

## Conversions in context

### Insights from an autobiographical narrative of a Congolese-born missionary at Stinkwater<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

Indigenous African missionaries are increasingly becoming involved in various mission interests in their contexts. Assumptions made by many mission institutions are that when they call indigenous Africans, they would be easily accepted and integrated into the community and get on with mission duties. However, these assumptions do not hold for indigenous Africans who are not native to the land where they serve. In relation to the latter this article, based on an autobiographical narrative of a Congolese-born missionary at Stinkwater, highlights four 'conversion episodes' that the missionary went through before he begun to 'weave together' the story of the good news of Jesus with stories of people in this particular context. All these episodes have had profound implications towards reshaping and reviving his theology of mission and praxis at Stinkwater. Insights from this autobiographical narrative could be useful in the preparation of indigenous workers who intend to work in context where they are not native to the land.

**Key words:** autobiographical narrative, Baptist, Congolese-born missionary, conversion, Stinkwater

## 1. Introduction: setting the scene

I am an African, a muntu of the yaka<sup>3</sup> ethnic group, a descendant of Mangayi<sup>4</sup>, an evangelical Christian of a Baptist<sup>5</sup> persuasion who has been working in the strug-

<sup>1</sup> The abbreviated version of this article was first presented as a paper at the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) conference which took place at Seoul, South Korea (11 - 15 August 2016) under the track "theologies of mission" convened by Steve Bevans and Kirsteen Kim.

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<sup>3</sup> The Yaka are an ethnic group of Southwestern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola. They live in the forest and savanna areas between the Kwango and Wamba rivers. Many of their religious and cultural customs transcend ethnic boundaries, and are shared with the Suku and Lunda (cf. Bourgeois, Arthur P. 1985. *The Yaka and Suku*. Leiden: Brill, see also [http://www.forafricanart.com/Yaka\\_ep\\_43-1.html](http://www.forafricanart.com/Yaka_ep_43-1.html))

<sup>4</sup> Oral tradition has it that the Mangayi clan scattered from central region of Africa migrating south at the time of the great Bantu migration. Perhaps, this explains the existence of people with the surname Mangayi in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa. Variances of the surname in these countries include Mangayi, Mangaya, Manganyi, Mangai and Manganye. The point I am making is that in South Africa a Mangayi descendant is at home among his relatives - He is not a foreigner in the soil of his ancestors. But that doesn't mean s/he can do effective mission in central and southern Africa regions as easy as 'walking in the park'.

<sup>5</sup> Baptists are evangelicals who identified themselves by the following distinctives: 1) the Lordship of

gling parts of urban South Africa for 25 years. Thirteen of these years were spent at Stinkwater, an African multi-ethnic township situated 46 km northeast of Pretoria where I served as a lead missionary with Stinkwater Baptist Mission under the auspices of Pretoria Central Baptist Church from 1991 to 2004. Pretoria Central Baptist Church initiated this outreach in 1980s. This article is based on the lived experiences (autobiographical narrative) of the author as a missionary at Stinkwater.

One of the assumptions that Stinkwater Baptist Mission had - as is the case with many other mission institutions – is that when I was ‘called’ as an indigenous African, I would be easily accepted and integrated into the community and get on with mission duties such as evangelism and church planting and community development. Unfortunately, this is not the case for indigenous African missionaries not native to the land of their service. On the contrary, I realised that I had to be subjected to continuous ‘active conversions’ regardless of already being a ‘regenerated’<sup>6</sup> Christian. Hence, the central question of this article: Should an indigenous African Christian be ‘converted’ to do mission work in Africa? The short answer to this question is ‘yes’ and drawing from my personal experiences at Stinkwater, the elaborated answer is provided in the content of this article.

