AOSIS

A Pentecostal perspective of mission in the context of violence

Check for updates

Author:
Mangaliso Matshobane[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Tshwane, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Mangaliso Matshobane, matshmm@unisa.ac.za

Several cases have been reported to the police since 2022, where at gunpoint, criminals would storm into the church building in the middle of a sermon and demand congregants to hand over their electronic gadgets and cash. This traumatic experience has, in some cases, resulted in the loss of lives. The question that this article interrogates is why criminals are targeting Pentecostal churches. Literature reveals that most Pentecostal churches in urban areas, where this criminal practice is prevalent, have an affluent membership. This affluence is mainly demonstrated by their flamboyant cars parked in the church's parking lot and, in some cases, their expensive dress code. Another attraction to Pentecostals by criminals is the recent media attention on controversial Pentecostal pastors who extort money from their members, which creates an impression that Pentecostal churches are an easy target for quick cash acquisition. A literary analysis using relevant case studies will be engaged to demonstrate how such violent crimes negatively impact the mission of Pentecostals. The study's objective is to provide a solution on how Pentecostal churches can protect themselves against this violent phenomenon that threatens their mission in communities. Kritzinger's theoretical framework of missiological encounterology, buttressed by the Spiral Dynamics theory, will be used to describe how Pentecostals, as agents of God's mission, encounter violence caused by the context of poverty, drawing from the ecclesiological practices of other Pentecostals in East and West Africa who have learnt how to do mission within the context of security vulnerabilities. This framework will further assist Pentecostals to reflect on their theology and spirituality in the context of security vulnerability and help them develop practical action points to help them maintain the mission in their daily reflections.

Contribution: One of those pragmatic outcomes is for Pentecostal churches to hold dialogues among themselves and with strategic stakeholders such as private security companies, including the South African Police Services (SAPS) and its community policing forums, in protecting the mission of the gospel within vulnerable communities.

Keywords: Pentecostals; mission; violence; missiological encounterology; security vulnerability.

Introduction

The church in South Africa is under siege by criminals who are robbing congregants of their electronic gadgets and cash during a church worship service. On 08 July 2024, an incident of church robbery was reported where the African Evangelical Church held their regional conference in Lasev Resort, North of Pretoria (Pijoos 2024). A month later, another similar incident, which went viral on social media, was reported in Gqeberha. The latter incident happened on the 05 August in a Pentecostal Church in New Brighton where four armed young men stormed into the church building during preaching and demanded electronic gadgets and money from worshippers. Police have subsequently arrested two boys suspected of the robbery (Marriah-Maharaj 2024).

These kinds of church robberies have been reported on the news media for the past 2 years, but now they are recurring almost monthly. Some of these incidences are accompanied by assault of worshippers and even deaths. Most of these incidences are reported among Pentecostal churches, which seem to be a target for these robbers (Fiorillo 2023; Mosebetsi 2024; Sekhotho 2023; Solomons 2022; Thathia 2023). The question that this article will probe is why criminals are targeting Pentecostal churches. Could it be that the recent media attention on controversial Pentecostal pastors who extort exorbitant amounts of money from their members positions Pentecostals as vulnerable to criminal activity, and it creates an impression that Pentecostal

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Mission and Vulnerability', under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Lukwikilu Mangayi and Prof. Lygunda Fohle.

churches are an easy target for quick cash acquisition? Perhaps the affluence that most urban living Pentecostals display through the expensive cars they drive and the expensive clothes they wear when going to church creates an impression that they carry valuables, including cash (James 2019).

A literary analysis will be conducted to ascertain the cause of this phenomenon, using a conceptual framework which combines Kritzinger's (2008) missiological encounterology and the spiral dynamics of Beck et al. (2018). Kritzinger's framework will be used to describe how Pentecostals, as agents of God's mission, encounter violence caused by the context of poverty, drawing from the ecclesiological practices of other Pentecostals in East Africa who have learnt how to do mission within the context of security vulnerabilities. This framework will further assist Pentecostals to reflect on their theology and spirituality in the context of security vulnerability and help them develop practical action points to help them maintain the mission in their reflexivity. The framework of Beck et al. will highlight the reasons behind the diversity in the code of ethics between the two worlds of church and the criminal element of society to provide an amicable solution that will protect God's mission of the redemption of society through the church.

Conceptual framework

Missiology as encounterology

Kritzinger is a professor emeritus and a missiologist from a reformed theological background; although not a Pentecostal, his theoretical framework of mission as encounterology fits well within the Pentecostal tradition, which is a tradition of encounter. Missiology as encounterology is a framework Kritzinger (2008) developed as a response to Meiring (1995) on the religions of South Africa and their interrelations. He critiques Meiring's book of *Suid-Afrika, land van baie godsdienste* [South Africa, land of many religions], which compares other religions with the Christian religion from a Christian perspective. This comparative analysis privileges the Christian religion and fails to engage in an equal footing with other religions objectively, thereby 'othering' instead of treating them as fellow believers despite their different belief systems. He queries a lack of reflexivity where the authors must consider their biases and open the door to appreciate other religions' contributions to society. The other critique of the book is its prerogative of discussing other religions without hearing from them and letting them speak for themselves. If other religions do not speak for themselves, they can be easily misrepresented and prejudiced and, as a result, be treated as objects of missions through conversion. In all, he advocates for mutual respect of other religions as fellow believers, from which we can learn not just about others, but more about ourselves in relation to others.

