

# Synodality: Communion, participation and mission in action

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**Dates:**

Received: 20 Feb. 2023

Accepted: 14 June 2023

Published: 14 Aug. 2023

**How to cite this article:**

Resane, K.T., 2023, 'Synodality: Communion, participation and mission in action', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(2), a8503. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i2.8503>

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The article used the current Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 as a road map to reinforce understanding of synodality, communion, participation and mission. It extracted some theological lessons the non-Catholics can learn from this synod. The essay is not here to defend or to critique Synod on Synodality 2021–2023, but to expand it and to conscientise the non-Catholic adherents of Christian faith of the importance of synodality as a theological dictum. The starting point was the historical and etymological background of synodality and moved into synodical understanding from the Reformed traditions. Three of these traditions in South Africa were highlighted to demonstrate how some Reformed Churches had been on a synodical journey. These three are the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), Lutherans and the United Congregational Church. The three sub-themes of synodality, that is communion, participation and mission were examined and studied to deepen the ecumenical understanding of this Synodality. The literature, past and present, on the three sub-themes was the basis of the argument. There were some references to electronic sources as the Synod is still sitting and is expected to conclude in October 2023. The conclusion was an appeal to the universal church to journey together to meet [*koinonia*], listen to each other and to the Spirit [participate], and discern [mission] the direction the church is to take to reach the world with the love of Christ. The people of God are to engage in communion by re-appreciating the love of Christ that leads into and enhances communion. The Synod is a call for participation of all members of the body of Christ to respectfully listen to the Holy Spirit and each other in order to guide the church in the world.

**Contribution:** The Protestants, especially of Reformed tradition always ignore important events such as Synod on Synodality 2021–2023. This Synod reminds Protestants of the importance of communion, participation and mission in the world.

**Keywords:** synodality; synod; communion; participation; mission; church; dialogue.

## Introduction

Pope Francis II announced a 2-year process of listening and dialogue in October 2021. This call has become popularly known as Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 within the Roman Catholic Church circles. The Pope has deliberately invited the Church into a process of healing. It is a call to the synodal church to embark on renewing itself by responding to the new realities in human history. The three themes of this synod are communion, participation and mission. This synod is unique because it is not intended to address a particular issue, but a call to the Church to togetherness as the people of God. Also the synod is unique because it is from the bottom up involving everyone in all dioceses in a journey of mutual listening in order to do self-examination as the church. This call is to lived experience of self-renewal to better serve God's people and to respond to human needs in diverse manners. It is the dynamic humanising journey of the community in evolution. This journey serves as the lesson to be extended to the Protestant faith, especially to the Reformed tradition. This sounds like prophetic fulfilment of Avery Dulles (1992) when he called upon the Roman Catholic Church towards an ecumenism of mutual enrichment:

To welcome the more traditional and conservative churches into dialogue. For the Catholic Church it may not prove easy to reach a consensus with either the Orthodox or the conservative Evangelicals, but these churches and communities may have more to offer than some others because they have dared to be different. (p. 193)

Synodality has been a yearning for Christians to re-introspect and come closer to each other, just as Dulles sensed. As early as 1988, a noted Pentecostal scholar, Donald W. Dayton (1988:87–100), challenged the World Council of Churches (WCC) to reassess its Reformed paradigm and allow

**Note:** Special Collection: Interreligious Dialogue, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

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the Wesleyan-Holiness movement and Pentecostals to participate in WCC. The same voice was echoed by an Episcopalian leader, O.C. Edwards (1996:7–29) when he decried the dwindling membership of National Council of Churches and made a passionate appeal to Roman Catholics, Evangelicals and Pentecostals to consider entering into partnership. The American Baptist theologian, Mark Heim (1992:780) challenged the World and Councils of Churches to go beyond their declining memberships and look for inclusion of those in their peripheries. Those in the peripheries, he was referring to the Catholics, Pentecostals, Southern Baptists and the Independent Churches. World Council of Churches through its Assemblies since 1991 has embarked on inclusion of Pentecostals and Charismatics.

