

# Mission in vulnerability

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This article is a revised version of the keynote address presented to the inaugural conference of the African region of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) Africa in August 2024 in Stellenbosch. It argues that the formulation 'Mission in vulnerability' creates a more fruitful platform to engage missiologically with vulnerability than the announced conference theme 'Mission as vulnerability'. The article uses a praxis-based missiological framework to show how vulnerability can be understood as: (1) a distinct ethos of mission: a voluntary vulnerability in which believers 'make themselves vulnerable' in relation to others to make an encounter more authentic and transformative; (2) an oppressive context of mission: a structurally imposed vulnerability which believers manage to transform into a resisting and surviving vulnerability, against the odds; (3) a dominant vulnerability in a society where Christianity constitutes a majority but believers experience a lack of credibility due to the ongoing negative impact of coloniality.

**Contribution:** The article concludes by reflecting on mutually re-evangelising praxis in a situation of dominant vulnerability.

**Keywords:** mission; vulnerability; South Africa; credibility; re-evangelisation; IAMS Africa.

## Introduction

The following three passages are not usually identified as 'key mission verses' in the Bible. None of them has been hailed as the Great Commission. And yet, at the start of this conference, they remind us that mission and vulnerability have always belonged together, representing a fundamental feature of the Jesus movement:<sup>1</sup>

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (Mt 10:16)

Do you also wish to go away? (Jn 6:67)

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (Ac 9:4)

In addition to evoking these biblical connections, our theme 'Mission as vulnerability' touches an open nerve in many situations across Africa. The large number of articles from various regional, denominational and theological backgrounds to be presented in this conference shows that the theme resonates widely and deeply with missiological scholars across our continent.

In this article I suggest some ways in which the notion of 'vulnerability' could function in a praxis-based missiological framework and I conclude by exploring the notion of vulnerability in relation to one specific element of mission in the present South African context, namely 'Mission as evangelising'.

## A missiological framework

The missiological framework that I have developed<sup>2</sup> identifies five key mission elements that serve as an epistemological 'lens' to recognise where and how God is at work in our globalised world:

- Mission as communicating the good news of life in fulness (evangelising praxis)
- Mission as building up just and caring faith communities (church 'planting' praxis)
- Mission as dismantling oppressive structures to broaden social justice (liberating praxis)

1. Each of these verses will feature at appropriate points later in the article.

2. This missiological framework is explained in the revised version of the first part of the address that I presented at the IAMS Africa conference.

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

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- Mission as coming together as estranged parties to learn social belonging (reconciling praxis)
- Mission as caring for the environment to preserve God's earth (earthkeeping praxis).<sup>3</sup>

This proposed set of mission 'elements' was chosen in dialogue with the proposals mentioned above and by assessing the situation of our continent today, but other configurations are possible. These five elements should not be seen as isolated compartments, but as overlapping and interacting fields of praxis. By excluding 'Mission as vulnerability' from the list, I imply that vulnerability does not fit in well at this level of a missiology framework, as one of the *key elements* of God's mission. It seems advisable to limit the elements that are categorised with the tag 'Mission as ...' to the *main elements* of activity within God's one mission.<sup>4</sup>

If one does speak of 'Mission as vulnerability', adding it as a new 'element' of mission, it would mean agreeing with Bosch (1991:512) that the 'elements' of mission should not be limited, since 'even the attempt to list some dimensions of mission is fraught with danger, because it again suggests that we can define what is infinite' (p. 512). That would amount to adding another facet to a complex diamond.

However, one could speak of 'Mission as vulnerability' in another way: not as an addition to Bosch's list of 'elements', but to replace them all, implying that Christian mission is facing such a fundamental challenge (or crisis) that vulnerability is 'written all over it', so to speak, and that it is the single most important issue to address now. That would be similar to the view expressed by colleagues such as Schreiter (2013), Langmead (2008) and others, who contend that 'mission as reconciliation' should be the priority for mission in the 21st century.

I have respect for both these options, but believe that we do better to deal with vulnerability differently in a missiological framework, by speaking of 'Mission in vulnerability' rather than 'Mission as vulnerability'. In the rest of the article, I explore three ways in which this theme could function missiologically.