To achieve this goal of treating others with respect, Kritzinger posits that while Religious Studies and Systematic Theology, respectively, deal with what others believe and what we as Christians believe about them, Missiology, on the other hand, deals with how we encounter others. This encounter with others needs a 'praxis approach which integrates all the significant factors shaping the dynamics of interreligious encounter' (Kritzinger 2008:769).

Kritzinger uses Lochhead's characterisation of theory, which he derives from two premises: a minor premise with doctrine and a central premise with ideology. Out of Lochhead's theory, Kritzinger proposes seven dimensions that can be used in a field of praxis when interrelating with others, and these are agency, context analysis, ecclesial analysis, theological reflection, practical projects, reflexivity and finally, spirituality as a driving force behind all. Kritzinger calls this process encounterology, inspired by Koyama's (1974) mission concept of neighbourology, where he advocates for a mission that goes beyond the reality of doctrine to that which embraces the reality of the neighbour.

In this study, Kritzinger's theoretical framework is used to compare the Pentecostal church with the criminals targeting them. It is easy to dismiss the criminals as preying on Pentecostals without understanding the underlying factors that cause this kind of behaviour. This is where we are 'othering' instead of looking at them as members of the community who are themselves vulnerable to the challenges posed by their environment. Kritzinger's framework does not intend to solve the problem between two contrasting philosophies or views of life, rather, it allows an open conversation between groups, most likely not to be in the conversation. The theory of Spiral Dynamics attempts to provide the logic behind this strange phenomenon of church attacks by studying different ways of thinking that influence behaviour informed by life circumstances. It also tries to point to an organic solution, which addresses both parties in conflict, hence our subsequent discussion.

Spiral dynamics

Whereas missiological encounterology focuses on how to do missions in a hostile environment, it does not delve into the psycho-social patterns that inform this untoward behaviour to deconstruct the reason behind this criminal behaviour against the church. The theory of Spiral Dynamics explains why humans behave the way they do and how this behaviour evolves through time into a specific master code based on varying value systems.

The concept of spiral dynamics was inspired by the work of Graves (1974) in his article *The Futurist.* His work deals with the emergence of humans over time who, when faced with challenges that they did not prepare for, re-invent themselves to 'a newer, higher-order system, behavior, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Later, this theory became known as Spiral Dynamics' (Beck et al. 2018:xviii). This Spiral Dynamics argue that humans are always in a state of constant change because society is not static; as a result, whatever was the solution yesterday can evolve into a problem today, which will require another change of path. Various codes inform this pattern in human behaviour, be they ethical codes, social

codes, legal codes, etcetera, which sometimes are not pronounced but are assumed by all in organisational, institutional, or societal cultures; hence, Beck coined the phrase humanity's master code. To simplify the concept of Spiral Dynamics, Beck devised a categorisation based on colour codes to depict varying human ways of thinking or views over the years of human existence. Eight codes depict human thinking, that is, how people think, not necessarily what they think. These codes have been divided into colour codes to depict how individuals can master their environments. The warm colours beige, red, orange, and yellow focus on the individual's relation with the environment, whereas purple, blue, green, and turquoise focus on the group and its relationship with the environment. For our study, the focus will be on the colours red and blue. Red (the criminals) represents egocentric, self-preserving tyrants who will have their way at all costs, including dominating others. Blue (the church), on the other hand, represents a code that enforces a communal code of conduct based on eternal principles of absolutes and righteous pathways, resulting in a code of law and order in society.

Pentecostals as agents of God's mission

The first aspect of the framework is to reveal the identity of the agent, which, in this case, is the Pentecostal church, its social and economic aspects, including its social position about the criminals, and the power dynamics between the two.

Pentecostalism is a Christian faith tradition whose beginning can be traced from the roots of Pietism, Puritanism and Wesleyan perfectionism, also known as the holiness movement (Dieter 1996). The revival of 1857–1858, also known as the Third Great Awakening, fuelled the Pentecostal roots and experienced more growth after the American Civil War (1861–1865) through a splinter group named 'Third Blessing' (Faupel 2019). This Third Blessing took a position of a pneumatologically centred Christology where it named the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a legitimate process of sanctification for a believer, a position which the other two groups, Classical and Keswick, were not so bold to take. Isolated traces of the Pentecostal tradition and experiences were evidenced in various parts of the world, but this evidence was pronounced in 1906 during the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles. William Seymour, an African American, led this revival. It was a similar experience to that of the early church outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts (Anderson 2006). Pentecostals are arguably one of the fastest-growing traditions of the Christian faith, with the latest estimates at 644 million, representing 26% of all Christians globally (Johnson & Zurlo 2020). In their various traditions, Pentecostals are very mission-focused, with the ultimate intention of converting many to Christianity by using every means possible and every opportunity available to challenge individuals to encounter Christ, hence their stupendous growth.