## Synodality: Definition

First of all, let us attempt to understand what synodality is. Etymologically, it comes from the common word ‘synod’ which in Greek is *συν* [together] and *ὁδός* [way or journey] which is often used to describe the process of fraternal collaboration<sup>1</sup> for the future direction of the church. Synodality speaks of the involvement and participation of the whole church in its life and mission.<sup>2</sup> It is in fact ‘the active participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church’.<sup>3</sup> It is about listening to each other, all listening to the Holy Spirit in order to discern the Spirit’s message to the church. According to the Laudato Si’ Movement (LSM), which serves the Catholic family worldwide to turn Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* encyclical letter into action:

Fundamentally, synodality is about *journeying together*. This happens through listening to one another in order to hear what God is saying to all of us. It is realizing that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone to help us walk forward together on our journey as the People of God.<sup>4</sup>

Laudato Si’ Movement reinforces that synodality refreshes the understanding that the Church as the People of God is all about walking or journeying together. In this sense, synodality is a way of renewing the Church from her deepest roots, in order to be more united with one another and better carry out her mission in the world. Concretely, being ‘synodal’ is a way of being and a way of working that takes a more grassroots, collaborative approach, taking time to discern the path forward together. It highlights the fact that we all have something precious to contribute to the Body of Christ. This calls for change of doing things, in order to become relevant and remain true. It can be achieved by walking together, within humanity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis seeks for the Church to journey together, expressing communion, participation and mission (Kibira 2022:19). So, the church is called to encounter and

1.CNA, ‘What is “synodality”? Experts explain’, *Catholic News Agency*.

2.International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (02 March 2018), no. 6. (Accessed 13 January 2023).

3.’Chieti Document | Synodality and Primacy During the First Millennium. Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church’, [www.christianunity.va](http://www.christianunity.va). (Accessed 13 January 2023).

4.<https://www.Movement.Contribution.to.the.Synod.on.Synodality.2021-2023> (Accessed 13 January 2023).

dialogue with herself and other traditions, which may contribute towards discovering ‘new aspects of the truth, which is Jesus Christ’ (Kasper 2004:40).

## Synodality in South African Reformed tradition

The Reformed tradition understands a synod to be an ecclesiastical body or advisory council where church leaders or delegates from the district, province, national or international delimitations gather to map the way forward for the church. Synodality for the Protestant faith is clearly Jesus’ call in John 17 that ‘all may be one’ (Long 2001:125). All Protestant confessions in South Africa and abroad had in one way or another engaged in synodality where the agenda item was to listen to one another and attempt to journey together. The missions era in South Africa was ushered in by missionaries from the different countries of the West. After denominational and confessional formations were establishment, synodical processes kicked in on how to coexist (Europeans and indigenous peoples), worshipping and believing the same way. The author will only highlight three examples to illustrate historical synodality in South Africa within the Reformed tradition; and acknowledges all the churches in South Africa somehow have experienced or still continue to experience synodality. For instance, the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) arrived with the Dutch settlers in 1652 and was officially inaugurated in 1665, and through listening to the voices from other communities, started to spread to the northern interior from 1836 onwards. In 1855, the Hervormde Kerk (NHK) was established in the then Transvaal around Rustenburg. Gereformeerde Kerk (GK) was also pioneered in the Transvaal around 1857. As the indigenous populations and new arrivals from Europe started to compose the sub-continent’s population, synodality became inevitable, which unfortunately enhanced the racial bars in the church. In 1881, the Dutch Reformed Missionary Church (NGSK) was established for the so-called coloured population. Their first regional synod was established in 1910 in the Orange Free State (as NGSK for the indigenous Africans), then followed former Transvaal, Natal, Western Cape. Synodal evolutionary processes continued since then. In 1963, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (NGKA) was established for indigenous Africans. The NGKA was a synodical outcome of the NGK as these populations were viewed as mission field for the NGK. In 1994, NGKA and NGSK combined, inviting others from NGK to form the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). From 1652 up to the present, these Reformed family churches had ceaselessly been on a synodal journey, debating, discussing and deliberating how to become a communion in the world full of hatred, poverty and misery, especially in the apartheid South Africa. Synodical discussions are continuing to be at different levels with different tempos but listening and walking with one another is the desired goal. Reformed faith and theology played some enormous role in the shaping of South African culture and society. Gerstner (in Elphick & Davenport 1997:16) points it out that this tradition

'contributed greatly to the formation of a distinctive identity among the white settlers and to their conviction of superiority to indigenous peoples and slaves'.

