devoting considerable attention to the matter of fatherhood; however, father absence does not appear to be diminishing (Ratele, Shefer & Clowes, 2012). South Africa is increasingly evolving into a fatherless society, characterised by the absence of engaged dads in families, where a significant number of men exhibit immoral behaviour against women and children (Feni, 2016:2).

The South African discourse on fatherhood precipitates significant controversies, especially concerning the concept of Christian fatherhood. Unsurprisingly, neither Christian nor biblical fatherhood is regarded as significant or pertinent today. I firmly believe that fatherhood should take precedence in religious discourse to foster a broader and more optimistic perspective on fatherhood aimed at promoting human social welfare. Eighteen years ago, authors such as Wall (2007:53) contended that fatherhood ought to be reevaluated from a child-centred perspective, rather than an adult-centred one. This statement is correct; nonetheless, it still underscores the human realm, although centring on children. Fatherhood needs to be regarded from a biblical perspective. The concept 'biblical' is not novel but rather an appeal to revert to God the Father and His effective techniques and prescriptions for earthly parenting, as outlined in the Bible (Freeks, 2018b:210). It is essential to recognise that paternity and its origins stem from the paternity of God (Steensma, 1995:183). Scriptural reference is found in Isaiah 64:8: 'O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay; and You are the potter. Your hand shapes us.' Deuteronomy 32:6 enquires, 'Do you repay the Lord in this manner, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father who has redeemed you? He has created you and established you.' Furthermore, Ephesians 4:6 states, 'One God and Dad of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.' Lastly, 1 Corinthians 8:6 asserts, 'Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.'

According to Gushee (1995:435), Christian fatherhood serves as a model and the authority for the concepts of paternal absence and fatherlessness. I concur with Gushee (1995) and assert that the Bible should continue to serve as the paramount source of authority for the moral lives of faith-based families, institutions, communities and society. This should remain true, even in an age of secular predominance, encompassing beliefs and discussions regarding the family and the paternal role, including the opposition to masculinity by LGBT (lesbian gay bisexual transgender) groups or movements, and especially the predisposition to feminism (Dictionary Unit for South African English, 2006:427; Dobson, 2020). Feminism is articulated as the rationale for women's rights based on the principle of sexual equality. It is a perspective that opposes the conventional role of men (Dictionary Unit for South African English, 2006:427; Dobson, 2020). Feminism posits that there are

no significant differences between men and women, asserting their equality in ideals and positions within the home, religion and society. From a biblical perspective, individuals are 'equal yet distinct' – positionally equal before God in Jesus Christ, yet operationally different (men do not conceive or gestate an embryo or foetus for nine months). This argument is somewhat valid, especially when examining men and women from the viewpoints of both the New and the Old Testament.

The Old Testament (in Genesis) advocates gender equality, rather than male supremacy. It asserts that man and woman are created equally in the likeness of God and possess shared sovereignty over the planet (Payne, 2015; see also Gen 1:26-27). In the New Testament, Paul exemplified the equality of men and women by greeting ten particular individuals, seven of whom were women (Payne, 2015; see also Rom 16:1-16). In Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 11:11, Paul contended that men and women were equal in ecclesiastical life and for all mankind, referencing the *Imago Dei*. Galatians 3:28 states that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, since all are one in Christ Jesus (see Payne, 2015). Nonetheless, the Bible explicitly delineates some features, such as the priesthood. In the Old Testament, the priesthood was exclusively occupied by men (Exod 19:6; Isa 61:6). However, this does not imply that men dominated women. In the New Testament, God established the priesthood of all believers (see 1 Pet 2:9). The man, or dad, alongside the wife, or mother, should assume the primary responsibility in guiding their family towards the sanctity of God the Father.

Within the framework of this paper, the faith-based dad serves as the spiritual leader of his household or family. In Ephesians 5:25-29, the word 'head' is used to signify that the man is the head of the woman, or the husband is the head of his wife, as articulated by Paul. In the Old Testament, humanity is shown as the pinnacle of God's creation, and the lineage between man and woman is elucidated (see Gen 1:26-28; 2:4-24; 2:18-25). The term 'head' in the Greek translation signifies 'source', rather than a hierarchy of power. Within the scope of this paper, the phrase 'the source of' denotes the male figure (or dad) who sustains his wife and offspring. In my opinion, the qualities of being a provider and protector are commendable traits of an engaged parent as a mentor.

Moreover, post-feminist discourse and perspectives challenge the essence of gender roles and paternal responsibilities. It further emphasises choice, autonomy and female empowerment (see Dictionary Unit for South African English, 2006:427; Gresaker, 2017). Post-feminism amalgamates the principles of equality and female empowerment (Köstenberger & Köstenberger, 2014:312). The post-feminist movement, regrettably, lacks an acknowledgement of God and His guidance for

humanity, concentrating solely on the individual. This egocentric movement advocates self-actualisation to the detriment of others, hence contradicting and undermining fatherhood within the family, church and society (see Alard, 2020:114). The post-feminist movement criticises masculinity and is reshaping the concept of manhood. It criticises the eradication of gender-specific notions and wants to substitute these notions with neutral alternatives. Furthermore, gay activists express their animosity against heterosexuality and demonstrate in the streets with banners proclaiming, 'I hate straight.' Society continually amalgamates several representations of masculinity that vie for male approval (Dobson, 2020; Munroe, 2001:17-18). It is particularly troubling because society and culture overtly denigrate men and dads, frequently depicting them as disreputable – the subject of humour – and labelling them as useless (Carstens, 2014:9-11).

Manhood has been undermined, and societal ideas and attitudes distort authentic masculinity, resulting in significant uncertainty (Mohler, 2010:19). Men and Christian parenthood alike have faced public criticism from LGBT activists and the feminist movement, exemplified by the former prime minister of Iceland, Johanna Sigurdardottir, who addressed 'toxic masculinity' in an effort to eliminate separate gender roles and parenting (see Mohler, 2010:19). All these methodologies and criticisms not only ignore the significance of the Bible but also challenge God, its source.

The Bible is an important and paramount text globally (Saucy, 2003:3); indeed, it is the most influential book in the annals of civilisation (White, 2004:19). The Bible contains essential truths addressing social issues such as paternal absence, fatherlessness, disengaged dads and the challenges of adolescence (Sills, 2016:33-34). Therefore, it ought to be the paramount and supreme authority on familial issues, encompassing fatherhood (Dobson, 2020). The Bible should direct faith-based families (Christians) in their lives, as it is the authoritative Word of God. The primary cause of several societal issues is fatherlessness and the lack of (involved) dads (Freeks, 2017:1-2). This concern is significant – it has been recognised as the fourth most significant issue globally, following crime, drugs and violence (Carstens, 2014:9-11). The absence of a dad precipitates severe dysfunction within families, encompassing emotional, physical and spiritual issues, poverty, abuse, educational challenges, crime, sexual difficulties, teenage pregnancy and numerous other problems (Carstens, 2014:9-11). The lack of a dad prevents numerous children from receiving and expressing affection (Richter *et al.*, 2010) and directly influences their behaviour and socio-emotional well-being (Grey & Anderson, 2016). Boys raised without paternal figures exhibit behavioural issues such as emotional instability and violence (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Girls raised without paternal figures exhibit

hazardous sexual conduct, diminished self-esteem and challenges in establishing and sustaining romantic relationships (Malherbe, 2015). Many of these concerns pertain to the concept of fatherhood.

Consequently, fatherhood requires re-examination. The following question arises: Where should we commence? In Christianity, God is referred to as God the Father, our Father and the Father of Jesus Christ. The concept of fatherhood is articulated in Scripture; for instance, 2 Corinthians 6:18 states, 'And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, declares the Lord Almighty.' Jesus addressed God as His Father and extended an invitation for us to engage in a relationship with Him. He instructed us to refer to God as 'our Father in heaven', in accordance with Matthew 6:9. Consequently, fatherhood derives from the Fatherhood of God. God is the Creator and Father of His creation and humanity. The Fatherhood of God serves as a paradigm for the pursuit of faith-based, earthly fatherhood (Freeks, 2016:9-11). Christianity has the capacity to encourage men and dads to engage more actively with their families (Wall, 2007:53). Men were divinely designed by God to serve as the origin and sustainer of humanity (Munroe, 2008:43). The man constitutes the cornerstone of his household. Fatherhood is God's method of establishing and maintaining the human family (Munroe, 2008:43). Today, activists audaciously challenge the Creator of the universe.

The Fatherhood of God is a fundamental notion in the Bible, and understanding God as our Father is vital to the Christian Gospel (Gal 4:5-6; Rom 8:15). The Fatherhood of God is affirmed in Jesus Christ, as He referred to God as His Father and the Father of all (John 5:18-47; 8:19, 25-30; 10:29-30). In John 8:41, Jesus proclaims that God is the sole Father of all humanity, and they are His genuine offspring (John 17:3).

Research Objective

The objective of this paper is to advocate mentoring as an effective equipping instrument for faith-based dads facing familial challenges, including paternal absence, fatherlessness and paternal disengagement from families, especially regarding children.

Research Design

This paper employs a literature review and discussion on mentoring as viable equipping tools proposed to support faith-based dads who are absent from and uninvolved with their families. The argument pertains to the impact of fatherlessness and paternal disengagement on both boys and girls.

Ethical Considerations

This paper adheres to the ethical norms for conducting research. I address mentorship through a literature study, and the research does not concentrate primarily on empirical findings.

The Notion of Mentoring and its Relevance

Definitions of Mentoring

As early as 1985, mentoring emerged as a significant phrase for assisting and supporting individuals. Kram (1985:110; see also Caffarella, 1992:23-24; Clutterbuck, 2013) observes that mentoring encompasses a profound loving connection in which a more seasoned individual, the mentor, fulfils two roles for a less experienced individual, the mentee. The primary duty is to offer guidance on professional advancement. The second objective is to provide personal assistance. Scholars and authors offer varying interpretations and meanings about the ideas of 'mentor' and 'mentoring'. Mentoring is a multifaceted and intricate concept encompassing several components that are challenging to delineate (Chiroma & Cloete, 2015:1). Various scholars and authors characterise mentoring as a relational process whereby learning, experimenting and skill development occur, with measurable consequences reflected in acquired competences. The mentoring process should last for a specified duration to achieve efficacy (Chiroma & Cloete, 2015:1). Conversely, Masango (2011:1) emphasises that mentoring is a supportive process designed to modify behaviour, enabling the protégé to operate completely and successfully. In the context of this paper, a mentor is an individual possessing relevant life experience and knowledge who may offer appropriate direction and assistance to a younger, less experienced individual. In most cases, mentors are older than their mentees.

Sanfey, Hollands and Gantt (2013) assert that mentoring parallels parenting in some respects, necessitating time, emotional investment and energy. The notion of a mentor is frequently linked to the roles of adviser, friend, teacher and counsellor (see Knippelmeyer & Torraco, 2007:2). Santora, Mason and Sheahan (2013:427-428) characterise mentoring as a collaborative and personal connection in which the mentor (an experienced individual) directs the mentee (a less experienced individual) towards optimal performance. Furthermore, Tucker (2007:iii-vi) defines mentoring as a learning relationship that emphasises the mentee's preparedness and willingness to gain from the interchange of information, experiences and insights. These definitions indicate that mentoring includes a connection, care, guidance, cooperation, knowledge sharing, influence and communication. The concept of mentoring is used

in this paper to address the problem of fatherlessness and the absence of dads in children's lives.

Significance of Mentoring

The importance of mentoring has gained prominence in recent years, especially within the familial context (Masango, 2011). The domain of mentoring remains inadequately explored, and its dynamics are always evolving (see Clutterbuck, 2013). The term 'mentoring' is sometimes employed synonymously with 'coaching' (Masango, 2011:1-5). Miller-McLemore (1994:19) poses the following significant question: 'Who can find a kind mother?' This inquiry is grounded in Proverbs 31:10, where the author, Solomon, poses it concerning his own mother and delineates the attributes of an exemplary mother. Miller-McLemore (1994:19) posits that the inquiry should be addressed with 'the courage to dispel the clouds of silence that enshroud the complexities of mothering and with the first-hand knowledge of the power of a woman close to a child'.

Bober (2017:vi) states that she was raised with her sisters and mother, and other relatives, but in the absence of her father. She conveys profound gratitude to her grandmother, mother, two children and other family members for their indispensable support during her experience as a single mother (Bober, 2017:vi). She also expresses appreciation to her ex-husband for his aid, but omits any mention of her father, who was absent from her life. It is evident that women do not require men to raise children or achieve success in life. Miller-McLemore (1994:19) substantiates this assertion by recounting the achievements of the single mothers she examined.

Moreover, mentoring has been implemented in higher education, nursing, psychology, medicine, business and research (Freeks, 2014:191-196). This vital life skill has rapidly become a significant factor in family dynamics (Freeks, 2021:1). In addition, mentoring is a crucial and efficacious approach to assist individuals in understanding the fundamental nature of fatherhood and motherhood (Freeks, 2021:1).

Therefore, this paper focuses on mentorship, highlighting its importance in advising and assisting dads who face challenges in parenthood and supporting their personal development to address these concerns. Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of mentoring, its role in supporting faith-based dads in their personal development and its facilitation of discussions regarding the challenges faith-based dads experience, while also aiding in the reflection of their thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Jenkins, 2013:144; see also Katz, Elsaesser, Klodnik & Khare, 2019:306-307). Father engagement in mentorship offers several advantages for mothers,

women and children. Mothers provide stability and strength (Freeks, 2018a:4), while fathers, as mentors, serve as the foundational anchors of the family by guiding the appropriate course (Groenendyk & Volling, 2007:205). Women derive advantages from the engagement of committed dads, including enhanced hope, the establishment of positive connections and the cultivation of trust and commitment, which serve as the foundational elements of the family (Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico & Lewis, 2011:53-54).

