

Volume 3, Issue 1 (May 2026)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion

and Public Life





RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Let Us Return”: Enacting Transforming Mutuality Through Duoethnography

Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe ¹

Abstract: In the aftermath of institutional collapse within transnational religious networks, how do former leaders and congregants navigate the complexities of shared trauma? This article frames research not merely as data collection, but as a missiological act of return. Grounded in the biblical mandate of Acts 15:36—“Let us return and visit the brethren”—and the missiological vision of “second missionary journeys,” the study traces a shift that is both methodological and relational. Originally designed to analyse a Colombian congregation’s post-2003 transition to autonomy through Roland Allen’s “three-selves” framework, the research trajectory changed during a series of six talking circles with study participants, a married couple). The initial narrative of institutional success gave way to a more unsettled and candid dialogue about pre-crisis relational dynamics and researcher complicity. In this space, duoethnography emerged not as a preselected method, but as the lived expression of a relationship in which safety made possible critical intimacy. Drawing on Ivan Illich’s ‘She/It’ distinction, the foregoing analysis argues that research itself can cultivate *transforming mutuality*, turning the scholarly process into a site of relational repair and decolonial knowledge production. References to trauma are used descriptively rather than diagnostically, naming relational and institutional harm as narrated and processed over time rather than assessed in clinical terms.

KEYWORDS: transforming mutuality, duoethnography, decolonial methodology, resilient spirituality, religious institutional crisis.

Introduction

1.1 The theological logic of return

“And after some days Paul said unto Barnabas, let us return now and visit the brethren in every city wherein we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they fare” (Acts 15:36 ASV).

This biblical invitation marks a pivotal shift in mission strategy. The context of this return was itself amid crisis—the theological controversy described in Acts 15:1-29

¹ Dr. Renee Rheinbolt-Uribe, is an independent researcher and Research Fellow at Stellenbosch University. She completed her Ph.D. through the OCRPL partnership with Stellenbosch University. Based in Bogotá, Colombia, she and her husband engage in mission work across North and South America.

regarding Gentile inclusion, which had led to the Jerusalem Council. It is not a call to conquer unfamiliar territory, nor to impose new structures, but a call to *return*. In his theological proposal on “second missionary journeys,” my husband Flavio Uribe (2006) argues that this return is distinct from the initial planting of churches. It requires a different posture: mature Christians returning not to lead or control, but to “become part of the congregations,” helping local leadership mature from within and embody a presence that strengthens the brethren rather than managing the institution.

The pattern of crisis demanding transformative response that emerges in Acts 15 reflects what David Bosch identified as central to missiology itself. Bosch frames his body of work—spanning from *True Mutuality* (1978), *Mission to the World* (1980), *Transforming Mission* (1991a), 'Re-evangelisation' (1991b), *The Vulnerability of Mission* (1991c), through to *Believing in The Future* (1995)—around the theme of crisis and even collapse. In *Transforming Mission*, Bosch (1991a:1-4) introduces his whole argument with these subsections: (i) 'Mission: The contemporary crisis'; (ii) 'Between danger and opportunity and the wider crisis'; and then (iii) 'Where the early church failed'- Bosch (1991a:50-52). Bosch's foundational body of work demonstrates that crisis has been a constant throughout church history, making the transforming mutuality advocated in the present study particularly relevant for understanding both the Acts 15 crisis and contemporary institutional challenges.

The following posits that qualitative research, when conducted in the aftermath of a religious institutional crisis, can and should embody the theology of return. It recounts a research journey that began with an academic inquiry into institutional structure but developed into a relational practice of “seeing how they are doing.” Such approach aligns with Stackhouse’s (cited by Bosch, 1991a:531) call for *poiesis*: “We also need the dimension of *poiesis*, which he defines as the ‘imaginative creation or representation of evocative images. People do not only need truth (theory) and justice (praxis); they also need beauty, the rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe, and mystery.’” Enacting transforming mutuality thus brings praxis and theory together to foster the beauty found in the renewed capacity for relationship amid institutional failure.²

² The present study is a significantly expanded and refocused version of the analysis and findings originally presented in Chapter 6 (Part 1) of R. Rheinbolt-Urbe (2023), *Transforming mutuality in a theology of mission: A missiological evaluation of a Colombian congregation case study*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University: South Africa.

1.2 The context: Institutional collapse and the "three-selves"

The context for the return was the Iglesia ICI-Colombia (ICO-CO), established in 1992 by the International Church of Christ (ICOC). As a USA-funded transnational Religious Branded Organisation (RBO), ICOC exemplified the “managerial missiology” (Escobar, 2002 characteristic of late 20th-century megachurch movements. The model integrated a rapid, global disciple-making mission with corporate management strategies, centralised branding, and a high-control “one-on-one discipling” system.³ U.S.-based financial and doctrinal authority further reinforced this model, driving its worldwide expansion during the 1980s and 1990s.⁴

In 2003, while serving as mission practitioners in Argentina, the RBO fractured due to leadership crises and financial instability. The resulting rupture severed the managerial connection to the centre, thrusting the Bogotá congregation into turmoil. Key Colombian leaders were dismissed, resulting in a significant crisis of authority. Amid such disorder, local grassroots leaders, already part of the congregation, began to step forward to assume responsibility for its direction.⁵

Fast forward to 2018, I began my doctoral research with OCRPL and Stellenbosch University. My analytical lens was Roland Allen’s classic “three-selves” concept: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches.⁶ From an external perspective, ICI-CO’s post-crisis trajectory was a textbook success story of Allen’s theory. Seeking to reduce USA funding and oversight, the congregation had successfully pivoted to self-governance, achieved financial independence, and continued to propagate the faith. The original research design sought to document the transition to autonomy, framing the 2003 collapse as the catalyst for a triumphant maturation.

