

The Contemporary *Missio Dei* Paradigm and its Expression in the Global South

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Abstract

For a long time, the Global South has been unprepared for the ecclesiastical responsibility of mission work that has been naturally part of Christianity in the Global North. This could be so because, traditionally, Christianity has been introduced in the Global South through mission work. This article examines the contemporary *Missio Dei* paradigm and its expression in the Global South. It begins by explaining the development of the concept of *Missio Dei* and proceeds to elaborate its expression and reception in the Global South. It is generally considered that to understand the paradigm of *Missio Dei* in the Global South, it has to be viewed through ecclesiological structures native to the Global South. Concurrently, I seek to answer this question: what is the theological implication of Covid-19 for the African Church, and which strategies are being employed to mitigate the condition within the Global South? This paper undertakes a

qualitative methodology in which a systematic literature review is conducted from the available scholarly sources that leads to both theological and missiological inferences. Additionally, an extensive analysis of the concept of *Missio Dei* will be conducted as it relates to the Global South, demonstrating that the *Missio Dei* paradigm has shifted very significantly in the Global South, transforming the region from traditionally receivers of mission work to active participants in mission work. The Global South is now ready for both home and diaspora mission work. Findings and recommendations from this paper will be beneficial for current and future scholars in both theological and missiological fields.

Conspectus

Keywords

Missio Dei, Global South, African Church, ecclesiology

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introduction

As Christianity is transforming over time, new meaning is also developing over the concept of Christian theology (Wood 2018, 16). Traditionally, it has been understood that Christianity was limited to evangelism and defined within the confines of divine revelation and human experience (Muller 2014, 6). In that sense, mission work has been an inherent feature of Christianity. However, mission work has been understood traditionally in different dynamic forms. It is a way through which revealed truth about God is assigned human meaning and communicated to the contemporary population in a given geographical location. Viewed through this lens, it implies that mission work is responsible for molding new faiths, disseminating the message of God, and availing the necessary requirements for accessing the content of missiological revelation. Largely, mission work has been engaging both exegetical and canonical understandings of the biblical text within diverse contexts (Sawatsky 1987, 12). This has implicitly created roles that for a long time have been distinct identities of the Global North and the Global South. The Global North has been the mover of mission work whilst the Global South has been the receiver of mission work.

Historically, mission work has been understood in various ways. In the Global North, it is mainly considered as a divine call to God's people to reach as many nations as possible with the message of God as a means of offering salvation and expanding the Kingdom of God (Kool 2008, 21). In the Global South, however, it has been mainly viewed through a cultural perspective in which mission work is simply a conflation of globally east and south people with Western Christianity (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 4). This understanding is deeply rooted in the Global South owing to the fact that Christianity was introduced there by missionaries from

the West. In these two views, albeit divergent, the concept of authentic Christian theology comprising Christology and the Holy Trinity is still consistent, or has so been, within the spheres of theological teachings. However, there have been developments over time with the concept of Christianity being viewed as a religion of the West becoming vacuous and less sufficing under theological scrutiny (van Klinken 2017, 42). This has led to the evolution of the Global South assuming roles of mission work that was traditionally a reserve for the Global North, leading to what some scholars refer to as reverse missiology (Adedibu 2013, 408). Similarly, with the outbreak of Covid-19, the Global South has been immensely affected with numerous theological implications that have birthed new theological trends and changes in ecclesiology. Therefore, this article endeavors to examine the concept of *Missio Dei* in the contemporary Global South as well its expression within this geographical location.

2. The Concept of *Missio Dei*

There has been an immense debate in the world of Christian theology surrounding the etymology of the word "mission." While some scholars hold that there is no equivalence to the contemporary mission directly mentioned or alluded to in the Bible, there are others who argue for its origin from the great commission in Matthew 28 (Jensz 2012, 244). Peskett and Ramachandra (2003) postulate that the earliest use of the word "mission" and the inception of the concept of "missionary" is attributed to the envoys of the Pope that were out to convert Asians and native Americans to Catholic Christianity. Up to now, there is still a rift between those who try to understand mission work as a human initiative and those who think of it as a work of God (Harold 2019, 21). In the Brandenburg Missionary Conference of 1932, Karl Barth supported the same notion of understanding mission as the work of God himself (Bentley 2009, 19). It

has further been strongly affirmed that the authentic concept of mission work should entail understanding the nature of God followed by human experience in disseminating what God wants of his people. In this sense, most missiologists have become contented with the understanding that mission is a work of God accomplished through human activity (Adedibu 2013, 64).