Children acquire their occupations and public personas from their engaged dads, who serve as their mentors (Larney, 2009:37). From engaged dads, children get consistent affection, a close connection, safeguarding and explicit guidance throughout life (Williams, 2008:18). Furthermore, engaged dads serving as mentors are exemplary role models and offer social support to their offspring (Steytler, 2007:54-55). Moreover, there is significant engagement between an engaged dad and his children (Pleck, 2007:196), as he instructs them on navigating various life disasters (Williams, 2008:1-3). Through these responsibilities, mentoring transcends coaching, as the mentor attempts to elicit the mentee's full potential. Hendricks and Hendricks (1995:18) explain that a mentor perceives the potential within an individual and identifies the person they aspire to become. Thereafter, the mentor facilitates the realisation of the mentee's potential, while also nurturing the mentee's spirit. The mentor also shapes the mentee's character, directing them to become a full individual and, with divine favour, a virtuous person. Consequently, mentorship within the framework of this paper possesses a biblical essence and significance. The importance of mentoring lies in its accessibility and the lifelong benefits it offers to all individuals.

Mentoring Faith-Based Dads

In this paper, I emphasise ten mentoring ideas aimed at guiding faith-based dads with familial challenges. It is essential to expound upon these mentorship ideas.

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 1: Mentorship is Grounded in Biblical Teachings

As articulated in both the Old and the New Testament, mentoring highlights the necessity for dads to be engaged and proactive. Dads should pardon their children for their mistakes and assist them in making more informed decisions in life (see Luke 15:11-32). Faith-orientated dads should prioritise their involvement in their families. Mentoring is essential in the household, and men should recognise their roles as the spiritual leaders of and authority figures in their families. The Scripture advocates mentorship, indicating that the Israelites were required to instruct their children in the

commandments. Consequently, it is evident that mentoring constitutes a spiritual duty for faith-based dads in their parental role (see Dan 4:9; 6:1-25; 11:19).

Scholars such as Hendricks and Hendricks (1995:17-18) have suggested that the concept of mentoring can be traced back to various biblical figures, including Joshua, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Paul and Timothy. Biblical mentoring is a highly effective method for cultivating faith-based dads and leaders (Johnson & Ridley, 2004; Pelletier, 2006:46). Biblical mentoring assists faith-based dads in understanding the fundamentals of discipleship and advancing their Christian journey as spiritual leaders. It is essential to recognise that the family, especially as depicted in the Old Testament, can be regarded as a form of home congregation. Consequently, a father who guided his family was required to exemplify the paternal nature of God. In the New Testament, Paul was determined to cultivate others. This is shown in his mentorship of Timothy, Titus and Onesimus in 2 Timothy 2:2. Paul served as a spiritual adviser, counsellor, educator, modern exemplar and benefactor to these individuals (his mentees).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 2: Mentoring Influences Lives

Mentoring has significant relevance, especially in the lives of children, irrespective of whether they are learners, adolescents or engaged in higher education. Fatherly mentoring encompasses not only the imparting of information but also the provision of support to children as a faith-orientated paternal figure. Faith-orientated households, with the dad as the primary authority, may cultivate a faith-based generation. Mentoring offers a chance to influence the lives of children, especially in guiding them towards the destinies to which they are divinely appointed. By means of mentoring, faith-based dads (mentors) can cultivate the character of their family members (mentees) and assist faith-based families (mentees) in realising their potential (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1995:18). Through their influence, faith-based dads (mentors) can aid their families (mentees) in attaining their objectives (Ndabazandile, 2006:14). Tucker (2007:iii, vi) affirms that mentoring involves unlocking individuals' potential. It enables mentees to achieve their utmost potential. Religious parents ought to train their children in biblical virtues through mentorship. Biblical characters and their influence shape conduct, providing significance and direction to an individual's existence (Larney & Lotter, 2005:663-664).

Mentors should nurture and advocate for young people, while children who embody the essence of parenting should impart it to others. Children raised in faith-based environments develop self-reflection and confidence owing to the mentorship of their faith-based dads, who provide vision, cultivate trust, give encouragement and ensure

care and protection throughout their lives (Evans, 2019:403-404). Faith-based dads serving as mentors can embody these human characteristics while guiding and socialising, as the principle of 'I am because you are' (the spirit of ubuntu) facilitates interpersonal connections and mutual appreciation (Mulaudzi, Libster & Phiri, 2009:49).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 3: The Significance of God within a Faith-Based Family is Essential

From the outset, God desired unity among father, mother and children (Gen 2:7-25). God did not create a single parent; instead, He created man and woman to assume responsibility and nurture the offspring entrusted to them together (Bergh, 2002:47). Consequently, the function of faith-based families represents the most exalted vocation from God, and such families ought to recognise their profound, dedicated and proactive responsibility (McGraw, 2004:10). God designed men with a specific purpose in mind. He intended men to fulfil the role of dads and, hence, God created them for this purpose. The man was appointed as a father by the Creator, as God manifested Himself as the Father throughout the creation of man (see Munroe, 2008:23-26). God anticipated that a faith-based family would embody more dignity and strength since it is His divine mandate through which He intends to uphold humanity until the end of time (Bergh, 2002:47). In a faith-based family, God is the foremost priority, necessitating his prominence in all facets of family life. A faith-based dad should recognise that God is paramount in all aspects of his life, as his role significantly fosters a robust religious environment for faith-orientated families.

Children experience security and certainty when they regard God as a paternal figure inside the household (Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak & Nixon, 2006:58-59). The paternity of God serves as the archetype for earthly paternity, with human fatherhood deriving its essence from the Fatherhood of God (Steensma, 1995:183). Therefore, faith-orientated parents ought to impart God's truths to their children and guide them in discovering their own faith in God (Bergh, 2002:110).

I concur with the aforementioned assertions that God should be prioritised in all familial matters and that dads need to impart knowledge of the nature of God and His truths to their children. It is essential for faith-based families to embrace and study the Word of God to cultivate confidence in the Bible. I regard the Bible as the constitution of the household, and faith-based families need to conduct themselves in accordance with its teachings. God has benevolent intentions for faith-based families – not detrimental intentions, but plans to enrich them and provide a promising future (see Jer 29:11). Faith-based families should enhance their devotion to God and His

Word, ensuring that God is prioritised in both the household and their individual lives. Devout parents must recognise their relationship with God, as the influence of their faith permeates their children. The Holy Spirit fosters the children's bond with and confidence in God. It is essential for faith-based parents to recognise that their beliefs encourage their children to pursue a relationship with God (Hart & Hart Frejd, 2010:16-19).

Faith-based families should engage in spiritual practices, such as maintaining household altars. A house altar is a sacred space within a domestic domain designated for prayer, meditation, and spiritual reflection. It is sometimes referred to as a family altar where significant elements such as family time of Bible reading, spiritual gathering, prayer, contemplation, songs, edification, communion, and spiritual practice occurred. House altars serve as a daily reminder of faith, offering peace and hope, and spiritual grounding (Freeks, 2018b:184-185). Household altars provide effective means for faith-based families to engage with the Word of God and cultivate devotion to Him. Regrettably, faith-based families appear not to view household altars as essential anymore. Consequently, it is imperative to re-establish household altars, with faith-orientated dads assuming responsibility for their establishment. They ought to guide their families in prayer, presenting their petitions to the Heavenly Father at the household altar. Furthermore, they should incorporate Bible study, cell church gatherings and prayer groups into their families. Lastly, faith-based families should refer to the Word of God to thrive in all aspects of their lives (Bergh, 2002:168).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 4: The Significance of Reliance on God

The role of a faith-based dad is a blessing bestowed by God's favour upon faith-based families. For instance, Matthew 7:11 states that sinful (earthly) fathers can provide advantageous gifts to their children, and therefore, so can God, our Heavenly Father. It is essential to recognise that faith-based dads are not infallible and do not consistently fulfil their primary responsibilities. God, our Heavenly Father, epitomises perfection, and earthly dads of faith may never attain His stature; nonetheless, they can endeavour to emulate Him in their paternal and mentoring roles in their children's lives (Crow, 2008:89-93). Jesus Christ serves as the primary exemplary model to emulate. He entrusted his life to His Father and never questioned His will. The function of the earthly, faith-orientated dad within the family should remain consistent; the mother and children ought to entrust their lives and faith to the father, who derives his authority and fortitude from the Heavenly Father (see John 18:11; Matt 7:7-11). God bestowed life upon parents, both father and mother, and endowed them with the capacity to nurture their offspring. Consequently, parents should rely on and be accountable to God. God designated them as parents, and from a Christian

perspective, the obligation of parenthood constitutes a divine vocation (Bergh, 2002:119).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 5: The Function of the Faith-Based Dad Should be Firmly Rooted in the Biblical Framework

The role and function of the faith-based dad should be profoundly anchored within the biblical context. Many faith-based families have departed from the biblical paradigm in which the father serves as the priest of the household (Barker, 2008:5). A faith-based dad must recognise the necessity of Jesus Christ in his life and exemplify a godly character by becoming a follower of Christ and embodying traits such as love, patience, humility and respect (Barker, 2008:5; Coakley, 2006:153-156; Munroe, 2008:127). To demonstrate a virtuous character, faith-orientated dads ought to serve as educators inside their households. They should proactively educate their children on fundamental issues without relying on other spiritual instructors. As religious parents, it is their obligation to educate their children. For instance, before children commence school, they should be adequately prepared; likewise, faith-orientated dads should instruct their children in spiritual resilience.

In this paper, it is essential to recognise that faith-based parents need to be the principal educators of their children, especially in cultivating character and establishing values at home (Heenan, 2004:3). Religious dads should demonstrate engagement in their children's education (Freeks, 2004:91). A dad fulfils multiple roles, including that of a teacher, coach, manager, agent, mentor and advocate for his children (Coakley, 2006:154).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 6: Faith-Based Dads Should Exhibit Unwavering Commitment

The faith-based dad should be fully dedicated to his role, as it is both significant and obligatory (Barker, 2008:1-3). A devoted parent needs to contemplate the following question: What lessons am I imparting to my children? Am I practically embodying these pillars? Do my children observe these ideals in my life? Dads who adhere to faith but do not actively champion their children's interests are perceived as failing to satisfy the criteria for effective parenting. Committed faith-based dads actively foster their children's success, as parental dedication is a vital determinant of achievement.

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 7: Faith-Based Dads Ought to Assume a more Responsible Role within the Family

Faith-based dads' increased engagement with their children is vital, as it is fundamental to the home and fosters the children's success (Coakley, 2006:154). Religious dads should establish expectations for their children and strategise for their future (Wall, 2007:59). There should be a discernible connection between a faith-orientated dad and his offspring. Physical touch and connection are essential since they reinforce the relationship between parents and their children (Roest, Dubas & Gerris, 2009:146-148). Furthermore, responsible faith-based fatherhood addresses children's needs and fosters success (Freeks, 2004:58).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 8: Faith-Based Dads Ought to Dedicate More Time to their Children

Currently, faith-based parents (especially dads) are insufficiently engaging with their children (Freeks, 2004:94). A faith-based dad should allocate time to engage with his children, despite his demanding schedule. Children encounter delicate and intricate situations, especially throughout their adolescent years. If faith-based dads invest time in their children, the link between them will strengthen. Children have shown a desire for increased paternal involvement (see Steytler, 2007:55). Faith-based dads need to establish a robust alliance with their families (mother and children) to confront challenges, collaboratively seeking solutions to those problems. Children require parental engagement, rather than material presents and monetary compensation as a replacement for quality time (Freeks, 2004:94). Dads should devote time to outdoor activities with their children (Freeman & Almond, 2010:243).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 9: Faith-Based Dads Ought to Serve as Role Models

Faith-based dads must exemplify desirable behaviours so that their children perceive them as positive role models and aspire to emulate them in adulthood (Coakley, 2006:154-159). Devout dads ought to endeavour to be the most exemplary role models for their offspring. Children acquire knowledge by seeing their parents' conduct and attitudes, allowing faith-based dads to exemplify the ideal model owing to their roles as priests and nurturing dads within the household (Barker, 2008:1-3; Bergh, 2002:168). Faith-based dads serve as crucial role models, especially in influencing their children's understanding of God (Bergh, 2002:168; Munroe, 2001:201-203).

Mentoring and Equipping Pillar 10: The Role of the Church Concerning Faith-Based Families

In addition to essential spiritual practices, such as household altars, cell churches and prayer meetings (previously discussed), families, guided by faith-based dads, should participate in church gatherings collectively (Bergh, 2002:168). Participation in church gatherings influences the worldview of faith-based families significantly, encompassing their perceptions of God and religion (Beckmann & Nieuwenhuis, 2004:58). The church is tasked with guiding, supporting, mentoring and serving faith-based dads to facilitate their spiritual maturation. Accordingly, the church serves as a venue for the interchange and dissemination of knowledge and should provide reading materials and brief programmes for faith-based men about parenting and parenthood. The church should assist in preparing young couples for parenting prior to marriage and childbearing. Training within the church about values, especially moral standards, will significantly benefit faith-based dads and young adults.

The experiences and observations children and young people have in church should be sufficiently significant to surpass the negative and erroneous views they encounter in the external world. The church has historically been viewed as a congregation of believers to exalt and adore the Lord; apart from that, it should also serve as an institution for education and instruction, ensuring the transmission of religious and cultural values (Pitout, Smith, Windell & Steinmann, 1990:37). Church and religion encompass more than just the reality of God. They also encompass the worship of God. Consequently, religion needs to be a fundamental aspect of the life of the faith-based dad (Abdool, 2005:47). The church should assume a pivotal role in the vocational endeavours of a faith-based family. In addition, it serves as a venue where faith-orientated families receive instruction on philanthropy, encompassing tithes and offerings (Bergh, 2002:160).

Recommendations

This paper investigated the mentorship of dads confronting challenges related to fatherhood within a faith-based framework to influence the community. The study has resulted in the following recommendations:

- Mentorship is a pivotal concept that can be employed to assist and support families dealing with paternal absence and fatherhood dilemmas.
- Mentoring can positively influence lives.
- Mentoring shares similarities with parenting, especially in fostering positive relationships, which is a fundamental value for families.

- Mentoring has a biblical essence and serves as a vital framework for addressing the challenges faced by faith-based families with fractured structures.
- Mentoring should be regarded as not only a recommendation but also an imperative for dads confronting familial and paternal challenges.

Conclusion

The notion of fatherhood is a significant challenge within the South African setting, where the absence of paternal figures is a detrimental and alarming trend in several households and society. Consequently, mentoring and equipping can be significant approaches for dads who grapple with fatherhood issues. Furthermore, mentorship is an essential requirement for dads facing familial challenges. Relationships are a characteristic of families, and mentoring pertains to relationships. Dads can be guided to become valuable contributors to both their families and society. However, in reality, a faith-based dad must have a Christ-like character, exhibiting traits such as humility, tenderness and patience towards his wife and children (see Scalise, 2010:53-54). Dads who are grounded in faith ought to be mentored, equipped and instructed to accomplish their divine responsibilities within the family. This debate indicates that the faith-based dad possesses a divine duty and should consistently fulfil that responsibility in the familial context and society.

