




A two-tier protestant evaluative framework for cults applied to KwaSizabantu Mission



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Dates:

Received: 05 Oct. 2020
Accepted: 14 Jan. 2021
Published: 29 Mar. 2021

How to cite this article:

Fleischmann, E., Ferreira, L.W.
& Muller, F., 2021, 'A two-tier
protestant evaluative
framework for cults applied
to KwaSizabantu Mission',
In die Skriflig 55(1), a2686.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2686>

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The vague use of the term 'cult' in popular media to describe religious groups has in the past unjustly exposed various committed Christian communities to libel and dehumanisation. However, celebrity-based cults masquerading as Christians are damaging the trust in Christ. The objective of this research study was to provide a viable two-tier Protestant evaluative framework (2TPEF) in order to identify cultic characteristics in a religious group. The proposed framework was applied to South Africa's KwaSizabantu Mission as a case study. A theoretical framework was synthesised from a variety of sources. For the case study, information was collected from multiple sources, including interviews, documents, sermons, newsletters, observations and research reports. Applying the 2TPEF in the case study demonstrates how it operates as a workable tool. In this case, it explains why the KwaSizabantu Mission cannot be viewed as a cult. In addition, the 2TPEF may serve for comparative purposes or be used by religious groups themselves to demonstrate their position relative to Protestant Christianity.

Contribution: This study not only focuses on Reformed Theology exclusively but provides insights in critically applying the 2TPEF within Protestant religious circles using a current case study within an African context.

Keywords: church; cult; evaluation; KwaSizabantu Mission; protestant; two-tier protestant evaluative framework; 2TPEF.

Introduction

Currently, celebrity-based religious groups have been proliferating and upending the foundations of Christian orthodoxy. Some have even engaged in bizarre practices such as eating grass, rats and snakes (Resane 2017:3). Such incomprehensible behaviours often gain sensational media headlines (Arweck 2005:1).

In recent months, some media sources have alleged that the KwaSizabantu Mission in South Africa, one of the largest and most respected Protestant missions on the continent, is a cult. The media trial started on 22 September 2019 in a *Rapport* newspaper article, in which a former member of the Mission criticised its practices (Eybers 2019). The views and judgements expressed within this secular newspaper were soon echoed by the German evangelical news agency *Idea* (14 October 2019) and the Dutch *Reformatie Dagblad* (15 October 2019). Moreover, the former member continued publishing allegations, ranging from money laundering to bizarre activities involving Zulu nobility connected to KwaSizabantu (Botha 2019).

These allegations were subsequently republished on various overseas internet platforms as truth claims, further feeding the KwaSizabantu cult narrative. The Mission took no legal action against the former member at the time.

A year later, during the week of 19 September 2020, News24 began to broadcast claims about abusive practices at KwaSizabantu through a film, podcasts and articles. Adriaan Basson (2020), editor of News24, also called for a boycott against aQuellé, the Mission's bottling plant. In order to avoid attracting negative publicity, major retailers, such as Game, Food Lovers, Macro, Massmart, Pick 'n Pay, Spar and Woolworths, swiftly withdrew aQuellé products. A boycott against the Mission's Emseni farming produce followed soon afterwards.

The question arises if this trial by media was an effort to curb cult activities, or whether it was a case of disgruntled former members seeking to paint an entire organisation with the same brush. Should the latter be true, the Mission's true character could easily be misrepresented globally, and could result in the ostracism of its members and their children. Conversely, as some

outwardly impressive ministries have, in the past, fallen into serious errors or scandal, it remains important for Christians to take such charges seriously rather than 'circling the wagons' and blindly defending a ministry.

The KwaSizabantu case led to the realisation of the importance of having a tool to evaluate adherence to orthodox Christianity, both in dogma and in practice. Protestant Christians should have a clear set of criteria to evaluate and recommend adjustments to the teachings and practices of Christian groups within their circle. In this article, we use 'Protestant Christianity' to refer to Christians who maintain belief in the classic 'solas' of the Protestant Reformation: *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fides, solus Christus* and *solus Deo gloria*. We seek to develop a two-tier Protestant evaluative framework (2TPEF) as an evaluative tool. The tool is then applied to the current KwaSizabantu Mission controversy in order to determine possible 'cultic' or aberrant tendencies relative to traditional Christianity. The 2TPEF not only serves as a tool for identifying cults but also helps religious groups to evaluate their beliefs relative to Protestant Christianity.