My experience at Stinkwater was filled at first with some discomfort, powerlessness and marginalisation. Nonetheless, these feelings paved the way toward personal profound conversion episodes. Four of which are highlighted in this article. The article also challenges some of the deep-seated assumptions and acclaimed advantages in mission circles relative to indigenous African missionary service in Africa, such as less disruption with immigration requirements; linguistic and cultural aptitudes and high-cost effectiveness. I therefore argue that personal continuous ‘active’ conversions are necessary for all African mission workers regardless of whether they are native to the land of their service or not. These conversions pave the way for informed mission encounters enriched with insights on cross-cultural

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Jesus Christ, 2) the Bible as the sole written authority for faith and practice, 3) soul competency, 4) salvation from sin and eternal death to forgiveness and eternal life only by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior who is the grace gift of God, 5) the priesthood of each believer and of all believers in Christ, 6) believer’s baptism, 7) baptism and the Lord’s Supper as wonderfully symbolic but not essential for salvation, 8) church membership composed only of persons who have been born again and 9) religious freedom and its corollary, the separation of church and state. For an extensive elaboration, see <https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/what-makes-a-baptist-a-baptist/>

<sup>6</sup> According to the Bible, another word for regeneration is rebirth, related to the biblical phrase “born again.” Our rebirth is distinguished from our first birth, when we were conceived physically and inherited our sin nature. The new birth is a spiritual, holy, and heavenly birth that results in our being made alive spiritually. Man in his natural state is “dead in trespasses and sins” until he is “made alive” (regenerated) by Christ. This happens when he places his faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:1) (see also <https://www.gotquestions.org/regeneration-Bible.html>)

communication, mission praxis and stimulate reflexive engagement and enhance perspectives on contextual praxis.

Based on a personal lived missionary journey, the main aim of this article is to unearth insights which could be useful in the preparation of indigenous workers who intend to work in contexts where they are not native to the land. This article also recommends and reinforces the need for the development of creative imagination in “weaving together” the story of Jesus with stories of people in a particular context. Stinkwater Baptist Mission is the context in the case of this article.

## **2. Stinkwater Baptist Mission: Contextual background and insights**

Like many other African settlements, such as Klipgat near Pretoria, the establishment of Stinkwater by the apartheid government was associated with violence and great human abuse. The Black Sash (1969) narrates:

“Stinkwater and Klipgat, those appropriately named shanty towns north of Pretoria, where more than 400 African families were dumped in the heart of the coldest winter, shows once again the cold, inhuman attitude of the [apartheid] Government toward the African people. For whatever reason they were uprooted, whether valid or not...” (p10).

The Bantu Administration Department of the apartheid government that orchestrated this forced removal or ‘uprooting’ under the guise of preventing ‘illegal squatting’, threatening African people with being sent back to their homeland far from Pretoria, did not consider the negative impacts of its actions. The apartheid government went against the wishes of the people who would “have preferred to have stayed where they were, near Eersterus. It was close to their work, close to the railway station, close to their friends, and most of all close to their hearts” (Black Sash 1969:10). The Black Sash elaborates (1969: 10 – 11):

The families were taken to Klipgat and Stinkwater in ‘lorries’<sup>7</sup>. They were left in the cold with one tent per family, and told to build their own houses. They were told that the tents would be removed in three months. Many said they could not afford to build their houses. They were forced to put together lean-to shacks from rusty corrugated iron sheets, cardboard and scraps of wood. Anything to keep the cold out...

To the people who were moved to Stinkwater it meant rising at 03:00 am to travel 35 to 40 miles each day to their places of employment which, for most of them, was

<sup>7</sup> Lorries are big trucks used to transport goods and animals.

Silverton near Eersterus, and arriving home at around 21:00 pm. Family life was disrupted for most of these people, who left and returned home when their relatives were still sleeping. The people at Stinkwater were also deprived of amenities such as clinics, shops, water, and schools in those days.

The foregoing snippet on the history of Stinkwater highlights dispossession, being forced into homelessness, victimisation, violence, abuse and dehumanisation, all of which these families had suffered at in the hands of the apartheid government and its structures. This history had, and still has, serious multi-dimensional socio-economic, political and spiritual implications, which have stood in the way of the collective wellbeing in Stinkwater. However, this displaced community excited the compassion of the civil society; particularly some sectors of the church (cf. Parnell 1995).