³ See Chapter 3 of Rheinbolt-Urbe (2023). The ICOC has been the subject of criticism regarding authoritarian practices. In 2003, the denomination publicly acknowledged problematic aspects of its structure, doctrine, practices, and approach. This admission prompted substantial organizational reforms, including decentralization, as outlined in the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Olsen, Atwood, Mead & Hill, 2018).

⁴ While radical transformation within movements is possible, the ICOC’s path diverges significantly from the Worldwide Church of God’s transition to Grace Communion International. Under Joseph Tkach Jr. (1997), that denomination undertook a centralized doctrinal overhaul, explicitly renouncing non-Trinitarianism, Anglo-Israelism, and strict Sabbatarianism in favor of evangelical orthodoxy and salvation by grace. In contrast, the ICOC experienced a systemic fracture rather than a smooth, top-down reformation.

⁵ My study of ICO-CO is built on two insiders’ research, one historical by Castellanos (2011) and the other missiological by Diaz Castro (2014).

⁶ Allen held that mission work should be from its beginnings financially self-funded, self-governing and resulting in self-expansion. This is the “three-selves” concept in a nutshell (Bosch 1991a:378-79). In previous work, Rheinbolt-Urbe (2013) I outline the historical background and the application for ICI-CO.

1.3 The pivot: When the data refused the narrative

However, research—much like mission—often undergoes significant transformation when confronted with real-world complexities. The initial analytical approach evolved during the talking circles with Sara and Manuel, as our conversations transitioned from focusing solely on post-crisis autonomy to engaging in a collective exploration of the pre-crisis 'system' and my involvement within it.

1.4 Thesis: Research as enactment

It was here that duoethnography emerged—not as a method selected *a priori* from a textbook, but as the methodological name for what our relationship had become. Duoethnography creates a dialogic space in which two or more voices explore their shared histories to generate new meaning (Sawyer & Norris, 2012), offering a possible theological and missiological application of “mutual-hospitality” (Heuertz & Pohl, 2010).

The collaborative approach aligns closely with Burleigh and Burm's (2022: n.p.) rationale for applying duoethnography:

Duoethnography is a collaborative research methodology that invites researchers to serve as sites of inquiry. Through juxtaposition, the voices of each researcher are made explicit, working in tandem to untangle and disrupt meanings about a particular social phenomenon. We gravitate to duoethnography for its evocative power and the opportunity this methodology provides to engage in meaningful self-study in the presence of another.

As a decolonial approach (Campbell-Chudoba, 2024), the assumption is that, in the context of spiritual trauma (Oakley, Kinmond & Humphreys, 2020), duoethnography does more than generate data; it enacts transformative mutuality. It moves beyond the descriptive task of sociology into the redemptive praxis of theology. By returning to the field with acknowledged complicity, rather than objective distance, the research process itself became a “second missionary journey”—a site where the hierarchy of the past was dismantled, and a new, mutual way of spiritual togetherness was rehearsed

2. Returning

2.1 A praxis of apology and presence

The “return” described in the present study was not a single event, but rather a complex, multifaceted process of confronting the past. In 2003, when the international RBO collapsed, my husband and I were serving a congregation in Argentina. The global crisis was a “trainwreck” of leadership failure and spiritual abuse, leaving congregations struggling to cope.⁷

During the height of the crisis in 2003, my husband traveled from Buenos Aires to Bogotá on three occasions. He confronted the challenges directly, addressing the congregation to seek forgiveness for our involvement in the systemic practices that had inflicted harm. He enacted the biblical mandate of return both promptly and in person.

For me, the experience of returning was distinct. At that time, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the collapse and the responsibilities of caring for our young children; as a result, I did not travel with him. Although we eventually relocated to Colombia in October 2004 to support the congregation, the internal process of “returning” to the site of trauma—and confronting my own involvement—proved far more challenging for me to fully engage. The return brought significant personal and economic changes: my husband accepted an 80% salary reduction, requiring a dramatic shift in our family's lifestyle. For years, I lived in the tension of being a “broken healer,” present with the community while bearing the burden of the past (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:193).

It was only through undertaking this doctoral research, which commenced in 2018, that I was able to fully confront and resolve that history. The research process itself evolved into my personal version of the “third journey”—a delayed yet essential engagement with the profound relational dynamics that had previously been neglected. Although my husband had issued public apologies some years earlier, the

⁷ *Note on terminology:* In the present article, terms such as *harm*, *abuse*, and *trauma* are used descriptively rather than diagnostically. Drawing loosely on Oakley et al.'s (2020) reconceptualization of spiritual and religious abuse as harm arising from the misuse of power, authority, and trust within religious contexts, I employ these terms to describe relational and institutional injury as experienced and narrated by participants. The foregoing study does not seek to define trauma in clinical terms, nor to assess psychological impact, but rather to attend to how institutional collapse and systemic practices were remembered, interpreted, and relationally processed over time.

thesis served as the vehicle for my own appeal for forgiveness. I wrote in my dissertation:

“In 2003 I had an awareness of my complicity, but now... I am more aware than ever. I have repented before God... and hope that if there is anyone who continues to be held captive by this past, that they find freedom” (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:225).