## Different forms of 'mission in vulnerability'

Before proceeding, I need to give a working definition of the term. It is derived from the Latin noun *vulnus* ['wound'] and the verb *vulnerare* ['to wound']. To be vulnerable [*vulnerabilis*] therefore means 'liable to be wounded' and 'exposed to danger'. The term is suffused with both violence and suffering, but like poverty it can have two faces: external (imposed) or internal (voluntary): you are either

3.I have taken this term from my late Unisa colleague, Marthinus (Inus) Daneel (1998).

4.I am not suggesting that my selection of five mission elements is exhaustive of Christian mission, but there is a measure of consensus on this among missiologists.

'made vulnerable' by being threatened, attacked and oppressed by others, or you 'make yourself vulnerable' by exposing yourself to discomfort and danger for the sake of others. The first is a contextual fact and the second a disposition or ethos. These two forms of vulnerability are not incompatible and can feature together in the same encounter, as I show next.

In what follows, firstly, I explore *voluntary* vulnerability in general, as an ethos in mission encounters, and secondly I look at mission praxis in situations of *contextual* vulnerability where people suffer because of exclusion and oppression.

### Mission praxis in (voluntary) vulnerability

The first aspect of vulnerability as a distinctive *ethos* in a mission encounter is a rejection of superiority, manipulation and triumphalism. Viewed positively, it is a disposition of respect for others and the openness to expose oneself to another person or community. It is the inner disposition of a Christian community when encountering others not to *impose* themselves on anyone, but to *expose* themselves to others as fellow human beings. It is a willingness to be ignored, treated with suspicion, questioned and even rejected. It takes nothing for granted in an encounter and does not demand or assume respect. Generally speaking, if there is no great power difference in an encounter, vulnerability often exhibits the following three features.

#### Vulnerability as embrace

An ethos of vulnerability can be characterised as an attitude of embrace. Wolf (1996) used vivid imagery in his 'phenomenology' of embrace, in contrast to exclusion: an embrace is when you open your arms to someone else and wait for them to reciprocate. To pull someone towards you would be a form of exclusion – not allowing them to assert themselves as human beings in their own right. To embrace is to wait with open arms, to risk being ignored, dismissed and rejected. It is to make yourself vulnerable – to risk being wounded.<sup>5</sup> Christian praxis done in vulnerability – whether the focus is on liberating, evangelising, healing, reconciling or earthkeeping – gestures towards life-infulness when believers embody such an (ostensibly weak) ethos of embrace; but Wolf (1996) highlights the risk involved:

I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, and do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a savior or a victim – possibly both. Embrace is grace and grace is gamble, always. (p. 147)

And yet, there is a strange ambiguity to an embracing vulnerability: it often exerts a unique *power* of its own.

5.Wolf (1996:140–147) explains embrace as a drama in four acts: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms, and opening the arms again.

## The power of vulnerability

In John 6:67, Jesus is portrayed as making himself vulnerable. When many of his disciples leave because of the 'hardness' of his sayings, he asks the Twelve: 'Do you also wish to go away?' (NRSV).<sup>6</sup> He risks losing them too. He holds out his arms, and waits. He makes it possible for them to leave, but they stay, won over by the sheer power of his vulnerability, confessing that he is the Holy One of God who has the words of eternal life. The Jesus movement in history is inherently precarious, often beset by doubts, divisions and desertions but in its most authentic manifestation it stays together, expands and moves forward not by imposed authority but by the soft and vulnerable power of trust and a deep sense of belonging.<sup>7</sup>

The power of vulnerability in Christian praxis is love in action. Sacrificial, kenotic love (*agape*) is a key element in the habitus of 'making oneself vulnerable' in relation to others, but so is *eros*, not in a commodified and sexualised sense of the word, but referring to the simple joy of belonging together: you make me feel good; I like being with you; you enhance my life; we are human together – *Motho ke motho ka batho*.<sup>8</sup> Jennings (2020) writes about the cultivation of such a profound creaturely belonging, characterised by an intimacy and eroticism:

... that speak of our birthright formed in the body of Jesus and the protocols of breaking, sharing, touching, tasting, and seeing the goodness of God. There, at his body, the Spirit joins us in an urgent work, forming a willing spirit in us that is eager to hold and to help, to support and to speak, to touch and to listen, gaining through this work the deepest truth of creaturely belonging: that we are erotic souls. Nobody that is not a soul, no soul that is not a body, no being without touching, no touching without being. This is not an exclusive Christian truth, but a truth of the creature that Christian life is intended to witness. (p. 11)

A praxis shaped by such a vulnerable (and inherently eucharistic) ethos is attractive and winsome, drawing people towards each other to share life-in-fulness. This soft power of vulnerability in human encounters should shape the praxis of all five elements of Christian mission identified above.

## Confident vulnerability

From the foregoing, it should be clear that an ethos of vulnerability does not amount to compromise (bending over backwards), opportunism, cowardice or false humility. To 'make oneself vulnerable' is an expression of inner strength and character. An insecure or narcissist leader begs, threatens

6.The NIV translation, 'You do not want to leave too, do you?', captures the nuance of the rhetorical question in the Greek text that prompts (or expects) a negative answer (Brown 1966:297; Croy 1999:193). That form of question shows that the narrated Jesus of John was not expecting them to leave, but he did make himself vulnerable in relation to them by suggesting that they were free to do so. Neyrey (2007:133) judges that the purpose of the question was to challenge the Twelve by 'aggressively confronting' them with a 'test of loyalty', but the Greek syntax suggests a less confrontational intent.

7.Commenting on this passage, Athanasius remarked: 'It is the part of true godliness not to compel but to persuade' (in ed. Elowsky 2006:247).

8.This Sesotho expression means 'a person is a person through [other] persons' and functions as a definition of *ubuntu* or *botho* ('humanness') in African cultures (see Ramose 2002).

or manipulates their followers to stay. It is necessary to express this element of strength within an ethos of vulnerability – so that it may embody the creative tension of the cross-resurrection dialectic in a way similar to the phrases 'bold humility' (Bosch 1991:420, 489) and 'prophetic dialogue' (Bevans & Schroeder 2011) – by speaking of *confident*, *dignified* or *self-affirming* vulnerability.

To grow into authentic vulnerability as explained here – attentive, appreciative and sensitive – one needs to grow in inner freedom, courage and confidence.<sup>9</sup> The kenotic praxis of Christ, as traced by Paul in Philippians 2:5–8, bears this out: the dignity and glory of Christ's equality with God is the assumed point of departure for his radical vulnerability in identifying with humanity to the depth of the cross.<sup>10</sup> The paradoxical connection between 'roots' and 'wings' also expresses this dialectic of inner strength (rootedness) and relational openness (wings), as does the phrase *confident* vulnerability.<sup>11</sup>

## Mission praxis in (imposed) vulnerability

Having reflected on some common features of an *ethos* of vulnerability, this section deals with the mission praxis of a Christian community finding itself at a structural (economic, political, religious or cultural) disadvantage, which has been imposed on it. If such a situation has endured for some time, the community is not only *vulnerable* ('wound-able') but actually *wounded*. In that case, 'vulnerable' alone is inadequate to describe the situation; 'bleeding' or 'scarred' will more accurately reflect the experience. And yet, transformative praxis often emerges precisely from a Christian community in a wounded condition.

My earlier comments on a *confident* vulnerability apply here too because an oppressed community often succeeds in transforming an imposed vulnerability from within. When this happens, the cross-resurrection dialectic is better described as a *resisting* vulnerability (a vulnerability *that resists*): the wounds and scars are not denied or spiritualised but tackled head-on and transformed from within, by mobilising spiritual, cultural, economic and other resources. As Leidinger (2020:409) points out, power-*in*-vulnerability builds a praxis of resilience and resistance.