Theoretical framework

Historical background of cults and new religious movements

Unorthodox practices presented as 'Christian' are not a new phenomenon. Such a pattern has recurred ever since the time of the early Church. More recently, exotic practices originating from the East have increasingly been accepted in Western culture. Consequently, some oriental beliefs have been accepted by groups of people who continue to identify themselves as Christian (Clarke 2006:vi). Such groups are appropriately categorised as examples of *new religious movements* (NRMs). Meanwhile, other religious groups accused of engaging in authoritarian or psychologically abusive practices have often been branded with the loaded term of 'cult'. Since the 1960s, so-called cults have proliferated, ranging from the Manson family, the Moonies (Sun Myung Moon's movement) and the Branch Davidians to Jim Jones' isolated group, known for perishing together in the Jonestown, Guyana massacre (Bader & Demaris 1996:285). In order to prevent cult violence, parents of members and other concerned members of the public, often supported by representatives of the legal system (e.g. police, lawyers, and judges; Kent & Willey 2013:306), set up monitoring groups, such as the American Family Foundation and Cult Awareness Network.

The importance of identifying a religious group correctly

Pretorius (2012) warned against either overestimating or underestimating religious cults in South Africa. To classify denominations or religious ministries without an in-depth evaluation risks exposing committed, legitimate Christian communities to unjustified vulnerability and libel. Scholars, such as Barker (1986), Olson (2006) and Richardson (1993), argued that the term 'cult' is so loaded with undesirable connotations amongst the general public and media that it

has become a derogatory label, which is used to depict a group negatively, even before any information has been obtained or a chance is given for a fair hearing.

Scripture emphasises the importance of identifying a religious group properly, especially those that appear to be orthodox but deviate from Christian teachings. Christ warns in Matthew 24:24 and Mark 13:22: '[f]or false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect', whilst Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:13–15 of false apostles attempting to 'transform themselves', and thereby, deceive the true church and the world:

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (NKJV)

It is of paramount importance, therefore, that Protestant churches detect signs of deviance or 'cultic' practices within their circles. However, to do so requires a clear definition of a cult.

Defining a cult (or a new or alternative religious movement)

Scholars have struggled to reach consensus on an appropriate definition of cults, which differentiates them from mainstream religions (Pretorius 2013:288). Confusion arises not only from the word's use as a derogatory term in modern English vernacular (Olson 2006:97) but also from the fact that different academic disciplines have different understandings about cults (Roberts 2015:350). Consequently, some social-science scholars consider it best to avoid using the term completely in academia (Olson 2006:97). These scholars argue that 'using the term cult in academic literature is an ethical breach for modern social scientists' (Christiano, Swatos & Kivisto 2002:11), and many suggest that the media's use of the term is even more problematic. However, within Reformed theology in South Africa, the term 'cult' is used freely (Pretorius 2013:287; Stoker 2000:183, 2020:65).

Various definitions of a cult or sect have been proposed by secular researchers, depending on their own conceptual frameworks. Whereas some researchers focus on the group's organisational structure, others primarily consider the level of dedication required of members, and still others describe cults as religious groups with mystical or occult beliefs (Bader & Demaris 1996:287). Given such conceptual differences, researchers struggle to generate coherent data (Bader & Demaris 1996:287). Although these scholars may serve a broader scope of religious groups, the question at issue in this study is how to rightly define and evaluate a cult in Protestant circles.

In contrast to secular experts who rely primarily on sociological, psychological or behavioural factors to evaluate

cults, Merriam-Webster (2005) describes a religious cult as 'involving worship, adoration and a set of beliefs outside of the doctrines and dogma of mainstream religions'. Similarly, Protestant Christians focus on doctrinal issues (McDowell & Stewart 1982:31). They recognise that although Protestant churches may differ on some issues, these differences remain insignificant compared with the heretical, non-Christian beliefs of cults. Within this line of thought, McDowell and Stewart define a cult as 'a perversion, a distortion of biblical Christianity', thereby indicating that cults 'reject the historic teachings of the Christian Church' (McDowell & Stewart 1982:17). These historic teachings include the ancient creeds of the church (such as the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed), as well as writings of the church fathers who defined and rejected the classic heresies refuted in these creeds (Melton 2014:223), thereby defining *orthodoxy* and policing its periphery (McGrath 2013:66). These creeds serve the dual function of affirming the fundamental themes of faith and establishing an evaluative framework to identify heretical or deficient versions of Christianity (McGrath 2013:66); accordingly, they are utilised within this study.