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To cite (Harvard):

Freeks, F.E. (2025) 'Iron Sharpens Iron: Mentoring and Equipping Faith-Based Dads for Community Impact'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 32-59.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Situated Learning Theory: An Integration with Online Theological Education

Dr Taimaya Ragui¹

Abstract: Learning is most effective when situated in the learner's context, particularly in the context of distance and online theological education. Learning theory (situated learning), online learning (blended learning), and theological education (distance/online theological education) are interfaced within the framework of a theological paradigm that recognises the significance of being contextually rooted. Various learning modes are examined, including synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, and different types of blended learning, within the context of some Asian and African institutional settings. The focus is on how these modes can be utilised by learners and course/curriculum designers to align with the learners' specific context. This is done by showing different types of learning activities that encompass the essential aspects of situated learning, such as activities that allow for participation in collective endeavours and authentic environments.

Keywords: situated learning, online theology, blended learning, hyflex model, contextual theology, communities of practice

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the field of online learning-education² has seen notable growth and discussion, largely attributed to technological advancements and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend has gained traction in both the Global

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² I have hyphenated the term "learning" with "education" to emphasize the distinctiveness of *online learning-education* as a sub-discipline of education and the need to develop its pedagogies (and/andragogies) as an interdisciplinary field of study (e.g., online theological education) in the Global South.

North³ and the Global South (Allied Market Research 2021).⁴ Despite its growing popularity, traditional educators, if not all, remain sceptical about the efficacy of online theological education due to its inherent challenges and apparent absence of contextualization or formation (see Jo Ann Deasy 2021), particularly in the Global South.⁵ There is a disparity between the context of the learners and the mode of learning and learning activities used by theological educators, when online education is involved.⁶ This circumstance, I argue, necessitates that we connect our learning experiences to the context of the learners. In terms of learning design, I argue for the need to combine a learning theory known as situated learning with online theological education; that is, to incorporate the learner's context into theologically based online theological education (see Diane Hockridge 2021). This is also to suggest that online theological education can be most effective in the Global South – and also, other parts of the world – when theological educators and/or course-curriculum designers consider the context of the learners when designing, developing, and delivering online theology courses. The scope of this research is limited to the needs and concerns of *The Shepherd's Academy's* (hereafter, TSA) partners in Asia (India, Nepal, and Pakistan), Africa (South Sudan, Zambia, Kenya, Gambia, Cameroon, Uganda, South Africa, and Nigeria), and a South American academy (Guyana).⁷

The incarnation of Jesus is proposed as a theological paradigm for a contextualised approach to online theological education (Dean Flemming 2005: 20). This is to acknowledge that Jesus embraced the humanity and context of humankind: he was born as a man in a particular historical setting, within a specific culture, spoke their language, involved in the practices and traditions of that culture, and impacted the lives of those in the same context through his words and action. Furthermore, the theory of situated learning is advocated to engage efficiently in contextual online theological education, where such learning theory-design underlines the importance of context and its impact on knowledge acquisition (Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger 1991) – as well as character formation within a given community of learning. This proposal posits that learning is most effective when it takes place in the context in which it will be used, rather than in a disconnected, abstract setting. The purpose of integrating a theological paradigm, a learning theory, and theological education is to

³ The term Global North refers to the North American context and countries with significant technological and digital learning advancements. While the term Global South refers to countries or regions that are socially, economically, and technologically disadvantaged i.e., those that lack digital tools and resources for online education.

⁴ According to Allied Market Research, Asia is likely to see exponential growth in online learning (or e-learning) in the next few years (Allied Market Research 2021).

⁵ However, the necessity to design and deliver contextualised online courses/programmes is felt throughout disciplines, not simply theological studies. For instance, Rosa Maria Bottino and Elisabetta Robotti argue that proper contextualisation is “decisive in making educational software effective; otherwise, the potential of even the best programme will remain largely unexploited” (2007: 174–186).

⁶ In my experience with several institutions in the Global South, people's perception of online education is typically restricted to synchronous learning in the form of virtual meetings like Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams.

⁷ TSA is the undergraduate department of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life (OCRPL). See <https://shepherds.academy/> (Accessed 28 July 2023).

provide learners in the Global South with a theologically grounded-contextual learning experience.

This paper is presented in a threefold manner. First, it looks into the theological foundations of why online theological education in the Global South should be situated in the context of the learners. The suggested answer is the incarnation of Jesus as the paradigm for engaging in theological education. Second, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's situated learning theory will be introduced, with an emphasis on its application to online theological education. Third, building on the work of Lave and Wenger, additional efforts will be made to demonstrate why understanding context is critical for adopting an effective online mode and designing online lessons and activities that are contextually relevant to the learners, fostering collaboration among them, providing immediate feedback, and encouraging reflection.

2. Preliminary: Incarnation as a Learning Paradigm

Most academic literature pertaining to Christian online learning or online theological education centres on the pedagogical strategies for instructing biblical or theological subjects in a virtual environment (See, for example, Thorne 2013; Flynn 2013; Babyak 2015; Ascough 2018; Ascough et al., 2018; Beech 2021). Consequently, there is a tendency to overlook the significance of establishing a biblical or theological grounding for online theological education that occurs within a community of learners or religious organisation. This suggests that there have been few efforts to establish a biblical/theological framework for online theological education.

It is observed that the reason for efforts to build a biblical or theological framework stems from the assumption that online education should be backed by biblical theology (Thorne 2013; 99-109) or theological argument (Graham 2006: 24-28). According to James A. Thorne, "A concern for the validity of online biblical education requires a careful look at good educational pedagogy based upon biblical principles in order to effectively provide Christian higher education" (2013: 99). Given that theological education involves dealing with knowledge and truth as well as learners, such theological support is regarded as necessary for a learning community. Thorne's biblical reasoning is based on "Paul's comment in 1 Cor 9:19-22 which calls for the proclamation of the gospel by all means possible" (2013: 100). He goes on to suggest that constructivism be used to provide "student-centred knowledge, truth-oriented perception, individually transformed information, and an actively constructed worldview" (2013: 102). The constructivist concept is used as a tool to achieve theological education goals. Thorne attempts to provide a biblical framework by way of integrating with humanist educational philosophy i.e., use constructivism to provide biblical online education. However, he does not elaborate on developing a biblical framework or theology to guide online theological educator engagements. You find such similar engagement in the works of Andrew T. Babyak (2015: 63-77). While attempting to develop "a Christian virtual environment" for online theological educators, he compiles a list of texts that discuss knowledge (Gal 3:7; Eph 5:5; 6:22; Phil 1:12), human limitation and the ability to know God (Rom 11:33-34), the need to encourage (Rom 1:8, 11) and pray for learners (Rom 1:9-10), and the importance of

teaching and learning a Christian worldview (Eph. 2) (Babyak 2015: 65-67). These works are helpful for starting a conversation about developing a biblical framework for online engagements, but their use of biblical texts appears to be peripheral.

In John Gresham's work, we find an attempt to provide a theological model for online theological education (2006: 24-28). This may serve as an alternative to the peripheral selection of passages that have been presented previously. This may also be seen as a response to "the criticism that theological education has been driven by pragmatic concerns to embrace educational technologies without due consideration of theological issues" (Gresham 2006: 24). Gresham argues for "divine pedagogy, the way God teaches humanity," as a theological pedagogy/model for online education (2006: 24). He draws this theological pedagogy from *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy 1998) which was published in 1998 by "the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy as a guide for catechetical ministry within the Roman Catholic Church" (Gresham 2006: 24). With the notion that this theological pedagogy has its roots in "a broader Christian and Jewish biblical tradition" – and not just the Roman Catholic one (See, for example, Alexander 2001), Gresham suggests that "the divine pedagogy originates from the church fathers especially as a way to describe the progressive preparation for the coming of Christ" (Gresham 2006: 25). The central emphasis of divine pedagogy is "adaptation" as the document states, "God willing to speak to [humankind] as friends manifests in a special way [God's] pedagogy by adapting what [God] has to say by solicitous providence for our earthly condition" (Congregation for the Clergy 1998: 146). According to Gresham, "online education can represent such adaptation" to the needs of learners, and it can also assist theological educators in considering "the online environment as a part of the contemporary cultural context to which theological education must adapt" (2006: 25-26). In the final section of the paper, I propose that in order to be located in the context of the learner, context-specific modes and learning activities are required to maximise the learning experience.

This paper expands on Gresham's suggestion to locate online theological education within the contemporary cultural context by proposing the incarnation of Jesus as a learning paradigm for theological educators, particularly when adopting an online mode. This theological or learning paradigm emphasises both the need for theological underpinning and the need to be situated in the context of the people. In *Contextualization in the New Testament*, Flemming asserts, "The incarnation of Jesus serves as a key paradigm for contextualized mission and theology" (2005: 20). In this context, contextualization refers to the process of adapting the gospel message to the language and culture of a specific learning context. In order to make the message of the gospel accessible to humankind, God assumed human form through the incarnation. Furthering Flemming's argument, I would contend that the incarnation of Jesus can serve as a theological/learning paradigm for online theological education. This provides a compelling paradigm for online theological education, which requires a similar process of translation into a digital context. According to Huang Po Ho, considering the Asian context for theological construction and educating would imply attempting to "locate where we are and thereby indicate our area of responsibility and

concern, namely, the varieties and dynamics of Asian realities" (Po Ho 2008: 5). Similarly, for Susan Murithi, to engage in contextual theological education in Africa, it would mean recognising that "the only kind of education with the power to form humanity is the one that relates to them and addresses their unique situations, and answers their questions" (Murithi 2014: 45).

Considering this reality, the incarnation as a learning paradigm provides a framework for understanding how to communicate the gospel in the context of the learners. Flemming contends that Jesus embraced "the human context in all of its 'scandalous particularity' – as a male Palestinian Jew, 'born of a woman, born under the law' (Gal 4.4) – in a specific time and place" (2005: 20). Moreover, he participated in "the Jewish culture; he participated in its celebrations and traditions; he spoke Aramaic with Galilean accent; he had distinctive physical features and personality traits" (2005: 20). This same principle should be applied to online theological education. To communicate effectively in the digital context, theological education must be translated into the language and cultural forms of the online environment.

The incarnation also serves as a model for how to interact with individuals in a digital context. Jesus did not simply communicate a message to people from a distance; he entered their world and engaged with them on their terms – so that they would understand or learn. This is evident in his interactions with the culture of the time. Flemming suggests, "Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, his teaching on the law and righteousness, and his use of life-specific parables drew upon language, thought categories and rhetorical traditions from the Jewish culture of his day" (2005: 21). The same strategy can also be applied to online theological education. Rather than simply broadcasting information to learners, theological educators can enter the digital world of their learners and engage with them on their terms.

And the incarnation of Jesus can provide us with tools for our approach to online learning and online lessons and activities. This should be accompanied by the necessity of recognising the cultural distinctions of various contexts. For example, if I were to teach an online course about online theological education in Northeast India (of which I am a part), I would have to address not only the challenges, but also the misconceptions about online education in the region (See, for example, Ragui 2023). Flemming argues that Jesus mediated "the good news in ways that were appropriate to particular people and occasions" (2005: 21). This is to recognise that "Jesus spoke differently to the crowds than he did to the Pharisees, differently to Nicodemus than to Peter. He tailored his exposition of the gospel to the situation at hand" (Flemming 2005: 21). If we apply this principle to online learning, we must also recognise that the digital context has its own cultural values and worldviews with which we must engage to communicate effectively.

Having said this, as theological educators, or course-curriculum designers, we also must consider the goals of online theological education. We must ask why we are offering online theological education to our learners. This may mean asking the following questions: 'What is the purpose of online theological education? How do you, as a theological educator, carry out the task of formation via online platforms?' We may

find answers to these questions in the understanding that “Jesus came to transform human institutions he entered, and as a result the incarnation retained a universal significance” (Flemming 2005: 22). Fleming argues, “His message of the kingdom, although it was articulated in language and symbols thoroughly familiar to the Jewish hearers, had a boundary-breaking character and a cosmic eschatological vision that transcended his own social location and culture” (2005: 22). To put it simply, online theological education should not be just about sharing information, but it should transform the lives of the learners i.e., it should result in formation (Smith 2009; chap. 6).

If this is the case (i.e., if theological education is to be incarnational and purpose-driven), then this paper poses and attends to the following questions: ‘What does it mean for theological education to embrace the incarnation of Jesus? What does it mean for online theological education to accept incarnation as a learning paradigm?’ As a response to these questions, the following sections present a learning theory that invites theological educators and/or course-curriculum designers to situate their learning experience within the context of the learners; it also attempts to outline possible learning modes and learning activities (or exercises) that would initiate learners to become situated within their context.

3. Situated Learning Theory

The notion of Jesus embracing the human context lends support to the claim that individuals are most capable of optimal learning when they are located in their own contextual environment. Instead of restricting learning solely to cognitive processes, the focus is on situating learners and their learning experiences within a community of practice. This part will now explore the theory of situated learning and its key features, while also considering its potential application in the context of online theological education.