Their missional focus is seen in their ability to be adaptable and flexible in planting churches anywhere, and everywhere they can find a space to worship, whether it is a place that used to be a brothel, a cinema, a retail shop, or a school classroom (Adeboye 2012; Nterful 2020). This adaptability accounts for their ability to reach communities by going to places that are familiar spaces for the community; unfortunately, they are also familiar spaces for criminals. They use conventional Sunday services to worship and hold special evangelistic meetings in the evening to reach those working during the day, even on weekends. It is in these evening worship meetings that they are attacked and robbed by criminals, as per media reports.

Most Pentecostal churches in urban areas where these criminal activities are prevalent display affluence based on the cars they drive and, in some instances, the dress code, including the social media coverage of some of their controversial affluent pastors. The power dynamics are such that the Pentecostals portray an upward economic trajectory while the criminals, on the other hand, are economically at the bottom of the scale (Meyer 2007). Hence, they come to rob those at the top. This sociological concept is what Galtung calls a structural conflict because conflict is not against the two entities. However, it is caused by unequal economic structures, which put the entities on opposite sides (Galtung 1996). Next is the focus on the context where these two entities exist, further complicating the situation.

The context of poverty

The second aspect of the framework is the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence the context in which these entities (the Pentecostal church and the criminals) find themselves and how they view these challenges and relate to each other within this context.

The context in which these robberies are taking place are poor communities where these criminals originate. One of the biggest causes of poverty is unemployment, which stands at 33.5% in the second quarter of 2024, from 32.9% in the first quarter, an increase of 0.6%, which in numbers means that there were 5.2 million people unemployed in the first quarter of 2024. However, in the second quarter, they were 8.3 million, an increase of 3.2 million (Maluleke 2024). According to the Trading Economics report, the youth, who are the perpetrators of these church robberies, are the most affected by the increased unemployment rate in the second quarter of 2024, which stands at 60.8%, from the previous rate of 59.7%, making South Africa the second highest in unemployed youth globally (Trading Economics 2024).

Another factor contributing to a high rate of unemployment among the youth (15–34 years) is limited education, particularly for those without matric, and various social and economic disadvantages (Statistics South Africa [STATSSA] 2022). One of the social challenges within neighbourhoods is gangsterism, which tends to be appealing to these young

people because it looks like an easy way out of poverty. Unemployment fuels this lifestyle of gangsterism, where young people are recruited into criminal activities, which for a season gives them power over poverty and marginalisation, earning them a higher status in the gang (Wood & Alleyne 2010). This sense of importance and respect is very attractive to young people from poor, dysfunctional families and communities. (Bowers Du Toit 2014; Daniels & Adams 2010).

Poverty and unemployment are not just issues that the church alone must deal with by themselves. However, they are issues that society must work through to provide a solution. As custodians of the welfare of its citizens, the government must be at the forefront of poverty alleviation by creating employment for citizens. The comprehensive social security programme and integrated development in the Department of Social Development aims to alleviate and reduce poverty, particularly in cases of loss of income and empower young people (Department of Social Development 2024). The impact of this commitment by the government is underwhelming, given the high rate of unemployment, especially youth unemployment, which is prone to acts of criminality. Small business enterprise (SME) is one of the leading sectors for creating jobs in South Africa and should be an area that is deliberately enhanced (Nkomana 2021).

The Pentecostal churches know this context of poverty, unemployment, and various social ills. That is why some of them intentionally planted their churches in these contexts to provide the answer by preaching the gospel. The criminals, on the other hand, see the church's presence and message as irrelevant to their pressing poverty needs, and they opt to see the congregants' money and electronic gadgets as a more tangible and practical solution to the problem of poverty. Therefore, these two entities (Pentecostals and criminals) are in two different worlds and operate from different paradigms. However, it is still the obligation of the Pentecostal church as agents of God's mission to provide a solution to the community that criminals ravage. This point of the discussion takes us to the next aspect of this theoretical framework, which scrutinises the church's activities in addressing the challenges of its community.

Ecclesial scrutiny: What has the church been doing regarding crime prevention?

The third aspect deals with the conventional practices of both entities in their encounter with each other. Pentecostals, like all other South Africans, are aware of the level of crime that ravages the community, and some have encountered crime in their capacity. Therefore, this has prompted Pentecostals to pray against crime, even as scripture exhorts prayers for peace in the land (Tm 1 2:1–3). Whether all Pentecostals practise this habit of prayer against crime in their daily fellowship cannot be guaranteed because there is no standard liturgy that Pentecostals follow (Anderson 2016). It is unthinkable in Pentecostal tradition for a physical danger that threatens the life of congregants to happen during a worship service. In the minds of Pentecostals, those who dare to cause trouble during the worship service can probably be struck down by God's wrath, as it happened in the case of Ananias and Saphira when they committed the crime of lying against the Holy Spirit in church (Ac 5:1–11). The recent crimes, therefore, present a challenge to Pentecostals in their view of crime and God's protection for congregants.

As an observer participant for over 30 years in the Pentecostal church in South Africa, I have observed that most Pentecostal churches do not have an active ministry towards crime prevention except for a few like Grace Bible Church of Soweto, Hope Restoration Ministries in Thembisa and others (Matshobane 2023). It is, therefore, an area which most Pentecostals still need to develop, the same way that in the past, there was not much ministry to the poor among Pentecostals. However, today, ministry to the poor has become a common practice among Pentecostals (Warrington 2011).