According to The Black Sash (1969: 12) “the churches hastened to aid soon after the news broke out of the removals: funds were started, and blankets and warm clothing collected. Donations came in from generous people who felt compassion for the unfortunate families”. Well before the 1960s, the Baptist Union of Southern Africa in particular was already ministering in Hammanskraal near Stinkwater, through a health mission at Jubilee Hospital (cf. Parnell 2002: 81-82). Through this hospital ministry they mobilised other Baptists to assist in addressing the socio-economic needs of the greater Hammanskraal area. Parnell (1995) elaborates on how it all began in 1955, also referring to the expansion of the Baptist ‘witness’ at Stinkwater in the 1980s:

There’s no hospital in the Hammanskraal area. The nearest is forty miles away... The people there are some of the poorest in the country, the death rate of little children is appalling. The government says that if we will get a small hospital up and running, then they will provide for all the running expenses and half the cost of new buildings ...with wonderful answers to prayer, work and much hard work and ingenuity, we were at last able to dedicate the hospital in 1955....

A few miles further we have the Stinkwater Lethabile Baptist Community Development project led by a Baptist from Zaire [now Democratic Republic of Congo] who has a degree in Community Development. This came into being in the eighties [i.e. 1986], when the heart of a Scottish Baptist doctor at Jubilee was touched by the need of these people who seemed to be the most deprived and overlooked community in the whole area [of Hammanskraal]. The heart of Pretoria Central Baptist Church was also touched and they started the Stinkwater (Baptist) Mission. They got the school right; provided accommodation and help for a clinic from Jubilee; sank boreholes; erected buildings; started teaching vegetable and hen and egg production, sewing and knitting; and they preached Christ. They make up monthly parcels of food for elderly people and run a soup kitchen.

It is apparent from the above that Stinkwater Baptist mission attempted to redress the situation of the people of Stinkwater in a holistic manner (cf. Parnell 2002: 219). Put differently, Lowe and Mangayi (1999: 30) contend that Letlhabile Baptist Community Development project (previously known as Stinkwater Baptist Mission from 1986 to 1992), like Jubilee Hospital, opted for a biblical holistic basis for mission and ministry at Stinkwater. This meant integration of the proclamation of the gospel with demonstration of the love of God in practical ways through development and compassionate deeds. Opting for a holistic approach was in itself a big conversion moment for an evangelical denomination which used to focus on 'winning souls'. The approach was also a stepping stone which triggered multiple episodes of conversions for both the community development project as well as the key leader, Mangayi, who was responsible for overseeing the realisation of the vision of this project. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into all of these conversion episodes. Only four conversion episodes underwent by Mangayi are highlighted, foregrounding the question as to what conversion is.

### 3. Conversion in perspective

The term 'conversion' is derived from the Latin '*convertere*', which means to revolve or turn around. Gooren (2010: 10) suggests that the basic meaning of the term relates to the biblical Hebrew word *shub* ("to turn, to return") and the Greek words *strepbo* and *epistrepbo*. Two other Greek words are mentioned in the New Testament: *metamelonai* ("to be anxious, regretful"), which describes the state of the subject undergoing a conversion experience, and *metanoia* ("change of mind"), which describes the positive state or attitude of one who has undergone conversion. Usually, *metamelonai* and *metanoia* complement each other, as the one leads to the other.

My own experience as both a missionary and researcher/missiologist encapsulates both *metamelonai* ("to be anxious, regretful") and *metanoia* ("change of mind"). I was anxious when I realised that the Stinkwater context (in terms of history, socio-economic life and physical experience) and my theological preparation were on different tangents (cf. Mischke 2015: 173). This anxiety triggered in me some conversions which are highlighted in section 4 of this article. A brief discussion is thus needed towards the conceptualisation of the term 'conversion'.