In recent decades, situated learning theory has been the subject of much discussion and research across disciplines. Researchers in a number of fields, such as cognitive science, education, and sociology, have contributed to the expansion and improvement of the theory (See, for example, Brown 1989; Anderson, Reder, and Simon 1996; Arnseth 2008; Saigal 2012; Catalano 2015; Greenhow, Graham, and Koehler 2022). In recent years, some attempts have been made to integrate situated learning theory with online education, particularly in the field of integrating technology into educational pursuits (See, for example, Oliver 1999; Herrington, et al., 2000; Slaouti 2007; Shaltry, et al., 2013; Buldan 2021; Schott and Marshall 2018; Archambault, Leary, and Rice 2022). Similar initiatives are currently underway in various Christian studies (Kemp 2010; Grey 2012; Westerlund 2021). This paper builds on the work of Lave and Wenger to argue that theological educators in the Global South should consider the context of the learners when attempting to interface online learning with theological education. It emphasises learning in context and through social interactions, over abstract instruction alone (Brown 1989). It refers to the

notion that learning occurs situations or contexts and that knowledge is acquired through participation in social activities.⁸

The concept of situated learning can be traced back to the works of Lave and Wenger in the 1980s (See also Lave 1988). Lave and Wenger argued that learning should be understood as a social and cultural process that occurs through participation in communities of practice. They argued that learning cannot be understood as a process of acquiring knowledge and skills in isolation, but rather as a process of becoming a member of a community of practice and engaging in the activities and practices of that community. According to Lave and Wenger, "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (1991: 29). In another setting, Lave discusses the concept of situated learning where knowledge is viewed as a collection of tools that are stored in a person's memory (1988: 24). These tools are retrieved and used by that person, with frequency and appropriateness being key factors in their effective use. Once the tools have been utilised, they are returned to storage without any alteration during the process. Furthermore, Lave and Wenger highlight the importance of a concept called "legitimate peripheral participation" in the learning process, where learners engage in tasks that are meaningful and relevant to the community, but they do not yet have the full knowledge and skills of a more experienced member (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29). In other words, it serves as a means of discussing the interactions between individuals who are new to a particular community and those who have been established members for a longer period of time. Additionally, it facilitates discourse surrounding various "activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29).

From their explanation of situated learning and what it entails, we can deduce four defining features of legitimate peripheral participation. The first feature concerns *peripheral participation*. They define peripherality in terms of a "multiple, varied, more - or less -engaged and - inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). Situating oneself within the "social world" is essential to their definition of peripheral participation; and changing one's physical location and point of view are components of the "learning trajectories, identity development, and forms of membership" that learners pursue (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). If this understanding aligns with their explanation of situated learning, it will imply that individuals who are new to a community of practice initially focus on peripheral tasks that are less taxing and play a lesser role in achieving the overall goals of the community. This makes it possible for them to gradually become acquainted with the customs, values, and practices of the community.

The second feature has to do with increasing participation or *legitimate peripherality*. This is a position or "a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation" from peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). While this position can be disempowering as they have not fully participated in the community, "it can itself be a

⁸ This theory has its underpinning in social development theory (Vygotsky 1978).

source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). However, as the learners or newcomers become more acquainted with the customs of the community, they are gradually given more responsibility and allowed to participate in a greater variety of central activities. They can improve their skills and knowledge as a result of this gradual increase in their participation.

The third feature relates with learning through practice or *full participation*. According Lave and Wenger, “Full participation is intended to do justice to the diversity of relations involved in varying forms of community membership” (1991: 37). They further suggest that full participation “stands in contrast to only one aspect of the concept of peripherality as we see it: It places the emphasis on what partial participation is not, or not yet (Lave and Wenger 1991: 37). Full participation in the practices of the community facilitates learning. New learners or newcomers learn by observing, asking questions, and attempting new tasks under the supervision of more experienced members. Hence, the ambiguity of defining the position of peripheral and full participation is connected to “issues of legitimacy, of the social organisation of and control over resources, if it is to gain its full analytical potential” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 37).

The fourth feature relates with *socialization* or learning in the context of the social world. Lave and Wenger argues for a shift from “the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more-encompassing view of social practice” (1991: 43). They suggest that “The social relations of apprentices within a community change through their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices’ understanding and knowledgeable skills develop” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 94). Therefore, learning involves not only acquiring skills and knowledge but also becoming a member of a community of practice. Newcomers are socialised into the norms, values, and practices of the community, which shapes their identity as community members.

4. Learning Modes and Activities in Online Theological Education

The notion that individuals acquire knowledge most effectively within a community of practice, wherein they actively participate in authentic tasks alongside seasoned professionals, prompts an examination of the practical implications of this theory. This implies, particularly within the scope of this research, the examination of the significance of online approaches/modes and learning activities in relation to the specific circumstances of the learners when situated learning theory is integrated with online theological education. In other words, it would mean considering the modes of online learning that considers or best fits the context of the learners, as well as designing online learning activities that simulate real-world situations and offer opportunities for social interaction and collaboration among learners.

4.1 Modes of Online Learning

It is critical to consider the context of the learners when determining the mode of delivery, as this will help course-curriculum designers and institutions in developing online courses sensitive of the context of the learners. For example, between the pre-Covid and post-Covid eras, there was a significant difference or shift in attitude and practice regarding online education and online theological education in India. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, there was widespread opposition to online theological education and, to a lesser extent, to online education in the secular context. One could argue that educational institutions and theological colleges/seminaries were slow to adopt online learning or used limited digital learning platforms prior to the pandemic (Muthuprasad, et al., 2021). Theological and secular institutions were forced to adapt to some form of online learning because of several national lockdowns (See Express Web Desk 2021). Over time, Indian colleges, universities, and theological colleges/seminaries adopted online education alongside the top institutions/ universities in the world (Kumar 2021).

When theological colleges and seminaries were compelled to adopt some form of online learning, they primarily adopted *synchronous* learning, a mode of online learning that requires online presence-interaction between the instructor and all enrolled learners at the same time.⁹ Most theological colleges and seminaries, if not all of them, used Zoom or Google Meet to deliver online lectures. In response to the need for emergency adaptation to online learning, synchronous learning was perceived as a more feasible alternative to facilitate the transition from traditional face-to-face (hereafter, f2f) classroom instruction. Although synchronous learning has certain limitations, especially in situations where there is a digital divide between different demographic groups such as gender, age, location, and socioeconomic status, it is a preferred mode of instruction for many teachers and theological educators, even if it is not the preferred mode for their learners (Bedenlier, et al. 2021).

Hence, many learners opt for *asynchronous* learning as a preferred mode due to its temporal and geographical independence (See, for example, Bernard 2004; Clark and Mayer 2016; Xie et al. 2019). This mode of learning is characterised by individualised and self-paced instruction, with less reliance on the instructor/teacher for guidance. Asynchronous learning involves the provision of educational materials, including lessons and assignments, to learners who are given a specific timeframe within which to complete coursework and examinations. Many teachers and theological educators of online theology courses have found that short, asynchronous courses are beneficial for enhancing their knowledge and skills in the field of online education while remaining in their current position of employment or ministry.¹⁰ In the capacity of an online facilitator, it has been observed that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

⁹ Charles Hodges and others suggest that a distinction must be made between online courses that were developed during an emergency and those that are well-developed (2020).

¹⁰ One such platform is the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) Academy, which offers "certified professional training for theological educators." Over the past two years, I have gained a great deal of knowledge and experience both as a learner and as an educator-facilitator. See <https://icete.academy/> (Accessed 13 April 2023).

such as Coursera, edX, Udemy, Swayam, among others, have proven to be highly advantageous in enhancing their proficiency and expertise.¹¹ These platforms are advantageous, especially for acquiring knowledge on learning theory or learning design, and for conducting a concentrated and in-depth study on a topic of personal interest and need, despite their tendency to lack human interaction.

Many theological institutions have implemented a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning modalities, commonly referred to as *blended* or hybrid learning, to accommodate in-person educational possibilities and remote learning potential. As per Tony Bates' view, this form of online education pertains to the comprehensive restructuring of traditional classroom-based courses, which effectively harnesses the potential of technology (Bates 2015: 344). The proposed approach involves the integration of online education with targeted in-person or f2f small group interactions, or a hybrid model that combines virtual and hands-on classroom experiences. It can be posited that this form of online education combines the favourable aspects of web-based learning with the established methodologies of traditional in-person learning. While online education is not ideal in locations where there are digital divides, a college or seminary can use one or more types of the following blended learning to nurture their learners since blended learning combines elements of f2f learning with online learning.

In a *rotation model*,¹² the programme provides courses in which learners “rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning,” while other modalities may involve various learning activities (Staker and Horn 2012: 8). For example, in The Shepherd’s Academy (TSA), we offer modular courses that are delivered using a blended learning approach that combines online content created by subject experts with self-study, peer group learning under the supervision of a qualified mentor, and weekly tutorial meetings. The courses are facilitated through an online Learning Management System (LMS) that is readily available for access. Learners engage in weekly self-study lessons of fully manuscript content, actively partake in learning activities and assignments, and then engage in guided tutorial sessions to discuss and reflect on their acquired knowledge. This approach is well-suited for our predominantly remote learners, both in Africa and South Asia, who are either currently involved in ministry or preparing to enter a ministerial context. This is also suitable for any context, which focuses on theological education at the grassroots level in the Global South. This approach to online education can be considered context sensitive.

In the *flex or hyflex model*, the course content and instruction are predominantly delivered through online platforms; learners have the flexibility to progress through various learning modalities at their own pace, tailored to their individual needs; and the teacher-of-record is physically present at the learning site or study centres (Staker

¹¹ See <https://www.coursera.org/>; <https://www.edx.org/>; <https://www.udemy.com/>; <https://swayam.gov.in/> (Accessed 13 April 2023).

¹² Also consider *station model* in which “within a given course or subject (e.g., math), students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion among classroom-based learning modalities. The rotation includes at least one station for online learning” (Staker and Horn 2012).

and Horn 2012: 12). This instructional approach is contextually adaptable as it incorporates the pedagogical principles of hybrid and flexible learning. During the COVID-19, for instance, as a Bible college in Sri Lanka grappled with the needs of learners and online education, they adopted this learning strategy and supported the learners in benefiting from it (Ragui and Hunukumbura 2023). In terms of learning approach, they combined f2f learning with online learning and flexibility (i.e., they could attend class online or in-person at the centres).

In a *self-blended model*, learners choose to supplement their traditional or informal courses with one or more online courses, and “the teacher-of-record” is the online instructor (Staker and Horn 2012: 14). Learners may take this “online courses either on the brick-and-mortar campus or off-site” and it ought to be differentiated from full-time online learning (Staker and Horn 2012: 14). This type online learning model can be used both at the formal and informal learning settings. In a modular or semester-long course, for instance, learners may be offered an online nano-course to supplement their f2f or classroom learning. In my experience, this type for learning can be used to complement in-person workshop i.e., by having learners take an online course and then attend a workshop for f2f interaction and learning.¹³

In the *enriched-virtual model*, learners are required to divide their time between campus attendance or f2f class and remote learning via online delivery of content and instruction (Staker and Horn 2012: 15). In other words, learners are expected to participate in f2f sessions with the course facilitator and complete their assignments online (Krismadinata, et al. 2020). For example, some seminaries or study centres require their learners to attend course work (e.g., research methodology, research and writing, etc.) and then complete the remainder of the course or writing projects remotely (e.g., assignment, writing project) at both the ministerial and higher research levels.

4.2 Integration of Context and Learning Activities

Implementing Lave and Wenger’s situated learning in online theological education would require a theological institution to develop a good relationship with churches, Christian organizations, or NGOs. It would also require the development of online learning platforms that facilitate the formation of authentic communities of practice and the provision of opportunities for participation in collective activities and authentic contexts. The purpose of such collective learning activity or experience is to help learners in engaging in peripheral participation and gradually progressing to more central positions i.e., from peripheral participation to legitimate peripherality, full participation, and socialisation.

¹³ In relation to our discussion, several online courses from ICETE Academy have been used by a number of scholars in various parts of the world to fulfil this learning approach. I have the privilege of facilitating several of these workshops and webinars (ICETE Academy 2022).

5.2.1 Case-Based Learning

Peripheral participants gradually enhance their learner involvement and knowledge over time by engaging in authentic activities. In order to promote peripheral participation in the context of online education (i.e., blended learning), it is recommended that instructional contents and tasks be designed in a manner that facilitates active engagement of the learners (See, for example, Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver 2006). Regarding online theological education, it is recommended to integrate problem-solving tasks or case studies into the learning design. For our purposes at TSA, integrating case-based learning or case studies with an online theology course can facilitate a peripheral learning experience for our learners. By designating authentic tasks, the following case-based learning prepares learners for peripheral participation.

Course: Christians in the Public Space – I

Task: As part of the course, learners are required to visit a campaigning organisation to do a case-based study. They are encouraged to schedule an in-person visit to an organisation that addresses issues of poverty, human rights, religious freedom, or justice. They are expected to have conversations with individuals who *run* the organisation, either as trustees or executives. Furthermore, they are instructed to engage in a conversation related to the organisation's history, activities, and future plans. The responses from the learners will serve as the premise for a reflection paper on their visit.

Learners: These learners are in their second year of the Bachelor of Theology programme. They are church leaders from the Global South, primarily Africa and Asia, who are already engaged in ministry and mission work. This learning task requires learners to write a reflection paper based on their conversation with the organisation's policymakers.¹⁴

Technology: The course is accessible via mobile phones, tablets, and laptops/desktops. The course material (complete manuscript) has already been uploaded to the learning management system, Moodle. They meet virtually once per week with fellow learners and their course instructor-facilitator using Zoom or Google Meet.

The above learning task is an example of case-based learning, a pedagogical approach, that involves presenting learners with real-world scenarios and asking them to analyse and solve problems or begin developing their thinking based on their knowledge and skills (Savery and Duffy 1995). In online theological education, case-based learning can be used to simulate ministry situations and provide learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world contexts.

¹⁴ See <https://shepherds.academy/about-us/> (Accessed 22 May 22, 2023).

Additionally, and depending on the nature of the course, course-curriculum designers have the option to incorporate peer review and feedback into a course or programme, in addition to receiving feedback exclusively from the course facilitator. The course may also require attendance at online seminars or webinars, where learners can gain insight from experts through notetaking, reflection, and gaining expert knowledge. Learners may have the opportunity to participate in weekend ministry or semester-end internships, allowing them to gain firsthand experience and learn from authentic ministry contexts.

5.2.2 Collaborative Learning

In the context of online theology course or programme, increasing participation or legitimate peripherality can be achieved through online discussion forums or collaborative activities. The goal is for the learners to engage in peripheral participation and gradually transition towards more central roles as a learner. As an attempt to bring about collaborative learning, we use online discussion forums in the following manner:

Level: Level 1-3 of Bachelor of Theology.

Tasks: We offer multiple types of discussion forum questions, depending on the nature of the course or subject. They are exploratory questions, which help learners probe information and knowledge; challenge questions, and examine assumptions and presuppositions, or interpret a subject/text; relational questions compare the learners' learning with real-world experience; diagnostic questions search for the motive or cause behind an issue, event, or incident; and action questions are designed to motivate learners to take action about a specific problem/issue in the family, church, or society (Adapted from Davis 2009: 119-20).