Another synodical journey is that of the Lutheran missionaries who came to South Africa from Germany, Norway, and Sweden, and later from United States of America and Canada. This was a missionary denomination divided by nationalities, polity, liturgy and free association with non-Lutherans. Synodical journey among the Lutherans is very long, especially after 1966 when the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in South Africa (FELCSA) was born. This synodal synergy came into being when the newly emergent black Lutheran and Moravian Churches embarked onto synodical journey (Strassberger 1974:75; Thomas 2002:193). The synodal evolution came through listening to one another and endeavouring to walk together in united confession, liturgy and polity. Through almost a decade of synodical deliberations, it was only in 1975 when many African Lutherans and few foreigners who were not part of Lutheran Free Churches formed Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa (ELCSA). However, most white Lutherans remained under United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (UELCSA), which was founded in 1965. Tensions that may be inhibiting proper synodality within the Lutheran faith are between structure [hierarchical versus synodical] and relationships with non-Lutherans [ecumenical versus denominational]. Unfortunately this also runs along the racial lines. The church was permeated by theology of ethnic churches among the black people, with white people on a parallel line, opting for non-involvement. 'Efforts to produce a more organic union between white and black Lutherans have so far not succeeded' (Scriba in Elphick & Davenport 1997:173).

The last example of synodality to mention is that of current United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA). As churches and missions of the same confession and polity [congregationalism] grew and became visible in South African socio-religious landscape, the need for synodality arose. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa was birthed in 1967 through the synodical 'efforts of the predominantly white and Coloured Congregational Union (CUSA), the Bantu Congregational Church [formerly the American Board Mission] and the churches of the London Missionary Society' (De Gruchy in Elphick & Davenport 1997:159). The new denomination was predominantly black in membership.

A common feature observed at the final synodality is the united communion where confession and liturgy become some form of a uniting force. For instance, the Uniting Reformed Church came up with an ecclesiastic confession known as Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982 and adopted in 1986. This Confession addresses the unity of the church, reconciliation and the justice of God. Evangelical Lutheran Church renewed its commitment to Augsburg Confession and embraced a motto 'Growing Together in Christ'; while the United Congregational Church embraced a motto 'One

People'. All these three confessions or declarations are based on communion ecclesiology, where confessors declare the importance of unity or communion.

Another synodal observation is to see a common prefix of 'United' or 'Uniting' after synodical conclusions of certain confessional identities. This is confirmed by Robeck (in Stackhouse, Dearborn & Paeth 2000:169) that 'several united or uniting churches have been formed in Canada, Australia, Great Britain, Indonesia, and elsewhere'. In South Africa one notices United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (UPCSA), and significantly, the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). In the case of 'United', it seems the synodal unity is complete, while for Uniting, the process is still in motion and the door still open to welcome the new entrants. A good example here is URCSA, which is still open to welcome the predominantly Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) and those left behind in the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (NGKA).

Another observation is that these new denominations carry Southern Africa as the postfixes to their names rather than South Africa. For them, the synodality is not limited by national boundaries. The church goes beyond the national restrictions. Synodality is not walking alone, but together with others beyond the national identities. Synodality is listening others in different zones with different experiences. The church is in the world, though not of it, and therefore listens to the cries, needs, concerns and propositions of and from the world.