Even as the study of missiology is expanding and changing over time, missionary theology owes much of its transformation to the influence of Karl Barth. It is through him that a basis of understanding mission chiefly as work ordained and commissioned by God was founded (Bentley 2009, 17). Tormond Engelsviken (2003, 9) in his work, *Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology*, illustrates that the use of the word *Missio Dei* was first discussed in the Willingen IMC conference in 1952. Engelsviken argues that, however the exact terminology was employed, it is reasonable for one to conclude that the conference was the foundation of the term *Missio Dei*.

Because mission was understood as a work of God, it became insufficient to incorporate other aspects of human influence into the confines of missiology. It was in its basic scope a subject to explore the Triune God. However, as time changed, the missionary theology has equally experienced a paradigm shift. Primarily, there was need to examine mission work in light of the doctrine of ecclesiology. This was necessitated by the fact that for mission work to be successful, an understanding of the structural concept of Christian denominations was mandatory (Adedibu 2013, 67). Consequently, besides communicating the message of God, creating ecclesiological communities became mission work's other fundamental tenet (Bevans 2015, 131). In that light, the *Missio Dei* concept was birthed in which it was defined as the voluntary action of emulating God in sending his Son and the Holy Spirit to do his work on earth.

In the Global South, the reception of *Missio Dei* was initially an act in creating new Christian communities and opening churches in various places. It was an idea in which the church was considered as a representation of the personage of the Trinity and that mission work was ordained by God to expand his work on earth (Sonea 2017, 77). By the beginning of the twentieth century, different mission representations were already established in the Global South. By this, the Global South was becoming a diverse ground for evangelization to be soon filled with mainly Catholic, Protestant, Adventist, and Orthodoxy theologies. As elaborated above, the basic comprehension of mission work described by Willingen, in which *Missio Dei* was believed to have arisen from God, was embraced by all the early Christian denominations arriving in the Global South (Sonea 2017, 81). The opening of new churches and the creating of Christ awareness in the Global South became *Missio Dei's raison d'être*, but this would soon not be the case as there was a need to point the Global South unto God through his word and will (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing. 2020, 17).

While *Missio Dei* emphasized the doctrine of the Trinity and God's action in the world, its consequences brought about distinct changes in ecclesiological and theological perceptions. Since the Global South was uniquely a ground for evangelization through mission work it became necessary to differentiate *Missio Dei* from the activities of the Church (Bentley 2009, 22). This is clearly reinforced in Lutheran missiology whereby the *Missio Dei* is given priority before church mission (Rasolondraibe 2004). This understanding has had a varied impact on the *Missio Ecclesiae* as well as the ecclesiological structures within the Global South. In the most dominant view, mission work has been cast as an independent entity that is separate from the Church and taken to be God's own activity.

However, since Christianity at large and churches in the Global South are products of mission work, it becomes inevitable to look at missiology

and ecclesiology through a similar lens. For this reason, the concept of *Missio Dei* had to expand in order to incorporate not only the doctrine of the Holy Trinity but also soteriology and Christology. By including these doctrines, *Missio Dei* and the Church became functionally synonymous and inherently inseparable (Engelsviken 2003, 490). Even though they operated on different theological planes, their roles quite often overlapped making it impossible to have mission work without the Church and *vice versa*.

However, since the Global South was continually the receiver of mission work, it was natural for missionaries to dominate church activity as this established mission continuity. Unlike the Global North in which the Church had a constituent of mission work, in the Global South, the Church was structured in such a way that it seemed mission work was a prerogative of the Global North (Sonea 2017, 86). *Missio Dei* was therefore construed in a different light in the Global South, the most dominant view being a representation of God's work on earth by creating and opening new Christian congregations (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 14). In a sense, mission work could comprise the activities of the Church, but the Church could not entirely be a substitute for mission work in its functions. Similarly, the missiological perspectives of the different denominations established in the Global South differed concerning the interdependence of the Church and *Missio Dei*. For instance, in the Catholic Church's layout of ecclesiological structures it is elaborated that the Church in its nature is missional and therefore mission work is inherently a feature of the Church which cannot survive on its own (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 61). This is further illustrated by the nature of activities of the Church through which the doctrine of the Trinity, soteriology, and the Christocentric principle are the central foundations of faith formation. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder add that churches were established through *Missio Dei* and therefore by default assumed a missiological role

in which they are commissioned to call people of the nations to faith, offer salvation through Christ, and communicate the Word of God.

