

Article

Doing the Word: Reawakening the Church to Save Society in Southern Africa

Kimion Tagwirei

The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom 2531, South Africa; kimion22tc@gmail.com

Abstract: Southern African societies are presently beleaguered by manifold socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges. Ordinary people long for answers to questions about how to mitigate these challenges. Meanwhile, the Church mostly preaches the gospel and establishes and grows denominations across the world. Proclaiming the gospel in word is good; however, without demonstrating the gospel with transformational deeds, the Church remains Salvationist and partially missionary. Bearing in mind that the integral mission of the Church is advancing the gospel holistically, fractional mindfulness of the gospel, hearing the words without performing the corresponding deeds, is defacing its identity. Today, this situation is problematic and helpless, as society is in dire need of a wholesome Church that acts in accordance with its own faith and values and attends to the soul, the body, and all other facets of life. Much has been published about the integral mission of the Church, though little has been said about its role in social action. By qualitatively reviewing the literature and observing the Southern African context and some biblical examples, this paper finds the integral mission to be the predominant and comprehensive purpose of the existence of the Church. While the Church could be aware of its mandate, it should be reawakened so that it becomes a doer of the Word and stands out as the salt and light of the world by contributing to addressing the needs of society.

Keywords: church; society; integral mission; proclamation; demonstration; diakonia; reawakening; transformation



Citation: Tagwirei, Kimion. 2024. Doing the Word: Reawakening the Church to Save Society in Southern Africa. *Religions* 15: 608. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050608>

Academic Editor: Fábio Py

Received: 11 April 2024

Revised: 6 May 2024

Accepted: 10 May 2024

Published: 15 May 2024



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1. Introduction

Current Southern African society is troubled by endless socio-economic, political, and environmental problems. As Kuwonu (2024) views it, continentally, Africans have the potential to make moderate economic gains but face a multiplicity of local and global challenges. He refers to South Africa's struggles with its persistent energy crisis and how it limits economic growth, as well as the debt crises in Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, and other African countries, which affect health, social life, and economic and political sustainability. In Southern Africa, the southernmost region of the African countries—South Africa, Eswatini, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia Botswana, Namibia, Angola, and Malawi—are struggling with socio-economic, political, and environmental ills, which are detailed in my review of the Church and society in Southern Africa.

In this context, the bulk of affected people are distressed and lack the knowledge required to overcome their difficulties. Yet, as demonstrated by Tagwirei (2024a), it is paradoxical that Southern African nations struggle with a variety of these predicaments while the vehicle of transformation—the Church—does not help much. So, the Church is viewed as a cold, sleeping, and dying giant. In view of the integral mission, i.e., living out the gospel in all areas of life (Johnson 2012, p. 14; Tibus 2022, p. 36), this submission qualitatively interfaces the Church (*all Christians from all denominations*) with the integral mission and reintroduces the Church to its mandate to save society in view of biblical and scholarly engagements.

2. Redefining the Church in Southern Africa

Extending Tagwirei's (2024b, pp. 3–5) claim that the Church (as indicated before, referring to all followers of Christ from evangelical, Pentecostal, and other Christian churches) in Zimbabwe is currently a mixed and confusing entity, it is clear that the Church in the rest of Southern Africa is in a similar state based on various images that are used to portray the Church. While the term Church is assigned different meanings due to situational references (Howard 2017), Tagwirei (2024b) reports that the Church is interchangeably equated to a workshop, marketplace, theatre, Salvationist embassy, and burial society. With such depictions, churches conduct themselves as Salvationist entities by being overly concerned with the soul. As workshops, they publicise their ability to fix people's lives, much like cars can be fixed; as marketplaces, they trade miscellaneous ideas and goods for payment in cash and kind. As theatres, they accommodate entanglements with comical and controversial theatrics; and as burial societies, they provide financial aid, moral security, and presence to members in times of illness or bereavement. Because of these mixed portrayals, the Church should be redefined to regain her inclusive identity as the body of Christ that advances the integral mission of God on Earth.