## Synodality and communion

It is proposed here that synodality is listening and walking together as the church in the human context. The church is not an isolated island in the sea of humanity, but is part and parcel of human community; hence, it cannot walk alone or listen to itself alone. Synodality is the call to community where an individual cannot afford to be an absolute value, because 'Our humanity, in solitude and bereft of stimulation from others, remains incomplete' (Muya in Bujo & Muya 2011:127). Through walking together and listening to each other, 'every member of the community is bound to reinforce the life-giving force within the community by transmitting life by progeny, and by acts of justice and goodness' (Muya in Bujo & Muya 2011:121). This is the heart of the Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 where community comes together to connect with each other in order to listen and gain strength to manoeuvre through life with its cosmic challenges. Resane (2022) alludes to this by asserting:

A well-connected society is composed of men and women who discuss and debate ideas and issues among themselves to test the validity of the information and impressions they receive from one another – as well as the ones they receive from their civil structures. (p. 1)

This concurs with synodality as proposed by Pope Francis – a communal vision which makes life possible through

community in order to regain humanity that is continually lost through hierarchical dictatorships and patriarchal commands. The Nigerian bishop, Elochukwu E. Uzukwu (1996) reflects on this top-down approach:

We are the church, you are not the church; the church speaks, you listen; we talk, you do the listening; we give directives, you obey; you are there, we are here; we send you; you go. (p. 121)

The Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 changes this approach. It invites the church to do introspection. She is the community that needs to do self-inspection in order to become the healing agent to the humanity. Bujo (2010) captures it well that:

If the Church is a community of believers in Jesus Christ, communitarian thought and action are part of her. It is her task to make it possible for each individual to lead a life of human dignity. If she commits herself to this in the world, she has to start with herself. (p. 188)

Communion is the first sub-theme of Synodality. This has been a theological discussion for over two decades based on *koinonia*, sometimes called *communio* or communion ecclesiology. On the broader terms, 'it speaks of fellowship, unity, participation, and/or partnership'. It is about togetherness, sharing, and stewardship' (Resane 2017). According to Lawler and Shanahan (1995):

[I]ts Latin equivalents are manifold: *congregatio, societas, coetus, adunatio, corpus, communio, populus, ecclesia*, each with a specification such as *fideliium* or *christianorum*, as in *communio fideliium*, 'the communion of the faithful'. (p. 8)

Orobator (2008:84) correctly points out that communion 'implies the actual experience of an inclusive fellowship, participation, sharing, equality, hospitality, mutuality, solidarity and so on'. It is important to note that the paramount essence of communion in ecclesiology is both the vertical and horizontal relationship of God and humanity and humanity with humanity. In the spirit of Vatican II, *communio* is communion with the triune God, the Creator who created humans for participation in the divine communion (LG 2). It is the:

[C]ommunion of the faithful with God in Christ through the Spirit, and hence their common participation in Christian goods. In that each is in communion with God, all are also in communion with one another. (Lawler & Shanahan 1995:8)

Taking from the perichoretical understanding, synodality is imagining 'God's complete self-giving and self-receiving, mutuality, sharing, freedom, invitation, gift, acceptance, intimacy, co-dwelling, and communion' (Zsupan-Jerome 2014:51). In the sense of synodality, communion is sitting with and in the presence of God, conferring with one another without devouring each other. Synodality envisaged by Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 is 'human communication that is blind to the possibilities of communion results in abuses of dignity, progress, justice, and freedom' (Zsupan-Jerome 2014:51). The listening church is the uniting church, whereby walking together in the light is part of her ethos. This correlates with Moltmann (1994:108), that 'It is only in dialogue with one

another that we can discover truth, because it is only in relationship to other people that we form our own identity'. This involves transparency. Synodality involves open dialogues and truth telling without any reservation, conspiracy or intimidation. In other words, synodal church is a *communio* in dialogue with itself about others, as confirmed by Kasper (2004:42): 'The Church is dialogical by her very nature'. Communion is transparent voice of many people heard by God – *Vox populi, vox Dei* [the voice of the people is the voice of God]. Communion is people coming together to enjoy each other, as Healey and Sybertz (2012:117) confirm that 'People enjoy being together and doing things together' calling for personal engagement. People assemble for a reason, for a particular objective, or a task to be done. The synod calls and convenes for a common task. There is a passion for communion accompanied by the subjective pleasure of being together, what Maritain (2011:90) calls *zusammenmarschieren* [marching together]. The synod gathers around God the Father through Christ in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The trinitarian God as the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit is both the source and fulfillment of human communion and thus serves as the fundamental theological standard of social communication. (Zsupan-Jerome 2014:49)