Rambo & Bauman (2012: 1) point out that conversion has been a topical issue in psychology for over two centuries. In theology or religious studies, McGrath (1995: 239) writes: "[I]t started to receive considerable attention since the days of Oetinger in 1849". The exploration of the term conversion has also focussed on understanding the phenomenon of conversion. Anthropologists and sociologists such as Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo (1999) undertook scientific studies on

religious conversion (also cf. Mahoney and Pargament 2004: 482). Rambo (1995) in particular developed a heuristic stage model of conversion consisting of seven stages, namely context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences, to serve as a framework for a better understanding of the processes involved in conversion. Other studies by Rambo (1999) considered theories of conversion for understanding religious change. Rambo (1982) and Rambo & Bauman (2012: 886) studied the correlation between charisma of a religious leader and conversion, while Smith (2007) explored the actual experience of the people involved in the religious conversion process. Looking back at my own experience as a believer, I probably went through similar stages as those highlighted by Rambo. In addition, as mentioned by Mahoney & Pargament (2004: 481), “religious traditions have long acknowledged the human potential for transformation via the process of conversion”. Furthermore, Barrow, Hwang and McCleary (2010: 30) studied conversion shifts across major types of religion, as well as the reasons that motivated these shifts. Their findings seem to point to the fact that people may be receptive to choosing a new religious option to lessen anxiety, find meaning, and gain a sense of belonging (cf. see also Rambo & Bauman 2012:882). Buxant, Saroglou, and Scheuer (2009) examined the motivations behind contemporary conversions and found that motivations are associated with whether a person is active or passive in the conversion process, and whether a person’s drive to convert is compensatory or constructive. With reference to a missionary, Kirby (1995: 131 – 143) stresses that language and culture learning is conversion, as a missionary becomes bi-cultural.

Conversion is a psycho-spiritual process which depends on variables associated with a person, such as inner conviction, need for change, circumstances and rewards. It suffices to say that these variables do not have the same effects on all people in that what triggers a desire for change in one person will not necessarily realise the same desire in the other person. Personal motivations and the willpower of an individual also play an important role in determining whether a person will accept or reject conversion. Conversion is voluntarily and thoughtfully considered, and not done under coercion. Biblically, it implies one’s natural life being voluntarily submitted to the spiritual, obeying the orders of the Spirit of God (cf. Chambers 1992, December 28).

In biblical theology, conversion is a prerequisite for entering the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matthew 18: 3). Chambers (1992) expounds: “The words of our Lord Jesus in this verse (i.e. Matthew 18:3) refer to our initial conversion, but we should continue to turn to God as children, being continuously converted every day of our lives”. Conversion as a term thus has dual usage in biblical theology. Cairns (1998: 102) elaborates further on this by stating that it is firstly a turning to God, which signifies the change of nature, a regeneration referred to as *passive conversion* by

Francis Turretin<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, the exercise of that changed nature in faith and repentance is conversion referred to as *active conversion* by Francis Turretin. Regeneration is a once-for-all act; conversion is the continuing activity of turning to God.

In my own case, although I was 'regenerated', continuous conversions were essential for the ministry I 'have received' (cf. 2 Cor.4:1) at Stinkwater. The idea of continuous conversions is biblical, as pointed out above, and resonates with the three significant missiological documents of this decade, namely 'Together Towards Life' (TTL) (2013), '*Evangelii Gaudium*' (2013) and the 'Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Movement' (2010). The continuous conversion idea turned the notion of conversion around, as it focusses on the individual missionary, and is in contrast to the common understanding that a missionary is the one sent out to convert non-believers to the Christian faith. There is a place for the latter, but I contend that, unless the missionary is willing to undergo conversions relative to his context of ministry, he remains, in many subtle ways, an instrument of the established church which perpetuates disconnections of his theology of mission and its context of ministry. Even worse, the missionary can become one who works to maintain the status quo and as a result stands in the way of the Holy Spirit who is supposed to work through him or her in intercession (cf. Rom. 8: 26-27, Mark 11: 17) and service (cf. Col. 1:24) for the realisation of the kingdom of God.