Criminals, on the other hand, have primarily targeted church property when congregants are not around, with a few exceptions where harassment of congregants is motivated by political or religious extremism (Maseno 2019; Ojedokun & Oduoye 2020; Scheitle 2016; Scheitle & Ulmer 2018). The growing phenomenon of church robberies during a worship service is a new phenomenon that needs further research from a multidisciplinary approach. The theological reflection of Pentecostals on crime should inform their praxis, which will be further discussed in the next section.

It must be stated that the church is not the only role player in the fight against crime, but communities must also partner with the church in fighting crime committed against the church. In most cases, community members will know who committed the crime. However, they may also choose to conceal their identity for fear of being targeted by the very criminals unless there is a healthy relationship between the community and the church, just as the case is when it comes to effective policing (McGuire, Evans & Kane 2021).

Theological reflections: How do they interpret their religious tradition?

Pentecostals, because of their alignment to biblical theology, use a literal hermeneutic as their lens of interpretation of the scripture, which is descriptive and inductive, while on the other hand, reformed theology uses systematic theology as a topical ordering of biblical truths presented logically and synchronically (Nel 2015; Warrington 2008). Pentecostals, therefore, view church robberies as the breaking of the Ten Commandments, which specifically refer to the declaration that: 'Thou shall not steal' Exodus 20:15. There is, therefore, an expectation for God to punish robbers, especially those who steal in the house of the Lord (Zch 5:4). Pentecostals also expect God to protect his people from danger through the ministry of his angels (Ps 91:10, 11).

In the light of this literal hermeneutical understanding, the question that bothers Pentecostals is where these angels were when gunmen stormed the church building and demanded everyone to lie on the ground and hand over their gadgets (Tshwete 2024). Conventionally, every crime, including this one of robbing congregants, should be seen as the sufferings experienced in our modern times. However, most Pentecostals, especially neo-Pentecostals, struggle with the concept of suffering because of their triumphalist view (eds. Kgatle, Thinane & Kaunda 2021; Warrington 2008). They do not see how a God of love can choose a path of suffering for them, so they perceive it as an attack by evil and something that should be fought and conquered (Anderson 1999).

On the other hand, criminals perceive doing a crime as a way to attain a social status among their peers no matter where it is done and how it is done; the more unconventional the crime, the better because it gains them a certain status. Doing a crime is a demonstration of coercive power through violence, especially among gangs (Knox in Wood & Alleyne 2010:106). Criminals take their values as seriously as a religion, especially those in gangsterism, because of the ranking system that governs the gang, where new members must prove themselves worthy of being part of a gang by committing specified criminal activities in the same way that new religious members must go through a series of teachings and demonstrate the fruit of righteous living for them to be regarded as members in good standing in the church (Lambrechts 2012). These two entities, the Pentecostal church and the gangs, are, therefore, on opposite sides in their value systems, but it remains the mission of the church to reach out to them and demonstrate God's unconditional love to them. The discussion will, therefore, move to what can be practically done by Pentecostals to reach out to criminals and the community they live in, while at the same time safeguarding their members from harassment and victimisation.

Discernment for action: A strategy for a transformative action

Research shows that the presence of a church within a neighbourhood brings a sense of ethical consciousness to that neighbourhood, especially if the church is actively involved in empowering the community (Warner & Konkel 2019). This involvement by the church, which positively affects the behaviour of the community, is also known as an informal social control of the community, based on a theory called social disorganisation in the field of sociology (Bursik & Grasmick 1993; Kornhauser 1978; Triplett, Gainey & Sun 2003). Informal social control occurs when relational connectedness exists between the institution and the public. This article probes how connected Pentecostal churches are with their communities to a point where they can influence the community's behaviour and, in return, be protected by the community during times of crime or some emergency. If the church has not been proactive in addressing the crime that ravages the community by empowering the community

to be crime-free, the church will have to come face to face with crime through such incidences as robbery.

Pentecostals must realise that times of desperation for survival cause the desperate criminals to put themselves in harm's way; having no respect for God or people, they are willing to do anything to get money, even rob churches during the worship service. Therefore, Pentecostals must be willing to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to matters of security where they are not just praying for the community, but also working in partnership with the community and with security services in both the public and private sectors to prevent these robberies from happening.

Traditionally, Pentecostals are inclined towards addressing the spiritual needs above the social needs of society. In most cases, their response to social needs will be limited to prayer and evangelism (Warrington 2011:19–20). Although this indifference of Pentecostals towards social issues is changing, especially in the Global South, it has not yet reached a critical mass that can tip the scale for all Pentecostal churches to engage in social transformation agenda (Adeboye 2007; Anderson 2014; Warrington 2011:22–25). Pentecostals must reach out to the community with a gospel that addresses their social and spiritual needs. This outreach will prompt the community to reciprocate by protecting the church from criminal activity. Pentecostals must take the time to study the psychology behind young people who are raised in dysfunctional communities and target them as a mission field before they are recruited into gangsterism by their circumstances of life.

The South African church needs to learn from other nations on how they have handled church attacks. One of the standard features in East African churches is the presence of armed guards, whether private or government security, with a metal detector at the entrance gates of the church. Security personnel frisk male and female attendants, and handbags, including carry-on luggage, are checked (Maseno 2019:102).