This implies that to be synodal is to be in communion with the trinitarian God. The fact is also attested by Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium's* reference to the church as the people of God. Communion is gathering around God's word with Christ at the centre, God the Father as the owner of it and the Holy Spirit as the empowerer of it with 'graces, gifts, or charisms for growth, building up the church, and for the good and needs of the church in the world' (Orobator 2008:84). This Trinitarian centrality of the synod is beautifully captured by Dembski (2009:108), although referring to communion with creation, that 'God the Father forms an intention, God the Son articulates it, and God the Holy Spirit empowers it'. In the similar spirit, Dembski (2009:105) highlights the fact that 'To be is to be in communion, with God and with the rest of creation'.

The bottom line is that the synod should never consider itself as a supreme voice of the church but as the listener of God's voice on behalf of those on the grassroots and cutting edges of humanity. The pattern to be understood and followed synodically is the relational nature of the Trinity, where each Person of the Trinity is present with and for others. This is correctly captured by Muthiah (2009:60) that 'Being present with another means assuming an inviting posture that hears and receives the other and involves a movement toward the other'. In synodical spirit, participants do not live for themselves but for Christ and others. They give themselves to others without losing their own identity or personhood (Kärkkäinen 2019:452).

Taking synodality broader within the Protestant, especially the Reformed tradition has always been a historical energy. Some denominational groupings currently label themselves communions. The Anglicans for some time now call themselves a communion. Lutheran World Federation call

themselves a communion. After the synodical journey of the Reformed Churches, deliberations and dialogues between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council of 2010, identified themselves as World Communion of Reformed Churches (Houten in Presa 2010:4).

## Synodality and participation

Participation is the second theme of Synod on Synodality 2021–2023. *Communio* derived from *koinonia* is intertwined with participation. In fact, it is difficult to separate the two. However, for the sake of synodality, one can try to synergise and synchronise the two as a way of deepening the understanding of synodality. By participation, in this context, it means engagement of two or more partners to discover each other and see how to journey together for the common good. Participation in synodality can lead to a new discovery of theological truths which may pave the way towards understanding each other. Since 2021, Pope Francis has been giving the speeches with reference to the synodal process. The intention of these speeches and processes is to give the Church an opportunity to be listening, engage in dialogue, prayer and discernment for the real *kairos*, which is the time for openness to what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Participation obliterates the concept or the sense of isolation, aloofness, independence and self-absorption. It is participation with God, what we sometimes in theology call *theosis*, which:

[I]s the other word many used to talk about relational participation in God ... comes from the Greek word that means, 'becoming divine', and it refers to sharing in God's nature of love. (Conniry 2012:27)

As believers, God is with us all and we are in God's presence, and *theosis* calls us to imitate the participative God for the sake of the world in which we are to be missional, sharing God's incarnational and eschatological glory.

This is participation with God and fellow human beings to seek together the Spirit's voice in the world. This was expressed by the Pope on 18 September 2021 referring to the apostles who moved from Jerusalem to the other parts of the Empire that their:

[P]ower came from listening to the voice of God and men – never separated, never – and the power was kept on the 'lower level', the level of those who accept it.<sup>5</sup>

The voice of God is discernible through participation with other members of the body; hence, the Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 goes beyond traditional structures by inviting all Christians from any tradition to participate. The structured environment limits participation and restrains openness and transparency. A noted evangelical scholar, John Stott alludes to this openness that 'the church must organize itself in such a way as to express its understanding of itself' (2007:57).

5.Speech of His Holiness Pope Francis To the faithful of the Archdiocese of Rome On Saturday 18 September 2021 Paul VI Hall <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/ar/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiro.html> (Accessed 18 January 2023).