2.2 From objectivity to vulnerability

The documented personal history meant that I could not enter the field as a neutral observer. I was returning to a congregation where my *“fingerprints were widespread”* (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:225). Adopting a traditional, objective research stance would have been disingenuous, creating a false sense of detachment. Instead, I had to adopt a posture of *vulnerable presence*.

The duoethnographic talking circles with Sara and Manuel were therefore not just data collection events; they were acts of relational repair. They provided a space where the unfinished business of the past could be processed, not by “managing” the narrative, but by listening to how “the system” (as it is commonly termed) had impacted those we led. The context explains why the method shifted from an analysis of Roland Allen’s three-selves to a practice of transforming mutuality: the only way to research this history with integrity was to inhabit it together, with all the pain and safety that required.

2.3 Introducing Sara and Manuel

The duoethnographic core of the present analysis consists of a series of six "talking circles" with a married couple, whom I refer to by the pseudonyms Sara and Manuel. To understand the texture of our dialogue, it is essential to know their roles in this shared history.

During the 2003 institutional collapse, Sara and Manuel were young university students in the Bogotá congregation. My memory of them from that period is faint, as the crisis unfolded while I was in Argentina. Manuel, however, was at the epicentre. He had served a summer internship and held other leadership responsibilities within "the system," granting him an insider's view of its operational mechanisms, and he was physically present for the congregation's intense "meltdown" during the crisis. They belonged to a cohort of members whose lives were profoundly shaped—and ruptured—by the previously described structure, yet I had little direct personal

connection with them at the time. For Sara, the rupture was also a family matter; her parents, grandmother, brother, and other relatives were—and for many, still are—part of the same congregational fabric, making the crisis a deeply intergenerational experience.

I truly came to know them only after our family's return to Colombia, when Sara and Manuel were still single. They were deeply committed individuals within the reforming community. Since then, their lives have taken a transnational path. For over a decade, they have lived in Oceania; yet they maintain a profound and active sense of belonging to the Colombian congregation. The geographical distance has made them ideal interlocutors for exploring how relational and spiritual bonds persist beyond institutional structures and physical proximity. Sara described it this way:

“For me, I’m still connected, my parents are part of the church and many of my best friends are still a part of the church. Somehow, I find out what is happening. My parents share with what they’re doing in the Bible talks. So, there is still a connection” (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:174-74).

Since the collapse, Manuel has devoted himself to rigorous biblical, theological, and missiological study. As a grassroots lay intellectual with postgraduate training, he consistently seeks to understand the system in which he previously participated and contributed, the trauma arising from the crisis he directly experienced, and the facets of a resilient spirituality. Sara's commitment is equally deep but expressed differently. Her faith and community ties are woven into her family lineage; her practical, lived spirituality is nurtured within and extends to a network that includes her parents, siblings, and extended family within the congregation. She explains that her approach to Scripture and faith is shaped by the concrete demands of daily life and familial responsibilities, which brings a meaningful sense of groundedness to their shared theological reflection.

Their lived, transnational inquiry into the past and present of their faith community—shaped by Manuel's operational experience, his direct exposure to the collapse, and Sara's embeddedness in the congregation's familial networks—made them not merely participants but essential co-theorists in the research. The ensuing dialogue, therefore, bridges multiple gaps: between myself ("spiritual mother"), who was absent, and them ("spiritual children"), who were present during the rupture; between Colombia and the diaspora; and between institutional history and the evolving process of personal and familial meaning-making.

3. Theoretical and theological framework

3.1 Theological grounding: Theology of return

The impulse to return is theologically grounded in Acts 15:36, as described in the concept of "second missionary journeys." Uribe (2006) articulates the theology that guided our family's return to Colombia. He argues that while the *first missionary journey* concerns planting and establishing, the "second journey" requires a fundamentally different posture. Mature disciples return not to reassert control or "save" the movement, but to "become part of the congregations," helping local leadership mature from within and embodying a presence that strengthens the brethren rather than managing the institution (Uribe, 2006).

This *theology of return* aligns with what Ivan Illich (2018:43-48) calls "missionary silence." Illich emphasises that it takes "much courage" to "return to the patient silence of interest or to the delicacy of the silence within which words grow" (2018:47). He writes, "As long as he [she] sees himself [herself] as a 'missioner'[,] he [she] will know that he [she] is frustrated; that he [she] is sent but got nowhere; that he [she] is away from home but has never landed anywhere; that he [she] left his home and never reached another" (2018:47).

True arrival, then, required abandoning the missionary's stance entirely. It necessitated a shift from mission-as-management (authoritative teaching, administration, and financial control) to mission-as-presence (accompaniment, listening, and relational solidarity). In the context of the research, duoethnography served as the methodological vehicle for this theological approach: it enabled me to return not as a "founder" overseeing an investment, but as a sister "seeing how they are doing" and willing to be transformed by their response.

3.2 Transforming mutuality: Enacting the Jesus–Mary model

Heyward (2016:155) defines *mutuality* as "a relational process in which all persons, or parties are empowered, thereby experiencing themselves as able to survive, affect others creatively, and make a constructive difference in the world around them." Yet mutuality is often assumed to be "ethically and practically...a slippery concept, hard to define in practice, yet essential to right-relations."

Bosch's personal definition (1978:72) of true mutuality is the need for mutual dependence on each other and acceptance of one another, "We become, to one another, open doors in lieu of doors which have remained shut". The duoethnographic

talking circles literally opened doors that institutional hierarchy had kept closed—doors between 'spiritual mother' and 'spiritual children,' between former leader and those led, between researcher and researched.