Learners: These types of questions occur weekly. Every learner must respond to the query and provide comments on the responses of two other learners. This learning task is intended to teach them how to formulate an opinion on a given topic or issue, as well as how to learn from others as they formulate their opinions and exchange responses. In addition, they receive comments from a subject matter expert tutor.

Technology: We utilise Moodle to create discussion forum questions. They can participate via mobile phones, tablets, and laptop/desktop computers.

In addition to forum questions, other collaborative activities such as virtual group activities, paper presentations, and group projects are utilised. These collaborative activities are premised on the idea that collaborative learning entails learners working in groups to solve problems or complete tasks (See, for example, Johnson and Johnson 1999).

5.2.3 Full Participation

Along with the support of modern technologies that allow for more informal conversation (WhatsApp), reflective conversation (Moodle), and collaborative content creation (conferencing apps), we incorporate a learning pedagogy known as tutorial session, in which learners engage in f2f learning each week (McLoughlin and Lee 2010: 28-43). Our tutorial sessions are not lecture-based, but rather a time when learners' questions are clarified and discussions on a particular topic are continued. They are able to clarify doubts, pose questions, and extend their learning beyond Moodle, whether in-person or virtual f2f. Here, they progress towards full participation in their learning experience. Consider the following aspect of learning in connection with TSA:

Level: Level 1-3 of Bachelor of Theology.

Tasks: In addition to self-study, online activities, and online discussions, learners participate in a weekly tutorial session with fellow learners and the course tutor. This tutorial session does not involve lectures or classroom-style instruction. Instead, this is where learners get the chance to clarify doubts, pose questions, and apply their knowledge to their context. This is where they broaden their knowledge and apply the course material.

Learners: Learners range from first- to third-year learners. By the time they attend the tutorial, the learners will have completed online coursework, learning activities, and discussion forums. The recurring weekly tutorial session compliments their online learning experience.

Technology: Except for a few study centres or local centres, nearly all of the learning environment is online. Using conferencing applications, learners are brought together. We use Moodle announcements, emails, and backchannel networking applications to distribute the information.

To achieve full participation in online learning or blended learning, learning design should emphasise active engagement and authentic application. Incorporating problem-based scenarios, case studies, role-plays, and collaborative projects into the course or programme can further enable learners to partake actively in relevant and authentic contexts. The key element is to foster a learning design that promotes the self-directed and autonomous nature of the learner during the learning process (McLoughlin and Lee 2010: 33).

5.2.4 Community of Practice

The concept of socialisation or learning as participation in the social world emphasises that learning occurs through participation in communities of practice, in which learners engage in shared activities and interact with more knowledgeable members (Lave and Wenger 1991: 94). In online theological education, it is crucial to design a well-structured online learning environment, establish explicit participation guidelines, and foster a supportive online community.

A community of practice is a group of individuals who share a common interest or profession and who engage in regular interactions to share knowledge and experience (Wenger 1998).

Level: Level 3 of Bachelor of Theology.

Tasks: Learners must complete a collaborative assignment. If they are from the same study centre, learners can meet f2f; if the cohort is global, they are expected to use conferencing apps. Learners are expected to complete their assignments in a Google document and submit the link or share the document upon completion.

Learners: Learners are in their third year of study. At this point, they are accustomed to the TSA learning mode and the various technological tools necessary for this assignment.

Technology: They are required to use email/WhatsApp for communication, Google docs. for collaborative work, and Moodle for assignment submission.

Furthermore, in online theological education, a community of practice can be established through online discussion forums, social media groups, and virtual meetings.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that learning is most effective when situated in the learner's context, particularly in the context of distance and online theological education. I have attempted to interface learning theory (situated learning), online learning (blended learning), and theological education (distance/online theological education) within the framework of a theological paradigm that recognises the significance of being contextually rooted. This was done by examining various learning modes, including synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, and different types of blended learning, within the context of some Asian and African institutional settings. The focus is on how these modes can be utilised by learners and course/curriculum designers to align with the learners' specific context. Furthermore, this is done by showing different types of learning activities that encompass the essential aspects of situated learning, such as activities that allow for participation in collective endeavours and authentic environments.

One advantage of the current effort is that it enables theological educators and/or course-curriculum designers to contemplate the possibility of incorporating diverse modes of online learning or utilising multiple types of learning activities to provide theological education or enhance the proficiency of theological educators. Furthermore, the numerous learning activities mentioned were being implemented in a f2f setting. Additionally, it is worth noting that the majority, if not all, of these activities can be readily adapted to suit the specific requirements of an institution's context. An area that warrants additional exploration is the implementation of

situated learning theory into one's own educational setting, with the aim of augmenting the learning experience for learners.

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To cite (Harvard):

Dr Taimaya Ragui. (2025) 'Situating Learning Theory: An Integration with Online Theological Education'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 60-81.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



RESEARCH ARTICLE

That All May Be One: Trajectories and Trends of Ecumenism from the Early Church to Global Movements, Africa, and Ghana

Rev Dr Kwaku Boamah and Samuel Kofi¹

Abstract: Ecumenical movements bridge the historic and ongoing disagreements within Christianity to fulfil Jesus' desire that the church should be one. The early Christians struggled with questions of Christology, Trinity, and ecclesiological issues, among others, which were often resolved at ecumenical councils and synods. Today, churches still come together, not necessarily to resolve controversies but with socio-political interests. This paper assesses the trajectory of ecumenism, from its earliest roots to modern expressions, with an interest in Africa and Ghana. Through qualitative investigation of historical records, theological perspectives, and case studies of ecumenism in Africa and Ghana, the study exposes prominent achievements in dialogue, social justice, and reconciliation among different church denominations. Nevertheless, ecumenism in Africa faces doctrinal, hierarchical, and identity challenges. The study accentuates the relevance of ecumenism and calls for innovative approaches stimulated by the early Church's unifying ethos to address 21st-century challenges. By building collaboration as unity in diversity, ecumenism can be a transformative tool for peacebuilding and social cohesion in a religiously diverse world, even within the same religion.

Keywords: Ecumenism, Synods, Councils, Unity, Justice, Peace

Introduction

At Jesus' departure, His desire expressed to the Father was that they all (the disciples – the church) may be one (John 17:11). He sought that the disciples and the church would remain united in all they believe and do. This prayer for the church has become

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even more crucial today, given the varied denominational church categories leading to diverse Christian expression. Churches are born day in and day out at different places with various expressions. These schisms did not start today but from the days of the Apostles to today, and Africa is not left out of these breakaways. According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2018), 'Africa has become home to a diverse display of Christian denominations and traditions. It is therefore not surprising that Africa, being part of the global south, contributes immensely to the growth of Christianity globally, with increasing numbers.

The dominant types of Christian expressions in Africa can be categorized into various groups based on their historical characteristics, practices, and theologies. These categories include Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Protestant Churches, Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches (including the African Indigenous Churches), as well as some New Religious Movements. These are just a few of the different Christian expressions found in Africa today, which give a basis for Jesus' prayer that the church needs to become one. This prayer is essential because the various denominations carry their own traditions, bringing their own unique theological perspectives, worship styles, and social practices to the continent's religious landscape. These sometimes lead to clashes and internal conflicts, even in the media, making the call for ecumenical relations not just appropriate but crucial.

The study tracks the historical roots of ecumenism from the early church in a way that exhibits ecumenical activities as having a deep historical antecedent. It also stresses how global ecumenical movements have influenced African, particularly Ghanaian, Christian expressions. It examines major ecumenical milestones from the early church to the 21st century. Although both internal and external socio-political factors affect ecumenical organizations, this study explores the internal challenges faced by ecumenical bodies in Africa because they form the primary obstacles to a sustainable ecumenical movement in Africa.

The Romans and Greeks used the concept "ecumenism" to mean the physical, geographic or geo-political world, which is seen and managed, while the Christians applied it differently (Kitroeff, 2007). The Christians used it to mean the body of Christ, irrespective of their traditional differences and denominational identities. In recent times, "ecumenism" represents a movement or the promotion of Christian unity and cooperation among Churches through theological dialogue, community services, inter-denominational meetings, mission projects, social justice, and joint worship services. The concept of ecumenism is about Christian unity, collaboration, and cooperation among Christian denominations and traditions due to the acknowledgment of the common faith in Jesus Christ. The concept of ecumenism has therefore given rise to many organizations at international, national, and regional levels.

Ecumenism Through History

Historically, the word was originally used in the context of large councils that the Apostles organized to clarify matters of Christian theology, doctrine, and practices. In

the early Church, when a controversial issue came up that threatened the unity of the Church, a meeting of bishops from 'every part of the world' was called to resolve the matter. Ecumenism in the early Christian Church was experienced primarily through Synods and Councils to maintain unity on theological and doctrinal issues among Christians across time and space. How did these foundational practices then influence ecumenical movements among later Christians. This gives room for a comparative examination of how ecumenism evolved globally and in Africa, including Ghana.

According to Musurillo (1972), a major feature that shaped the development and action of the Early Church was the opposition it faced. Musurillo asserts that no study of the Early Church is complete without an exploration of the persecution and martyrdom of Christians. Boamah (2022) notes that the oppositions were external and internal. The external oppositions were marked by persecution and martyrdoms, while the internal opposition was a result of disagreements that became controversies between some individuals and groups in the church, leading to dissatisfaction and eventually schisms. These differences expressed by some persons that affected the unity of the church included issues on Christian-Jewish relations, the Trinity, Christology, pneumatology, canon, and sacrament. To resolve these controversies, leaders of the church at various times had to travel for such Councils to resolve such issues and to present a common position for the church in general. Recent studies (Lienhard, 2018; Edwards, 2009; Gonzalez, 2010) agree that while the terms 'Synods' and 'Councils' have somewhat different origins, scholars have used them interchangeably to mean authoritative gatherings of church leaders aimed at promoting unity, preserving orthodoxy, and guiding the life of the Christian community in the Early Church.

In the Early Church, Synods denoted gatherings of bishops, clergy, and sometimes lay religious members to respond to matters of theology, doctrine, discipline, and governance affecting the church, largely engineered mostly by certain Christians but sometimes by non-Christians. Lynch (1992) argues that, in the context of early Christianity, Councils characteristically meant a larger gathering of bishops and representatives from different regions to discuss issues of significant theological controversies or doctrinal disputes. Boamah (2022) argues that Councils were organized to establish consensus, explain doctrinal positions, and establish authoritative statements like creeds that would direct the belief and practice of the Church.

Nonetheless, they differ in their application and as ecumenical tools, as explored by various scholars (Chadwick, 1993; Tanner, 1990; Louth, 2007). Lynch (1992) maintains that whereas the Latins used Councils, the Greeks used Synods. The terms differ in scope (synods are often small and localized, while Councils are larger gatherings with people from multiple regions), formality (Synods are less formal, Councils are very formal), authority (Synods are less authoritative compared to highly authoritative Councils), frequency (Synods are organized more frequently, while Councils take significant time and effort to summon), and decision-making processes (Synods operate on collaborative consensus, while Councils follow a more rigid formal

decision-making process of debates, speeches, arguments, voting, and conclusions). For this study, Synods and Councils are used interchangeably to mean an ecumenical gathering of church fathers and mothers to resolve controversies in early Christianity. This is because their differences are in their composition rather than their impacts; for instance, the Council of Carthage began as a Synod of Carthage in 251 AD.

The decisions and decrees of Synods and Councils carried significant authority within the Christian community, shaping the course of Christian theology, ecclesiastical governance, and religious practice. Synods and Councils have therefore been influential in shaping the development of early Christian beliefs and theology, promoting doctrinal orthodoxy and fostering unity between the various Christian expressions in time and space. These gatherings contributed significantly to the life of Early Christians, helping to preserve coherence and integrity despite their various theological differences and cultural diversity.

Ecumenical Synods and Councils (1st – 8th Century)

Ecumenical Synods and Councils generally addressed varied controversies and disagreements in the church (McGrath, 2011; Kelly, 1960; Frend, 1996). Resolutions from these ecumenical gatherings influenced Christian expressions even today. Some of the major gatherings of bishops and lay members of the church from the 1st to 8th centuries are not limited to but include the following. This period is limited because it marks major landmarks in the history of Christianity, such as the monastic order, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and doctrinal foundations.

1. *Council of Jerusalem (50 AD)*: The issue, as recorded in Acts 15, was whether Gentiles could become Christians and, if so, whether they needed to behave like Jews, especially by observing circumcision. The Council, chaired by Apostle James, based on the doctrine of grace, answered that Gentiles could become Christians and were not required to be circumcised or follow Jewish laws.
2. *First Council of Carthage (251 AD)*: The main question was the legitimacy of baptism performed by people or groups deemed heretics by the church. The Council answered that baptism, even if done by heretics, is valid provided it is performed using the Trinitarian formula (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
3. *First Council of Nicaea (325 AD)*: Given the Arian controversy, this Council was convened to establish the relationship between Christ and the Father, specifically whether they are equal. The Council answered that the Son (Christ) is "of one substance with the Father," thereby establishing the Nicene Creed. It further affirmed the doctrine of Christ as divine and ruled that Arianism is heretical.

4. *First Council of Constantinople (381 AD)*: The controversy concerned the Holy Spirit's relationship with the Father and the Son, as well as persistent queries on the Trinity. The Council highlighted the divinity of the Holy Spirit as One "who together with the Father and the Son are worshipped and glorified" in the Nicene Creed.
5. *Council of Hippo (393 AD)*: The primary question was to determine the Christian Canon. The Council established the books of the Old and New Testaments, forming the Christian Canon used by the church today.
6. *Second Council of Carthage (c. 419 AD)*: The question here related to several disciplinary and doctrinal issues, including the Apostle's Canon and the Donatist controversy. It affirmed the authority of the Apostles' Canons and upheld the decisions of previous councils relative to Donatist bishops.
7. *Council of Ephesus (431 AD)*: The gathering was called due to the Nestorian controversy, addressing whether Christ was divine and human at the same time or only one of these. The Council rejected Nestorianism, affirming Christ's incarnation in Mary's "Theotokos" (God-bearer) theology, that Christ was 100% human and 100% divine.
8. *Council of Chalcedon (451 AD)*: Given the Monophysite controversy, the question again related to the nature of Christ, whether he had one nature or two. The Council rejected Monophysitism, corroborating the orthodox position of Christ being 100% divine and 100% human, without confusion, and establishing a firm Christological doctrine.
9. *Second Council of Constantinople (553 AD)*: The issues related to some theologians, including the "Three Chapters" (Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Ibas of Edessa), whose teachings seemed to favor Nestorianism. The Council reiterated the Christological theology agreed upon by previous ecumenical councils, mainly the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), that Christ is 100% divine and 100% human, although he is one person. The Council rejected the teachings of the "Three Chapters" and anathematized some propositions ascribed to them.
10. *Third Council of Constantinople (680-681 AD)*: The Council sought to address the Monothelite controversy concerning the will of Christ, whether it was more divine than human. The Council refuted Monothelitism as heretical and confirmed the humanity and divinity of Christ, supporting the orthodox position of Christ having two wills, both divine and human, united without separation or confusion.