Synodality cannot be fully realised as communion without participation where there is some dialogue. Participation involves incessant dialogue. Resane (2022) is of a strong opinion here that:

Dialogue is a focused and intentional conversation, a space of civility and equality in which those who differ may listen and speak together. On the other side, dialogue is a way of being – mindful and creative in relating. In dialogue, we seek to set aside fears, preconceptions and the need to win; we take time to hear other voices and possibilities. Dialogue can encompass tensions and paradoxes, and in so doing, new ideas – collective wisdom – may arise. (p. 1)

This is inevitably an active connotation, as Ryken (2001:61) asserts: 'The true meaning of communion is not passive basking but active fellowship'. This is participation par excellence as it is carried out within fellowship (*koinonia*), where community is participative dialogically. It is envisaged that the outcomes of this Synodality be the shift from rigid hierarchical structure to creation of participative culture. This participative culture is defined by Jenkins (2009) as:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices ... members also believe that their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one. (p. 99)

Participation is a continuous connection. Communities of faith stay connected through participation, and therefore, become mutually supportive. Their strength and resilience 'flow from interactions over a period of time' (Gould 2015:31). Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen is rightly against hierarchical structures of the church because they 'often echo secular institutions, have caused domination, even abuse. They have to be rejected' (2019:452). They hamper transparency and retrospection. The great lesson is that the *communio* in broader terms must continue 'to be communities of discourse and deliberation by being communities of discernment and memory' (Verhey in Husbands & Treier 2005:161). Participative culture empowers others and enhances self-worth. In the spirit of Synod on Synodality 2021–2023, synodality is 'a space for meeting, open for the transformation of ecclesial and social structures that allows us to renew the missionary impulse and the proximity to the poorest and most excluded' (Piñon 2022:17). Again, one finds in this assertion a clear tripartite theme of fellowship, participation and mission. Participation creates a moment of grace [*kairos*], in which all can participate and listen to the Spirit who establishes communion between believers of different doctrinal convictions and socio-economic backgrounds.

## Synodality and mission

The third theme of Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 is mission. So far, in agreement with Kärkkäinen, synodality is 'the gathering of people in Jesus name around the gospel and sacraments, as well as missional ministry in which fellowship or *koinonia* signifies a common participation'. In this assertion,

one clearly sees communion [*koinonia*], participation and mission reflected in the apostolic *praxis* of Acts 2:42–47. This is a clear pointer that the mission of the church is the ‘Church on the way out which becomes a neighbour and servant of a wounded humanity’ (Piñon 2022:17). The *vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 encourages us to understand synodality as:

[T]he particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in an assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. (Kibira 2022:19–20)

Mission is the synodical phase of listening offered to everyone, especially to the marginalised. It is giving them the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard. Kibira (2022) in referring to Document 32 of the Synod, correctly highlights the intention of the mission of the Church as to:

Make people’s hope flourish, stimulate trust, bind up wounds, weave new and deeper relationships, learn from one another, build bridges, enlighten minds, warm hearts, restore strengths to our hands for our common mission. (p. 20)

*Communio* and *missio* are profoundly intertwined with one another, because mission means the church ‘participating in God’s liberating activity in the world’ (Saayman 1991:7). The two [*communio* and *missio*] interpenetrate and mutually imply each other. If there is no communion, there is no mission. Mission finds itself in communion. It is impossible to be genuinely in communion with the Trinity and *ecclesia*, without actually responding missionally to the famous Great Commission of Matthew 28:19. The church’s missionality is both ecclesiastic and Christocentric. Synodality is missionality whereby the church walks the same road as Christ did. This means taking ‘a road of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice to the point of death’ (AG 5).<sup>6</sup> This is expressed by the noted South African missiologists, Kritzing, Meiring and Saayman (1994):

The glory and manifestation of God’s grace as our missionary goal, however, requires nothing less than our solidarity with the poor, the destitute and the oppressed in seeking first the Kingdom of God and his justice-righteousness. (p. 3)

The Synod makes an appeal that the Spirit’s call should not only be passive in the communion, but that the church should be actively engaged in *communion* mission (Lawler & Shanahan 1995:59). The charismatic nature of *ecclesia* necessitates the Holy Spirit to liberally empower and anoint believers for the service of the people of God. The gifts [*charisms*] showered by the Spirit of Christ enable each member of the body to be a communion for service. In other words, communion members are missionally pneumatological. Without the Spirit, mission is impossible. The recipients of the gifts utilise them for the good of *communio* and *diakonia* [services]. The services offered, together with *kerygma* and *incarnation* [presence], make a full embodiment of the Gospel, ‘by which we mean the adventure of going to live with others in the world in the name of Christ’

<sup>6</sup>Ad gentes, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church.