Bosch's understanding of mutuality was not merely theoretical but deeply personal and embodied. He illustrates this through a powerful example from apartheid-era South Africa (1979:72): a black minister in Johannesburg physically confronted a white man, grabbing him by the collar and shaking him while unleashing years of pent-up fury about white complicity in systemic oppression. Rather than experiencing this as an attack, the white man recognised he was participating in an act of mutuality—the black minister felt safe enough with one of the few white men he truly trusted to express his authentic rage and pain. This moment revealed mutuality not as polite dialogue, but as the capacity to receive difficult truths within relationships strong enough to bear them.

Inspired by Bosch's embodied mutuality, in earlier work (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2024), I conceptualised “transforming mutuality” through the biblical relationship between Jesus and Mary, describing how Mary shifted from resistance to “leaning in,” ultimately accepting a reversal of roles in which the mother learns from the adult child. In foregoing analysis, that theological model is methodologically enacted: as the former leader and “spiritual mother,” I intentionally adopt the position of learner with the participants, thus facilitating the emergence of transforming mutuality. This reversal establishes the foundation for mutuality, which is defined here as a triad comprising (i) a personal journey through liminal spaces; (ii) practical mutual transformation; and (iii) theological recognition of interconnectedness, drawing on David Bosch's text and interviews with his widow, Annemie Bosch (see Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:59-60).

3.3 The Illichian distinction: ‘It’ and ‘She’

To interpret the data, I employ Ivan Illich's distinction between the Church as ‘It’ and the Church as ‘She’ (Illich, 1970; Uribe, 2024).

- The ‘It’ is the institutional machinery—the “system” of control, finances, and hierarchy that collapsed in 2003.
- The ‘She’ is the mystery of the lived faith—the relational “glue” that held the community together when the ‘It’ fell apart.

Duoethnography enables a differentiation between these two aspects without creating a division. By fostering a secure environment to critically engage with the ‘It’

(the system in which I was complicit), we were able to recognise and celebrate the 'She' (the resilient spirituality that endured). Such a distinction ensures that the research does not devolve into a mere examination of a failed institution; rather, it serves as a testament to the enduring community that continues to exist even amid crises.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study design: Emergent duoethnography

The present study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design, with duoethnography serving as the primary approach through six virtual talking circles. Although the broader dissertation research involved 12 participants in 24 interviews to examine the overall trajectory of the congregation, the article centres specifically on the series of conversations with Sara and Manuel.

The decision to focus on this particular married couple was informed by both pragmatic and methodological considerations. Pragmatically, their residence in Oceania and ongoing affiliation with the Colombian congregation rendered them well-suited for examining how relational networks endure beyond institutional frameworks and geographical boundaries. From a methodological standpoint, duoethnography prioritises depth rather than breadth; the sustained engagement across six sessions fostered the trust required to cultivate transformative mutuality. The triadic arrangement—researcher, husband, and wife—produced a “triangulated duoethnography,” enabling the simultaneous unfolding of multiple relational dynamics: those between researcher and husband, researcher and wife, as well as the couple’s internal dialogue observed by the researcher.

4.2 Participants and context

As previously discussed, Manuel and Sara were chosen due to their longstanding association with the pre-2003 RBO structure and their ongoing involvement with the post-crisis ICI-CO community. Although they have resided outside Colombia for more than ten years, their deep connections to the congregation persist, representing the “community-at-large” as opposed to a community defined by geographical boundaries.

The decision to adopt a duoethnographic approach stemmed from the participants’ intellectual agency. Throughout the broader study, several participants continued to grapple with the question, “what happened?” regarding the 2003 crisis, utilising

insights from biblical studies, psychology, sociology, history, and organisational theory to interpret the collapse. They readily shared these evolving perspectives with me. The talking circles with Sara and Manuel served as a focused space where multidisciplinary, insider reflections were articulated and expanded in dialogue with my efforts to comprehend both my own involvement and the systemic dynamics at play.

4.3 Procedure: The talking circle

The sessions utilised a “talking circle” format, drawing from Indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa, 2020; Wilson, 2008) to respect collective knowledge production. Held remotely via Zoom between January and May 2021 due to the global pandemic, each meeting spanned 60 to 90 minutes. In contrast to standard semi-structured interviews, these circles fostered dialogue and reciprocity. A consistent rhythm was established through an opening or closing prayer, a personal check-in, and thematic exploration that responded to both participants’ contributions and the researcher’s guidance. The present approach cultivated a spiritual and relational environment capable of supporting the complex institutional trauma under discussion.

4.4 Data analysis

Data analysis followed a spontaneous, iterative process rather than a rigid coding scheme, aligning with the emergent nature of duoethnography.

Phase 1: Simmering (January–November 2021). The initial phase of data analysis involved a sustained period of what Mason (2018:45, 206) describes as a holistic or ecological engagement with the data—an approach that moves beyond linear coding to incorporate imaginative, intuitive, and affective forms of reasoning. I refer to this phase as simmering: a *sentipensante* (thinking–feeling) mode of mental pre-analysis (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:37) in which interview transcripts, field notes, and contextual memories were revisited repeatedly without imposing predetermined analytic categories. Rather than generating immediate themes, the process allowed patterns, tensions, and resonances to surface gradually through prolonged immersion in the material, aligning with Polanyi’s notion of *tacit knowing* (Smith, 2012:171).⁸

⁸ The understanding of “dwelling” in the data is drawn from Smith’s interpretation of Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowing (2012:171), in which understanding emerges through sustained immersion rather than immediate analytical extraction. As a heuristic, I liken this analytic posture to simmering or cooking on a low flame: ingredients are combined and allowed to interact over time, enabling distinct flavors to emerge through attentiveness and delay rather than forced acceleration. I use Smith’s reading of Polanyi as a methodological guide for this initial phase of analysis.