11. *Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD)*: Influenced by the Iconoclastic controversy, the question was whether the use of religious images (icons) in Christian worship constituted idolatry. The Council deemed iconoclasm heretical and answered that the presence of icons (iconodulism) in the church aided spirituality and devotion more than idolatry. It condemned iconoclasm as heretical and established guidelines for the proper use of icons in Christian worship.

Although the early Church faced challenges and divisions, especially in the context of theological controversies, the ideal of unity in Christ remained a central guiding principle for early Christian communities.

Medieval Periods (1054 – 16th Century)

Moving from the Early Church to the Medieval Period, these internal oppositions in Christianity have been very prominent and impactful (Hillerbrand, 2007; Le Goff, 1993; Louth, 2007; Noble et al., 2014; Rubin, 2009; Tanner, 1990; Lynch, 1992). Some major divisions and schisms have occurred, creating significant theological, ecclesiastical, and geopolitical consequences. Some of the major controversies include:

1. *The Great Schism (1054)*: Based on ecclesiastical authority and cultural diversity, particularly regarding the use of Latin or Greek, disagreements arose between the Eastern (Byzantine Greek) and Western (Latin) churches. This led to the division of the church into the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Catholic Church. As regards the Eastern Catholic Churches, after the Great Schism, some Eastern churches, such as the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, maintained allegiance with the Western Church, submitting to the authority of the Pope while retaining their theology and liturgy.
2. *The Western Schism (1378-1417)*: For nearly forty years, the Western Church faced a major controversy with two rival Popes elected in Rome and Avignon, dividing the church. This division, starting in 1378, was resolved in 1417 at the ecumenical Council of Constance by removing the two rival Popes and electing Martin V as a unified Pope for the entire region.
3. *The Protestant Reformation (16th century)*: John Calvin, Erasmus, Martin Luther, and others criticized certain doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, advocating for scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) and faith alone (*sola fide*) as the basis of Christian action. The movement was catalyzed when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses in 1517 at the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, raising questions about Catholic doctrines, particularly the sale of indulgences. This led to the creation of Protestant Churches from the Roman Catholic Church.

These disagreements within the church in the medieval period affected many of their expressions and theology. It was therefore necessary to seek unity among the various interests to present the church as one.

Efforts Towards Reconciliation and Unity

In dealing with these controversies of the medieval period, Synods and Councils were held to address the challenges of the times. These ecumenical meetings were intended to unify the church by bringing together interested parties to resolve these issues while establishing guidelines to prevent future occurrences. The following are examples of some major Synods and Councils in the medieval period, specifically between 1054 and the 16th century, given the turbulence of this period in Christian development in establishing ecumenical authority in dealing with such controversies. Attention is given briefly to the main issues and resolutions.

1. *Fourth Lateran Council (1215)*: The Council addressed questions related to Consubstantiation or Transubstantiation, heresy, discipline, and possible modifications in the Roman Catholic Church's administration. It reiterated the Church's position on the Eucharist, endorsing Transubstantiation, established structures to deal with heresy, and adjusted some administrative practices.
2. *Council of Vienne (1311-1312)*: The issues were calls to dissolve the Knights Templar and establish a stricter moral code for the church, particularly among the clergy. The Council agreed to dissolve the Knights Templar, transferring their resources to the Knights Hospitaller, and endorsed moral codes for the clergy.
3. *Council of Constance (1414-1418)*: The main issue was to resolve the Western Schism, where two Popes were established in different regions of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin V was declared the sole pontiff, and the two rival claimants were removed to establish unity within the Church.
4. *Council of Florence (1431-1445)*: This Council aimed to address the division between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church resulting from the Great Schism. Although unsuccessful in achieving full reconciliation, it made important modifications to theology and doctrines between the two churches.
5. *Council of Trent (1545-1563)*: The Roman Catholic Church sought to address issues of doctrine, theology, and discipline in response to the Protestant Reformation. The Council promulgated decrees on doctrine, reforms, and discipline to clarify Catholic orthodoxies and practices, confirming traditional teachings.

These councils brought together various church leaders across regions to deliberate on issues dividing them, aiming to establish unity as Jesus prayed for in the Garden. They addressed theology, doctrine, traditions, discipline, and personal interests that caused divisions, contributing significantly to the governance, theology, doctrine, and expressions of the Church in both Eastern and Western traditions.

Major World Ecumenical Movement

Several scholars and organizations (World Council of Churches, 1998; Christian Churches Together in the USA, 2015; Global Christian Forum, 2007; Kinnamon and Cope, 1997; Grdzeliidze et al., 2013; Leith, 2006; Bullock and Walker, 1998) agree that the 20th century saw significant ecumenical movements globally. These movements address various problems and seek to preempt controversies. Their objectives are to promote unity among churches, establish dialogue, and foster collaboration and cooperation among denominations to realize Jesus' ecumenical prayer. Some noteworthy ecumenical movements and their main objectives include:

1. *World Council of Churches (WCC)*: Established in 1948 with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, the WCC aims to promote Christian unity, foster inter-church dialogue and cooperation, work for justice and peace, and address social, economic, and environmental issues. Its membership includes Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and other churches but excludes the Roman Catholic Church.
2. *Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME)*: Founded in 1959 and based in Brussels, Belgium, the CCME focuses on migration and asylum-related issues in Europe, with membership spanning various church traditions.
3. *Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)*: Established in 1974 and based in Beirut, Lebanon, the MECC promotes Christian unity and cooperation in the region, advocates for peace and justice, and addresses the needs of marginalized communities, including refugees and migrants. Its members include Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican churches.
4. *Global Christian Forum (GCF)*: Founded in 1998 and based in Geneva, Switzerland, the GCF promotes common understanding and respect among churches, fosters common witness and mission, and addresses religious freedom and persecution issues. Its membership includes Pentecostal, Evangelical, Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic churches.
5. *Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT)*: Founded in 2001, the CCT creates a platform for dialogue and cooperation among churches in the United States, fostering unity, promoting evangelistic strategies, and addressing social

and ethical challenges. Its membership includes Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Churches of Christ, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Protestants, and the Salvation Army.

These ecumenical organizations worldwide continue to establish dialogue, cooperation, and common action among Christian churches and traditions. Their contributions focus on advancing Christian unity, as Jesus prayed, and promoting justice, peace, and reconciliation for the well-being of society. Given their impact on African Christian expressions, these global movements have profoundly shaped ecumenism in Africa.

Ecumenism Movements in Africa

Several ecumenical associations in Africa promote unity, cooperation, and dialogue among churches (Smit, 2016; Mugambi, 2015; Adogame, 2013; Baur and Miller, 2017; Kajwang, 2003). Examples include:

1. *All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)*: Established in 1963 and based in Nairobi, Kenya, the AACC seeks to establish Christian unity, promote justice, peace, and development, and address social and political issues. Its membership includes Protestants, Orthodox, Anglicans, and independent churches.
2. *Council of Churches in Africa (CCA)*: Founded in 1971 and based in Nairobi, Kenya, the CCA promotes cooperation and collaboration among churches, seeks social justice and human rights, and facilitates ecumenical dialogue and theological discourse. Its members include Protestants, Orthodox, Anglicans, and some United Churches.
3. *Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)*: Established in 1976 and based in the Philippines, EATWOT develops contextual and liberation theologies influenced by global South Christian experiences, critiques colonial and neocolonial systems, and promotes social transformation and justice. Key members included Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Ghana), Kwame Bediako (Ghana), C.S. Song (South Korea), Jose Miguez Bonino (Argentina), Marcella Althaus-Reid (Argentina), Kosuke Koyama (Japan), Namsoon Kang (South Korea), Joerg Rieger (Germany), Chung Hyun Kyung (South Korea), and Elsa Tamez (Costa Rica).
4. *Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa (FECCIWA)*: Founded in 1976 and based in Accra, Ghana, FECCIWA facilitates solutions to social, political, and economic crises and advances the Christian mission. Members include the Christian Council of Ghana, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, Christian Council of Nigeria, Council of Churches in Liberia, Christian

Council of Togo, Christian Council of Benin, Council of Churches in Côte d'Ivoire, Christian Council of Burkina Faso, Christian Council of Guinea, and Council of Churches in Mali.

5. *The Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC)*: Initiated in 1978 in Cairo, Egypt, and formally inaugurated in 1982 with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, the OAIC unites African-Initiated Churches to promote theological education, social justice, and community development while preserving African Christian identity.

The presence of these ecumenical bodies in Africa reflects the diversity of Christian denominations and expressions on the continent and the need to unite despite differences. These organizations foster commitment to working together for unity, mutual benefit missions, and the development of Africa. The exploration of ecumenism in African Christian expression is not separate from broader historical and global examples. Although Africa hosts various ecumenical organizations, Ghana has a unique religious landscape with a deep Christian heritage and strong interdenominational cooperation. Ecumenical movements in Ghana foster peacebuilding and theological dialogue, making it a valuable case study for understanding ecumenism in Africa.

Ecumenism: The Ghanaian Example

Ecumenical activities in Ghana are unique within Africa, given the country's early and sustained commitment to the Christian Council of Ghana. Ghana's successful integration of ecumenical activities into its national identity, with government support, has directly contributed to social cohesion and stability. The institutionalized, government-supported framework, which is not a prominent feature in many other African countries, provides reasons to examine Ghana's example.

In Ghana, various forms of ecumenical councils are aligned with particular church traditions. Recognized ecumenical bodies include the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches (GPCC), Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference (GCBC), National Association of Christian and Charismatic Churches (NACCC), Ghana Charismatic Bishops Conference (GCBC), Council of Independent Churches (CIC), Council of African Instituted Churches (CAIC), and the National Clergy Association of Ghana (NACAG).

Activities and Initiatives

Joint Worship Services and Prayer Gatherings

Joint worship services and prayer gatherings play a significant role in the ecumenical movement, fostering unity, dialogue, and collaboration among diverse Christian traditions. These events provide opportunities for believers from different

denominations to come together in worship, prayer, and spiritual fellowship, emphasizing shared faith and values while respecting theological diversity. These gatherings create spaces for meaningful dialogue and conversation among Christians from different traditions. Through shared worship experiences, participants engage in theological discussions, exchange perspectives, and deepen their understanding of each other's faith traditions. This dialogue contributes to greater mutual respect and fosters relationships built on trust and cooperation (Kinnamon and Cope, 1997).

While emphasizing unity, joint worship services and prayer gatherings also celebrate the diversity within the Christian community. Participants bring unique cultural, liturgical, and musical elements to the worship experience, enriching the collective expression of faith. This celebration of diversity acknowledges the richness of various Christian traditions and encourages appreciation for different forms of worship and spirituality.

Moreover, joint worship and prayer events have a powerful witness to the world, demonstrating the transformative potential of Christian unity. They send a message of reconciliation, peace, and love across denominational, cultural, and societal boundaries. This witness is especially significant in contexts where divisions and conflicts exist, offering a model of cooperation and solidarity rooted in faith.

Regular joint worship services and prayer gatherings contribute to strengthening ecumenical relationships at local, national, and global levels. They provide opportunities for ongoing collaboration, joint initiatives, and shared advocacy on issues of common concern. According to Kinnamon and Cope (1997), these relationships form the foundation for broader ecumenical efforts aimed at promoting Christian unity and addressing societal challenges.

Social Outreach Programmes and Community Development Projects

Social outreach programmes and community development projects are integral to the ecumenical movement, reflecting its commitment to addressing societal challenges and promoting holistic well-being. These initiatives often involve collaboration among diverse Christian denominations and may encompass a wide range of activities aimed at serving communities and fostering positive social change.

In the context of the ecumenical movement, social outreach programmes typically address issues such as poverty, homelessness, hunger, healthcare access, education, and social justice. These programmes may include food banks, homeless shelters, healthcare clinics, educational programmes, advocacy campaigns, and initiatives to promote economic empowerment and sustainable development. Community development projects within the ecumenical movement focus on empowering communities to address their own needs and challenges. These projects often involve grassroots organizing, capacity building, leadership development, and partnerships with local organizations and stakeholders.

According to the World Council of Churches (n.d.), they may include initiatives related to affordable housing, job training, entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation.

Challenges to Ecumenism

Theological Differences

Differences in Doctrine and Practice Among Christian Denominations

A division in or separation from a church or religious body in Christianity first occurred in the early 1500s, with the breakaway from the Catholic Church. Since then, divisions have recurred repeatedly and show no signs of stopping. Over time, new denominations have continued to emerge due to splits and mergers. According to Rhodes (2015), wherever people congregate, they will have differences of opinion about what to believe and how faith should be practiced. Rhodes further argues that churches split off from a mother denomination due to differences in belief and/or practices, giving rise to entirely new denominations. Another reason running through almost all divisions is the interpretation of the Bible. Diverse interpretations lead to differences in doctrines and practices. While some believe the Old Testament has been fulfilled and need not be prioritized, others argue the opposite.

Noffke and McFadden (2001) noted that “the frequency and form of prayer, types of religious rituals, and differing theological beliefs would result in varying God concepts.” This implies that people’s varying ideas of biblical concepts can lead to differences in doctrines and practices, hence different denominations. Differences in doctrine and practice among Christian denominations are easily identified by their order of service, day of worship, attire, and the like. For example, within the AACC, Pentecostals strictly adhere to adult baptism, while Historic Mainline Churches allow for infant baptism, which sometimes affects theological discussions. Similarly, in the CCG, some churches prioritize speaking in tongues, while others see it as secondary, sometimes creating tension among them.