I agree with Messer (1998) that we do not need to reinvent the identity and purpose of the Church; we simply need to readjust and realign the Church to its God-given identity and purpose. As Itulua-Abumere (2013) explains, the Church is an assembly or association of followers of Jesus Christ who are called to promote God's integral mission. Furthermore, the Church has now fallen and is scattered and disorganised as a result of self-serving and manipulative teachings. This view is confirmed by Tagwirei (2023), who says that some Pentecostal leaders are greedy, selfish, and lacking in *diakonia*. If the Church is rekindled to attend to its holistic mission, the result would be the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel in all areas of life, thus ministering the gospel in word and deed. Accordingly, the Church would be a voice for the voiceless, deliver the oppressed from their oppressors, exemplify responsible citizenship, advocate for justice, and empower the needy to overcome their problems. In doing so, the Church can transform and save Southern Africa from its current socio-economic and political crises. As the identity of the Church rests predominantly in the lordship of Christ (Maris n.d.), it is imperative to bear in mind that the Spirit of the Lord was anointed on Jesus Christ to preach good news to the poor, secure freedom for prisoners and the oppressed, and provide recovery of sight for the blind (Luke 4:18). Schirmacher (2017, p. 12) affirms this by saying that *missio Dei* is all-embracing, while John 17: 18 states Jesus Christ sent us (believers) as God sent Him to the world, and Mark 16:15 emphasizes the same thing. The Trinitarian mission goes beyond saving souls, extending to liberating the oppressed, poor, blind, and needy. In this light, the Church herein refers to all followers of Jesus Christ from all denominations. They should be reinvigorated to be hearers and doers of the word (James 1: 22–25), the salt and light of the world (Mt 5:13–16), by pursuing an integrated missionary purpose of existence to transform Southern African societies, economies, and politics.

3. Reconceiving the Integral Mission

The integral mission is taken to refer to the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel in all areas of life. It is the inclusive and multidimensional mission of God to address the entire lives of all human beings in all contexts. According to Kuhn (2005, p. 102), the mission is not just about preaching but living out the gospel. Accordingly, the mission interfaces evangelism with social concerns. "Holistic development is necessary to carry the gospel of God in the wisdom and strength of the Spirit and in the love and grace of Jesus Christ" (Kuhn 2005, p. 102). Thus, the gospel should be enacted in word and deed for total transformation. Such an understanding yields the restoration of the body and mind without neglecting the spirit. That is why Woolnough (2010, p. 4) defines the integral mission as a mission that addresses the body, mind, and spirit in human beings. Franklin (2020, p. 4) adds that the integral mission proclaims and demonstrates God's love. Accordingly, the integral mission focuses on wholeness, completeness, well-being,

and the comprehensive salvation of all people and relationships. Scholars such as [Waweru \(2015, pp. 15–16\)](#) and [Smither \(2011, p. 4\)](#) describe it as a multifaceted mission that integrates the spiritual with the social, economic, and political well-being of humanity. They explain that the integral mission ministers the gospel fully in evangelism, discipleship, and inclusive sustainability. Liberation theologians, such as [Padilla \(2007, p. 157\)](#) and [Escobar \(2007, p. 205\)](#), conceive the integral mission as applying the scriptures to the lives, situations, and communities of an audience. They observe that the gospel, and our faith, becomes meaningful, understandable, and transformational when it is contextualised to, for example, address poverty, oppression, disease, corruption, despair, and everything else that humanity faces in particular settings. [Padilla \(2004\)](#) states that “there is no biblical dichotomy between the Word spoken and the Word made flesh in the lives of God’s people”. Padilla adds that the Christian community must proclaim and demonstrate the gospel in its sacrificial service for others to express God’s love and outdo demonic forces as well as political and socio-economic injustices that do not uphold the lordship of Christ and the freedoms of humanity. This claim is backed by 2 Peter 1:3, which says that the power of God provides everything for life. As such, the gospel is sufficiently inclusive, inspired and substantiated to address all issues of life. This is what [Sider \(2010, pp. 15–20\)](#) means when he says that salvation is not just about redemption from sins but the demonstration of the message and life of Jesus Christ.