Mission praxes to counteract woundedness and affirm life are found in different forms of mission as liberation, such as feminist, womanist, black, and queer theologies, which share a great deal in common methodologically. They differ because of the type of woundedness they are resisting, but

9.Commenting on Jesus' rhetorical question to the Twelve in John 6:67, Bruner (2012:457) remarks that it was not asked anxiously and that one can even detect a sense of confidence in it, even though the fact that he did ask it as a question 'added poignancy' to his words.

10.This interpretation of Philippians 2:6 affirms the dignity and glory of Christ's pre-incarnate position of being *ἐν ψυχῇ θεοῦ*, which is rendered 'in the form of God' (NRSV) or 'being in very nature God' (Witherington 2011:139), a state of *τὸ εἶναι ἴσα Θεῷ* ('to be equal to God'). That exalted position of glory was the assumption of his self-emptying vulnerability because he did not consider it 'something to be taken advantage of' (Fowl 2005:94; Witherington 2011:139).

11.I developed some missiological aspects of the 'roots and wings' metaphor in Kritzinger (2002:145–147).

there is deep similarity and significant overlap (intersectionality) in their resisting, liberating and life-affirming praxes.

Seen from another angle, such a mission praxis could be called a *healing* vulnerability, with the implication that a community's wounds are gradually being healed, as people acknowledge their suffering, explore its roots, affirm their human dignity against all the odds, while they invite, accept and celebrate God's liberating presence in their midst. This is akin to the notion of 'wounded healers', classically developed by Henri Nouwen (1973). What makes this a *mission* praxis is that a community does not merely pursue life-in-fulness for themselves but shares the healing, transforming melody of the gospel with others who are in the same (or a similar) situation.

This form of mission praxis 'from below' – breathing through the wound<sup>12</sup> – could also take the form of a *surviving* vulnerability, in contexts where a small Christian community struggles to exist or flourish in a society where a dominant religion or ideology persecutes them by legal and other means, or where there is widespread violence (such as in a civil war), or where there is famine and grinding poverty. In such situations, the sharp power differential and level of hostility of the encounter with a dominant praxis make huge demands on the resilience and creativity of a Christian community. This is a vulnerability of sheep among wolves (Mt 10:16), which requires a shrewd (*phronimos*) and innocent (*akeraios*) *surviving* praxis. It is only possible when such an oppressed community embraces the empowering sentness contained in that verse: 'I am sending you out ... like sheep among wolves' and the promise of the Spirit's guidance:

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Mt 10:19 [NRSV])

Only the motivating power of such a deep mission spirituality can sustain a confident, healing and surviving vulnerability in situations of extreme suffering. Numerous biblical passages speak of the resistance and resilience elicited among oppressed believers by their experience of God's presence. In the book of Hebrews, the temptation to give up one's faith is countered by presenting the exalted Christ as an empathetic high priest who 'became like his brothers [and sisters] in every way' (Heb 2:17), embodying a confident vulnerability by remaining faithful to his mission when he was tempted – just as we are (Heb 4:15). However, he resisted temptation and learnt obedience through suffering for that commitment (Heb 2:10, 5:8). In a similar vein, the book of Acts portrays the praxis of the ascended Christ as a resisting vulnerability, in solidarity with his suffering followers: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?' (Ac 9:4).

12.This phrase was popularised in South Africa by an OUTsurance television advertisement and describes troublesome survival in a situation of suffering. It was associated in popular consciousness with the dying words of George Floyd: 'I can't breathe'. It is also the title of a Spanish novel (Del Arbol 2016).

This solidarity of the risen Christ empowers a resisting, healing and surviving vulnerability that not only sustains the mission praxis of oppressed believers but also compels other believers, as members of the 'body' of Christ, to express solidarity with them: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it' (1 Cor 12:26). As Leidinger (2020:410) has pointed out, the praxis of empathy has to do with concrete embodiment and materiality. This concrete bodiliness is clear in passages such as Hebrews 13:3, which calls on believers to 'remember' the prisoners and the mistreated.<sup>13</sup> The NRSV translates the verse as: 'Remember those who are in prison *as though* you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured *as though* you yourselves were being tortured' (NRSV). Other translations similarly use 'as if' or 'as though' to express the nature of the solidarity that the verse calls for, but that misses the essential *materiality* of the body-connection expressed here. It is better to translate more literally: 'Remember the prisoners *as* fellow imprisoned, the mistreated [or tortured]<sup>14</sup> *as* those who are also in a body'.<sup>15</sup> Cockerill (2012) links this to the Christology of Hebrews, as expressed in Hebrews 2:14–16, where the hearers were reminded that Christ:

... became human and assumed a body in order to identify with their vulnerability and redeem them through his suffering [...]. The pastor's hearers feel the sufferings of the persecuted in their own bodies while he speaks. (p. 682)

In other words, the two occurrences of ώς ['as'] in Hebrews 13:3 should not be reduced to an unreal 'as if' connection with the imprisoned or tortured but seen as a call to practical solidarity in which the vulnerability of the other's body is affirmed as your own.<sup>16</sup> The act of remembering is not an occasional 'thinking of others' but a way of life in compassionate shared bodiliness.<sup>17</sup> It is a shared vulnerability that creates resilience and resistance against every form of abuse and exploitation.

## Evangelising in (a situation of) dominant vulnerability

The final section of the article explores 'Mission as evangelising' in a situation of *dominant* vulnerability. This refers to a situation where Christianity constitutes a dominant (nominal) majority in a society, but has become vulnerable

13.The imperative μνήσκεσθε ('Remember') in Hebrews 13:3 is a call to more than a mental exercise of 'thinking about' others. Cockerill interprets it as concrete and bold support for the persecuted, referring to Hebrews 10:33–34 which recalls physical imprisonment of believers, practical solidarity with them (τοῖς δεομέοις οὐεπαθήσατε – 'you suffered with the prisoners') and even loss of possessions. Similarly, Grässer (1997:352) sees it as a practice of compassion based on existential affectedness (*Betroffenheit*) and revealed in concrete assistance.

14.The NRSV translates κακουχουμένων as 'those who are being tortured'. Cockerill (2012:682) affirms this, pointing out that the same verb is used in Hebrews 11:25 and 11:36–37 to refer to 'extreme deprivations' suffered by believers for their faith.

15.The Greek expression ώς καὶ αὐτοὶ ὄντες ἐν σώματι does not refer to being in the Body of Christ, as was suggested by Calvin and some older commentators (see Cockerill 2012:682; Grässer 1997:353), but to a shared bodily humanness.

16.Cockerill (2012:682) points out that 'being in a body' represents a shared vulnerability to suffering and abuse.

17.Most commentaries stress the fact that the present imperative μνήσκεσθε ('Remember') in Hebrews 13:3 has a continuous sense, which means that solidarity with the suffering is 'a habitual part of their lives', not an occasional or sporadic act (see e.g. Cockerill 2012:682).

because it is losing (or has lost) credibility and is in decline. In such a situation, the Christian community is not a tiny flock threatened by dangerous wolves, but a large flock, of which many have become disillusioned and some have left. This presents a particularly awkward type of vulnerability, particularly for evangelising mission in South Africa today.

### The scandal of Bible and land

On the wall of the Freedom Park Museum in Pretoria, the following words are attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu (West 2016):

When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray'. We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land. (p. 326)<sup>18</sup>

An uninformed visitor to the museum may get the impression that this anecdote originated with Tutu, but it has had a long history in anti-colonial politics across Africa.<sup>19</sup> This saying signals a credibility problem in the relationship between black and white Christians in general but also between black church leaders and the broader black community. Sensitive Christians, both black and white, are made vulnerable by the saying, by exposing that the 'ground' we are standing on is – in more ways than one – not a moral 'high ground'.

