



'The farm that became a great problem': Epworth Mission Station and the manifestation of mission in crisis in post-independence Zimbabwe

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Mission stations were created to radiate the light of Christianity to the surrounding communities. However, as time passed, what was meant to be the light became an eyesore to the noble intentions of the initial founders. Epworth Mission Station brings together the manifestation of a failed mission vision, as exemplified by the challenges and the squalid conditions of what was once a promising mission. This study explores the origins and challenges faced at a mission station and in particular Epworth of the Methodist Church in Harare. It looks at the challenges of the 19th-century mission approach in a post-colonial era. With the changes in political and religious terrain in Africa, mission work has suffered.

Contribution: Using qualitative methods, which included desk research, archival and ethnographic approaches, the researcher sought to uncover the latent sources and nature of the mission problems and ended by suggesting what new approaches can be used to salvage respectability of mission in a post-colonial era. These include missional orientation and decolonisation of the African mind.

Keywords: mission station; paradigm shift; missional ecclesiology; decolonisation; missional orientation; Epworth; Methodist.

Introduction¹

Epworth Mission Station,² like other mission stations, was created to be an 'active centre, from which would radiate' (Carpenter 1960:192; Gondongwe 2011:53, Kollman & Smedley 2018:34) the light of Christian teaching to the surrounding area, and thereby model the new way of life, brought about by the church. In the words of Sitshebo, mission stations were supposed to be beacons of light in the midst of darkness. Everything done on them, especially by the Africans, was to be 'Christian', so that the distinction between them and the villages was clearly apparent (Sitshebo 2000:90). These stations were created to bring about change by providing model communities. However, the current mission farm and station situation is far from that ideal; instead the mission farm has become a place of land disputes, poverty and squalor. Banana (ed. 1991:144) has made the following telling statement about Epworth, 'there was one farm, however that remained a great problem, that of Epworth near Harare'. Epworth speaks of overcrowding and unregulated settlements to poor infrastructure, poor service delivery and lack of social facilities. Chirisa (2010) has described Epworth as 'a complex humanitarian crisis driven by institutionalised poor governance, corruption and politics'. Epworth is one of the challenging settlements to both the church and the state; it has the highest crime levels, and high prostitution and poverty levels. Epworth has become a harbour for criminals and has seen a rise in immoral behaviour such as commercial sex work, which expose young children to sex and alcohol abuse. As Msindo and others articulate, '[c]riminal activities appear to be a cancer in Epworth squatter settlements' (Msindo, Gutsa & Choguya 2013:178; Mbanje 2017).

Scholars' attention has been drawn to this settlement for various reasons, ranging from geographical to sociological and religious ones (Butcher 1986; Gundani 2002; Tawodzera & Chigumira 2019). Butcher (1986:12), for example, identified four major critical characteristics of Epworth: land speculation, subregional pollution threat, lack of services and community facilities,

1. Prof. S.T. Kgatla assisted Rev. R. Ncube with missiological formulations and argument.

2. Epworth is named after John Wesley's (the founder of Methodism) village of birth, it is a small town in North Lincolnshire, England.

Note: Special Collection: Social Memory Studies, sub-edited by Christina Landman (University of South Africa) and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana (University of Limpopo).

and sites unsuitable for proper housing. According to research conducted by Tawodzera and Chigumira (2019), Epworth is considered one of the poorest urban areas in Zimbabwe: about 70% of its residents live in informal conditions, where access to key city-provided services such as energy, water and sanitation is limited or absent, and housing structures range from self-built brick structures to shacks, and poverty is endemic. Approximately 78% of households and 82% of individuals in the area live below the poverty datum line (Tawodzera & Chigumira 2019:2). Epworth was one of the settlements defined as a squatter settlement by the Zimbabwean government in 2005, resulting in operation Murambatsvina (Operation Restore Order) (Msindo et al. 2013:177; Chenga 2010). This operation was meant to clear squatters from around and within Harare, an operation that affected many families, and was heavily criticised by the United Nations.

Using qualitative inquiry, this study sought to investigate the cause of these challenges in mission stations, that is, why these stations have suddenly become a thorn in the flesh of the church. Using desk research, Methodist archives and available literature and ethnographic methods, the authors examined the causative factors underlying the church's thrust on the post-colonial existence and made recommendations. The research is inspired by David Bosch's paradigm shift theory, which challenges mission to adapt and reformulate in response to changes in society.