The case of a Pentecostal church in Mombasa named Joy Jesus Church can guide how to prevent church attacks proactively. After the random shooting of congregants of Joy Jesus Church, where four congregants were killed and 17 others badly injured, the police were deployed to places of worship in Kenya, some wearing police uniforms and others in civilian clothes. Their job was to put surveillance on all places of worship to safeguard them from terrorist attacks. In addition, the churches hired private security of young people who served as additional security (Maseno 2019:105).

Although the South African context is slightly different from the one in Kenya, where terrorist groups conduct attacks, the Kenya defence strategy can be adopted by placing security personnel at the church's gates where attendants can be searched. Private and public armed security can be hired to watch the church during worship services. This kind of visible security will deter criminals from attempting to invade the church premises; instead, they will respect the church because it is no longer an easy target for crime. The

big challenge is affordability because security is costly. Those Pentecostal churches that cannot afford professional security costs can engage the community and train volunteers internally and outside the church membership who are willing to provide security services at low or no cost. How Pentecostals do their mission must adapt to the changing environment without compromising the essence of the gospel mandate, which will be the next point of discussion.

Taking proactive and decisive action against crime is not just a responsibility of the church but that of the community working together with the police. This collaboration of the community and the police is a strategy that was adopted by South Africa after achieving democracy to try and build trust between the police and the community because of the apartheid era, where police were perceived as enemies of the community (Ngoveni 2022). The South African government established the Community Police Forum (CPF) through the *South African Police Service (SAPS) Act 68 of 1995*. According to the South African Police Resource Centre, the CPF consists of several community stakeholders, including community based organisations (CBO), faith based organisations (FBO), youth organisations, women organisations, school governing bodies (SGB), provincial government, local government traditional authority and parastatals (SAPS 2024). The community, with the church being a part of it, must actively protect its neighbourhood by participating in CPF forums where discussions are held on strategies to combat crime, including the crime that is committed against the church.

Reflecting on the mission praxis of Pentecostals amid violence

As agents of mission, Pentecostals must understand the changing dynamics of the mission field. Communities are not just struggling because of poverty but have become desperate and are willing to do anything to survive their circumstances. Pentecostal churches must be flexible in their mission praxis to address the economic challenges the communities are facing.

There must be proactive steps taken to address the psycho-social conditions of a community that lives in poverty and dysfunctionality, which takes more than just the kerygma approach but a holistic multidisciplinary approach of those involved in social work, psychology, education, counselling of families, economic development and especially youth development. The church must find out how it can partner with the stakeholders of the criminal justice system, which include the police, the judiciary, and the correctional services, to ensure that spiritual care and moral regeneration embedded in justice and righteousness become a feature in communities where church-invasion crimes are taking place (Geldenhuys 2020). The Pentecostal church ought to intentionally foster an informal social control that will ultimately benefit them when the community reciprocates by ensuring that the church is not harassed on its watch.

The healing of a violent community must become the focus of the mission for Pentecostals, who conduct anti-crime campaigns in addition to prayers, seminars, and conferences that address violence in society and its root causes. Learning from other countries that have gone through insecurities and developed ways of doing missions amid vulnerability will significantly empower the South African church.

Reflecting on spirituality

As alluded to above, the traditional response of Pentecostals is to spiritualise challenges of life through prayer and preaching for the conversion of souls; this response alone is not sufficient to address the economic desperation and societal dysfunctionalities of communities. Consider the biblical account in Mark 6:34–44 of the feeding of the multitudes who were listening to Jesus teaching them until it was almost sunset, then he fed them all when the disciples preferred them to be sent away, seeing that they could not feed such a great crowd. This demonstration by Jesus of combining spiritual and physical needs is a lesson Pentecostals can imitate in addressing society's social ills, especially given their literal hermeneutic.

Rather than dismissing this criminal behaviour as just an act of delinquency, Pentecostals must go to the root cause of this criminal act, which is based on societal dysfunctionality, which is the cause of the spiritual bankruptcy that such communities experience. Pentecostals must approach the challenge of crime from a holistic perspective where the problem is not only caused by demons of poverty, which must be cast out by prayer, but providing solutions to unemployment, teenage pregnancy, a lack of education, and multiple developmental solutions to communities can go a long way in casting out the demon of poverty and crime in communities (Kakwata 2017).

The spirituality of Pentecostals is very much challenged by these criminal activities, mainly because of their triumphalist view, which does not accommodate any suffering for Christians.

What is God saying to Pentecostals about this encounter with violence? Is the triumphalist approach sustainable amid life's vulnerabilities? Is suffering not God's way of calling Pentecostals to share in his suffering so that they can share in his glory (Rm 8:17)? The doctrine of suffering must be taught to help Pentecostals navigate the difficult times that life in this world can bring. Using their approach to biblical theology, Pentecostals must study how the early church conducted their mission amid vulnerability of the persecutions, perils, death, tribulation, and hunger and yet none of these vulnerabilities dented their faith (Rm 8:35–39; 2 Cor 8:10).