In 1972, Bishop Alpheus Zulu<sup>20</sup> quoted this saying when referring to the statement of an Afrikaner government minister that missionary work was essential for the 'self-preservation of the white man'. Zulu interpreted that as saying that missionary work – which was simply assumed to be a white enterprise – was part and parcel of white supremacy. He asked in response (Zulu 1972):

If you are black and a Christian missionary, how then do you respond to the accusation that when the white man came to Africa the black man had the land and the white man had the Bible, and now the black man has the Bible and the white man the land? (p. 5)

Zulu identified himself as a 'black Christian missionary' and understandably experienced the saying as an *accusation* against the Christian faith as such. The accusation against Christianity as 'the white man's religion' that accompanied and justified colonial dispossession was spelled out in the booklet *The role of the missionaries in conquest* (Majeke [1952] 1986:61), a sentiment that caused politically aware black people to ask whether decolonisation did not necessitate de-christianisation (Mofokeng 1983:15). Responses to this credibility problem by black Christian leaders have varied,

18.The anecdote also appears in a slightly different wording: 'When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us 'Let us pray'. After the prayer the white man had the land and we had the Bible' (Mofokeng 1988:34).

19.There is a perception that Jomo Kenyatta was the first to use this anecdote, as part of the Kenyan independence struggle in the 1960s, but I have not been able to confirm this.

20.Bishop Alpheus Hamilton Zulu (1905–1987) was the Anglican Bishop of Zululand and Swaziland from 1968 to 1975, the first black priest to occupy that position. He referred to the Bible-and-land saying while presenting a lecture on academic freedom at the University of Cape Town, in honour of Professor Thomas Davie, who was the UCT vice-chancellor from 1948 to 1955.

but the most creative has been to admit the element of truth in it, namely the scandal of entanglement between colonial dispossession and Christian evangelising, but then to counter that it represented a fatal distortion of the gospel, which is in fact a liberating message. That is what Desmond Tutu did. He did indeed quote the Bible-and-land saying on numerous occasions. Gish (2004:101) even calls it one of his 'favourite' quotes,<sup>21</sup> but it is disingenuous of Freedom Park to attribute the anecdote to him without reporting what else he said about it. According to West (2016:326), Tutu added on one occasion, tongue in cheek: 'And we got the better deal!' In more serious vein, Tutu often expanded on the anecdote and pointed out what a revolutionary book it was that the missionaries had placed in the hands of African people. Another black theologian, Mosala (1989), also affirmed the element of truth in the saying and then added:

The task now facing a black theology of liberation is to enable black people to use the Bible to get the land back and to get the land back without losing the Bible. (p. 194)<sup>22</sup>

This kind of response by black liberation theologians to the vulnerability created by the saying's accusation against Christianity issues a double challenge: negatively, *against* every mission praxis shaped by (and colluding) with white supremacy and, positively, *for* a new way of doing mission, namely mission as liberation.<sup>23</sup> One way to explore this saying is to reflect on a Christian praxis of land restitution ('using the Bible to get the land back'), which would be an exercise in mission as *liberating* praxis, which intersects in many ways with mission as *evangelising* praxis in the black community. The latter theme could be characterised as 'Re-evangelising the black church', a topic that I am not adequately qualified to address.<sup>24</sup>

Instead, I have opted to take up another issue raised by Alpheus Zulu. Expressing exasperation at the fact that the attitudes and intentions exhibited by the first white missionaries were still operative more than 150 years later (in the words of an apartheid government minister), he commented that such white utterances 'make a black man look silly and unpatriotic if he continues to hope for reconciliation between white and black Africa' (Zulu 1972:5). The theme I explore in the rest of the article is the intersection between mission as *evangelising* and as *reconciling* between white and black Africans.

The mission history exposed by the Bible-and-land saying is the shared legacy and burden of black and white missiologists. This history imposes on us a shared vulnerability – in the sense of a lack of credibility – vis-à-vis

21.Gish (2004:101) pointed out that Archbishop Tutu even used it in public speeches on his trip to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.

22.Kumalo (2013:96) conflated the two responses and attributed the following words to Tutu: 'But you see now we are using the Bible to get back our land. In the end we shall have both the Bible and our land. That is a better deal'.

23.I reflected on this double challenge as the main argument of my doctoral thesis (Kritzinger 1988).

24.I did, however, help plan a conference in 1990, where Fr Smangaliso Mkhatswa (1991) presented an article on that topic and I spoke on 'Re-evangelising the white church' (Kritzinger 1991).

our black and white constituencies at large, but also in our relationship to each other as black and white theologians.