Statement no 34 of TTL document of the World Council of Churches (2013) captures this idea in these words: "Mission provokes in me a renewed awareness that the Holy Spirit meets me and challenges me at all levels of life and brings newness and change to the places and times of my personal journeys". (Paraphrased TTL 2013, statement no 34). As a minister/missionary/missiologist I am certain that the Holy Spirit at work in me initiated these continuous conversions and their implications in the ministry that I received from him at Stinkwater. This is so because pneumatology and mission can never be separated, they are interdependent. The Cape Town Statement (2010, Part 1: Clause 5) highlights this interdependence as follows:

He is the missionary Spirit sent by the missionary Father and the missionary Son, breathing life and power into God's missionary Church. We love and pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit because without the witness of the Spirit to Christ, our own witness is futile. Without the convicting work of the Spirit, our preaching is in vain. Without the gifts, guidance and power of the Spirit, our mission is mere hu-

<sup>8</sup> Francis Turretin (1623 – 1687) was a Calvinistic Scholastic theologian in an age of Protestant, Catholic, Lutheran and Socinian Scholastics. Like his great predecessor, John Calvin, Turretin entitled his scholastic work *Institutio*. This word suggests foundational or basic instruction. <http://www.apuritanismind.com/puritan-favorites/francis-turretin/>, accessed 14 November 2016.

man effort. And without the fruit of the Spirit, our unattractive lives cannot reflect the beauty of the gospel.

Therefore, the missionary, as the vessel of the Holy Spirit, works as the Spirit leads toward bearing fruits of the kingdom of God. Yet, as Pope Francis (2013: 44) cautions: “[the missionary and his co-workers] need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also – and this is decisive – choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil.”

In this section I attempted to conceptualise the term ‘conversion’ in relation to the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and religious studies, referring to biblical theology and to contemporary Missiological documents such as TLL, *Evangelii Gaudium* and the Cape Town Statement of the Lausanne Movement. The role, which the Holy Spirit plays in the process of conversion, was also highlighted in relation to my autobiographical narrative. The insights gained in this section are helpful in making sense of the continuous conversions I recount in what follows.

#### **4. Four continuous conversion experiences of a Congolese-born missionary at Stinkwater**

Building on the brief introduction and the ministry background of this Congolese-born missionary (i.e. Mangayi) in sections 1 and 2, I now turn to narrate my conversion experiences as autobiographical narrative, that is, “it contains information about the self” (Brewer 1986 cited in Tenni, Smith and Boucher 2003: 1). Brockmeier (2000: 52) elaborates that autobiographic narrative is talking about one’s life and personal experiences, reflections and concerns – past and present. “Usually, telling one’s life is closely intertwined with autobiographical remembering, the retrospective reconstruction of one’s life history” (Brockmeier 2000: 54, see also Josselson 2010: 1). It is one of the “processes of understanding one’s self in time” (Brockmeier 2000: 55). Brockmeier (2000: 56) states: “. . . as it is with every narrative about my past it is always also a story told in, and about, the present as well as story about the future”. This narrative is central to how I conceive of myself; I create stories of myself to connect my actions, mark my identity, and distinguish myself from others (cf. Josselson 2010: 1). This is also true for the narrative which follows, where I present my story in episodes as related to conversion.

The choice to use autobiographical narrative in this article is driven by the central question I have asked as stated in the introduction. I concur with Tenni, Smith and Boucher (2003: 2-3) that “it [autobiographical narrative] is not about presenting [myself] in a good light – in charge, competent, controlled, organised and so on, or how [I] might like to be seen. Rather, it is writing (. . .) accounts that include

(...) the self-doubts, the mistakes, the embarrassments, the inconsistencies (...) and that which may be distasteful". Further, this article's central question which pertains to one's own missionary practice or personal experience clearly requires the author to study himself (cf. Tenni, Smith and Boucher 2003: 2) as I have briefly done in these conversion episodes.