What can be inferred from this study is that mission stations were used as a means that represented a western missionary approach that was based on Christendom, conquest and economic interest – a method that was condescending in nature and completely disregarded the culture and context of the converts. This approach lacked depth and authenticity, and as a result instead of creating sustainable, lasting communities, it gave birth to 'experimental communities' (Sanneh 2010:222), which wilted and continued to struggle as missionaries handed over the churches to local leadership, in what was called autonomy. As Africans gained political independence and their assertiveness challenges began to manifest. Epworth thus brings together the dynamics of a mission struggling in post-independence and post-autonomy era together.

Historical background of the establishment of Epworth Mission

Epworth is a shanty town situated about 12 km to the South East of Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe (Msindo et al. 2013:172), and currently has an estimated population of 167 462. According to Butcher (1986:11), Epworth is Harare's largest recognised informal settlement. In terms of population density, Epworth comes fifth after Mutare, Chitungwiza, Bulawayo and Harare (Zimstats 2019). Epworth was established as a Methodist mission station in 1892. It was established by Rev. Isaac Shimmin who was accompanied by Rev. Owen Watkins, the chair of the Transvaal District of South Africa, as part of the expansion of the Methodist church in the Southern Africa mission to the North (Gondongwe

2011:45). The Methodist mission in South Africa had been established much earlier, having reached the Cape in 1875, four years after the death of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. The mission was formally introduced by Rev. Barnabas Shaw in 1816, and in 1889 the Methodist church in South Africa became independent from the British conference. Rev. Isaac Shimmin was a little known cleric, but a very popular young man with Rhodes and his soldiers (Thorpe 1951:39). Isaac Shimmin had successfully negotiated an offer of support from Rhodes who granted him enough land for mission and a grant (Zvobgo 1991:18).

The establishment of the Epworth Mission was not an isolated event (Mazarire 2007:2; Ndile 2018:51); it represented an influx of missionary activity after the signing of the Rudd Concession by Lobhengula with an untidy cross in 1888, the entry of the Pioneer column on 12 September 1890 and the raising of the Union Jack in Salisbury on 13 September 1890 (Graaf 1988:14; Thorpe 1951:32). It represented a collaboration of the crown and the cross after the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, which conveniently partitioned Africa for European interests (Goto Nathan 1994:14; Njoku 2005:220; Nkomazana & Setume 2016:29). Epworth was the second mission station to be established by Methodists in Zimbabwe. Others included Fort Salisbury (1891), Hartleyton (1891), Nenguwo (1892) and Kwenda (1892) (ed. Banana 1991). It was a mission with so much promise, scoring immediate successes in terms of enrolment of children in school and church attendance. Because of a number of challenges and problems that developed after Independence, a large part of Epworth was handed over to government in 1981.

Epworth farm is naturally scenic, housing the famous balancing rocks, a popular tourist attraction (Vumbunu & Manyanhai 2010:244). Geographically, Epworth is a combination of three plots acquired by the Methodist Church between 1891 and 1908. These plots include Epworth, Glenwood and Adelaide. Epworth is a grant³ measuring 2520 acres given to Rev. Owen Watkins and Isaac Shimmin by Cecil John Rhodes on their arrival for the purpose of their mission work (Thorpe 1951:44). Glenwood (purchased 1904) and Adelaide (purchased 1908) were purchased later by Rev. John White, and the mission work at Epworth was growing and people multiplying such that Epworth alone was no longer enough to offer space for more people. Glenwood was thus bought by the Methodist Church through a loan paid off by rentals of tenants.

From these three plots, two major villages were created over the years, Chiremba (which consists of Muguta and Makomo families) and Chizungu (consisting of Chinamano and Zinyengere families) (Chitekwe-Biti et al. 2012:132). Because of expansion, Epworth is now made up of nine villages, which are Chiremba, Chinamano Extension, Zinyengere Extension, Chizungu, Jacha, Overspill, Magada, Makomo and Domboramwari. These altogether constitute seven administrative wards. There are seven primary schools and two secondary schools, all of which are run by the community

³Cecil Rhodes was one of the leading figures in British imperialism at the end of the 19th century, pushing the empire to seize control over vast areas of southern Africa. He annexed Southern Rhodesia in the 1890s.

and the local board. There are only three clinics serving the entire population, one of which still falls under Methodist administration.