To start addressing this issue, I need to briefly explain where I am thinking *from*. I started my adult life in that white missionary tradition, but the exposure to black theology through numerous black colleagues changed my mind. As I became increasingly aware of the deep entanglement of Christian mission with colonial dispossession and racism, I may not have remained a church minister, or even a Christian, had it not been for my encounters with black theologians who chose not to reject the gospel because it was used as a tool of dispossession but instead retrieved it as a message of liberation and justice, as an instrument of *decolonisation*.<sup>25</sup> My approach to mission as evangelising and reconciling is done in solidarity with the insights and initiatives of black theologians.<sup>26</sup>

### Mission as re-evangelising

A key insight that I discovered in writing my doctoral thesis was the call of Motlhabi (1984:260) that the church should embark on 'The "re-evangelisation" of black people who will lead to their spiritual freedom and simultaneous striving for their political and social liberation'. My thesis explored black theology as a re-evangelising praxis in the black community (Kritzinger 1988:155–258) and what would be involved in re-evangelising the white community (Kritzinger 1988:259–334; also Kritzinger 1991).

When reflecting on mission as evangelising in South Africa today, in the light of the Bible-and-land anecdote, it is clear to me that the response modelled by black theologians is the only meaningful way to develop a credible re-evangelising praxis with and among politically aware fellow Africans. It means admitting that we are wounded as black and white communities and that our wounds are not going to disappear overnight. Some wounds are still open, while others are slowly being healed. Some scars will always remain, and sadly new wounds continue to be added. However, the compassionate solidarity of our wounded-crucified-resurrected-ascended Lord – as outlined above – moves us to become resilient and resistant for vulnerable participation in his liberating mission towards life-in-fulness.

### Re-evangelising as decolonising

Many colonial features are still evident in South African society: land distribution, residential separation, educational backlogs, language practices; but my article focuses on the distorted colonial sense of 'belonging together' between black and white Christians in South Africa. The root of our malaise is the set of problems bequeathed to us by 'modern Christian colonialism', which Jennings (2018) attributes to Christians who:

25.The most influential in my life were Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Itumeleng Mosala, Bonganjalo Goba, Takatso Mofokeng, Simon Maimela, Frank Chikane, Tinyiko Maluleke and Zach Mokgoebo.

26.In my doctoral thesis (Kritzinger 1988), I constructed a typology of white responses to black theology – rejection, sympathy and solidarity – and positioned myself in solidarity. That gave birth to a liberating white theology to decolonise white minds and dismantle oppressive structures. I revisited the typology in a recent article (Kritzinger 2022b).

... have presented themselves as worldly power brokers, not only capable of handling its power but also eagerly willing to attain such power by any means necessary. Forming themselves into nations, intoxicated with their unprecedented control over indigenous peoples and their lands, they brought into the world the horrors of racial reasoning and racial identities, new and more virulent forms of patriarchy, death-dealing forms of sexuality and intimate life, and ways of seeing the planet that reduced our world to a giant bowl of commodities created for the sole purpose of extraction, manipulation, and consumption. (p. 2)

This is what we are up against. It is unrealistic to expect 372 years of entrenched colonial practices (since 1652) to disappear in 30 years of democracy, but if we want to evangelise with credibility in this society, the relationships among us as Christians need to be decolonised. This means that our key mission priority should be the *re-evangelisation* of Christians, all of us, black and white, because things went badly wrong – in us and between us – when we were first evangelised. This does not mean that evangelising people outside the Christian fold is unimportant or irrelevant, but that priority should be given to the need for those who already claim allegiance to Christ to *re-evangelise one another*. The drawing and retaining of newcomers into the church depends largely on the attractiveness, integrity and unity of the existing Christian community. It is through re-evangelising one another that we will best learn the skill of evangelising others. In fact, if such a re-evangelising process starts bearing fruit it will be the good news that the whole South African society has been waiting for.