#### **4.1 Conversion from highlighting numbers to highlighting personal stories**

Reese (2006: 477) writes; "...sharing the gospel (...) cross-culturally includes adjusting to another's way of looking at life". For me adjustment included: 1) allowing the host community to be my guides and companions; 2) remembering that my goal is to become more effective in building relationships; 3) learning by asking honest questions which can lead to building relationships, so that I can begin to become part of the people's lives; 4) participating in building people's lives; and 5) sharing what I know (cf. Reese 2006: 477 – 478). At the core of this adjusting process was language and culture learning (Kirby 1995: 136). For me the gospel could effectively be shared at Stinkwater only if weaved together with the stories of the people. It was no longer a matter of counting numbers of people who have accepted Christ in their lives at the end of a meeting. Rather, individual stories transformed by the gospel in this context became the focus and were reported on. This required a mind shift about how I told what the Lord God was doing through Stinkwater Baptist Mission. My evangelistic ministry became more about "mediating the good news of God's love in Christ that transforms life, proclaiming, by word and action that Christ has set us free" (Bosch 1991: 413, also cf. Gutierrez 1988: xxxvii, xii). This was a major shift for somebody who comes from an ecclesial tradition, which used to see mission primarily as 1) evangelism – "emphasis being on people who are not yet Christians...or who are no longer Christians" (Bosch 1991: 409, also cf. McGravan 1983: 17); and 2) "witness to people of other living faiths" (Bosch 1991: 474 – 477). To me reporting in numbers used to be the way one was expected to highlight progress in the mission field. I no longer subscribe to highlighting numbers of converts to Christianity. Individual stories of lives changed by the gospel are what I consider as important now.

#### **4.2 Conversion from teaching biblical scriptures to mediating the meaning of scriptures in a concrete context**

Tyrant (2005: 283 – 291) suggests that the missionary journey to acceptance is like climbing a big hill very slowly. The missionary is like an ...

[I]mportunate guest at first then gain the status of an invited guest. Being accepted as an invited guest is a significant step ... as it gives the missionary the opportunity

to recognise the presence of evangelical values in the host culture... After having had exposure to community needs, he must respond in action while being conscious that his solutions to these needs might be un-adapted and incomplete. (Tyrant 2005: 286 -287).

Tyrant also captures my journey and that of many other cross-cultural workers. My experience was uncomfortable in that I was expected to get on with ministry, that is serving the community of Stinkwater with the gospel which touches life holistically, as a native would. It was expected to be easy for me, as Stinkwater was not an 'unreached' area in that the gospel has been preached there before my arrival. However, although an African, I was a guest, which led me to revisit the way theological institutions taught me to teach biblical scriptures – where the pastor is the only “*mfundisi*” (meaning the teacher and provider of biblical knowledge), and worse, this “*mfundisi*” has been trained to ‘dish out’ the scriptures in English and from a western point of view. I soon realised that teaching and preaching biblical scriptures in English the way I was taught would not reach the people of Stinkwater. Owing to my previous training as an adult educator, I recognised the importance of mediated learning whereby the teacher’s role moves from provider of knowledge to learning facilitator, as the student becomes self-regulated, independent and creative.

Going against my theological formation, I changed my approach by taking a role of a facilitator rather than a teacher and thus mediating the meaning of what the Bible says in concrete ways as related to Stinkwater. I concur therefore with what past century missiologist Allen<sup>9</sup> (1953: 194) said: “...the test of all [Bible-based] teaching is practice ...Nothing should be taught which cannot be so grasped and used”. This way, I contend, the gospel would be adapted to local context conditions and not be mere imitations of Western Christianity. One of the ways for achieving this is to ‘convert’ the proclamation of the gospel in the local language befitting the local culture (cf. Kirby 1995) and embracing a Contextual Bible Study - which is a See-Judge-Act method of reading the Bible, developed by West & Ujamaa Centre Staff (2011: 3).