The entire establishment now falls under Epworth Local Board, a body established in 1986 to oversee the development of Epworth (Chirisa 2010:42). The extent and complexity of problems at Epworth had become insurmountable after the Zimbabwean independence, and the church's capacity to deal with these challenges was tested. The Methodist Church in 1981 handed over much of the Epworth land to the government and remained with a small piece of land called Lot 2. The lot houses the church, the minister's residence, a clinic, a women's centre, a children's home and a theological college. The primary school is in the hands of the community, whilst much of the land close to the United Theological College and the Matthew Rusike Children's Home has been invaded by squatters. The church has been struggling to evict land invaders for a long time, and instead of abating the problem, it is increasing, with much of the land now fully occupied. Recently, conference has commissioned a team to look into the future prospects of mission land in the context of these issues. Part of their findings and recommendations will be discussed at a later stage.

The story of Epworth is a story that brings together the various aspects of the manner in which mission crises have manifested. It is an exemplification of a mission in crisis. It represents the challenges of a church in mission in a post-colonial context and whether the church is able to respond appropriately to the new and emergent challenges or if they are stuck in privilege of the colonial and missionary era. Whilst the missionaries had the support of their mother countries and colonial governments, churches in a post-independence era do not have such luxuries. The terrain has changed, and there is growing poverty, rural-urban migration, as well as competing perceptions about land and authority whilst colonial church has retreated.

Epworth developments post-independence

The challenges at the Epworth Mission Station represent a fourfold manifestation of mission in crisis in a post-colonial and post-missionary setting. The first is the church's lack of capacity to handle emerging issues and problems at Epworth; the second is the growing overcrowding, landlessness and indiscriminate illegal sale of land; thirdly, crisis of development – health and other social ills emerging – poor water and sanitation issues, crime and prostitution; and fourthly, the crisis of identity amongst the people of Epworth in the post-independence and post-missionary era.

Lack of capacity of the church to handle the issues and problems at Epworth Mission Station

What was intended to be a model community espousing a Christian standard of community and values has deteriorated to an urban menace (Msindo et al. 2013:172; Zindoga & Kawadza 2014). The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, after

independence in 1980, struggled to handle a plethora of challenges at the Epworth Mission Station, culminating in the church handing over a greater part of the mission land to government, and remaining with a small portion called Lot 2, and the institutions namely the mission station (church, manse and primary school), Matthew Rusike Children's Home and the United Theological College. The problems at Epworth were, however, not new to the period after autonomy and independence, and they have their roots in the colonial period. They only manifested after the war (1980). Contestation over tenure has always been there. As early as the inception of the *Land Apportionment Act 1930* (Gundani 2019:4), the church grappled with issues of tenancy at Epworth, especially security of tenure, what could be done on the land and the problem of inheritance. After the Zimbabwean war, problems crystallised further.

Events leading to the donation (surrender) of the land to the new government

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Conference in August 1982 voted unanimously to hand over a part of the Epworth land to the government (MCA 1982). This donation of Epworth land to government must be seen in the context of the wider crisis, which evolved around the sustainability of the mission station in its original form. As shown by Mujinga (2018:291), in 1998 the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Conference again voted to cede part of Kwenda Mission (another mission station of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe) to government. The resolution to donate (surrender) Epworth's land to the government was done by conference through a recommendation from the Standing Committee. The proposer was the government that made the suggestion to the church. The church was battling the squatter problem and crime that was brewing in Epworth owing to the exponential unplanned population growth in Epworth after the war. Epworth's population grew during the war period, and people from the rural areas escaping the war found refuge in Epworth which was less regulated than the urban townships. The church allowed its tenants out of hospitality to welcome visitors fleeing the war. The influx of the people increased unabated after the war, with more people searching for a better life in the city. Many tenants began to sell part of their land as these people sought some permanent shelter. Because of the increase in unregulated settlement, not only did the administration of the mission become extremely difficult, but also the provision of social amenities. Crime and lawlessness also became prevalent. This meant that the church had to seek political help in easing the pressure and to reduce crime. The government suggested that the church donated the land. A draft of proposals was made by the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing on 06 October 1981. The government undertook to prepare a plan for the improvement of basic services through a squatter upgrading programme, by improving water and sanitation infrastructure and protecting the land rights of original tenants. In addition, the government would then seek donor support towards the improvement of the Epworth farm (MCA 1981).

The government cited the rapidly deteriorating public health, lack of infrastructure and crime as reasons. The government also acknowledged responsibility for the occupiers of land and the challenges as urban housing problems (MCA 1981). The proposals were in one way attractive to residents, but intimidating to the church, especially where donor support could only be accessed if the land had been handed over to the state.