Solutions drawn from spiral dynamics

Spiral dynamics evolve from life conditions that are influenced by time, place, human problems, and social circumstances, which affect how people think about their existence and survival. The circumstances of poverty, among others, bring forth the code Red in people, which makes them villains as

they seek to survive. It is important to note that the theory of Spiral dynamics does not attempt to justify nor judge the codes and their belief systems, but it highlights the way of thinking that forms the mindset of various codes. The spiral dynamic theory advocates an integrated understanding of codes that are built on each other as scaffolding and not separate entities. In the Blue, there is a Red, and in the Red, there is a Blue. In other words, there are ways of thinking among church institutions, represented by the Blue Code, with elements of the Red Code displayed in religious extremism. In the Pentecostal context, the latest neo-prophetic tendencies demonstrate some element of egocentrism, especially with the malpractices of extorting finances from poor church members, promising them breakthroughs for their life challenges at a specific financial cost, which is also known as the commercialisation of religion (Matshobane 2023).

Similarly, there are also ways of thinking among criminals that can have a mindset for the welfare of society, like the legendary Robin Hood, who stole from the rich to give to the poor. This welfare mindset is the Robin Hood principle (Seal 2009). This Robin Hood principle is what makes it a spiral dynamic theory, in that it can go up or down the spiral, depending on the conditions of life that force humans to re-think as they seek to survive the challenges that life puts on them. This flexibility of codes is what Beck calls humanity's master code, which he believes, if understood, will help to facilitate healthy codes as people move within the codes. Put differently, there is a way that criminals can be interfaced with, such that the element of criminality is repurposed into a positive thinking. However, specific conditions need to happen to bring about this ideal transition. Beck et al. (2018:49) propose that these six conditions needed to foster change of thinking within the various codes. The conditions are open-mindedness, stability of current destabilising situations, dissonance with the status quo to allow a new way of thinking, clearly identified barriers to change so that they are reframed to suit a different way of thinking, a clear identification of what causes the current way of thinking to fail and an awareness of newer and better ways of thinking; there must be a way of supporting the transition period to stabilise the volatility that comes with change.

Open-mindedness

In the context of this study, both the church and the criminals who attack them must meet these conditions to transition into positive ways of thinking about their challenging conditions of life. Criminals must be open-minded and adopt positive ways of meeting their needs rather than engaging in criminal activity. On the other hand, the church must be open-minded to believe that criminals can be influenced to change their negative behaviour into a positive one, which is, in any case, the core business of the church to convert the wayward to righteous paths.

Stability

There must be stability to the current destabilising situations that the criminals are experiencing, of poverty that is catalysed by unemployment and a lack of education opportunities, which contribute to the dysfunctionality of families and societies. On the other hand, there must be safety for members of the church who are experiencing these traumatic attacks so that they can start thinking about their mission of helping the very criminals to repurpose their hostile mission to one that is positive.

Dissonance with the status quo

If both parties do not change their view on the current situation, there will be little change. Criminals must realise that crime does not pay because it has negative consequences, which could result in legal criminal charges, which will affect the development of any individual involved in crime. On the other hand, the church cannot continue to be naïve and indifferent to the realities of a dysfunctional society. It must actively engage in activities that address criminal behaviour, starting with the youth.

Identifying clear barriers to change

Criminals must acknowledge that a life of crime is a barrier to societal progress and development and that the energy spent planning to commit crime must be repurposed for society's benefit. The Pentecostal church must stop being so 'otherworldly' in its approach to the gospel message and intentionally adopt methods of redressing the social ills of society in the same way it addresses the spiritual ones.

Challenging the current ways of thinking

Criminals must move from egocentric ways of thinking just about themselves and their personal needs and start adopting positive ways of thinking about the well-being of society, including the future of their children, who may as well be the next victims of crime. The church must move from a self-serving mindset and adopt a societal preserving mindset, with the understanding that if there are no intentional and proactive strategies to shape the moral fibre of society, challenging circumstances of life will continue to prescribe the thinking processes of society which are evident in the current state of high levels of criminality.

Support for transition

The church, as custodians of societal morals, must take the first initiative to support the process of change and work together with other stakeholders in society, such as the government, education system, businesses for job creation, the criminal justice system, and communities where these crimes happen, to undergird the process of transformation and change, which can be volatile if not well managed.

Trauma counselling

One of the most important elements of this discussion is the importance of offering trauma counselling for the congregation that has experienced such a traumatic incident in their safe space of worship. Group therapy is one of the

most effective ways, especially because the incident was experienced by all who were in the place of worship at the time of the attack and can help in treating an array of post-traumatic symptoms. The communal support, peer-to-peer feedback, and relatable vulnerability that makes others reflect on their own experience of the trauma facilitate an effective process of healing for the congregation (Herman & Kallivayalil 2018).

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to highlight the current phenomenon of church robberies, which is spiralling out of control, and to discuss possible solutions that can be explored within the context of Pentecostalism. Using Kritzinger's theoretical framework of a missiological encounterology, the presentation discussed how Pentecostals, as agents of God's mission, ought to advance the mission despite the vulnerability of being attacked by robbers who are themselves vulnerable because of poverty, caused by unemployment, among other social ills. The context of poverty, which results in unemployment, especially of the youth as perpetrators of these robberies, and various other social ills such as gangsterism, seem to be a significant contributor to the dysfunctionality of communities, which leads to crime. Spiral dynamics theory was used to buttress missiological encounterology, understand the thinking behind the phenomenon under study, and propose possible solutions that are necessary conditions that will facilitate a positive outcome. The human master code transforms negative thinking from both church and criminals to find amicable ways of preserving society rather than egocentric practices. In their mission praxis, most Pentecostals, except a few, do not have a specific focus on crime prevention initiatives. However, they usually pray against crime and perhaps evangelise to try and rid the community of criminals, which has been insufficient. They also struggle to reconcile how a God of love can allow such harassment of the church during worship. The whole concept of suffering for the gospel seems complicated among Pentecostals because of their triumphalist view.