Based on this understanding, a Christian cult may, therefore, be defined theologically as a religious group that presents itself as Christian but practises a distorted Christianity and does not affirm the beliefs of the early church's creeds. The creeds illuminate the essence of the gospel: that Christ, God's Son, came in human flesh to provide salvation and reconciliation with God. Martin agrees, stating that a cult stems from 'major deviations of orthodox Christianity relative to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, particularly the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ' (Martin 1955:12; McDowell & Stewart 1982:17). Martin, as quoted by Melton (2014), further suggests that:

[C]ultism ... [is] the adherence to doctrines which are pointedly contradictory to orthodox Christianity and which yet claim the distinction of either tracing their origin to orthodox sources or of being in essential harmony with those sources. (p. 223)

In addition, because churches are faith communities, not only creeds (dogma) but also the actual practice of the Christian life must be considered. These two evaluation areas are, therefore, focused on the development of the 2TPEF (see Table 1) and the application thereof to KwaSizabantu Mission (see Table 2).

Research methods and design

This qualitative study consists of two phases. During phase 1, the literature from various databases, such as EBSCOhost, JStor, Google Scholar and Scopus, was searched using terms such as 'cult', 'evaluation', 'Christian' and 'protestant'. From these searches, prominent scholars within the cult research field were identified, such as Martin (1955), McDowell and Stewart (1982), Melton (2014), Roberts (2015) and Stoker (2020). After a review of typical characteristics of cults, characteristics proven to be a consensus of multiple sources were selected for the 2TPEF (see Table 1). The synthesised 2TPEF was then checked at face value by two independent

scholars on cults. After some minor adjustments, this framework was applied to the KwaSizabantu Mission within an evaluative case study.

During phase 2, both *key informant sampling* (Patton 2015:284) and *snowball sampling* (Patton 2015:270; Yin 2016:95) methods with insiders were applied to select as interviewees, individuals who could offer rich cultural and historic information on the ministry of KwaSizabantu, and its founder and director, Erlo Stegen. A combination of these sampling methods identified various key informants who were not on the initial list. The interviewees included individuals who worked with Erlo Stegen during most of his ministry's time span, traditional and community leaders, members of the Zulu nobility and ministers of the gospel.

Further data were gleaned from the Exodus film (a News24 documentary on KwaSizabantu), newspaper articles, several academic writings and reports on KwaSizabantu, 50 transcribed sermons, 20 interviews and 20 newsletters. Moreover, the writings and allegations of critics, such as Botha (2019), Greeff (2003) and Pilon (2016), as well as the News24 Exodus film and reviews of it, were analysed. Data obtained from these sources provided a 'thick description' of the nature, structure, leadership and members of the KwaSizabantu Mission and criticisms thereof. The use of multiple sources of data enhanced *source (data) triangulation* (Flick 2018:191) and promoted internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell 2016:244, 245, 252; Yin 2016:87).

Data obtained from these various sources were merged, condensed and analysed (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014:12). The corresponding codes were allocated to data pertaining to descriptors contained within the 2TPEF. Further rigour was ensured by continuously moving back and forth between data and descriptors within the TPEF (Merriam & Tisdell 2016:202).

Development of a two-tier Protestant evaluative framework

In search of an adequate yardstick to evaluate the errant beliefs and practices of cults, we collected commonly cited principles from various esteemed authors on the topic. Table 1 describes the resulting set of criteria.

Table 1 displays 12 main groupings of characteristics listed by scholars in two different domains: doctrinal and practical or psychological. The evaluation of any group that claims to be Christian should begin with key doctrines, such as the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the authority of the Bible and the nature of sin and salvation, comparing the group's statements with orthodox positions to identify differences, if any (Melton 2014). However, as groups may appear to affirm orthodox Christian doctrine, yet act in ethical or abusive ways, doctrinal criteria must be accompanied by practical and psychological criteria.

TABLE 1: The two-tier Protestant evaluative framework (2TPEF).