Institutional Obstacles

Ecclesiastical Structures and Hierarchies

As argued earlier, ecumenical bodies consist of different denominations and church traditions. Within the FECCIWA, for instance, Methodists are Episcopalian, while some churches insist on a congregational structure. In the Ghanaian context, which is similar to most churches worldwide, ecclesiastical structures and hierarchies differ from denomination to denomination. In the Presbyterian tradition, the final authority rests with the General Assembly, whereas the Methodist Church in Ghana practices the Episcopal system. In most Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, the final authority lies with the leader/founder of the church. This raises issues during ecumenical meetings when decisions are to be made, as representatives may engage in power plays, each

wanting the ecumenical body to adopt their administrative system, believing it to be the best.

Fear of Losing Identity or Autonomy

The fear of losing identity or autonomy is a major challenge to ecumenism. Submitting to or signing the charter by which such councils were formed implies agreeing to submit to the council. This becomes a challenge for most churches, as they perceive this as a reduction in power or autonomy. This may further imply that a council's decision might conflict with a church's tradition, leading to a loss of identity. Consequently, many Christian denominations are reluctant to join such councils, and those already part of them sometimes find it difficult to submit to council decisions. Some Pentecostal churches shun the CCG, and many in the AACC have failed to sign joint theological statements to maintain their doctrinal independence.

Social and Political Implications

Role of Ecumenism in Addressing Social Justice Issues

Ecumenism, as a global movement, promotes cooperation among Christians of different traditions for religious unity, where Christians from various denominations work together toward a common aim. Ecumenical bodies create avenues for these denominations to foster unity and promote peace for the body of Christ. Dating back to the twentieth century, ecumenism gained prominence as a coalition of like-minded groups seeking to restore religious unity and fellowship lost due to divisions among churches. Issues of concern to the church and society are addressed (New World Encyclopedia Contributors, 2024). Scholars such as Eregare et al. (2017) suggest that "ecumenical initiatives aim at truth, justice, and unity of the body of Christ or Christian churches or denominations." Hence, social issues concerning truth, justice, peace, and unity are identified and addressed. The role of ecumenism in addressing social justice issues is necessary, as these issues often lead to divisions, discrimination, and injustice. The church frequently faces these challenges, even from other churches, necessitating comprehensive action (Eregare et al., 2017).

Ecumenism, rooted in Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:20-21, designates churches to promote truth, shun evil, support people's struggles, defend their rights, and advocate for social justice. In Africa, the AACC has been at the forefront of economic justice and human rights, while the CCG has advocated against human trafficking and political corruption.

Ecumenical Efforts in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation

In a world where divisions, conflicts, and violence are increasing, the church and Christians are entrusted with the ministry of peace and reconciliation. As required in the Bible, the Church has a mandate to promote peace and unity in every regard. Violence and conflict-based practices are neither condoned nor encouraged. As part of its objectives, ecumenism seeks to promote peace and unity, especially among

Christians of different denominations and churches, extending to the world at large. To promote peace and reconciliation, ecumenical bodies respond to violence and conflict through deliberations, engagements, understanding, practice, and advocacy, assisting churches to progress toward greater unity for peace, as supported by the World Council of Churches (n.d.). Their peace-building efforts focus on conflict transformation and reconciliation. Within the CCG, some churches openly support political parties, which sometimes affects public policy advocacy.

In Ghana, ecumenical efforts in promoting peace and reconciliation are undertaken by bodies such as the CCG, GCBC, and GPCC. These bodies bring together churches from different denominations for peaceful activities, advocating and campaigning for peace and unity through dialogues and diplomacy. These activities are particularly visible during elections, with campaigns on the streets, radio, and television. Various churches step in for reconciliation in conflict-prone areas during and after elections. For example, in a case study on violence and conflict in Ireland, Father Gerry Reynolds at Clonard Monastery acted as a mediator to resolve conflicts between warring Irish chieftains (Cichon, 2000). Similarly, the Christian Council of Ghana has intervened to resolve conflicts between traditions and among churches (Cichon, 2000).

Conclusion

Ecumenism, as argued in this paper, is rooted in the teachings of the Bible and the early church. Significant progress has been made in the core mandate of the ecumenical movement, from evangelization to addressing social justice issues. In Ghana and most parts of Africa, ecumenical councils have played key roles in promoting peace, reconciliation, and social interventions. Despite these successes, they face unavoidable challenges, from theological to institutional issues. However, the unity sought by the ecumenical movement is unity in diversity, not the church becoming a single organic unit. By structuring this paper from the early church through global ecumenism to African and Ghanaian examples, the paper assesses the continuity and relevance of ecumenism across time and geography. This approach shows that African ecumenical activities flow from a broader historical and global movement. Ecumenism in contemporary times still faces these challenges. In the light of this, we have suggested some new approaches to addressing these shortcomings and obstacles in the 21st century.

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To cite (Harvard):

K. Boamah and S. Kofi. (2025) 'That All May Be One: Trajectories and Trends of Ecumenism from the Early Church to Global Movements, Africa, and Ghana'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 82-100.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



BOOK REVIEW

The Great Siege of Malta, by Marcus Bull

Published by Allen Lane, 2025

By Lucas Nyaware¹

Keywords: Siege of Malta (1565), Marcus Bull, Ottoman Empire vs. Knights of St. John, Religious and Political Conflict, Military Strategy and Siege Warfare, Christian-Muslim Relations in the 16th Century

Anyone who has read other books about the siege of Malta like Bruce Ware Allen's 'The Great Siege of Malta: The Epic Battle Between the Ottoman Empire and the Knights of St. John', would be curious to know if there is any new perspective or information about this war. Allen presented the historical, political and religious perspectives to this war. Needless to say, it was a consequential war that defined religious future of Islam and Christianity in regards to their expansion beyond the 16th Century. Its significance in Christian history can be seen in works of art about it in places like the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In evaluating Marcus Bull's book, this review looks at its strengths in view of earlier works, while analysing the historical, political and religious aspects presented.

The 18th day of May 1565 set the stage for an epic battle between the Knights in Malta and the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of their Sultan. The match was unequal, with all the odds seemingly favouring the Turks. A small contingent to defend the island was composed of about 580 Knight Hospitallers supported by a couple thousand soldiers from the native inhabitants of Malta. They were to face the might of the Ottoman Empire. Bull poses questions and presents an inquisitive aspect to the reader. At this point in history, there are religious tensions between the Christians and Muslims. There is the quest to control trade between Europe, Northern Africa and Asia not to mention piracy by the surrounding nations. He brings these tensions to the fore as he narrates the battle, but seems lean in favour of the Christian side in his presentation.

¹ Capt. Lucas Otieno Nyaware, Coordinator, Africa Shepherds Oxford Centre, ASOC. A Shepherds Academy Study Centre.

The style of using 'siege' as a strategy of war is discussed here in light of other historical events where this strategy was used. Readers who love war strategies will be curious to find out how the powerful Ottoman Empire, which had pushed the Knights from Rhodes Island to settle in Malta would have the tables turned against them. Earlier, the Ottomans had used the art of the siege, assault and attrition to successfully gain a victory over the Knights and drive them from the Island of Rhodes. On the religious front, readers may like to know how a solidly united Islam under the leadership of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent would not win against a divided Christian side led by the Grand Master Jean Parisot la Vallette. The Christians were divided by the Reformation with the west part of Europe like England and Germany largely moving away from the leadership of the Pope, while Spain and Italy were leaning towards the Roman Catholics under the leadership of the Pope.

The book gives a detailed background of the activities leading to the war making it easy for the reader to understand the context of the battle. The tense situation politically and religiously around the Mediterranean is highlighted without forgetting the other activities that were a mix of trade and piracy. Bull's work is well researched and includes the aftermath of the war. The chronology of events from the time of the Crusades leading to the advent of the war is explained.

The Knights had been preparing for such an eventuality since their arrival in Malta. The strategic planning before the battle included, fortification, food and gun fire storage and supply. A weakness in Marcus Bull's book is that he does not attribute the success of the Knights to some specific strategy.

A detail that several books do not capture but is captured by Bull's investigative approach is that not every Knight was of noble character and behaviour. The Knights of St. John's were dedicated to caring for the sick and the poor pilgrims to Jerusalem from the eleventh century under the leadership of Grandmaster Gerard. Because of frequent attacks, the Knights had to include military skills in their work. Before the siege of Malta, some Knights had deviated from the main course of the Order of St. John. An example was Gregorio de Adorno who had abandoned the Knights' charitable course and even turned into a murderer. These 'former knights' played a significant role during this war, bringing them back to the original course of the order of the Knights of St. John.

For those who love military strategies and adventure, this is a book to read. The book also gives a honorific mention of the contribution of the local Maltese in this battle. They fought heroically alongside the Knights to protect the Island from falling into the hands of the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the book, the reader will see the

importance of the siege of Malta in Christian history. Although Bull's presentation leans on the Christian side, a religious zealot would be disappointed in the book's attribution of success to control of trade, piracy, politics and power of the wider Mediterranean area and beyond.

For the Ottoman Empire, the victory of the Knights despite being celebrated by Christendom, does not change much in their broader scheme of operations. This is Bull's view on the impact of the war. He sees this war as a major event in history, but that changed very little. The quest for the Ottoman activities in the region did not change. This can be seen when the Ottomans, using the same siege tactics to attack the Hungarian town of Szigetvar the following year. That siege took place from 5th August to 8th September 1566 and resulted in Ottoman Victory, in spite of the Sultan dying in his tent of natural causes. Bull points at the sultan as the one whose ego may have been hurt by this small setback which was corrected by staging the Sultan personally leading the next assault on Szigetvar within months.

The author is the Coordinator of Africa Shepherds Oxford Centre, a study centre of the Shepherds Academy and an examiner of Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life's institute, The Shepherds Academy.

To cite (Harvard):

Lucas N. (2025) 'The Great Siege of Malta, by Marcus Bull Published by Allen Lane, 2025'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 101-104.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



BOOK REVIEW

Family, School and Community in the Pluriverse of Current Education

Eds. Lavinia Nădrag, Fazel Ebriham Freeks Tudor-Cosmin Ciocan, Alina Gălbează
(Buzarna-Tihenea) (Editura Universitară 2025) open access 278pp

Review by Renee Rheinbolt-Urbe, PhD¹

Keywords: Pluriverse. Multilingualism, Multicultural education, AI in education, Parents and education, Empirical educational research

As an educator and researcher operating outside the traditional Anglo-American academic centres, I have always been passionate about voices from the Global South getting a rightful place in the conversation, the reason for choosing OCRPL as my doctoral home in 2018. That is why contributing to *Family, School and Community in the Pluriverse of Current Education* felt so meaningful. This book is a bold and necessary answer to the call for a truly decentralised knowledge production, bringing together grounded research from the margins of Europe to the heart of Africa and Latin America. It does not just talk about the ‘pluriverse’; it *becomes* it.

My connection to this volume is both academic and personal. As a contributor from Colombia, I helped shape its core conceptual framework, including suggesting the ‘pluriverse’ title. This represents more than jargon; it signifies a paradigm shift from Western pedagogy’s universalising tendencies toward celebrating contextually situated knowledge. This aligns with my view of multilingualism not as a problem but as a divine gift—initiated at Babel in contrast to imperial efforts from Nebrija’s 1492 standardisation of Castilian to today’s English hegemony (Chapter 8).

The book is structured around two complementary sections that fulfil the primary editor Lavinia Nădrag’s vision: to ground research in practical application. Part 1, ‘Teaching & Learning in a Multilingual and Multicultural World’, explores pedagogical approaches for diverse, real-world classrooms. Part 2, ‘Social Issues concerning Education’, examines how broader societal challenges intersect with educational practice and policy. Both sections move from theory and original studies to generate good practices and recommendations. The editors have woven together a tapestry of

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researchers from three continents who share their insights and lived experiences towards this practical end.

The themes explored are as vast as they are relevant. The book's journey spans from examining teachers' personality traits in Romania (Chapter 1) and reflective practices in higher education (Chapter 2), to the sophisticated integration of artificial intelligence (Chapters 3 and 12). The AI discussion is particularly timely, addressing how 'students should become AI literate' while maintaining a 'balance between technology and traditional methods'. The research demonstrates how AI can enhance educational resilience, helping students 'understand different materials at school' while requiring careful implementation to avoid 'wrong or fragmentary content'.

The theme of parenting is explored in three chapters. Chapter 7 grounds character education in the communal wisdom of Ubuntu philosophy, emphasising the crucial role of parents. Chapter 9 analyses how parenting styles directly manifest in classroom behaviour and management strategies, advocating for sustained communication between parents and educators. Meanwhile, Chapter 10 gets practical, exploring the modern challenges of digital parenting in managing screen time and bridging digital literacy gaps and their direct implications for academic success.

The research spans an impressive global landscape, from Romania's educational contexts and South Africa's post-Apartheid educational reality to Nigeria's linguistic diversity challenges. Asian perspectives emerge through India's multilingual frameworks and China's minority language policies, while Latin American contributions include Brazil's cultural diversity initiatives and Mexico's Indigenous language programmes. The volume's reach extends to North American policies, European multilingual frameworks, and Oceania's innovative approaches like New Zealand's Māori-medium education.

A chapter that stands out for its profound empathy and innovative approach is Chapter 13, 'Navigating Identity and Inclusion: Educational and Faith-Based Perspectives on Multiracial Families'. This chapter is especially close to my heart, as it discusses the delicate process of identity formation and cultural tension for mixed-race and multilingual children. This is a journey I have navigated personally. What makes this chapter so unique is its robust theological foundation, drawing on Christian teachings like Galatians 3:28, which proclaims equality for all regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. It demonstrates how theology can complement psychological and educational theories, showing that faith is not an add-on to education but can be a core part of supporting some of our most vulnerable students and families.

While the volume successfully demonstrates pluriversal scholarship in practice, readers might wish for more explicit dialogue between the diverse theoretical frameworks presented across chapters. As each chapter is so different from the other, I can find it overwhelming and must only focus on one at a time. Nevertheless, the

theological thread woven throughout this secular academic work proves deeply compelling (Chapters 7, 8, and 13).