The proposed solutions, among others, are for the Pentecostal church to be aware of their environment and get involved in proactive programmes that will address this growing phenomenon, allowing them to practise what sociologists call informal social control. This social control comes from the church getting involved and positively influencing the community; in return, the community will feel obligated to protect the church from being targeted by criminals. The theory of Spiral Dynamics has also presented six conditions necessary to bring the transformation of mindsets to both parties, which, if done correctly, will provide a long-term solution to this phenomenon. In the meantime, the church must learn survival skills by partnering with other stakeholders like the South African Police and private security agencies to safeguard its members so that the mission of God to the community is not hindered by criminality.

Pentecostals must take these experiences of harassment as a call to do the mission of the church by actively addressing the fundamental ills of society which cause society, particularly young people, to be recruited into acts of criminality.

Acknowledgements

References

Adeboye, O., 2007, 'Arrowhead of Nigerian Pentecostalism: The redeemed Christian Church of God, 1952–2005', *Pneuma* 29(1), 24–58. https://doi.org/10.1163/157007407X178238

Adeboye, O., 2012, 'A church in a cinema hall? Pentecostal appropriation of public space in Nigeria', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42(2), 145–171. https://doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12341227

Anderson, A., 2006, 'The Azusa street revival and the emergence of Pentecostal missions in the early twentieth century', *Transformation* 23(2), 107–118. https://doi.org/10.1177/026537880602300206

Anderson, A.H., 2014, *An introduction to Pentecostalism: Global charismatic Christianity*, pp. 263–265, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Anderson, A.H., 2016, 'Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity', in L. Walls (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to world Christianity*, pp. 653–663, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford.

Anderson, E., 1999, *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*, W.W. Norton, New York, NY.

Beck, D.E., Larsen, T.H., Solonin, S., Viljoen, R. & Johns, T.Q., 2018, *Spiral dynamics in action: Humanity's master code*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.

Bowers du Toit, N.F., 2014, 'Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A challenge to engage the powers', *HTS Theological Studies* 70(3), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2727

Bursik, R.J. & Grasmick, H.G., 1993, *Neighborhoods and crime: The dimensions of effective community control*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD.

Daniels, D. & Adams, Q., 2010, 'Breaking with township gangsterism: The struggle for place and voice', *African Studies Quarterly* 11(4), 45–58.

Department of Social Development, 2024, *Building a caring society together*, viewed 06 December 2024, from https://www.dsd.gov.za.

Dieter, M.E., 1996, *The holiness revival of the nineteenth century*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD.

Faupel, D.W., 2019, *The everlasting gospel: The significance of eschatology in the development of Pentecostal thought*, vol. 10, Brill, Leiden.

Fiorillo, C., 2023, *Terrifying moment armed men storm church congregation and kidnap official during sermon*, mirror, viewed 30 April 2024, from https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/terrifying-moment-armed-men-storm-31344899.

Galtung, J., 1996, *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilisation*, Sage, London.

Geldenhuys, K., 2020, 'When the criminal justice system fails victims', *Servamus Community-based Safety and Security Magazine* 113(4), 30–36.

Graves, C.W., 1974, 'Human nature prepares for a momentous leap', *The Futurist* 8(2), 72–87.

Herman, J.L. & Kallivayalil, D., 2018, *Group trauma treatment in early recovery*, Guilford Publications, New York City.

James, D., 2019, 'New subjectivities: Aspiration, prosperity and the new middle class', *African Studies* 78(1), 33–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2018.1540516

Johnson, T.M. & Zurlo, G.A., 2020, *World Christian encyclopedia*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Kakwata, F., 2017, 'The progressive Pentecostal conception of development within an African context of poverty', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3(1), 159–183. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n1.a08

Kgatle, M.S., Thinane, J.S. & Kaunda, C.J. (eds.), 2023, *Commercialisation of religion in South Africa: A Pentecostal approach*, Springer Nature, Cham.

Kornhauser, R.R., 1978, *Social sources of delinquency: An appraisal of analytic models*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Koyama, K., 1974, *Waterbuffalo theology*, SCM Press, London.

Kritzinger, J.N., 2008, 'Faith to faith – Missiology as encounterology', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29(3), 764–790. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v29i3.31

Lambrechts, D., 2012, 'The impact of organised crime on state social control: Organised criminal groups and local governance on the Cape Flats, Cape Town, South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38(4), 787–807. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2012.749060

Maluleke, R., 2024, *Quarterly labour force survey (QLFS), Q2:2024*, viewed 07 September 2024, from https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/Presentation%20QLFS%20Q2%202024.pdf.