Phase 2: Reflexive correspondence. The phase of analysis was dialogic, extending beyond the talking circles into email exchanges that became a key source of data for understanding the relational and emotional texture of the research process. Drawing on Stamper's (2020) discussion of letter writing as a method in qualitative research, these correspondences functioned not only as communication but also as an analytic practice in their own right. In an email to Sara and Manuel (personal communication, 23 October, 2021), written during the simmering phase, I reflected on the challenge of carrying the weight of their testimonies:

"I feel distance from what they say about everything that happened before, during and after the 'crisis' but it is strong to live with this information. But I'm already at a point in my life that I'm ready... I still feel like I am participating in a miracle. That we can still talk about what we talk about in the interviews; considering the panorama that you paint of what 'the system' was like... And there's still a part that Participant 114 tells me, 'I feel safe to tell you these things'" (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:162).

Manuel's email response (personal communication, 24 October, 2021) validated the core dynamic, explicitly naming the "miracle" of safe critique:

"I appreciate the opportunity to be part of this process... And what you describe of being able to say such strong things against a system and at the same time being able to have intimate relationships within the group... is nothing short of a miracle" (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:162-63).

The exchange documented simultaneous safety and critical intimacy that defined the duoethnographic space and shaped the thematic analysis.

Phase 3: Content analysis (December 2021). To consolidate and triangulate the qualitative insights generated in earlier phases, I employed a hybrid analytic approach that combined content analysis (Neuendorf, 2019; Humble & Mozelius, 2022) with reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Using Speakai.co,⁹ I conducted a systematic keyword count across the interview transcripts.

Phase 4: Mason's data poems (February 2022). I applied Mason's (2018) method of poetic inquiry to condense lengthy transcripts into data poems. The process functioned as a form of deep listening and pattern recognition, distilling participants' core themes into an evocative, participant-centered form. For example, to capture

⁹ Speakai.co is a data analysis tool.

Manuel's reflective disposition and his focus on "*the essence of things*," I crafted the following poem from his dialogue (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:177):

Poem 4: Essence of Things *While not shying away from Bigger questions, bigger trajectories, And the bigger, long-term dynamics. Dynamics of what? in Bible and history. What does it mean to be people of God's land or a Christian today? It comes back to those questions, and those definitions. While it gives a deeper meaning, if you look at and unpack the cultural context. Keeping in view: Big trends Big movements in Biblical history and History of Christians.*

I created a collection of these data poems and initially shared them with Manuel and Sara, as well as with all participants, as a powerful form of dialogic member checking. In June 2022, I also produced a creative output—a multivocal poetic narrative—which I shared with all participants and the gatekeepers of ICI-CO. Such a practice invited further reflection and affirmed participants' experiences in their own conceptual and linguistic cadence.

Phase 5: Member checking. (February–June 2022). Participants reviewed their transcripts and my preliminary interpretations. Their feedback—including explicit affirmations of the research's value in helping prevent future harm—reinforced the study's communal purpose.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The study received ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University. Beyond standard institutional protocols, three ethical dimensions were paramount in the duoethnographic work:

- i). **Researcher complicity:** My position as an insider/outsider and a former leader required explicit acknowledgment in the university paperwork. As shown in Section 5.2, I openly admitted this complicity, validating the participants' critiques of the system I had helped build. This transparency became a cornerstone of the "safety" Manuel later identified.
- ii). **Emotional safety:** To mitigate the risk of retraumatization, participants were encouraged to use prayer and were given the freedom to pause, stop, or withdraw at any point. The research space was explicitly framed as one of care: free therapy sessions were offered within the interview agreement and reiterated at the start of each talking-circle series.

- iii). Confidentiality: Given the close-knit nature of the transnational community, the presentation of data balances transparency with the protection of identities. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and specific biographical markers are omitted where necessary.

My positionality as an insider/outsider—a Latin American researcher, mother, former authority figure, and currently marginal member—was not bracketed off but intentionally mobilised to cultivate the relational safety necessary for deep inquiry. This deliberate stance created space for what Manuel, in a pivotal email exchange, would later describe as a “miracle.”

The interaction explicitly names the core of the duoethnographic encounter: the simultaneous presence of safety and critical intimacy that became the defining condition for the findings that emerged. Three co-constructed themes arose from such a dialogic space, as detailed in the following section.

5. Findings

Three co-constructed themes emerged from the duoethnographic dialogue: (1) active prayer as resilient spirituality; (2) “the system” as the pre-crisis congregation; and (3) friendship as sustaining togetherness. These findings reflect not only the content of the conversations, but also the relational process through which they were generated.

5.1 Theme 1: Active prayer as resilient spirituality

The significance of prayer emerged as a primary site of theological processing and mutual care—a “double-blind” discovery, as neither the participants nor I initially treated these moments as formal data. Only through later reflection did the prayers offered at the beginning and end of each session reveal themselves as embodied acts of resilience that often-inverted traditional roles. This dynamic was evident from the very first talking circle, when Sara opened our dialogue with a prayer that set the relational and spiritual tone for the entire process:

“Dear Father God, thank you for this time that we can come together and remember our work with you. Sometimes it’s easy to forget how much we have worked in our lives to keep us faithful and to be as close to you. Thank you for this time. Please guide Renee in all her research and studies and please keep us close to you, Father God. Thank you for using Jesus. In His name I pray. Amen” (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:320).