I agree with [Sider \(2010, pp. 15–20\)](#) that the kingdom of God has both vertical (towards God) and horizontal (towards fellow human beings other) dimensions; in addition to attending to our spiritual relationship with God, the integral mission must attend to human relationships, interactions, problems, and solutions. Consequently, [Mombo \(2010, pp. 43–44\)](#) asserts that the function of God’s mission brings abundant life. For Mombo, abundant life can only be experienced when there is a total transformation that exhibits the presence, reign, love, and peace of God. Given that, the integral mission involves the inclusive development of human beings and the whole natural world. Mombo’s views reveal that the integral mission proclaims and demonstrates the gospel across geographical, gender, racial, political, social, religious, and economic boundaries in pursuit of the demonstration of the gospel everywhere and to everyone. Thus, John 10:10 comes to mind, which tells us that Jesus came to give humanity abundant life, which can be discerned as a totally transformed life that is sustained by the loving, caring, healing, providing, protecting, and sustaining reign of God. As such, the integral mission can be reconfigured in the socially, economically, and politically problematic Southern African context as proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel beyond spiritual parameters by speaking about it and applying it to all aspects of life. Therefore, the absence of the spoken and lived word of God and the inattention of the Church to some areas of life deface the mission and present it as only salvific and exclusive when it should be inclusive and holistic, hence the significance of reawakening the Church to save society.

4. Reviewing the Church and Society in Africa

Southern Africa is battling with various spiritual, social, political, and economic problems. First, countless Southern Africans struggle with challenges of spiritual insecurity in relation to their traditional African ancestral worldviews and Christian supernatural power that can diagnose and solve their life issues ([Magezi and Magezi 2017](#)). This is why religious syncretism abounds and demands attention ([Tagwirei 2024a, p. 2](#)). Considering that the Church is understood to be the embassy of God, it is expected to cast the demons of witchcraft and other evil spirits out of people’s lives.

In a social sense, moral degradation, early and unwanted pregnancies, child marriages, divorce, family disruptions, substance abuse, mental health issues, and high levels of criminality bedevil Southern African society. [Agbiji and Swart \(2015\)](#) report that Africa is plagued by a pandemic of poverty and corruption. Correspondingly, [Agbiji and Swart \(2015\)](#) argue that Christianity could be used to transform society.

Politically, abuse of office, staying in power too long, submission to corruption, and ill governance characterise the politics in the majority of Southern African countries. The Church is expected to stand up and speak out as the salt and light of the world and as the voice of the voiceless to advance its diaconal mission. Economically, the majority of Southern African countries are struggling to meet their needs. While Southern Africa is rich in resources, it is poor in leadership. If the Church could exemplify a Christly leadership that epitomises servant leadership, stewardship, and other-centeredness, it would be acting in accordance with the word of God (James 1:22–25), living as the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16), and serving as letters that are read by everyone (2 Corinthians 3:2). As explained by [Nwadiolor and Nweke \(2014\)](#), the entire African situation is due to be exposed to liberation theology. They mention various problems that the majority of Africans face, such as social, economic, and political injustice; unemployment; and poverty, which are so reminiscent of the Latin American context at the time that liberation theology rose to the fore.

Again in Africa, as in many other developing nations, poverty has come to stern people in their faces; people increasingly aspire freedom from poverty. . . . Consequently, sincere Christians in Africa must be committed to liberation which in turn must mean an unconditional option for and solidarity with the poor. (Nwadiolor and Nweke 2014, pp. 87–88)

Consequently, the Church in Southern Africa is faced with a serious need to proclaim and demonstrate the liberating gospel in all spiritual, socio-economic, and political areas of life. By doing so, the Church will save not only the soul but the body and everything about humanity. Ultimately, the Church will be as transformational as its Trinitarian God. That is why [Magezi and Tagwirei \(2022, p. 10\)](#) argue that the engagements between the Old Testament prophets and kings, as well as the New Testament's metaphoric reflection of disciples as the salt and the light of the world, provide a typical model of integral ecclesiology. Christians should be faithful to act in accordance with the word in all aspects of life. The Church should be exemplary and influential to transform and save Southern Africa from her current predicament of spiritual, social, political, and economic evils such as selfishness, violence, intolerance, and corruption. If the Church rises as the salt-and-light agent of the word, it can minister, transform, and save Southern Africa.

5. Relearning Integral Mission from the Bible

The Bible is the principal book by which a theology of mission can be built ([Kuhn 2005, p. 102](#)). The word of God is inspired by Him. It is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16) and serves as the basis of the faith and practice of the Church that God uses to advance His mission. Therefore, the integral mission can be well conceptualized from the Bible as it teaches about proclaiming the gospel, teaching, Christian witness, discipleship, and other transformational essentials. With regard to this, the following subsections unfold essentials about demonstrating the gospel through caring about social, political, economic, and environmental transformation.