Framework	Variable	Descriptives
Doctrinal essentials in Protestant Christianity		
1. God the Father	Doctrine of God	The Doctrine of God is similar in all three branches of Christianity, in that 'there are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory' (McDowell & Stewart 1982:32).
2. God the Son	The person of Jesus Christ	He is fully human and fully God (McDowell & Stewart 1982:35).
	The atonement	The Deity of Christ enabled Him to be sinless and therefore the blameless offering to a just God, receiving substitutionary punishment for the sins of the world (McDowell & Stewart 1982:47–48).
	Accepting a false Christ	Another Jesus is being accepted (Roberts 2015:355) – this is not the Jesus revealed through the Bible as the second person of the Holy Trinity, who lived a sinless life on earth and died as sacrifice for sins, and who rose from the dead and ascended into heaven sitting at the right hand of the Father. Salvation by works.
3. God the Holy Spirit	Deity of the Holy Spirit	The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity, is personal, is God and can be grieved (Eph 4:30), resisted (Ac 7:51) and lied to (Ac 5:3).
4. Scripture	Doctrine of authority	Divine inspiration and authority of the Old and New Testament. Protestant churches view Scripture alone as the final authority on all matters of faith and practice (McDowell & Stewart 1982:32).
	Viewing the Bible as sub-authoritative	Promotion of the false idea that God revealed a new truth that supersedes and contradicts all previous revelations. Reinterpretation of the Bible without the context. Non-biblical source of authority, which supersedes the Bible (Roberts 2015:355), or writings are added to the Bible (Roberts 2015:356), or translations of the Bible are purposefully twisted (Roberts 2015:357). Non-biblical teaching on the nature of God (Trinity).
		Atoning death of Christ on the cross, received by faith alone (McDowell & Stewart 1982:48).
5. People	Doctrine of salvation	
	Doctrine of man	God created people, male or female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness with dominion over creatures (McDowell & Stewart 1982:48–49). After the fall of man in Eden, his nature became corrupt.
	Judgement of man	Not referred to by McDowell and Stewart but laid down in Scripture (see Ja 2:13; 1 Pt 4:17; Mt 12:36; Jn 3:18; Mk 16:16; Rv 20:12–13; 2 Pt 2:9; 2 Tm 4:7–8).
6. Church	Doctrine of the Church	The true church comprises of individuals who trust Christ as their Saviour. Only the Holy Spirit's transforming work within the heart of the repentant sinner qualifies a person for membership in the true body of Christ (McDowell & Stewart 1982:47).
7. Spiritual world	Angels and demons	Not referred to by McDowell and Stewart but laid down in Scripture (see Ps 103:20; 1 Pt 1:10–12; 2 Th 1:7–9; Rv 12:7, 9; Heb 13:2).
Practical or psychological (Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:69–81)		
8. Leader	-	A cult leader makes the entire career and life decisions for the members (Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:69, 70).
9. Members	-	Cult members swear total allegiance to an all-powerful leader whom they believe to be the Messiah (Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:79–80).
	-	A cult's recruitment techniques are often deceptive (Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:80).
	-	A cult weakens the follower psychologically by making him or her depend upon the group to solve his or her problems (Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:81).
10. Manipulation (reconfigured conscience and emotional control)	-	Cult members are isolated from the outside world and any reality testing it could provide, and so develop a closed-mindedness (Martin & Zacharias 2003:37; Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:74).
	-	Within cults, rational thought is discouraged or forbidden (Martin & Zacharias 2003:36; Melton 2014:5). Cults manipulate guilt to their own advantage (Melton 2014:5; Stoker 2020:78–79).
11. Finances	-	Cults exist only for their own material gain or survival and make false promises to work in order to improve society (Melton 2014:5).
	-	Cult members often work full-time for the group for little or no pay (Melton 2014:5). Cults are secretive in their handling of finances (Melton 2014:5).
12. Other	-	Cults have apocalyptic tendencies in that they believe themselves to be the surviving remnant awaiting the end of the world (Melton 2014:5).
	-	Many cults operate using an 'ends justify the means' philosophy (Melton 2014:5).
	-	Cults show a frequent potential for violence (Melton 2014:5). Cults are anti-women, anti-children and anti-family (Melton 2014:5).

Source: Fleischmann, E.M.-L., 2020, 'Erlö Hartwig Stegen: A missiological evaluation of his life, ministry and teachings', PhD thesis, North-West University.