The prayer immediately enacted a form of transformative mutuality. Sara, a congregant, assumed a position of spiritual authority by interceding for me—the former leader and researcher. She situated our academic inquiry (“*guide Renee in her research*”) within the sacred frame of shared faithfulness (“*our work with you*”). The prayer acknowledged a history of collective effort (“*how much we have worked*”) while reaffirming a present and future longing for closeness to God. In doing so, it established the talking circle itself as a spiritual space for remembering, reconnection, and repair. The pattern continued throughout the sessions, most notably in Manuel’s later prayer during the third talking circle, offered as a plea for healing after a discussion of institutional harm:

“Thank you God for the opportunity to be together this morning or afternoon... Thank you for Renee and the opportunity for me to be part of this research. Please be with us... Just talking about people and talking about people that might have been hurt or might have bitter feelings against other people, please help everyone heal. Please help everyone become closer to you over time” (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:341).

The prayer enacted the reversal of roles that became central to transformative mutuality: the former “spiritual child” interceding for the healing of the former leader and the wider community. It framed the research itself as a spiritual practice (“*Thank you for this study*”), dissolving the boundary between academic inquiry and faith. Across the sessions, these prayers consistently expressed a resilient spirituality—one that named pain and “bitter feelings” while persistently orienting toward healing and renewed connection with God. The observed resilience was not an individual accomplishment but a communal practice, sustained even after the institutional structures that once contained it had collapsed.

5.2 Theme 2: “The system”

As is common practice, Manuel and Sara consistently referred to “*the system*” as a central category for analysing the institutional context prior to 2003. The term encompassed a triad of control mechanisms that consolidated authority within U.S. leadership. Their characterisations were incisive and multifaceted:

“Results oriented” – THE SYSTEM – “baptize a lot so that it looks good” High boundaries in THE SYSTEM Unspoken ‘texts’ in THE SYSTEM “whether it was verbalized or not, it was the case” Creating favouritism within THE SYSTEM Leadership in THE SYSTEM Dating within THE SYSTEM Control with THE SYSTEM Dependence in THE SYSTEM

Campus ministry as a strategy in THE SYSTEM Cultish practices in THE SYSTEM (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:169).

Manuel extended his analysis, connecting the system's logic to the elitist social stratifications of Bogotá: *"In a sense you create a pool of influential people that have reach to other people... System can mean method or organization"* (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:174). The previously mentioned quantitative pattern corroborated the qualitative finding that financial control was central to the system's dysfunction, a point highlighted by one participant's observation that "money ran the system" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:199-206).¹⁰

The process of deconstructing the "It" both demanded and revealed the core conditions of our duoethnographic space. The relational safety between us—explicitly named as a "miracle"—made possible a level of frankness that would have been unlikely in a conventional interview setting. Yet this safety was not simply a passive backdrop; it was continually tested and negotiated through my own visceral responses to their candid reflections. Assimilating these insights was a personal struggle, as the following journal entry attests.

"Most of the time he referred to cultish practices but then stated that bottom-line he believed it was a cult. And I asked him something along the lines of, 'then Flavio and I you would consider at that time "cult leaders" under your description' and he said 'yes.' I was in a type of shock at that time and did not react at that moment but later it hit me. Soon after, I shared this moment with Prof. Simon, my Stellenbosch supervisor and cried some tears. I also wrote to Manuel and Sara to let them know that it had been a bit of a shock but at the same time thankful for their perspective, as I wanted to keep an authentic relationship with them through this process" (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:169).

Naming the *"white elephant in the room"*—my pre-crisis role—did not introduce new information, but acknowledging it felt jarring at the time. Doing so was a deliberate enactment of mutuality. By leaning into vulnerability rather than retreating, I affirmed the primacy of the relationship. As participants expressed feeling safe with me, I also came to feel safe with them—a reciprocity that proved essential to the healing and inner transformation that unfolded within me.

¹⁰ Allen (1962), Bosch (1978), and Bonk (2006), among others, reflect on the forementioned reality in much of their missionary endeavors.

5.3 Theme 3: Friendship and belonging

Despite living in Oceania for over a decade, Sara and Manuel maintained a profound sense of belonging to ICI-CO. The feeling of belonging was sustained not through institutional membership rolls or formal obligations, but through enduring friendships and family ties.

Manuel explained his continued commitment: *“We’re going to sin against each other... it’s a group of people... we just have to hang in there and see where this heads... keep going and help the congregation heal”* (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:176). The statement reflects a theology of grace and persistence—a “glue” of togetherness that survived the institutional trainwreck. Sara added that relationships formed in the congregation *“were very formative for me and remain a very important component of my life”* (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:176).

Critically, many of the post-crisis spaces for connection—informal gatherings in people’s rooms *“around the table”*—were *“not created with funds provided from ICI-CO or from the USA”* (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:241). The community’s relational resilience thus proved to be independent of the financial structures that had once sought to govern and control it. The duoethnographic talking circles themselves became an enactment of transnational belonging, bridging time zones and shared histories through the simple, unfunded commitment to be together.

6. Discussion

6.1 Enacting transforming mutuality

These findings validate transforming mutuality not merely as a theological concept, but as a methodological reality. The Jesus–Mary model—moving from resistance to *“leaning in”*—was enacted through the shift from my former role as authority to that of a vulnerable learner. Manuel’s prayer for healing, along with the couple’s ability to offer sharp institutional critique, demonstrates that power dynamics were not only examined but fundamentally transformed.