The church, in response, sat on Friday 16 October 1981 and responded to the government proposals. The meeting was constituted by the President Rev. Andrew Ndhlela, Rev. O.D. Ramushu, Rev. Dr. F.B. Rea, Rev. P. West (Secretary) and 25 representatives of the Epworth villages (MCA 1981). The meeting resolved that the tenants were going to sit and consider the proposals of the provincial planning officer and the Office of the Minister of Local Government and National Housing and respond by Monday 09 November 1981. Meanwhile, an Epworth Lands Steering Committee was held at the Methodist Church connexional office on 13 October 1981. The meeting resolved that the Methodist Church agrees to the proposals from the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, and that for the best development of Epworth, Adelaide and Glenwood, farms should be handed over to the state without any payment. The Methodist Church would retain freehold rights on three sections of the farm, Matthew Rusike Children's Home, United Theological College, the mission station, church and primary school (MCA 1981). The conference in 1982 voted for the resolution to hand over part of Epworth to the government, and the following were the votes: 55 for, 7 against and 12 neutral. The votes show that a quarter of the members of conference did not agree. This demonstrates that there was no unanimity on arriving at this decision. Furthermore, there seems to have been so much pressure on the church to hand over land rights as quickly as possible, judging by the chronology of the events. Either it was from those remaining missionaries who would have been keen to please the government at any cost to improve their image, or it could be political pressure from the new government that stood to gain significant mileage being seen to act on human plight. There was plenty of support of such a trajectory considering that the new president was a Methodist cleric, who would be seen to bring the church and government on a closer working relationship towards the betterment of the people's lives. Why would a steering committee meet and make decisions even before the tenants have met? The farm was donated without any payment. The government used the *Deeds Registries Act* Chapter 139 to re-vest the deeds to itself, something which was done in 1994. The government undertook a programme to develop the area for eventual incorporation into Harare City, which directed a freeze in all non-permitted developments (Chirisa 2010; Chitekwe Biti et al. 2012:132). The Epworth Local Board was created in 1986 to run the affairs of Epworth. However, as Mhanda (2018) observes, not much has been achieved, these boards have limited capacities in terms of funding models and that

much of the decision-making rights are concentrated with the central government. The transfer of land to government, however, did not ease the problems at Epworth. Problems actually increased. Challenges in the donated sections could not be isolated. People who live on the land donated to the government remained in the Methodist fold, as practising Methodists, and/or as descendants of Methodists. The land they occupied lay in close proximity.

The growing overcrowding and landlessness, indiscriminate illegal sale of land

Epworth has become a harbour for sporadic squatter settlements in Zimbabwe, with an impact on the local board and the church's ability to provide necessary and adequate services and therefore improve the quality of life. The dynamics are faster than the authorities' ability to react appropriately. The Government of Zimbabwe in 2006 embarked on an operation to restore order, and as its reasons, it argued that it sought to deal with crime, squalor and lawlessness, and rebuild and reorganise urban settlements and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). '... It was a follow-up to the anti-corruption drive started by the government in early 2004 to cleanse the financial services economy, which had become the centre of speculative activities ...' (Sachikonye 2006:16).

When government took over Epworth in 1982, it directed a freeze on all new settlements so that it could focus on those already settled. But a combination of factors militated against the government directive, and instead of abating, more settlements emerged. Msindo et al. (2013) made general observations pertaining to this phenomenon. The unprecedented exponential rural-urban migration after the war, family growth, need for accommodation and slow allocation processes of stands for those who needed them led to more and more settlements sprouting. Epworth had a number of advantages; besides that, it was a cheaper place to rent, it was strategically positioned with regard to Harare's biggest market, Mbare, and the industry. More people entered the cities in search of better opportunities and Epworth was a better priced destination (Chirisa 2010). The increase in population at Epworth had an effect on the capacity of the land donated to the government and that which remained in the hands of the church.

As Mhanda (2013:92) observes, the lack of resources had a negative impact on the local board's ability to deliver its mandate. The council could not service enough stands, as per demand from the seekers, and where they managed, the cost was beyond the generality of the population of Epworth dwellers who were largely either self-employed or were lowly paid. The local board made several attempts to control unauthorised development and evict all those in illegal settlements on the land without success (Chitekwe-Biti et al. 2012:133). Msindo et al. (2013:176) show that political meddling at election time and corruption had a significant effect in undermining the local board and the church's efforts in managing land.