Case study: Evaluation of KwaSizabantu Mission

In order to consider the effectiveness of the 2TPEF as an evaluative tool, we applied it to the KwaSizabantu case. We obtained doctrinal information on the Mission from KwaSizabantu's website, services conducted by Rev Erlö Stegen and research studies of Hugo (1988), Van Rooy (1986), Kitshoff and Basson (1985), Oosthuizen (1985) and (Kim 2011). Because of the controversy and sharp difference in opinions concerning KwaSizabantu's actual practices and the accusations of serious abuse, for the practical or psychological criteria, we relied, in part, on the findings of an independent panel that recently investigated the Mission's practices.

Summary of the main allegations against KwaSizabantu

The following prime allegations were levelled against the Mission within the media:

- The Mission is a cult – thereby implying that the Mission's teachings are unscriptural, and that it uses nefarious ways to compel people to remain at the Mission.
- The Mission has tolerated and overlooked allegations of rape, sexual and physical assault of women and children.
- The Mission has tolerated, overlooked and facilitated virginity testing in contravention of subsections 12 (4) to (6) of the *Children's Act*.
- The Mission is involved in money laundering.

TABLE 2: 2TPEF application to doctrinal aspects of KwaSizabantu Mission.

Doctrinal essentials in Protestant Christianity	Doctrinal essentials accepted by KwaSizabantu	Descriptives
1. God the Father	Doctrine of God	KwaSizabantu Mission ministries uphold the apostolic confession of faith found on the Mission's website: https://www.ksb.org.za 'We believe: Within the one Being or essence of God, there eternally exists three distinct yet equal Persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).† 'We believe: There is one, and only one, true God: Creator and Sustainer of all things, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, Self-existent, Immutable, Spirit, Incomprehensible, Eternal, Sovereign and Master of the universe, infinitely perfect in love, goodness, holiness, and justice' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).†
2. God the Son	The person of Jesus Christ	'We believe: In the full Deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ. These two distinct natures, perfect deity and perfect humanity, are inseparably united in the one Person' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).† Stegen (1993:126–130) upholds the uniqueness of Christ as the second person of the Trinity and the very Son of God who came in the flesh.
	The atonement	'We believe: In Jesus Christ's virgin birth, sinless life, death on the cross for our sins, burial, bodily resurrection from the dead, ascension into heaven (where at the right hand of God, He is our High Priest, Advocate, Saviour, and Lord), and in His visible and bodily return' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).† Stegen stresses Christ as the only way to salvation (Hugo 1988:17).
	Accepting a false Christ	Biblical Jesus is being preached for the salvation of sinners. Many referrals to a biblical Christ being preached, also as the second person of the Holy Trinity. A thematic analysis of Easter sermons provides sufficient evidence that Christ is being preached as the sinless Son of God who came in the flesh of man, died for the sins of humankind, and rose from death and ascend into heaven. Salvation through faith preached also stated within the KSB creed. However, a balance is found between faith and the living out of that faith, which is only possible through the grace of God. Christ is preached as the Saviour, where nothing can be added for salvation (Kitshoff & Basson 1985:52). There is also an emphasis on individuals to work out their faith in fear and trembling according to Scripture (Phil 2:12).
3. God the Holy Spirit	Deity of the Holy Spirit	'We believe: In the full Deity and full personality of the Holy Spirit and in His work in regeneration and sanctification, and His work of uniting His Church' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).† The Holy Spirit as described in Scripture and highlighted through the revival, such as His power and holiness, which convicts and guides a sinner to repentance (Kitshoff & Basson 1985:52).
4. Scripture	Doctrine of authority	'We believe: The Holy Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired Word of God, without error in the original manuscripts, the complete revelation of His will for our salvation and the Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).† Since the inception of the revival in 1966, the whole Bible is accepted as the unfailing Word of God. Commentaries are also used, whilst placing emphasis on God's holiness and sovereignty (Natale NGK Sinode 1983:571). Kim (2011:266) remarks that these key biblical principles have been kept for half a century of KwaSizabantu Mission's existence and are also observed in 2020.
	Viewing the Bible as sub-authoritative	Not present. Scripture is used to evaluate all revelations. The KwaSizabantu Mission does not teach a new doctrine or hold the view of exclusive ownership of the truth (KSB 2000:4). Whole Bible preached, variety of preachers also from other protestant denominations which include international academics from time to time. A full range of sermon topics publicly are available at the KSB Media room and on the internet (https://www.ksb.org.za/all-sermons/). Authority of the Bible supersedes that of other revelations as noticed within sermons where the Bible takes a prominent place (Sermons are translated simultaneously into several languages, with the original language available on MP3). No non-biblical teachings on the nature of God (Trinity) were found within the analysis of 50 randomly selected transcribed sermons of Rev Erlo Stegen.
5. People	Doctrine of salvation	'We believe: Salvation comes only by the grace and love of God, through regeneration by the Holy Spirit, repentance of sin, and faith in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).†
	Doctrine of man	'We believe: Human beings were created in the image of God, to glorify God and be in fellowship with Him. We, however, rebelled against Him and are now sinners by nature and by choice. We, therefore, stand condemned before God, deserving of His wrath and are unable to reconcile ourselves to Him by any form or amount of human works, merits, or ceremonies' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).†
	Judgement of man	'We believe: In the bodily resurrection of the dead, of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with the Lord, of the unbeliever to judgment, everlasting conscious torment and separation from God. We further believe in the conscious existence of all souls between death and resurrection, of the believer in heaven with God, of the unbeliever in Hades apart from the Lord' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).†
6. Church	Doctrine of the Church	'We believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting' (KwaSizabantu statement of faith).†