Marriah-Maharaj, 2024, 'Police arrest two teenage boys for firing shots, robbing congregants during church service', *MSN News*, 23 August, viewed 27 August 2024, from https://www.msn.com/en-za/news/other/police/-arrest-two-teenage-boys-for-firing-shots-robbing-congregants-during-service/ar-AA1oHRiy.

Maseno, L., 2019, 'Securitising places of worship in Kenya: The case of Faith Evangelistic Ministry (FEM)', in *Religion and Human Security in Africa*, pp. 102–113, Routledge.

Matshobane, M., 2023, 'Prophets violating South African Reserve Bank (SARB) regulations: The case of Enlightened Christian Gathering Church', in M.S. Kgatle, J.S. Thinane & C.J. Kaunda (eds.), *Commercialisation of religion in South Africa: A Pentecostal approach*, pp. 247–263, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham.

McGuire, J., Evans, E. & Kane, E., 2021, *Evidence-based policing and community crime prevention*, Springer, New York, NY.

Meiring, P. (ed.), 1995, *Suid-Afrika, land van baie godsdienste* [*South Africa, land of many religions*], Kagiso, Pretoria.

Meyer, B., 2007, 'Pentecostalism and neo-liberal capitalism: Faith, prosperity and vision in African Pentecostal-charismatic churches', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 20(2), 5–28. https://doi.org/10.4314/jsr.v20i2.47769

Mosebetsi, K., 2024, 'Police on the hunt for five church robbers', *OFM News*, viewed 14 May 2024, from https://www.ofm.co.za/article/centralsa/331036/police-on-the-hunt-for-five-church-robbers.

Ngoveni, T.D., 2022, 'A systematic study on the evolutions of community policing forums: A supplementary tool to crime prevention in South Africa', *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 5(11), 145–162. https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v5i11.716

Nel, M., 2015, 'Attempting to define a Pentecostal hermeneutics', *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 114(1), 1–21.

Nterful, E.L., 2020, 'The construction of permanent church halls for effective church planting: A model of the Lighthouse Chapel international', *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 6(6), 308–317.

Nkomana, S., 2021, *The role of business-specific attributes on job creation in South Africa*, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg.

Ojedokun, U.A. & Oduoye, O.O., 2020, 'Property theft in places of worship in Osogbo City, Nigeria', *Crime Law and Social Change* 73(4), 475–490. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-019-09879-w

Pijoos, I., 2024, *Faith under fire: Congregants robbed, assaulted during service at Pretoria*, viewed 23 August 2024, from https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/faith-under-fire-congregants-robbed-assaulted-durign-church-service-at-pretoria-resort-20240702.

SAPS, 2024, *Resource centre publications*, viewed 06 December 2024, from https://www.saps.gov.za/resource_centre/publications/mr_tj_masilela_presentation_effective_policing_practical_perspective.pdf.

Scheitle, C.P., 2016, 'Crimes occurring at places of worship: An analysis of 2012 newspaper reports', *International Review of Victimology* 22(1), 65–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758015610855

Scheitle, C.P. & Ulmer, J.T., 2018, 'Profane concerns in sacred spaces: The challenges and consequences of implementing security measures in religious congregations', *Journal of Applied Security Research* 13(1), 29–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361610.2018.1387736

Sekhotho, K., 2023, *Prophet Gordon killing was a hit – McKenzie, Newzroom Afrika*, viewed 14 May 2024, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Myfqoy7CLus&list=TLPQMTQwNTIwMjRoCxk9wEQAw&index=3.

Seal, G., 2009, 'The Robin Hood principle: Folklore, history, and the social bandit', *Journal of Folklore Research* 46(1), 67–89. https://doi.org/10.2979/JFR.2009.46.1.67

Solomons, L., 2022, *Armed gang walks into Johannesburg church and robs congregants*, viewed 22 August 2024, from https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/armed-gang-walks-into-johannesburg-church-and-robs-congregants-2022112.

Statistics South Africa (STATSSA), 2024, *Unemployment in South Africa: A youth perspective*, viewed 07 September 2024, from https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17266.

Thathia, D., 2023, 'Worshipers want more protection after robbery', *Enca #DStv 403*, viewed 14 May 2024, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwwGZKrPJCs.

Trading Economics, 2024, *South Africa youth unemployment rate*, viewed 07 September 2024, from https://tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/youth-unemployment-rate.

Triplett, R.A., Gainey, R.R. & Sun, I.Y., 2003, 'Institutional strength, social control and neighborhood crime rates', *Theoretical Criminology* 7(4), 439–467. https://doi.org/10.1177/13624806030074003

Tshwete, M., 2024, 'Gunman hit constantia church', *IOL News*, viewed 14 May 2024, from https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/gunmen-hit-constantia-church-6998c5e2-60a4-405f-9aa8-cbdb1d2f9ce4.

Warner, B.D. & Konkel, R.H., 2019, 'Neighborhood churches and their relationship to neighborhood processes important for crime prevention', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 41(8), 1183–1204. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2019.1581030

Warrington, K., 2011, 'Social transformation in the missions of Pentecostals: A priority or a bonus?', *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 31(1), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1179/jep.2011.31.1.003

Warrington, K., 2008, *Pentecostal theology: A theology of encounter*, A&C Black.

Wood, J. & Alleyne, E., 2010, 'Street gang theory and research: Where are we now and where do we go from here?', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 15(2), 100–111. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.005