The uncontrolled influx and settlement of people at Epworth meant that the available adjacent land belonging to the church could not remain immune to land grab. Inevitably, the land has now all been invaded. Several reasons account to why the church's land at Epworth has been taken over by land-hungry people and parcelled out despite the government being pro-church as far as land acquisition is concerned (Chitando 2005; Gundani 2003). Firstly, the church did not immediately use the land that it retained, owing to its limited capacity in a post-missionary era. Although the church had plans for projects, it took long to implement them. Secondly, the church itself had serious gaps in administration of its land at Epworth as evidenced in a report by a commission set up to investigate a demonstration by Epworth residents who were accusing the church, especially its Bishop, Rev. F. Chirisa, of abusing land for his own personal gain. The findings of the report indicated that there was no clarity at the lower echelons as to who had the right to sell or distribute land, with instances where the local minister would give rights to people who wanted to settle in the land (Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Epworth Demonstrations, MCA 1996). There is a lack of political will to remove the unregulated settlers from the church's land. The church has tried several times to evict the illegal settlers, but has failed. There is always a promise by government to assist, but both legal notices of eviction and political pressure have ended up in smoke.

The encroachment of illegal settlers is affecting the church's ability to utilise its own land, and it further threatens the already existing institutions like the Theological College, the Matthew Rusike Children's Home, the clinic and the mission house itself. The recent farms' report commissioned by the conference found that expansion of the church's institutions is now impossible until there is a way of clearing the squatters.

Crisis of development

A third crisis presented by the Epworth Mission scenario is the crisis of development. Development in Epworth is lagging behind in all its facets. Infrastructure, housing, provision of social services, water and sanitation are way below expectation (Kadirire 2017). In a community with a population of over 168 000 (ZimStats 2019), it is ironic that it has only seven primary schools, two secondary schools and three clinics, of which only one is a Methodist clinic (Slum Dwellers International 2009). Epworth lacks proper housing, most of the houses do not meet the standards as they were never planned or supervised, some lie in wetlands and often flood during the rainy season. The limitations of the Epworth Local Board are militating against ability to plan, service and supervise proper housing (Chirisa 2010:12). Poverty in Epworth has many dimensions. It ranges from limited income levels owing to the capacity of its residents, largely because of the kinds of skills and jobs they undertake (Chirisa 2010). The church had plans for a few original tenants, and the institutions and facilities were able to cater to the few residents. The church never anticipated illegal influx of people, and never planned for the post-war pressure on the

land. This influx of people during the 1970–1980 war of liberation complicated the capacity of the church, as most of those who settled illegally never had a say in planning. The residents, therefore, became informal, and mostly their jobs were also not high paying, making it worse. The informal nature of the settlement affected land tenure and residents' ability to attract funding or investment. Most settlements in Epworth have not been regularised and therefore residents do not have a title to the land on which they are settled.

Whilst it is true that the current scenario is a product of the colonial legacy, it is also true that the post-missionary church has not been able to grasp the extent of the needs of Epworth or anticipate them. Colonial and missionary era development was based on a colonial ideology focused on separate-managed development guided and controlled by a select few people (Kgatla 2016:122). The onset of independence changed the dynamics. Selective development was no longer possible, as the majority poor now demanded universal development. At the root of the Epworth misery is, therefore, a legacy of colonialism and the limited power of missionaries and the church to arrest this. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report (2002) describes human development in the following words:

Fundamental to enlarging human choices is building human capacities: the range of things that people can do or be. The most basic capacities for human development are leading a long and healthy life, being educated, having access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and being able to participate in the life of one's community. As this Report emphasizes assuring people's dignity also requires that they be free—and able—to participate in the formation and stewardship of the rules and institutions that govern them. (p. 13)

Amartya Sen (1999:14), in his seminal contribution to development discourse, argues that development is freedom. He suggests that poverty in its proper definition should not be seen in terms of income levels only, but a deprivation of capabilities. What he calls 'unfreedoms' are a result of inadequate processes and inadequate opportunities. Unfreedom can arise either through inadequate processes or through inadequate opportunities that some people have for achieving what they minimally would like to achieve (Sen 1999:17). He says, 'development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives people lead and the freedoms they enjoy' (Sen 1999:14). This kind of development is what has lacked in mission stations and has given rise to growing poverty. Epworth as a mission station has not been able to provide the benchmark for human development because of a culture and an era that deprived the African resident the necessary involvement in the processes and opportunities for development.