Source: Fleischmann, E.M.-L., 2020, 'Erlo Hartwig Stegen: A missiological evaluation of his life, ministry and teachings', PhD thesis, North-West University.

†, KwaSizabantu Mission's confession of faith (see <https://www.ksb.org.za>).

2TPEF, two-tier Protestant evaluative framework.

- The Mission has contravened section 32 of the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA)*, 1997.

Each of these allegations were investigated by an independent panel and will be dealt with within the broader framework of 2TPEF.

Summary of findings from the independent panel regarding the main allegations

As a result of the seriousness of the charges lodged against KwaSizabantu and reported in the media, the Mission created an external committee, who, in turn, appointed an

independent panel of two well-respected individuals who had no prior contact with the Mission and mandated them to conduct their own investigation and publish their findings independently. KwaSizabantu Mission covered the panel's costs but had no role in the selection of its members. The panel members include Peter Le Mottee, an attorney with a bachelor's degree in Theology, and advocate Khumbu Shazi, who previously assisted the Scorpions¹ in prosecuting cases of organised crime, money laundering and sexual offences. After their investigation, the panel reported the following findings:

1.The Scorpions, a now dissolved unit of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) used to investigate and prosecute organised crime and corruption in South Africa. The team comprised of some of South Africa's expert prosecutors, police, financial, forensic and intelligence experts.

- The Mission cannot be characterised as a cult (Shazi & Mottee 2020:11), as its teaching is Scriptural.
- 'There is no credible evidence that claims of rape were reported to the Mission and that the Mission covered up' (Shazi & Mottee 2020:12). In relation to physical abuse, corporal punishment did take place before 1995, but the Mission put an end to such practices a year before corporal punishment was outlawed in 1996 (Shazi & Mottee 2020:12).
- The Mission has not tolerated, overlooked or facilitated virginity testing in contravention of subsections 12 (4) to (6) of the *Children's Act*, 2005. In 1996, the Mission abolished virginity testing performed by Zulu parents within their cultural tradition, almost a decade before the *Children's Act* was enacted (Shazi & Mottee 2020:12).
- The panel found no evidence that companies affiliated to the KwaSizabantu are involved in money laundering. Moreover, it was found that employees of the Mission and its affiliated companies were remunerated timeously and in monetary form as required by section 32 of the BCEA (Shazi & Mottee 2020:13).

Thus, the main allegations of former members against the Mission, as reported by News24 and other media organisations, were unfounded.

After an in-depth evaluation of KwaSizabantu, using the criteria listed in Table 1, the following inferences are displayed in Table 2.

Findings related to KwaSizabantu's practices

There is substantial evidence that KwaSizabantu upholds doctrinal and practical essentials in Protestant Christianity. This section focuses on practical essentials, which seem to have been misrepresented by the media and critics of KwaSizabantu.