### 4.3 Conversion from church focussed to kingdom focussed

The social ecology of Stinkwater was up until the 1990s, and still is, in many ways marked by persistent ills, such as food insecurity and malnutrition, violence, housing insecurity, deforestation and countless others. These ills prompted me to revisit

<sup>9</sup> See the history and biography of Roland Allen on <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/a-c/allen-roland-1868-1947/> accessed 21 May 2016. Allen criticized missionaries for their paternalistic and protective attitudes and their failure to trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the new church in its development.

the church-centred focus approach to ministry I was accustomed to at that time. Inward focus of conventional church ministry praxes that I facilitated as the lead missionary proved to be ineffective in addressing those ills holistically. So many barriers (i.e. theological, cultural, institutional, relational, spiritual, as well as barriers regarding identity and capacity) stood in my way for embracing integral mission (cf. Chester 2004: 4-11). It was apparent that more was required of me than just being a church-centred mission-minded individual (cf. Mashau 2014: 3). I had to become a kingdom-advancing individual (cf. Miller & Allen 2008: 3) in order to exercise my calling to implement the “whole will of God” (Acts 20: 27, cf. Wright 2010: 24). Insights from Biblical Holism material written by John Steward<sup>10</sup> of World Vision Australia ‘fuelled’ a conversion in me which led me to become more kingdom-focussed in my approach to ministry. This conversion resulted in multiple partnerships with a wide range of eco-friendly socio-economic development projects in the community (cf. Lowe & Mangayi 1999: 34–35, see also Parnell 1995). We, the project staff and I, started doing “mission by being [good] neighbours” with the resolve “to meet them [people] in the context of their everyday life” (Chester & Timmis 2011: 10).

#### 4.4 Conversion from “one-size-fits-all” sermons to “tailor-made” sermons.

In his devotional for 22 April, Chambers (1992) contends: “A Christian servant is one who perpetually looks into the face of God and then goes forth to talk to others”. For me, the face of God is good news. How then could I share the good news with the people of Stinkwater – a community affected by socio-economic injustice and marginalisation? Building on insights gained through mediating the meaning of the Bible in practical ways at Stinkwater, my preaching had to become contextual. In this sense, Kritzinger (2013: 5) explains that “preaching is contextual when a preacher presents a message to a congregation by consciously using their language(s), customs and culture(s) to address their daily circumstances and situation, so that their lives may be touched, enriched, transformed, comforted and healed” (see also West and Ujamaa Centre Staff 2011). This naturally lead to preparing ‘tailor-made’ sermons, built with carefully selected materials (cf. Kritzinger 2013: 6) and aimed at having an impact on the context of the listeners. Bearing in mind, as Padilla (1981: 19 - 22) points out, “in the contextual approach both the context of the ancient text and the context of the modern reader are given due weight”. The context of Stinkwater was ‘in my face’. I was no longer comfortable to preach, as Padilla (1981: 23) puts it; “the gospel which has a foreign sound, or no sound at all, in relation to many of the

<sup>10</sup> Steward, John (1994). *Biblical holism: where God, people and deeds connect*. Melbourne: World Vision International Australia.

dreams and anxieties, problems and questions, values and customs of the people” of Stinkwater. I had a ‘change of mind’ about the sermons I delivered, by opting for “tailor-made” sermons befitting the context. This change meant that my sermons had to address real socio-economic, historical, political as well as spiritual issues which affected the community of Stinkwater at that time. In a way, the team and I aspired to becoming what John Stott (2010: 16 - 17) calls “the radical disciple” in opposition to “being a Christian”. A Christian is anyone who has a relationship with Jesus Christ, but as the biblical history has taught us, the identity of the Christian church has been marred by human-made rules, biases and prejudices, which unfortunately make the church more subservient to humans than to the head of the church, who is Christ. The ‘radical disciple’ is one who embraces non-conformity to the pattern of this world (cf. Rom. 12:2), Christlikeness (cf. Rom. 8:29, 2 Cor. 3:18 and I Jn. 3:2), maturity (Col. 1:28 – 29), creation-care (cf. Ps. 24:1 & Ps. 115:16), simplicity in lifestyle relative to money and possessions, balance (cf. 1 Peter 2:1-17), dependence (cf. Jn. 21:18, Gal. 6:2) and death (Rom.6:11). The radical disciple is expected to have no right to pick and choose the areas in which he or she will submit to Christ’s authority (cf. Stott 2010: 17) as the teacher.