Crisis of identity

Tarus and Lowery (2017:305) define identity as 'both individual and personal traits as well as social aspects acquired from the groups one belongs to'. In an African society, a person belongs to a community (Battle 2000; Menkiti 2001) of the past, the present and the future. An

individual is a part of a larger collective which includes the dead and those yet to be born. Identity in this sense incorporates all this that makes up a person and his or her community. Deng (1997) states that African societies functioned through an elaborate system based on the family, the lineage, the clan, the tribe and ultimately a confederation of groups with ethnic, cultural and linguistic characteristics in common. He further states that society is backed by 'values, institutions, and patterns of behaviour, a composite whole representing a people's historical experience, aspirations, and world view' (Deng 1997:1). The people of Epworth existed before Epworth was formed, and who they were was thus defined.

Before the onset of the missionary era, Epworth belonged to this larger community, ruled by chiefs and connected by family lineage, the customs and values that brought together their sense of being. In the course of the colonial and missionary era, Epworth assumed a new identity as a mission community, created for people who had become Christians. The old structures, norms and value systems were uprooted and new ones centred on the church and the missionary emerged (Madhiba 2010:59). For over 90 years, this had made the new society.

When the missionaries departed, and when in 1982, the Methodist Church handed over Glenwood and Adelaide to the government, this threw the entire community into disarray. What had become a *bona fide* identity was dismantled without a negotiation or an offer of a new form of identity. With the challenges enumerated above, particularly after independence, Epworth people found themselves struggling to relate to themselves. Court cases and commissions of inquiry show clearly a community struggling to redefine its identity. The following commission of inquiry and two court cases will be discussed to expound on the nature of the identity crisis.

In 1996, there were several demonstrations at Epworth. These were a culmination of a number of concerns and disgruntlements ever since the church had donated part of the land it previously held to government. Even though the church had donated the land, residents still identified themselves as part of the church and the church being part of them; the relationships seemed not to have been severed with the donation. There are reasons to acknowledge that Epworth residents were united by the history, the church and their graves. For the past century, they had been identified as believers under the church. They knew no other identity. Between 1982 and 1996, they were now to assume a new identity under the Epworth Local Board, a scenario undefined. Yet, they still congregated at church on Sundays, and buried their dead at the church cemetery. It must be highlighted that most of these processes had not involved wide consultations. The creation of Epworth had occurred without consultation, and the dismantling was now being done without consultation as well. This reminds us of Lamin Sanneh's lament that converts were 'dislodged' from their cultural system and that missionaries were deaf

to local voices in assembling 'experimental communities'. In doing this, he bemoans the fact that Christianity dispossessed Africans of their natural ties without giving them a real stake in missionary culture (Sanneh 2010:222). The handing over of the mission is an example of an experimental community being dismantled.

Amongst the series of demonstrations, the one held on 16 July 1996 caught the church's attention, leading to a commission of inquiry being instituted by the then presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Rev. Farai J. Chirisa (MCA 1996). The commission sought, amongst other objectives, to identify the problem, to collect and assess evidence and to recommend solutions to the standing committee (MCA 1996).

The demonstrators had demanded the removal of Rev. Farai Chirisa as the bishop, accusing him, amongst other things, of carrying out projects without consulting the community, and that he wanted to build flats at Epworth and bring people to squat in the area; above all they claimed that their ancestors had bought the land through their rents.

The commissioners upon researching proved many of the accusations to be false. However, they observed the following: the central problem at Epworth was the ownership of the land and the problem of communication. They went on to show that the Height had settled the issue of ownership in the 03 July 1996 case of Chiremba Residents Association and Epworth Local Board. However, what is clear from this analysis is firstly that the Epworth residents did not understand who owned the land and what their role was. They still believed that they and the church had a relationship and the church had to continue consulting them on issues pertaining to the land. The relationship was, however, confusing; they expected the church to account to them on land that belonged to the church, that is, Lot 2.

Secondly, the Epworth residents did not understand their new place under the Epworth Local Board. They had limited understanding of leases, and what rents meant; they still believed in the traditional tenure, where one was entitled to land on account of genealogy. Why they challenged the church was their claim that their forefathers had contributed to the purchase of Epworth.

The second indicator of the crisis is the court cases that Epworth residents lodged against the church and the local board claiming rights to the land at Epworth, both the section that had been donated to the government and the remaining Lot 2. From the commission findings, it is clear that residents in some sense believed that they had a right to the land owned by the church and this led to continued invasion despite appeal and courts directing otherwise.

In July 1996, the residents had approached courts challenging the Epworth Local Board's jurisdiction over the land that used to belong to the church. The residents argued that their

forefathers had paid for the land through rent, and that they had title to the land which the church had taken to England (MCA 1996). The court ruled against the residents, citing lack of evidence of ownership that the original residents claimed that they had a right to owing to the rents they had paid before. The court also disputed the title issue confirming that the Methodist Church had the title which the church had voluntarily ceded to the government.