Leadership

Although Stegen is the director of the Mission, he works closely with fellow leaders. Although leadership positions are not formally chosen, spontaneous fulfilment of these tasks occurs according to KwaSizabantu, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, who calls and equips individuals to fulfil specific roles (Hugo 1988:18). Hugo and Van Rooy view spontaneous fulfilment of offices as more scriptural than elections through voting (Hugo 1988:25; Van Rooy 1987:36). These scholars point out that according to the New Testament, an office requires the possession of a gift of the Holy Spirit to fulfil the task, whilst being equipped with the authority of the Holy Spirit (Hugo 1988:25; Van Rooy 1987:36). However, should the Holy Spirit be grieved in any way, this also becomes evident through a fruitlessness or 'bad fruit' of that ministry. Those called into God's work have a distinct measure of responsibility and diligence because of their relationship with Christ and His calling on their lives.

Leaders of the Mission are, therefore, respected for their abilities, as provided through the Holy Spirit and not tightly controlled by Stegen.

One of his co-workers observed that Stegen is not in a hurry to get involved with 'important things and people' but is careful to feed his master's sheep and little lambs, whoever they might be (Olsen 2006:1). Possibly because of this focus, even during times of severe criticism and slanderous personal attacks, Stegen keeps himself busy by helping those in need and visiting the sick. Mchunu (2019:FPA/I22), a co-worker for decades, observed Stegen's humility, faithfulness and integrity. This attitude explains Stegen's effective leadership style, which people with a business mindset sometimes tend to misunderstand.

Recruitment of members

In contrast to normal organisational recruitment practices, members are added to the Mission only if they indicate a personal calling to support the work. Those that come to repentance under Stegen's ministry are encouraged to go back to their own church, support the ministry there and live a scriptural life (Stegen 1988:FPA/D32).

Finances: Improvement of communities at KwaSizabantu's expense

KwaSizabantu has a 50-year record of serving neighbouring communities and their leaders. Over this time, an estimated 3 million people have visited the Mission free of charge. In contrast to the tendency of cults to pay attention to their own financial interests, KwaSizabantu endeavours to serve surrounding, low-income rural communities. One such example is the provision of tertiary education to rural students, including those belonging to other denominations and communities. KwaSizabantu also hosts a bi-annual, seven-day youth conference, which draws between 4000 and 6000 youths, mostly from rural areas. No registration or transportation fee is requested by KwaSizabantu, and meals and accommodation are provided free of charge. Unsurprisingly, this correlates with Rev Stegen's focus on supporting various communities and their church leaders (Olsen 2006:1). One such example is the support provided to over 18500 youths struggling with drug addiction-related problems, who were enrolled in the Mission's 21-day restoration programme from 2013 to 2020 free of charge.

KwaSizabantu has not, from its inception in the 1970s to the present, requested or collected any donations or money, thus not being a burden to any; however, it has endeavoured to be self-sustainable through various projects such as aQuellé and the Emseni Farming projects. Ironically, it was these very projects that News24 (Basson 2020) sought to shut down. Visitors and workers at the Mission are free to come and go at any time, although because of the COVID-19 pandemic, free movement was restricted in 2020.

Finances: Support for church leaders

Another example of support for other ministries, an activity in which authoritarian groups would have no reason to engage, is the bi-annual ministers' conference held at the Mission's own expense. These conferences are open to all denominations, typically drawing about 1600 ministers and Christian workers per conference.

During these conferences, numerous ministers from a variety of denominations and parachurch organisations have been invited to speak, including Anglican; French Protestant Fellowship; the Secretary General of the Alliance Church in Africa; Pentecostal; Youth for Christ; a Senior Counsel for European Centre for Law and Justice; a director of L'Abri; the Archbishop of the Protestant Lutheran Church in Rega, Latvia; the president and founder of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa; Reformed theologians and Dutch Reformed ministers. Out of approximately 240 sermons during these conferences, Stegen himself delivered only 50. Since 1988, KwaSizabantu has provided accommodation and meals for more than 36 such ministers' conferences at its own expense. Ministers from various churches broadcast their sermons on a regular basis over Radio Khwezi, which KwaSizabantu owns and operates. Even though KwaSizabantu is theologically Protestant, Catholic leaders, such as Cardinal Wilfrid Napier, who visited KwaSizabantu towards the end of 2020, have also expressed their support for this work.