For Christian educators 'in all corners of the world', this volume is nothing short of a gift. It provides a robust, scholarly alternative to the limited choices we often feel we have between secular multiculturalism and reactionary Christian fundamentalism. It demonstrates, with empirical data and theological depth, that celebrating linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity is not a theological compromise but a faithful response to the God who initiated diversity at Babel and encapsulated it in Galatians 3:28.

This makes the book an essential resource for:

- Christian parents seeking to understand their role in a complex educational landscape and navigate digital challenges
- Students studying education who are preparing to serve in multilingual classrooms
- Christian schools seeking biblical frameworks for teaching in multilingual contexts and navigating the relationship between education and AI
- Mission organisations thoughtfully rethinking their educational approaches in diverse cultural contexts
- Theological educators integrating decolonial perspectives with historical Christianity
- Church leaders developing educational ministries that reflect divine diversity
- Community leaders seeking practical strategies to bridge the parent-school divide

Family, School and Community in the Pluriverse of Current Education transformed my own perspective. It is more than an academic volume; it can be read as a testament to vibrant, authentic Christian witness that has the potential to show the world a faith that joyfully celebrates the rich diversity God created, rather than one that fears or suppresses it. Aleksandra Matulewska, in the foreword, expresses succinctly, "Education in the pluriverse is not about conformity; it is about embracing difference, navigating complexity, and working together toward equity, inclusion, and human flourishing."

To cite (Harvard):

Review by Renee Rheinbolt-Urbe. (2025) 'Family, School and Community in the Pluriverse of Current Education', Review of Eds. Lavinia Nădrag, Fazel Ebriham Freeks Tudor-Cosmin Ciocan, Alina Gălbează (Buzarna-Tihenea) (Editura Universitară 2025) open access 278pp'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 105-108.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



BOOK REVIEW

Justice and Rights: Nicholas Wolterstorff in Dialogue with the University

By Terence C. Halliday and K. K. Yeo (eds), Langham Global Library, Cumbria. EBook.
Basilius M. Kasera¹

Keywords: justice, rights, theology, university

This is an astounding work. Nicholas Wolterstorff's Theological Brief (NWTB) leaves no stone unturned to apply the notion of justice to every aspect of academic discipline. It is an ambitious and humble take but bold and commendable. The dialogue amplifies the nature and challenge of doing theology in the 21st century. In his quest for justice, he risks engaging Christian scholars from different disciplines to join in risking to think in daring ways about their professions. In this groundbreaking work, Wolterstorff is extending the reach and imagination of justice. What is particularly innovative is how he makes himself vulnerable to critique. His goal of this Theology Brief 'is to bring to light the roles of justice for the academy and the importance of being alert to that role' (p. 10). This review is to highlight discussions emanating from this goal; however, I will not address all his interlocutors. To make it manageable, I only address the key ideas to give the reader a foretaste of the book. This choice is for practical reasons and not a dismissal of brief commentators.

Wolterstorff uses the theoretical framework of rights as the basis for justice. He argues that since the Bible does not provide a theory of justice, Christians may need to borrow from philosophy and the UN Charter. He is also not blind to the reality of the limitation of the concept of rights language in understanding justice. From the look of it, Wolterstorff's awareness of his own limitation could be the reason he invites various interlocutors. His essay, Justice and Right, in as much as it is an argument for a specific view, is also an invitation to engage him and a humble admission of his own potential blindness. Wolterstorff's invitation of others to the dialogue is not so he may change

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his position; he presents it with deep conviction and admissive humility. Thus, he is not saying to his interlocutors, 'this is my view, change my mind'. Instead, he seems to be saying, 'this is my understanding of justice from my own reading of Scripture, external sources and socio-political conventions. I do not say that it is the only way of understanding what justice is. Therefore I am willing to engage you to help me see beyond my own perspectives. In so doing I get to learn from you, and you learn from me, and together forge a vision for Christian participation in academia.'

What is of particular interest is how the NWTB provokes major fields of academia (and beyond) to realise their duties and obligations. This is not an easy feat. However, Wolterstorff risks seeking to engage the various fields. He interrogates, through his interlocutors from diverse disciplines, a global interdisciplinary conversation of how justice and rights intersect with their academic work and issues that concern society. What makes it particularly challenging is his proposal of a theistic grounding for human rights. This proposal, while it is Wolterstorff's common practice, places Christian dialogue in academia in a whole new light.

I do not intend to summarise each chapter. The Preface gives a helpful overview of the different parts. The outline of the book gives a logical structure: 1) clarifies theological foundations of justice (pp. 9-14, 35-38); 2) distinguishes between first order and second order justice (pp. 3-5, 9-17); 3) interlinks justice with love (pp. 11-14, 52-54); 4) encourages scholars to reflect on justice in their various disciplines (all of Part III); and 5) courageously fosters a global but interdisciplinary Christian scholarship involving over 170 scholars.

The book is a remarkable conversation starter. Considering the courage, rigour and global spread, it is a provocative and daring piece of work. As such, it makes it difficult to critique. What I will refer to as potential areas of improvement, therefore, is not a critique. I am fully aware that it is not possible to cover every range of issues in the world, and sometimes conflicting visions of justice.

Firstly, while Wolterstorff and Martha Nussbaum differ on matters of theology, it would have been interesting to see how he responds to her notion of love in justice. Although the Christian concept of love is theological and emanates from God, perhaps Nussbaum has been pointing philosophical discourse into a less explored direction in the studies of justice. Secondly, in regard to African or global south post-colonial studies in relation to justice, I think of my own context of dealing with post-apartheid and post-German colonial atrocities. Thirdly, I am curious to know what first order justice should look like in academic interaction between powerful academic institutions of the Global North in relation to those in the Global South. Fourthly, this

is a brief dialogue. The conversation could be expanded to unpack this daring route that Wolterstorff has paved. It has not only placed cross disciplinary conversation on another level, but it also demonstrates what public theology should look like in practice.

I think the goal of Wolterstorff's quest has been met. The conversation has taken place, and Christian academics are challenged to rethink their role in academia. The book is written in a simple language; it really reads like a conversation of enquiry. What stands out is its honest theological quest and grappling with the subject of justice. For everyone reading this, especially if you are a Christian academic, it leaves us all with a practical challenge. The challenge comes from his postscript, and in form of a question: How does justice relate to your research, teaching and institutional life?

To cite (Harvard):

B. M. Kasera. (2025) 'Justice and Rights: Nicholas Wolterstorff in Dialogue with the University, By Terence C. Halliday and K. K. Yeo (eds), Langham Global Library, Cumbria. EBook'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 109-112.

Disclosure Statements

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The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.



BOOK REVIEW

Inflation Is About More Than Money

Economics, Politics and the Social Fabric by Brian Griffiths

Norman Russell¹

Keywords: Inflation, Monetarism, Economic Policy, Ethics and Economics, Lord Griffiths, Moral Dimensions of Money

This is a timely book. Inflation is rising again. Post Covid, the proportion of the working age population out of work in the UK and dependent on the state for income has risen by about a million. Government debt continues to rise as it seeks to fund its expenditure, raising questions about sustainability. Inflation is rising and many needing to renew mortgages in the near future are concerned that interest rates may also soon. Added to this, the unpredictable tariff policies of recently elected US President Trump have disrupted global trading, increased economic uncertainties and consequentially a rise in the price of gold as traders are attracted to the metal which has long been seen as a secure store of value.

The invention of the wheel is often seen as being a fundamental technological innovation which facilitated the development of civilisation. So also was the invention of money. If the wheel made it possible for farmers to bring their produce to market, the invention of money facilitated trade in goods and services at markets, transforming the limitations of a barter economy. To work as a means of exchange, coins also had to be seen as a secure store of value. In modern times, bank notes came to be accepted as reliable currency if backed by a convertible link to silver or gold.

In the book, we are offered a useful historical survey. Towards the end of World War 2, faced with the massive tasks of reconstruction, economists led by John Maynard Keynes saw the importance of laying foundations for currency stability. Structures were agreed in 1944 at the Bretton Woods Conference. The dollar was pegged to gold at \$35 per ounce and other currencies including the £ sterling to the dollar, though the dollar's convertible link at a fixed price with gold was subsequently removed by President Nixon. Whilst there were reasons for that, the truth is that today the functioning of all our currencies is totally dependent on confidence. Were inflation to become high and if expectations that it would continue to rise were to become embedded, hyperinflation could easily follow. This in turn could lead to the

¹ The Ven Norman Russell read economics at Cambridge and is former Archdeacon of Berkshire and one-time Chair of the House of Clergy of General Synod.

disintegration of civil society. Griffiths reminds us that inflation in the UK did actually rise to over 27% in 1975.

Two generations ago, most people thought of money as a mixture of notes and coinage in pounds, shillings and pence. There was an additional facility of writing a cheque to draw on what was in a bank account, or sometimes not if there was an agreed overdraft. Today, money is harder to define and many people do not carry cash at all, using debit cards, credit cards or mobile phones, not to mention crypto-currency. There is in fact a spectrum of financial liquidity which leads economists to use slightly different definitions of money for different purposes. Griffiths mentions this, but does not expand on it.

It is however the context in which Professor Griffiths has written his timely book. Now honoured with a peerage, Lord Griffiths of Forestfatch had a background at the London School of Economics before he became Dean of the City University Business School and at one point Head of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Policy Unit. For the whole of his adult and professional life, he has also been a Christian who has thought hard and sought to integrate the moral insights and ethical priorities of Christ and the Bible with his professional rigour as an economist in shaping policy.

Economics is not an exact science and there are well known professional differences of understanding between Monetarists and New Keynesians. It is worth mentioning that Professor Griffiths is a Monetarist in the tradition of Milton Friedman and maybe more particularly Friedrich von Hayek. That is reflected in his focus on the moral issues connected with inflation.

On one level, the book offers a clear explanation of the causes of inflation and a clear explanation of how it can be controlled by adjusting the money supply, including a comprehensible description of how this was done by Quantitative Easing during Covid. He explains how he sees the different but complementary roles of the Treasury and the Bank of England, and also the Office for Budget Responsibility which he thinks should have a higher degree of independence from Government in one area than it has at the moment. In addition, he helpfully offers empirical evidence with data to illustrate what has and has not worked well in the past as evidence of his policy prescriptions.

Although, as I will explain below, this is much more than an economics textbook, it is actually a very good and clearly written economics textbook. It would be invaluable to an undergraduate reading for a degree in economics or banking as well as offering an accessible framework of thought to the general reader wishing to understand the relationship between inflation, money and the Bank of England base rate. Good as this book is, a student of economics would of course also be wise to read a comparable introduction to the issues written from the perspective of the New Keynesians.

Finally, what is distinctive about this book are the reflections of an economist who also draws on the rich heritage of Biblical and Christian thinking about economics. He is not

the first to do so. Adam Smith, Edmund Burke and the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in their different ways are among those who have been aware that there is a societal and moral dimension to good economic policy. Griffiths' passion about this is clear from both the title and the subtitle of the book.

He lists a number of socially undesirable consequences of inflation. When there is uncertainty about the future level of inflation, canny investors may be more likely to defer investment in productive industry or business and look to gold, objects d'art, or property as a safe hedge against inflation. The last of these clearly distorts the housing market and effectively increases the number of empty properties when there is a shortage of housing.

Griffiths sums up his concerns in these words, "Inflation imposes a real cost on the economy in terms of reduced output, inefficient allocation of capital and labour, higher unemployment and investment in hedges against inflation". He then adds "All the evidence points to the lowest-income families having suffered most from the current inflation." This brings him to the passion which is at the heart of this book. "Inflation has a moral and ethical dimension that is easily glossed over".

There follows some interesting comments on Keynes: "When he wrote on the subject of inflation, he pointed out not just the significant economic and social costs of inflation, but also its ethical and moral character. He described it as an 'arbitrary confiscation' by governments of their citizens' wealth and an 'injustice' to those who had saved..... Keynes invoked the words of Lenin, whom he claimed had said 'the best way to destroy the capitalist system was to debauch the currency'. Keynes endorsed this view (and) asked the question 'What moral from our present purpose should we draw from this?' His answer 'We must make it a prime object of deliberate state policy that the standard of value, in terms of which they are expressed, should be kept stable.'"

There is more in this vein, seeing inflation as a form of taxation without Parliamentary mandate (Keynes again), summed up with the words "Inflation is more than an economic issue. It has a moral and ethical dimension. It is at heart a form of deceit." There follows a chapter on the consequences of inflation – "A culture of distrust" which fuels blame culture in society, profiteering, speculation, strikes and general industrial unrest. In a worst case scenario, when inflation moves towards hyperinflation a serious breakdown in civil society and its institutions becomes a serious possibility.

It will be for the reader and students of economics to judge whether the monetarist economic policies advocated by Lord Griffiths will be enough to ensure stability by keeping inflation under control. There is however one further factor which is addressed by him in the last chapter and conclusion.

Between the end of the Napoleonic wars and 1914 the value of our currency was remarkably stable with generally balanced budgets. In a section titled *Contemporary*

Culture and Economic Life, Griffiths quotes the distinguished historian GH Trevelyan “who argued that the foundation of the period’s success was not just economic, but related to cultural factors. ‘If any unity is to be ascribed to the Victorian era in England it must be found in two governing conditions: first, there was no great war and no fear of catastrophe from without; and secondly, the whole period was marked by interest in religious questions and was deeply influenced by seriousness of thought and self-discipline of character, an outcome of the Puritan ethos.’” More recently the contemporary historian Tom Holland has made very similar points and it is clear that Lord Griffiths takes a similar view. He puts it this way:

“Culture and economics are not unrelated subjects. Economic trends and events are influenced by the culture in which economic life takes place. It establishes a moral code of right and wrong. It provides respect for the law and prudence in economic life, especially in relation to debt, whether that is the debt of households, corporations or government. It provides purpose in work, recognises the value of deferred gratification and is a counter force to self-interest, competition and individualism. It sets as an objective the attainment of the common good, not simply the amalgam of private interests. A robust sacred canopy is helpful in preventing excess spending leading to inflation by recognizing the importance of boundaries.”

This sums up the passion which drives this excellent book and I commend it warmly.

To cite (Harvard):

Norman R. (2025) 'Inflation Is About More Than Money, Economics, Politics and the Social Fabric by Brian Griffiths'. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(2), 113-117.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

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This research received no specific funding.