These conversion episodes highlight how *metamelonai* and *metanoia* were used by the Holy Spirit in my journey to initiate and sustain processes of active conversion. These episodes have profound implications on one’s theology of mission and praxis. I highlight some of these implications relative to my autobiographical narrative.

## **5. Implications for my theology of mission and praxis in relation to these conversions**

I must admit that the personal conversion episodes discussed in the foregoing sections may seem simple at face value, yet they have had profound effects in my theology and praxis. Firstly, these conversion episodes highlight how *metamelonai* and *metanoia* were used by the Holy Spirit in my journey to initiate and sustain processes of continuous active conversions, which will ultimately make one a radical disciple in everyday life. I therefore submit that indigenous workers not native to the land where they are assigned to work must be open to the Holy Spirit to initiate necessary conversions in their lives. In my case, this meant learning to be more sensitive to the nudging of the Holy Spirit. Hence, my appreciation for waiting on the Holy Spirit to lead in worship and service is steadily growing. I rediscovered as an African Baptist that pneumatology and *missio Dei* work in an integral manner.

Secondly, these episodes led me to appreciate that mission is inherently transformative and liberating. I am now convinced that there is no way one could be genuinely involved in mission with God and at the same time remain neutral or ‘un-engaged’ about God’s agenda for transformation and liberation encapsulated

in the good news of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Saviour who declares “behold I am making everything new...” (Rev. 21:5). Radical disciples must therefore embrace Christ’s transformation and liberation agenda from self and idolatry in the here and now as faithful co-workers.

Thirdly, these episodes revived in me the notion that mission must be contextually and biblically appropriate. Issues of social justice, including eco-justice, inequalities and all sorts of exclusion, become foci of holistic and integrated mission, so that the good news of Jesus permeates all spheres of life on the *oikos* (cf. Phil. 1:6). This way, mission will truly become the cutting edge of the Christian movement.

Fourthly, these episodes made me realise that ecclesial theologies can be short-sighted about God’s mission agenda, which is about the coming and the advancing of His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, embracing kingdom theology is for me an opportunity to become useful in the affairs of the kingdom of God, which might even fall outside my faith community preoccupations. This could lead to co-working with agents from various professional backgrounds who work for the good of the kingdom and who might not be found among the church’s files and ranks.

Lastly, these episodes triggered in me an aspiration to become a lifelong learner – a practitioner of *missio Dei*. Having been convicted that God’s mission is what you are called to be part of as a disciple and what you are called to implement. My ongoing involvement in *missio Dei* locally, nationally, regionally and worldwide continues to be influenced by these conversion episodes.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on my autobiographical narrative, this article discusses conversions in relation to Stinkwater Baptist Mission. It argues that it is important for African indigenous workers who intend to work in contexts where they are not native to the land, to be sensitive to the ‘nudging’ of the Holy Spirit who facilitates personal ‘*active conversion*’ episodes. Being sensitive to context will ultimately equip them better for the call of mission in any assigned context. In my case, I went through four active conversion episodes, namely: (1) conversion from highlighting numbers to highlighting personal stories; (2) conversion from teaching biblical scriptures to mediating the meaning of scriptures in a concrete context; (3) conversion from being church focussed to kingdom focussed; and (4) conversion from ‘one-size-fits-all’ sermons to ‘tailor-made’ sermons, which all have had profound implications towards reshaping and reviving my theology of mission and praxis at Stinkwater. As a result, these conversions stimulated me towards a creative imagination on how to ‘weave together’ the good news story of Jesus as Lord of His people with stories of people in the context of Stinkwater.

This article makes a contribution to the study field of missiology by unearthing insights from the perspective of an autobiographical narrative of a Congolese-born missionary in South Africa. These insights could be useful in the preparation of African indigenous workers who intend to work in contexts where they are not native to the land. Ultimately, however, further research is needed to generate and reflect on other African autobiographical narratives as stepping stones for the development of an African epistemic base for the preparation and orientation of African indigenous workers.

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