Case study conclusions

Table 2 summarises the assessment of KwaSizabantu on each of the criteria presented in the 2PTEF. The following two inferences can be drawn:

- Doctrinal inference: KwaSizabantu is accurately aligned with mainstream doctrines of the Protestant faith. Sermons of Rev Erlo Stegen show that no theological shift has been observed during the last 50 years. Sermons uphold the Bible as the absolute authority with an emphasis on living a scriptural life. Therefore, KwaSizabantu cannot be characterised as a cult according to its doctrine.
- Practical and psychological inference: KwaSizabantu does not show any organisational cultic characteristics.

The application of 2TPEF indicates that KwaSizabantu is theologically orthodox, and that the practical and psychological charges against it are unfounded.

Discussion

The proposed evaluative framework developed in this study has potential for two applications. It can enable Protestant communities to monitor the periphery of their religious circle against cultic activities, whilst enabling groups facing criticism to provide suitable evidence of the legitimacy of their religious stance.

When accusations are made against any religious group, there can be two unfortunate results: legitimate concerns can

be dismissed, or false allegations may be believed or amplified in such a way as to harm the work of a valuable organisation. The 2PTEF does not address all possible forms of inappropriate teaching or behaviour by an ostensibly Christian entity, but it offers useful guidance for a usually achievable investigation of key matters of doctrine and practice. A reasonably thorough enquiry into the matters presented in the 2PTEF should provide enough information to determine whether involvement with any specific organisation should be endorsed or discouraged, or if further investigation is needed.

Within any denomination or ministry, disgruntled persons and ex-members may be found. Sometimes there is an honest difference in opinion on important matters, which Christians may disagree on; in other cases, the criticisms allege behaviour, such as sexual or psychological abuse, that no Christians would knowingly support. In the latter type of situation, any allegation should be taken seriously and not ignored, even if the organisation being targeted has had a good reputation up to that point. However, it is unjust towards any Christian ministry to accept the word of the disgruntled and then apply generalisations and sweeping criticisms to the entire ministry.

The recent News24 exposé of KwaSizabantu appears to be an example of such a reaction. Relying only on reports by ex-members, some of whom had left more than 25 years ago, reporters failed to gain in-depth insights into the holistic work carried out by the Mission. In addition, there remains a forensic disconnect between the presumed serious but vague allegations and the lack of corroborated evidence. For example, failure to file a police complaint against the Mission by the aggrieved over the presumed serious allegations obscured the validity and reliability of the claims, making cross-examination impossible. Not surprisingly, a number of these allegations were proved by the independent panel to be incorrect, and evidence of cultic or improper behaviour remains lacking.

The KwaSizabantu case highlights the importance of proper investigation that responsibly examines the credibility of informants and their statements, rather than rushing to a conclusion. Media sources with an incentive to attract viewers or readers may sometimes fall short of appropriate rigour in their evaluation of evidence and their preparation of sensationalistic reports, but Christians who care about treating others with integrity and respect must not do so.

In the evaluation of any ministry, careful discernment and scriptural guidance are required, along with humble recognition that the exclusive ownership of all truth ultimately belongs to God. We, therefore, urge all fellow Christians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12), as all will be judged through His Word (Jn 12:48) and by Him in the light of eternity. May none of his workers be found wanting on that great day.

Conclusion

The vague use of the term 'cult' in popular media has the potential to cause ambiguity, thus damaging the trust in Christ. The objective of this study was to provide a viable 2TPEF to identify cultic characteristics in a religious group. The proposed framework was applied to South Africa's KwaSizabantu Mission as a case study. Applying the 2TPEF in the case study demonstrates how it operates as a workable tool; in this case, it explained why the KwaSizabantu Mission cannot be viewed as a cult. In addition, the 2TPEF may serve for comparative purposes or used by religious groups themselves to demonstrate their position relative to Protestant Christianity.

Strengths and limitations

The insider position of one of the authors provided a 'thick-description' of insider information, which is essential for qualitative research. As this strength may also pose a limitation of subjectivity of this one author, the limitation was offset by incorporating multiple authors with no connection to the Mission. Although time and resources limited opportunity for further research, the amount of material collected led to data saturation.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the Society of Christian Scholars for providing a pre-review free of charge.

Competing interests

Although one of the authors is part of KwaSizabantu Mission ministries and provided insider information of this evangelical religious group, the other authors have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

E.F., I.W.F. and F.M. contributed equally to this article.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the North-West University Ethical Committee (NWU-01861-19-A6).

Funding information

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

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the

official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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