Three years later, a further case was lodged at the High Court, now pitting the church against Mr. Solani and residents of Epworth, in which case Mr. Solani was beginning to erect buildings on the church land (MCA 1999). This was the beginning of the further encroachment on the church land that had remained in the church's hands. The disagreements and the battles did not stop as evidenced by the media attention in the following headlines: 'Epworth the forgotten "suburb"' (Zindoga & Kawadza 2014) and 'Epworth land wrangle heats up' (The Zimbabwean 2014). Demonstrations and court battles continue to this day. These conflicts and appearances must have been a way of trying to salvage some identity and rights to self-determine out of a murky, unpredictable terrain on the one hand; however, these all proved to be illusory. The church, on the other hand, failed to manage the pressure and encroachments continued. Currently, all land that belonged to the church is now occupied by illegal tenants, some of whom are not suitable for settlement. There are no facilities and services – it is a health risk.

Epworth has struggled to define itself since independence. It has been characterised by conflict as it sought to redefine itself as a community. Epworth is a pale shadow of its former self, and it used to be the mission area built up in hope at its inception, as Isaac Shimmin had said, 'what Kilnerton is to Pretoria, Epworth will be to Harare'. Today, Epworth is a symbol of struggle of a failed suburb, harbouring crime and prostitution, an example of the worst squatter area.

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Conference in 2016 commissioned an inquiry into the church mission farms, to (MCA 2018):

[A]ssess the situation and status of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe mission farms, in the light of manifest challenges including the general underutilization of the land, invasion by illegal tenants, ... disregard of the farm rules and policies by tenants and increased conflicts arising out of exercise of authority by local chiefs councillors and politicians on the mission farms. (p. 8)

Some of the commission's findings included the following: inconsistency in policy implementation and weak enforcement, antiquated rules and regulations which are difficult to enforce, high leadership turnover, which is not compatible with project implementation, thus creating disconnect on project cycle, and the church's sensitivity in not asserting its legitimate authority and resorting to empty threats, thus widening the rift with farm tenants.

On land tenure it was noted that there is a general feeling of entitlement over church mission land, the tenants and their

children have concerns regarding their future on the church farms that arise from traditional expectations for land inheritance, and lack of resources has made it difficult for the church to implement land use programs and farm development activities (Farms Commission Report 2018:27).

Amongst the recommendations, the critical ones related to the church policy on Christian villages. The commission observed that the concept of Methodist Christian villages was no longer sustainable and does not serve any functional and practical purpose given the modern multi-religious, multi-denominational settlement trends (Farms Commission Report 2018:27). They advocated for a redefinition of this concept in light of the changing role and mission of the church. The church is coming to terms with the challenges it is facing because of the missionary paradigm and making attempts at addressing them. It is also an invitation to a redefinition of mission in the current and future context.

Reimagining mission for the future

David Bosch has argued for a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation and practice of mission (Bosch 1991:4). By this, he argues that with changes in society, an equivalent change must happen in the understanding of mission and how it is practised. Methodist Church mission in Zimbabwe was based on a mission station method (Thorpe 1951:81; Zvobgo 1991:26) – a phenomenon adopted by missionaries on the mission field without proper missiological reflection on implications and ramifications for the future. As may have been observed, mission in the 19th century was an overflow of European Christianity, culture and civilisation. Mission emerged in the glorious Christendom, where the church occupied the centre of the community and commanded authority and respect (Sales 1972:24). Mission imposed a western cultural blanket on Africa without reflection. It was condescending and rode on conquest and ignored the value of the African knowledge systems and worldview. As a result, it destroyed and dislocated communities rather than build them. Missionaries were, therefore, complicit in colonisation of the minds of Africans. The new challenges are a cry for redress and redefinition of the mission in a post-colonial post-missionary paradigm. They are a call for authentic mission approaches that address the past and current context holistically, whilst building sustainable ground for future mission. A relevant missional ecclesiology must define mission and locate it appropriately, and address the issues of sustainability, identity and poverty at a practical and structural level.