The Global South seems to have approached the understanding of mission work on a two faceted approach: firstly, mission work as God's work was primarily meant to save the world of its iniquities, and consequently this became an overlapping role of the Church as well (Bentley 2009, 39). This was broadly based on the concept of the triune character of God, which meant the source of the Church's missionary activity was God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Engelsviken 2003, 11). The Church had to find a link to connect with this redemptive mission of God. By reinforcing the concept of the triune God, the understanding of *Missio Dei* was primarily anchored on the Christocentric principle as it was through the gospel teachings of Christ that mission work spread in the Global South (Sonea 2017, 87). The aim of the Christocentric principle was to build a Christian religious foundation whose doctrine focused on the revelations of Jesus Christ as an arbiter of any truth claims about the nature of God. This precedence was received well in the Global South. However, as time went by, the understanding of the Christocentric principle varied in different church denominations, and this brought about differences in the structural understanding of the *Missio Dei* amongst Christians in the Global South (Adedibu 2013, 62).

Secondly, while the first approach emphasized the centrality of Jesus Christ as an arbiter of Christians' teachings about God and respectively incorporated the Church in the *Missio Dei*, the second approach was based on the concept of cosmocentric Trinitarianism. This approach focused on the "providential work of the Father through the Spirit in culture and World history" in addition to Christ and his Church (Sonea 2017, 77). This was marked by a mission work in which the Church was not considered as part of *Missio Dei* in the community, and it aimed at conducting mission work

through the principle of God the Father as the head of the Trinity and his providential work through his Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In a sense, there was a formation of two parallel approaches to *Missio Dei* in the Global South. However, due to the popularity of the gospel of Christ, the Christocentric approach seemed to win the day.

This was not the only concept of *Missio Dei*. As different factions of Christianity continued to appear, there was also an extensive expansion of knowledge regarding this concept (Harold 2019, 26). Due to differences in cultures and environments, there was a need to progressively redefine the concept of *Missio Dei*. Missiological thinking in the Global South progressively evolved and in time adopted a new approach in which the traditional concept introduced by European settlers was viewed as imperial and Eurocentric (Adedibu 2013, 71). This is also echoed in the ecumenical missiology and in the current missionary practice in the Global East in which the concept of mission work is termed as “mission from the margin” (Sonea 2017, 76).

The main point of departure of the Global South from the western model of *Missio Dei* is the initial exclusion of the receiver community in mission work (Melinda 2015, 24). This led to reluctance to participate in mission work, and consequently to a change in the understanding of *Missio Dei* in the Global South. Scholars and stakeholders of mission work in the Global South have adopted, in the contemporary context, a paradigm shift in their understanding of the *Missio Dei* in which an invitation to partake in the *Missio Dei* is favored as the most appropriate approach to winning the unchristian world (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 17). In such a circumstance, the traditional view of *Missio Dei* as introduced by early missionaries to the Global South falls short since in its activities of mission work, the participation of the objects of mission work was not called upon.

3. Expression and Reception of the *Missio Dei* Paradigm in the Global South

As expressed in the abstract of this article, *Missio Dei* in the Global South has experienced a paradigm shift over time since the introduction of mission work in the region. Historically, the Global South has been a recipient of mission work, and this has remained so for the longest part of the establishment of the African Church (Melinda 2015, 21). Conceptually, in the Global South, *Missio Dei* remains defined in accordance with its traditional view in which it is understood as God’s work on earth (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 13). This is vividly depicted in the earliest works of missionaries that settled in the Global South in which churches were opened, the message of God preached in new territories, and people converted to Christianity. *Missio Dei* was established with the intention of extending Christian religious faith to generations after generations through a well-founded belief in the work of God and the salvation conferred by Christ (Harold 2019, 16).

Over time, the Global South has held divergent views concerning the concept of *Missio Dei*. Most of the differences arose practically based on the rather disturbing events of political dispositions through which the Global South was conquered by Western authorities as a form of colonialism (Engelsviken 2003, 485). To some extent, this has impacted the understanding of *Missio Dei* in which a sect of Global South believers has contended that the classical expression of *Missio Dei* is territorial take over to not only create a new faith through the opening of churches but to also pass on a Western culture (Frescura 2015, 71). However, much this view seems weak in the actual intentionality of the *Missio Dei*. In the greatest part of it, this understanding has not stood the test of time as there have been progressive changes in the understanding of *Missio Dei* in the Global

South. To a greater extent, the Global South has maintained a tendency to hold on to true faith in God and primarily put more focus on trying to win back those who have fallen from faith, rather than converting unbelievers (Sonea 2017, 87).