The intrinsic connection between safety and mutuality constitutes the study’s central insight. *“I feel safe to tell you these things”* is not merely a statement of comfort, but of capacity. Safety functioned as the relational infrastructure that enabled the heavy burden of institutional trauma to be processed without relational collapse. It allowed us to disentangle the “It” of the abusive system from the “She” of our shared faith, preserving the latter while critically interrogating the former. The findings affirm

Heyward's (1996) definition of mutuality as empowering survival and creative action—in this case, the creative work of re-narrating our shared history.

6.2 A decolonial, relational methodology

The evidence challenges the assumption that rigorous research on religious trauma requires objective distance. Instead, it demonstrates that acknowledged complicity can be a more powerful tool for truth-telling than feigned neutrality. By placing myself within the narrative of the pre-crisis system, I removed the burden on participants to prove the reality of its harm; we were able to begin from the premise of that harm and move toward understanding its mechanics, as well as the forms of survival it produced. The approach offers a distinctively decolonial contribution. It rejects an extractive model in which a Northern researcher mines Global South trauma for data. Instead, it positions grassroots Global South participants as co-theorisers—already asking “what happened?” and drawing on multidisciplinary resources to answer it. In this way, the research process becomes a site of “mutual hospitality” (Rheinbolt-Urbe, 2023:223), creating space for healing that benefits the community, not only the academy.

6.3 Implications for research on institutional crisis

The study demonstrates that researching institutional failure requires methodologies that are themselves relational, reparative, and attentive to power. The findings move beyond documenting financial control to modelling a process for engaging it. The duoethnographic enactment of transforming mutuality offers a template for scholars—particularly those with insider/outsider status—to study collapsed or abusive systems without reproducing extractive dynamics. Future research might apply the relational protocol to other spheres of public life where trust has been broken, asking not only “what went wrong?” but also “how can inquiry itself become a site of critical intimacy and repair?” The finding “*money ran the system*” serves as a crucial reminder that such research must remain materially grounded, attending to how resources circulate through—and distort—relational systems. Yet the study's primary implication is methodological: it offers a way of knowing that heals even as it reveals.

6.4 Limitations and strength

The study's limitations concern emotional cost, scope, and historical distance. First, the core methodology of this study—my return to a site of personal complicity in order to rebuild trust and engage in transforming mutuality—exacted a significant emotional toll. It required sustained vulnerability, the navigation of researcher grief, and continued engagement with the weight of the past, a process for which I sought

therapeutic support. This long-term and costly commitment to relational repair presents a substantial barrier to replication. At the same time, it positions the study as a compelling case example that underscores the often-overlooked emotional labour and necessary self-care required in decolonial, trauma-informed research.

Second, the study focuses on a single couple, Sara and Manuel. This narrow scope limits generalisability in a traditional positivist sense. However, within duoethnography, the aim is analytic depth and resonance rather than statistical breadth. The intensive longitudinal engagement with Sara and Manuel revealed layers of nuance regarding institutional trauma and resilience that a broader survey-based approach would likely have obscured.

Third, the eighteen-year gap between the 2003 collapse and the 2021 dialogues introduces the risk of retrospective reinterpretation and memory distortion. At the same time, this temporal distance created space for maturity, reflection, and the development of critical perspectives that made our dialogue as relative equals possible—mirroring the biblical logic of Paul’s later return to the churches.

A primary strength of this study is that it does not merely theorise mutuality; it becomes an instance of it. The research enacts the theology of return and repair that it describes. Just as Paul's call to "return" emerged from the early church's institutional crises, today's ongoing crises within academic and ecclesial institutions similarly demand the transformative return outlined here.

These tensions between personal cost and methodological gain reveal the study’s central contribution. By integrating the grief associated with return and the rigor of inquiry, duoethnography extends beyond the ‘It’ of institutional analysis to honour the ‘She’ of lived faith. The limitations represent an essential trade-off that strengthens the enactment, transforming the research into an act of faithful presence that makes possible the redemptive potential of a second missionary journey.

7. Conclusion

Duoethnography functions not only as a means of data collection, but also as a decolonial approach for fostering transformative mutuality in the aftermath of institutional crisis. This methodological approach embodies what Bosch understood experientially: that authentic mutuality emerges not through theoretical frameworks alone, but through the vulnerable willingness to receive difficult truths from those we have harmed or led—even when that reception requires enduring discomfort, critique, or the dismantling of previous positions of authority.

Three key findings emerged from this dialogic co-construction: active prayer as a locus of resilient spirituality; “the system” as a critical category for analysing U.S.-based financial and structural control; and friendship as the foundation of belonging that endures beyond institutional confines. These insights were facilitated by the distinctive features of the duoethnographic process: my readiness to confront prior complicity, participants’ empowerment as co-theorisers, and a collective dedication to relational safety and healing.

Theologically, this approach is rooted in the biblical account of Paul’s return in Acts 15:36—a return characterised not by the reestablishment of authority, but by a willingness to share life and gain insight into the well-being of others amid controversy and crisis. It enacts a reversal of roles as conceptualised in the Jesus–Mary relationship, where the former leader adopts the position of learner. This methodology enables researchers to investigate their own communities with integrity, transforming the research process into a context of “mutual-hospitality” in which the ‘She’ of lived faith can be distinguished from, and preserved within, the remnants of the institutional ‘It.’