(Crow 1982:49). In other words, evangelism [*kerygmatic* act of mission] and social action are inseparable aspects of the Gospel (Kritzing 2002:93). Carrying them out is a divine intent. This missional intent is both a *paradosis* [a tradition to be preserved] and a *paratheke* [a deposit to be guarded]. To uphold its relevancy, the ‘Gospel must be contextualised, that is to say, related appropriately to each particular person or situations’ (Stott 2007:68). The bottom line is that mission is expected to become ‘God’s liberating presence in every human situation’ (Saayman 1991:7).

Theologians from all walks of life, especially those in the field of missiology are familiar with *missio Deo*, that is, God’s mission. *Communio* and *missio* are inseparable. *Communio* ‘lives, suffers, and lays down its life to serve God’s creative and redemptive mission to the world’ (Jenkins in Stackhouse 2003:180). *Missio Dei* is ‘the great mission of the triune God in the world, and then especially as characterised in the mission of Jesus the Messiah’ (Saayman 1991:5). The genuine ecclesiology endeavours to pursue truthfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ grounded in the *missio Dei*, as revealed in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection (2003:180). This is also captured by Hunsberger (in Stackhouse 2003:130) that the end results of the mission through community is ‘a gospelled community, cross-shaped and resurrection-voiced’. The purpose of the mission is to find or establish the kingdom of God, as seen in the apostolic mission of the New Testament founding ‘missional communities to continue the witness that had brought them into being’ (Guder in Husbands & Treier 2005:117). The mission of the church is not for the expansion of denominations or sectarian influence. In all spheres, whether *through kerygma, diakonia* or *koinonia*, the *missio* ‘has its ideal the establishment of God’s kingdom and his justice-righteousness’ (Kritzing et al. 1994:4).

Through mission, communion listens and participates in the healing, restoration and renewal of the *cosmos*. Missional theology encourages taking new directions and replacing the old methods with the new relevant approaches that make the Gospel message relevant. There is a call for a paradigm shift, a pendulum swing that calls for the new look at theology of missions. Mission crosses all barriers of life and presents the love of God beyond prejudices, without any patriarchal attitude. It is true that mission should ‘concern itself with the theology of other religions and enter the difficult areas of understanding and relating to people of other religions and ideologies’ (Pretorius et al. 1996:5). Through participation, communion listens to people of other religious or doctrinal convictions. For the 21st century Christians, there is undoubtedly the importance of dialogue with people of other religions, as this leads to encounter with them (Stott 1975:69). These other religions are part of God’s plan for the opportunity to be missional. Their existent reality is that they are ‘a platform on which the Christian missional expression should be exercised’ (Resane 2023:6). Mission cannot be undertaken in the vacuum or out of *tabula rasa*. It is an engagement, involvement and immersion into the cosmic affairs in order to incarnate the love of Christ.

## Conclusion

The Synod on Synodality 2021–2023 is a papal appeal to the universal church to journey together [*koinonia*], listen [participate], and discern [*missio*]. As the people of God, the church is called upon to be along a marked-out path walking together to engage in communion by re-appreciating *congregavit nos unum Christi amor* [the love of Christ that has brought us together]. This communion is best lived not as a uniformity but as a unity in variety. The Synod is a call for participation of all members of the body of Christ to respectfully listen to the Holy Spirit and each other in order to guide the church in the world. In other words, this is an appeal for *Ecclesia semper reformanda* [church continuously being formed and re-reformed]. The church has a mission in the world to fulfil. She is called to be a witness to the Gospel on which she was fed. The missional calling is to make common cause with all those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical and existential peripheries of our world.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

### Author's contributions

K.T.S., is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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