The transformation of the Global South was not an easy course for the initial mission work in the region to pursue. This is so because during the arrival of Western missionaries, the Global South was largely populated by many different religious traditions and for the message of God to be passed on to them it meant total abdication from their former religious beliefs (Knoetze and Verryyn 2021). Missionary outreach power was limited, and language barriers were an additional stumbling block for the introduction of *Missio Dei* in the Global South. Amongst the earliest missionary units to dominate the Global South included the Catholic Church in which Fatokun (2005) reports experiences of reprehension. This prompted a change in the missionary model by which the calling of locals to faith concentrated more on learning the ways of the locals before letting them understand and consequently believe the work of God (Fatokun 2005, 362). Although the traditional concept of *Missio Dei*, as influenced by Barth and later defined in Willingen, meant that emphasis should be put on the doctrine of Trinity and the Christological principle, it had to be considerably adjusted to fit the cultural and religious dynamics of the Global South. It, therefore, became necessary to first set physical centers through which mission work would later be established. The major focus of the *Missio Dei* became opening new churches as opposed to communicating the work of God through the salvation of Christ.

Over time, the Global South embraced *Missio Dei* in its traditional understanding and many were converting to Christianity, albeit with the view that the Church was established as a means of continuation of faith while mission work was mandated to primarily bring on board those who

have not yet heard of the faith (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 11). The Global South has since undergone a paradigm shift in the understanding of the *Missio Dei* in relation to ecclesiology. There is no general consensus regarding the concept of *Missio Dei*, as different Christian churches have slightly varying interpretations (Bentley 2009, 32). For instance, the Protestant church holds that the true Church of Christ transcends the physical building and therefore *Missio Dei* is not necessarily required to open up churches for it to succeed (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 42). Engelsviken (2003, 32) adds onto this idea by arguing that, in the traditional sense of defining *Missio Dei*, it is understood as the work of God and one cannot be wrong to say God's work can be achieved outside the boundaries of church and missionary institutions.

Given that the Global South has over time embraced *Missio Dei*, it has nonetheless never emphasized mission work outside its territory (Adedibu 2013, 415). In the contemporary *Missio Dei* paradigm, trinitarian theology has taken center stage in regard to understanding mission work. This has unified the understanding of both the Global South and the Global North (Sonea 2017, 77). This perspective implies that the *Missio Dei* originates from God, and it only begins when a community of believers understand the work of the personage of the Trinity. For this reason, the Global South has recognized the obsolescence of the initial view that mission work was a way of integrating cultures and spreading Western Christianity to a more dynamic view in which it is seen as a call to communion in God (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 16). This paradigm shift has prepared the Global South for extensive mission work both in its territory and beyond, including diaspora mission work.

4. *Missio Dei* Implications for the African Church in the Post-Covid-19 Era.

Missio Dei in the Global South has been a call for participation in God's work. The theological foundations of mission work highlight the connection between ecclesiology and missiology whose roles at some point overlap in the African Church (Bevans 2015, 131). In the Global South, it is paramount that the African Church be understood distinctively from mission work even though they share functional units. This means that the call of people to salvation through Jesus Christ and the spread of the gospel is a fundamental identity of the African Church (Hexham, Sundkler, and Steed 2001, 96). The unifying of the doctrine of Trinity, soteriology, and Christology as the purpose of *Missio Dei* transmitted its very essence to the Church and it is from this basis that ecclesiological structures have sprung in the Global South. The African Church is in every aspect a product of mission work.

More broadly, the African Church in its nature has encompassed the *Missio Dei* albeit in a separate operational dimension (Adedibu 2013, 417). The Church in its physical form has been transmitting the work of God through salvation and the holy communion that transforms believers into witnesses of Christ's death and resurrection, while in its *Missio Dei* dimension the Church has reached out to communities with the message of God. The operation of the two activities as functional units has been a typical characteristic of the African Church. This is an idea brought about and built by the initial missionary expedition in the Global South (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 15). In this sense, a church had to formerly be understood as a physical building in which believers gathered to worship and commune with God. On the other hand, mission work was construed not as a separate institution but an extension of the functions of the Church where the work of God is carried out outside of its walls (Fatokun 2005,

362). This has been the practice over time, up until the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, a shift in the understanding of mission work and the description of the Church initially held by the Global South was inevitable (Owino 2021, 10). To begin with, the understanding that a church was mainly a physical building into which believers had to come for religious service was being replaced with a different view in which it was not necessary for the believers to physically be present in the church building. This is in response to the directives by various governments in the Global South to ban mass gatherings as a measure against the spread of the coronavirus. In the wake of these directives, the African Church had to transform in its nature and operational structure. Frost and Öhlmann (2021) contend that this should lead to the understanding for the African Church that *Missio Dei* and the Church are one thing. They further assert that the Church should not be only about the salvation offered by the death and resurrection of Christ but should equally include the promise of the Kingdom of God through doing God's work on earth (Frost and Öhlmann 2021, 9).