My return to ICI-CO became a personal account of my own “second missionary journey,” by way of “missionary silence”, culminating in the “miracle” Manuel identified. The ability to sustain intimate relationships while engaging in candid discussions about “the system” represents the ultimate validation of the duoethnographic method. It demonstrates that safety and critique are not opposing forces, but rather complementary elements. Within the transformative mutuality established, our shared history could be expressed, allowing for the collective envisioning of a resilient future. The described process embodied the *poiesis* introduced at the outset—the imaginative creation of a new relational space in the midst of institutional breakdown. As I mentioned in my PhD dissertation, this method may have impacted me even more profoundly than the participants:

“I believe that the research process, and especially the process of the talking circles, led to more profound healing, as I had to confront more deeply my positionality prior to the collapse” (Rheinbolt-Uribe, 2023:270).

Ultimately, duoethnography is not a one-way extraction of data, but the embodied creation of beauty through transforming mutuality—a praxis that weaves scholarly theory, lived experience, and sacred relationship into a transformative way of knowing.

References

- Allen, R. (1962). *Missionary methods: St. Paul's or ours?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Bonk, J. (2006). *Missions and money: Affluence as a Western missionary problem.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Bosch, D. J. (1978). 'Towards true mutuality: Exchanging the same commodities or supplementing each others' needs?' *Missiology: An International Review* 6(3): 283-296.
- Bosch, D. J. (1979). *A spirituality of the road.* Independence, MO: Herald Press.
- Bosch, D. J. (1980). *Witness to the world: The Christian mission in theological perspective.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Bosch, D. J. (1991a). *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Bosch, D. J. (1991b). 'Re-evangelisation: Reflecting on the contributions of J N J Kritzinger and S Mkhathshwa.' *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 76: 122-131.
- Bosch, D. J. (1991c). 'The vulnerability of mission.' Paper presented at the twenty-fifth anniversary of St Andrew's College, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK, 30 November 1991.
- Bosch, D. J. (1995). *Believing in the future: Toward a missiology of western culture.* Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing Publishing.
- Burleigh, D. & Burm, S. (2022). 'Doing duoethnography: addressing essential methodological questions.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21.
- Campbell-Chudoba, R. (2024). 'Decolonizing research methodologies: weaving a third space with métissage and duoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23.
- Castellanos, F. M. (2011). *Historia de la Iglesia de Cristo Internacional en Bogotá: Un estudio de caso.* [Undergraduate thesis]. Cali: Fundación Universitario Seminario Bautista Internacional.

- Chilisa, B. (2020). *Indigenous research methodologies*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2014). 'Thematic analysis.' In Michalos, A. C. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Dordrecht, NL: Springer Netherlands, 6626–6628.
- Diaz Castro, P. A. (2014). *Metodo De Evangelizacion: Soy igual a mi vecino I Iglesia De Cristo Internacional en Bogota-Colombia*. [Master's thesis]. Laurel University Division en Espanol, High Point, NC.
- Escobar, S. (2002). *Changing tides: Latin America and world mission today*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Heuertz, C. L. & Pohl, C. D. (2010). *Friendship at the margins: Discovering mutuality in service and mission*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Heyward, C. (1996). 'Mutuality.' In Isherwood, L. and McEwan, D. (eds.), *An A to Z of feminist theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 155-156.
- Humble, N. & Mozelius, P. (2022). 'Content analysis or thematic analysis: Similarities, differences and applications in qualitative research.' *Proceedings of the 21st European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies* 21(1): 76–81.
- Illich, I. (1970). *Celebration of awareness*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Illich, I. (2018). *The powerless church and other selected writings, 1955–1985*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Mason, J. (2018). *Qualitative researching*. 3rd edn. London: SAGE.
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2019). 'Content analysis and thematic analysis.' In Brough, P. (ed.), *Advanced research methods for applied psychology: design, analysis and reporting*. London, UK/New York, NY: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 211–223.
- Oakley, L., Kinmond, K. & Humphreys, J. (2020). *Spiritual and religious abuse: Reconceptualizing what is known*. London: Routledge.

- Olson, R. E., Atwood, C. D., Mead, F. S. & Hill, S. (2018). *Handbook of denominations in the United States*. 14th edn. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Rheinbolt-Urbe, R. (2013). *Self-expanding, self-supporting, self-governing congregations: Hand in hand throughout the history of Christian mission*. [Final paper]. Lincoln Christian University.
- Rheinbolt-Urbe, R. (2023). *Transforming mutuality in a theology of mission: A missiological evaluation of a Colombian congregation case study*. [PhD dissertation]. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.
- Rheinbolt-Urbe, R. (2024). 'Transforming mutuality: The Jesus-Mary relationship as a model for theology and public life.' *Journal of Religion and Public Life* 1(3): 5–24.
- Sawyer, R. D. & Norris, J. (2012). *Duoethnography*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. 2nd edn. London: Zed Books.
- Stamper, C. (2020). 'Letter writing: life in letters—a method of qualitative inquiry.' In Shortt, H. and Ward, J. (eds.), *Using arts-based research methods: creative approaches for researching business, organisation and humanities*. Germany: Springer International Publishing, 177–208.
- Tkach, J. (1997). *Transformed by truth*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books.
- Urbe, F. (2006). *Second missionary journeys: Finishing the work—A proposal to cooperate in ICOC missions*. [Unpublished paper]. Bogotá.
- Urbe, R. (2024). 'Beyond the "It": Mutuality, maternal-thinking, and the "She" in Illich's thought.' *Conspiratio* (Fall issue): 38–52.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

To cite (Harvard):

Rheinbolt-Urbe, R. (2026), "'Let us return": Enacting transforming mutuality through duoethnography', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 3(1), pp. 23-46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70600/jrpl.v3i1.005>

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.