### Re-evangelisation as rebirth

The difficulty of re-evangelising one another should, however, not be underestimated. There is much to learn from what Mamdani (1998) has said about the decolonising of South Africa:

In the context of a former settler colony, a single citizenship for settlers and natives can only be the result of an overall metamorphosis whereby erstwhile colonizers and colonized are politically reborn as equal members of a single political community. The word reconciliation cannot capture this metamorphosis [...] This is about establishing for the first time, a political order based on consent and not conquest. It is about establishing a political community of equal and consenting citizens. (p. 3)

This transformation referred to by Mamdani is political, but the fact that he, as a Muslim political scientist, resorts to Christian theological terms such as *metamorphosis* and *rebirth*<sup>27</sup> to describe this change indicates not only the potential of the gospel message to effect political transformation but also the urgent need for us as a Christian community to drink our own medicine. Our decolonising challenge is to undergo a transformation from our opposing 'settler' and 'native' praxes into a shared praxis of 'equal and consenting citizens', into 'a single political community' that embodies a true humanity

27.The notion of *metamorphosis* occurs in Matthew 17:2, Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, while *rebirth* is found in passages such as John 3:3, Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 1:23.

'with a human face' (Biko 1978:47). In theological terms, that would mean reframing the concept of being 'born again' into a corporate instead of (the traditional) individual sense. Because colonisation produced a deeply distorted sense of human interaction and belonging, we need to be born again (and then grow up) *together* into a new humanity, into life-in-fulness. Such a mutual re-evangelisation requires a shared admission of the vulnerability of Christian witness in public life because of the lack of credibility described already. We need to 'make ourselves vulnerable' to each other, as we 'change and become like children' to enter the Reign of God together (Mt 18:3).

To use another biblical image, it was outside their respective towns, as excluded and vulnerable human beings, that Judean and Samaritan lepers found each other and learned to share their lives (Lk 17:11–19). The tragedy is that their healing was incomplete, not only because the majority of them failed to experience healing into gratitude, but especially because they had to go to different priests to be declared clean. The decolonising metamorphosis that we need is to find the healing touch of Jesus, leading us away from our shared vulnerability and shame 'outside the town' into a *single* ongoing journey of gratitude and public restoration, being cleansed *together*, for everyone to see.

## The praxis of mutual re-evangelising

Such a journey of rebirth is an ongoing and deepening encounter between a black liberating praxis and a white liberating praxis. Together we need to explore – and begin to understand – the role that each of the seven dimensions of the praxis matrix<sup>28</sup> has played (and keeps on playing) to shape the distorted belonging between (and within) our differently racialised communities. We need to do this by *telling* our stories and *listening* our way into one another's lives.

We can only be decolonised, metamorphosed, born again, *together*. However, because of the persistence (and resurgence) of our racialised identities and the growing inequality in South Africa, there is still a need to meet separately as black and white theologians to grapple with the unique identity issues facing our respective constituencies. Such separate reflection is necessary, but when we do that, we should not be facing away from each other, developing closed and opposed black and white theologies. When we meet *separately* to develop liberating insights to deal with the distinct brokenness of our respective racialised existences, we should be facing in the same direction, shoulder to shoulder, towards life-in-fulness. When we meet *together*, face to face, we will then have a more mature liberating praxis to share with each other, as we mutually re-evangelise each other into the future. All of this requires creating safe spaces where we can meet face to face, but also unsafe, challenging spaces out in communities, where we learn to work together shoulder to shoulder for life-in-fulness.<sup>29</sup>

28. For details on the praxis matrix referred to here, see Kritzinger (2017, 2022a, and 2022b).

29. This approach of an intermittent separate-and-together journey towards life-in-fulness is spelled out in greater detail in Kritzinger (2022a, 2022b).

## Conclusion

My discomfort with the theme ('Mission as vulnerability') of the August 2024 IAMS Africa conference, prompted me to propose 'Mission *in* vulnerability' as an alternative and to develop an overarching missiological framework in which vulnerability can be addressed more fruitfully. My thoughts on a suitable missiological framework have been expanded into another academic article, while this article contains an expanded version of the second part of my IAMS address. I present these explorations on mission in vulnerability – voluntary, imposed and dominant – along with the notion of mutual re-evangelisation in a context of dominant vulnerability, as a stimulus for further missiological reflection on our vulnerable and wounded, yet deeply resilient, continent.

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