5.1. Striving for Social Transformation

Since the integral mission concerns living out the gospel in all aspects, the Church should be stirred to attend to multifarious social ills such as poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, sexual immorality, child abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and related challenges ([Agbiji and Swart 2015](#)). Considering the precarious predicament of the needy in Southern African nations ([Tagwirei 2023](#)), they are in serious need of the diaconal ministry of the Church. The Bible calls for empathy and generosity for marginalised widows, orphans, and poor people (Rom 11:13; 2 Cor 4:1; Col 4:17). That is why deacons were installed, as reported in Acts 6. As explained by [Tagwirei \(2023, p. 2\)](#), *diakonia* is not only a caring ministry of the Church but also a deliberate demonstration of the gospel and an incarnational love of Christ in action. Furthermore, [Agbiji and Swart \(2015, p. 1\)](#) claim that 'religion constitutes an inextricable part of African society'. Hence, the Church

should minister not just the soul but all aspects of life. The Church should contextualise its teachings to empower and transform society and thus eradicate all social ills. According to Nwadiolor and Nweke (2014, p. 79), ‘For the African peoples, and indeed the developing nations generally, one of the foremost aspirations is freedom or liberation . . . the salvation of both the soul and the body, a quest for incarnated Christianity’. The Bible, furthermore, calls believers to help poor people (Lev 25:35; Deut 15:11; Isaiah 58:10; Matt 25:44–45; Mark 10:21; Luke 3:10–11). The Church needs to be reminded to keep helping the needy. According to Tagwirei (2023, p. 3), ‘while remaining principally biblical through lovely and gracious selflessness to get mankind to Godliness, *diakonia* can be effective when supplemented by sociological ideals of *Ubuntu*, sustainable empowerment and development towards curbing dependence syndromes’. This is what Shambare and Kgatla (2018, p. 6) allude to when they say that the Church should promote social responsibility, accountability, solidarity, and collaboration for inclusive development. They add that ‘the Church is invited to be the conscience of the society. As a custodian of social conscience, the Church has to point out and criticise the negligence of the common good’. Similarly, in view of various social ills, such as a rising crime rate, moral degradation, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and political evils, Shambare and Kgatla state that ‘the Church should address the conscience and attitude of society through teaching and preaching the undiluted gospel of Christ’. Overall, the Church should be reawakened to rise and serve as the conscience of society in all states of affairs.

5.2. Striving for Political Transformation

While some leaders strive to serve progressively, Southern African politics is commonly overshadowed by multiple evils, such as selfishness, ill governance, corruption, state capture, intolerance, conflict, and violence (Duri 2020; Pierson 2019; Aeby 2018; Beinart 1992; Gilpin 2016; Momoh 2015; Olaosebikan 2010; Siegle and Cook 2024). Remarkably, the Church bears a prophetic mandate under the diaconal dimension of her mission. Unfortunately, as Tagwirei (2023, p. 2) observed, most Southern African ecclesiologies divorce *diakonia* from *missio ecclesiae*, and others often narrow it to mere social service, social work, or care for the needy and do not give it as much attention as it deserves. That is why some ecclesial leaders attend only to *kerygma* and neglect *diakonia*. Yet, *diakonia* is a holistic mission, which Lee (2019, p. 23) describes as caring for everything. This is described by the Bible as loving our neighbours as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31); serving others (Mark 10:45); following Jesus Christ, who came to provide good news to the poor, freedom for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4:18); and giving life in abundance (John 10:10). All Christians should also remember that God liberated Israelites from bondage in Egypt, Old Testament prophets fearlessly served as voices for the voiceless, and Jesus Christ taught in the New Testament that believers are and should be the salt and light of the earth (Matt 5:13–16). We should acknowledge that Old Testament prophetic engagement with politics and the New Testament’s depiction of believers as the salt and the light of the world present an exemplary integral mission. The Old Testament teaches that word-bearers of God should be firm and fearless in living and applying scriptures in broad terms. Likewise, the New Testament exemplifies exemplariness for the transformation of others. In Southern Africa’s volatile political context, it is significant for the Church to influence the politics of the day towards serving and saving humanity from injustices, graft, and other evils that are haunting Southern Africa.