Another aspect of transformation for the African Church in the post Covid-19 era has been the introduction of technology in the preaching and communication of the Word of God. It has been necessary for almost all congregations to find the technological means through which both its congregants and the wider society can be accessed. This has technically meant that *Missio Dei* by this design has become one with the Church. By broadcasting the message of God and calling people to faith, the African Church has conflated the initially distinct roles of mission work with the functions of the Church (Bevans 2015, 121). In this sense, the Word of God stands as the functional unit and common factor whilst God becomes he who sends, and the Church becomes receivers of God's work.

The African Church has been entangled in an identity crisis over its ecclesiological and missiological roles in society (Adedibu 2013, 422). The classical understanding, brought about by western missionaries, shaped an ideology in which mission work was viewed through a lens of physical extension of churches and conquering unchristian territories (Fatokun 2005, 319). This notion was passed over generations in time until a paradigm shift was experienced in which the traditional concept of *Missio Dei* was seen as the passing on of a foreign culture in addition to the gospel. A further shift has been experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic in which *Missio Dei* has been open to technology, and now the unchristian world can receive the message of God without having to be physically available in a church building.

On the other hand, the implications of Covid-19 have equally had a negative impact on the development of both ecclesiological understanding and the *Missio Dei* in the African Church (Bevans 2015, 116). Since, for the first time, churches have been forced by circumstances to operate with no or a few congregants present, there has been a new conditioning in which members of the African Church are beginning to perceive the role of the Church in Christianity. This is seen in effect whereby most ecclesiological teachings have adopted a theological understanding in which the physical church is considered as a place where a community of faithful ones worship, whereas the true Church is a representation of Christ in one's life (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020, 22). Such a line of thought has therefore put emphasis on individual lives rather than community, giving rise to a decline in the physical church community. Given the implications of Covid-19, some members of the African Church have nonetheless embraced the idea of the "true Church" through remaining at home and connecting to their local churches through technological devices.

5. Conclusion

The Global South has been a ground for mission work, initially from the Global North and currently from its members. Due to the introduction of Christianity in the Global South through mission work initiated by the Global North, it has been a long-held notion that the Global South was incapable of mission work outside its territory. This could be true as evaluated in consideration of the weaker economic power and financial constraints of the Global South populace as compared to the Global North. Such an initial setting birthed a different view of the *Missio Dei* in which the Church was separated from missionary institutions as opposed to the definition given in the Willingen conference. Over time, the Global South experienced a paradigm shift in the concept of *Missio Dei*, and there was a redefining in which it was necessary for members of the Global South to partake in the activities of mission work. This was in line with developing objections of the traditional concept of *Missio Dei* in which some of the members of the Global South believed that, in addition to the gospel, there was too pervasive a dissemination of foreign western culture.

As far as the Global South is concerned, *Missio Dei* has been mainly viewed as not only a representation of God's work through the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, soteriology, and Christology but also an expansion of Christian territory through the opening of new congregations. This in a sense separates ecclesiology from missiology. From this perspective, *Missio Dei* is the initiative of God whilst the Church is a human invention through which the Word of God will be passed on by God's people. Additionally, the idea of the Church has progressively taken different meanings amongst different Christian denominations in the Global South. Lately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been immense changes to the ecclesiological structure in the Global South whereby the use of technology to conquer

unchristian territories and call people to salvation has been part of *Missio Dei*.

Alongside this understanding, the African Church has undergone radical changes in its understanding of missiology which have been necessitated with changes of events in time. It has become necessary for a clearer view that the Church and mission work be viewed as one thing. Similarly, it is safe for one to conclude that the Global South has undergone immense changes in the perception of missiology that has prepared it for mission work both in its territory and outside via diaspora mission. The ecclesiological transformations in the African Church in the post-Covid era is enough testimony for the theological flexibility of the African Church and serves as a hallmark of the contemporary *Missio Dei* paradigm shift in the Global South.

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