'Missional' is a relatively new terminology in the field of missiology, only appearing in the middle of the 20th century through the work of Bishop Leslie Newbiggin and later blossoming through the Gospel and Our Culture Movement in the United States of America (Goheen 2002:367; Guder 1998:9). It represents a departure from the old term 'missionary', which has increasingly become associated with colonialism, subjugation and exploitation of people of colour

by the west and carries the baggage of guilt on the part of missionaries from the west (Bosch 1991:3; Goto Nathan 2006:57). Missional thinking seeks to be true to cultural sensitivity and is dynamic, responding relevantly to a given paradigm, as opposed to the missionary which was static, rigid, paternalistic and condescending. The term 'missional' signifies a departure from us–them, North–South, to a sense of glocality (Henry 2016:6; Fagerli et al. 2012:27), a balance between the local as well as the global orientation. It unearths the biblical imperative of witnessing (Ac 1:6–8), beginning in Jerusalem to all Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth motif.

Missional ecclesiology is grounded in *missio Dei*, an affirmation that God is the sender and authority in mission. God the Trinity is in a continuous relationship of sending. Through the son, and the Holy Spirit has not only descended, but continues to reach out to the margins, to the ends of the earth. This places mission where it belongs, the margins. The church is placed in a perichoretic relationship with the triune God (Niemandt 2012:2) – dynamic, accommodative and adaptive to a changing context. It is biblical, for the Methodist context, and missional ecclesiology relates well with the Wesleyan mission spirituality.

Sheridan and Hendriks (2013:7) point out that understanding the relationships between gospel, church and culture is of primary significance, they view a missional shift as the process of learning to 'break the code' of the local cultural context in which the church finds itself. Missional thinking, therefore, has to do with contextual understanding of mission, mission as from the margins and to the margins. It is an affirmation of God as the author, and that the church as well as its missionaries responds to his guiding spirit, they participate in the mission of the triune God in humility. It is according to Bosch an affirmation that God has turned towards the world, towards the poor and the marginalised in an incarnational way (1991:423).

A Zimbabwean missional ecclesiology should be rooted in the unique and fertile African social, cultural and religious worldview. Pobe and Ositelu (1998:9) reiterate that sociologists and anthropologists have demonstrated that *Homo africanus homo religious radicaliter*, the African is a radically religious person, religious at the core of his or her being. Mission practice must therefore begin with such a paradigm shift that recognises the value of the African social and cultural worldview and leverage on it, by building resilient and sustainable communities. Missional ecclesiology and practice address the challenges of poverty, deprivation and vulnerability in Zimbabwe holistically. It goes beyond missioning to engaging in issues of development, be it in an advocacy way or in practical ways. The story of Epworth represents poverty and deprivation. When the church leaves the communities, they are left at the mercy of systems of government that are equally unable to help. Banana (1987:2) reiterates a relevant approach which addresses present realities rather than a pie in the sky

approach. Similarly, Kaulemu (2010:52) suggests that churches must strengthen capacities of communities to contribute towards the improvement of social conditions that facilitate the human development potential of every Zimbabwean.

Decolonisation should be central to the doing of mission, and it involves the recovery of African confidence, and re-affirmation of values, culture and worldview. Missionally, decolonisation of the mind should be seen as the affirmation of the black African experience of God; the Africans' response through their own cultural and traditional experiences. It has to do with identification with the poor (Wa Said 1971:520). Decolonisation has implication for an African theological and contextual orientation, which must pervade both the theological institutions as well as churches, to how these engage their local contexts. The challenges of mission stations such as Epworth raise issues of African realities, which theology needs to appreciate and correct. Epworth Mission can be seen as a crisis or a problem, but on the other side, it awakens the current missional practitioners to the limitations of a colonial mission in addressing African realities. A decolonised mission must affirm the African struggle for recognition, and fight for economic and political justice.

Conclusion

The study has highlighted the origins of the current challenges of the mission station. It notes that the problems in the mission station, particularly at Epworth, have their antecedents in the colonial and missionary era. The challenges are rooted in both the systems and structures imposed and extensively used by the colonial administration, as well as the close proximity the colonial administration had with missionaries, and therefore the church. Colonial government and missionaries according to Gundani (2019:15) believed that Africans were backward and lacked capacity to self-determine. This led to modelling of mission stations that were unsustainable as times changed, leading to crises such as in the Epworth Mission Station. The church was incapacitated to address the needs and challenges after independence, as a result leading to abandonment of much of the farm and its people. The study concluded by highlighting new trends in mission which are grounded in missional thinking and ecclesiology, with a strong sense of decolonisation of the mind. These need to be adopted if the church is to salvage relevance in a post-colonial existence. This is what David Bosch suggests to be a paradigm shift in mission theology – a turn towards the margins and the poor.

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