5.3. Working to Achieve Economic Sustainability

It is common knowledge that Southern Africa is rich in natural resources and human capital but impoverished by worsening internal and external political and climatic factors like ill governance, corruption, natural disasters, and pandemics (Mkodzongi 2023; Mhaka 2022; Barca and Ncube 2012). The Southern African crisis is also unique in that many of its elements are uncharacteristic of other developing regions. Mabwe et al. (2018, p. 144) encourage the Church to lead in terms of stimulating and transforming lives

through conducting Business as Mission (BAM), creating more platforms to evangelize people, saving lives, and contributing to economic as well as social development. This is why Ezenweke and Kanu (2012, p. 110) avow that the contribution of the Church to national economic development is significant. Tagwirei and Masango (2023) found that churches that operate without economic sustainability often fail to meet the costs of the integral mission. Similarly, Ezenweke and Kanu (2012) commend the Church for showcasing its mandate and its capacity to contribute to national development. They challenge the Church to undertake introspection and to ‘walk the talk’ of economic development. The Church should diversify its sources of income in order to contribute to national economic development. Additionally, the Church should set good examples for the public to follow (2 Corinthians 3:2) by paying its workers well. In the words of Ezenweke and Kanu (2012, p. 110), humanity needs transformational action more than good sermons and prayers. They explain that the Church should be an agent of total transformation to be relevant and useful. Accordingly, the Church should grow her economy in order to meet her operating costs and contribute to national as well as international economic transformation. As also stated by Jarosz (2015), the Church should initiate and put into practice subsistent elements of its holistic mission to inspire and empower its members to challenge and inspire secular leaders and followers to contribute to the economic development of their societies.

5.4. Undertaking Environmental Stewardship

The Southern African environment has been subject to a plethora of disruptive and tragic human and natural crises, such as illegal mining, deforestation, cyclones, veld fires, and water and air pollution (European Commission 2024; Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2022; Bernard and Darkoh 2009). The Church has been inattentive to environmental stewardship, especially in rural areas. Few churches have been other-centred, caring, and environmentally courteous in urban and peri-urban areas as demonstrated through clean-up campaigns, planting trees, drilling boreholes, and other initiatives under their representative bodies. Reflecting on God’s call and instruction to Adam to take care of the Garden of Eden indicates that the Church has a duty to execute environmental stewardship. A number of biblical references support environmental stewardship, such as Exodus 23:5, 11; Leviticus 25:7, and Deuteronomy 22:4, 6–7; 25:4).

Ecosystems sustain individual and collective lives and livelihoods, and the diaconal mission of the Church should care for everything. Neglecting the environment is irresponsible and self-defeating. Drawing from an inclusive conceptualisation of the diaconal dimension of *missio ecclesiae*, the Church ought to serve as a steward of the environment and contribute to the restoration of the environment and inclusive sustainability. In accordance with defining environmental stewardship as guardianship, entrustment, maintenance, the restoration and conservation of soil and vegetation, and the removal of invasive species (Attfield 2015; Bennett et al. 2018), the Church should integrate ecclesiology with integral missionality through observing ecological laws, providing education, joining partnerships, and engaging in advocacy, reforestation, and water, waste, and pollution management. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) exemplifies its integral environmental mission well, and other African churches can learn from it. Since 2012, the EFZ has been professing and propelling an integral mission by employing church and community mobilisation processes to publicise climate change and environmental sustainability as one of its key results areas under its Humanitarian Relief Development Commission. Such consciousness of environmental stewardship is exemplary and highly commendable. Other churches are recommended to pursue similar stewardship to complete their integral missions and boost inclusive sustainability and well-being (Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe 2020).

6. Conclusions

In light of prevailing socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges that are plaguing Southern Africa, this paper encourages the whole Church—i.e., all Christians—to attend to the work of the integral mission. By conceiving of the integral mission according

to its broad meaning, moving beyond mere social action to *proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel in all dimensions of life*, it is discernible that if the Church hears the Word without acting accordingly or addresses the gospel in word without performing corresponding deeds, it becomes useless and irrelevant. If the Church rises as the salt and light in every facet of life, it can oversee, undertake, and contribute to the transformation of its holistic missionary being in national and international socio-economic, political, and environmental life in Southern Africa. All in all, the Church should be reminded and encouraged continuously to live out the word of God as His agent of an all-embracing mission to save the soul, the body, and everything that affects lives on earth.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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