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# Ecumenical ecclesiology as a tool for township congregations to facilitate transformation of the (South) African society<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*South Africa is experiencing a proliferation of ecumenical church organisations since the advent of democratic South Africa. Many of these organisations occur in the townships in the form of minister fraternals, some of whom are affiliated to a larger and higher ecumenical body such as SACC and others. Nearly every town in South Africa has a minister fraternal. The goals of these minister fraternals are fellowship, reaching out to each other, and societal involvement to deal with social ills in partnership with other societal structures such as the state and business sectors. This study aims to explore how congregations in the townships (in Mangaung, Bloemfontein, and Qwaqwa), through their local ecumenical organisations, function together to facilitate the transformation of their identity and mission. This empirical study implements a critical theory approach to analyse sources and data used in this study.*



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- 1 This study is done in honour of Professor W.J. Schoeman and part of the festschrift with the title "Imagining congregational vitality - nurturing ecclesiologies from below." Professor W.J. Schoeman is a reputable researcher in empirical studies related to theology and in particular Congregation studies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Still viewed as one of the most respected institutions in many sub-Saharan countries, the church in Africa has a vital role to play in the transformation of society. However, many churches in sub-Saharan countries are still trapped in theological methodologies that adhere to the old missionary or clerical paradigm with a deductive theology practice (Hendriks 2004:8; Sakupapa 2018:1). While establishing churches in sub-Saharan Africa, early 19<sup>th</sup>-century western missionaries unwittingly imported their cultural and denominational preference into the churches they started and mimicked their own church experiences rather than encouraging Africans to develop their own church practices. For this reason, Sakupapa (2018:1) argues that the vast majority of churches that were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are trapped in denominational and theological elements of their “parent” European churches. Furthermore, early 19<sup>th</sup>-century western missionaries viewed their culture as superior. They often overrated their status and did almost everything for the development of their imported churches in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, they designed worship services, determined ministerial practices for Africans, dominated the leadership in their churches, and controlled resources donated to their churches. Hence, when the missionaries left, many of the mission-established churches in sub-Saharan Africa were void of leadership experience, lacked vision of mission, and struggled to generate financial income for the ministry of their own churches.

From the early missionaries, the mission-established churches in sub-Saharan Africa inherited denominationalism and foreign ministerial practices that disenfranchised the church to adequately serve its own community. The denominations imported by early 19<sup>th</sup>-century western missionaries have failed to adequately serve the needs of Africans. For example, Nyende (2008) argues that denominations such as the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are preoccupied with sacramental theology and doctrinal purity which are not urgent and salient challenges for African Christians. Dealing with the enchanted world is the principal issue with which African Christians are engaged in their everyday life. According to Nyende (2008), the challenge posed by the enchanted world is engaged mostly by independent churches initiated by Africans. Furthermore, in terms of the church addressing the needs of Africans, Biko (1978:56) expressed his concern about the actions of the early missionaries that adversely impacted on the future of the church in Africa. Biko referred to the following actions, namely irrelevant interpretations of Scripture; lack of commitment to eradicate injustices and oppression, and promotion of theological preaching that does not address poverty, unemployment, and overcrowding in African society. The above discussion indicates that

the way in which the missionaries introduced the church to Africans has impacted on how the church as local congregation and denomination understands its identity and performs its function in society. To bolster the identity and facilitate the transforming role of the churches in society, the churches in the African society need to critically reflect on the interpretation of the scripture, history and contemporary practices of the church and explore alternative solutions such as unity of churches and collaboration on ecumenical level.

Collaboration of churches on ecumenical level is inevitable and beneficial for both churches and their communities. Collaboration on ecumenical level can be practised on local, provincial, national, and international platforms. Ecumenical church organisations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), in the global context, and the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which functions on both local and national levels in South Africa, have so far proved that, despite the challenges facing the ecumenical church organisations, the unity and collaboration of churches on such levels have the power to challenge despotic governments and malevolent powers in society. Therefore, it is inevitable that churches on both local and global level should work together to bolster up their identity, inspire each other concerning their calling, and strategise the facilitation of the church's basic ministries (Kinnamon 2009:6).

This article aims to explore how congregations in townships (in Mangaung, Bloemfontein, and in Qwaqwa), through their local ecumenical organisations, function together to facilitate the transformation of their identity and mission. Within the context of South Africa, "township" refers to a human settlement designated for the Black people (including Coloureds and Indians) during the apartheid era. In the context of democratic South Africa, townships still exist and are dominated by Black people. In this study, "local ecumenical organisations" refers to the local minister fraternals in the townships. Many of the towns in South Africa have one or more minister fraternals, whose purpose is to build relationships among church leaders as platforms to reach out to each other and to members of the community. Most importantly, the churches use this platform to address common societal challenges and to enable local churches to speak with one voice against any malevolent forces in the local community.

This article is outlined as follows. First, I discuss the methodology and theory of this study. Then I focus on an understanding of ecclesiology and its challenges. I also discuss an understanding of ecumenical church organisations, their significance, challenges, and lessons. Furthermore, I focus on the empirical data and interpretation. This is followed by the conclusion.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study is part of the main empirical research project titled “Congregational ministry and leadership – Exploring vitality (2023-2025)”. The research project obtained ethical clearance from the General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC), University of the Free State. The principal aim of the research project is to critically describe and evaluate, from a missional, contextual, and practical theological perspective, the role of congregations as communities of faith and their leadership within their communities and society at large, by using a revised National Church Life Survey (NCLS) methodology.

The main research project uses a mixed methodology to gather data for the following purposes: An attender survey for listening to the congregations’ members; a congregational survey to describe the functioning and ministry of the congregation, and in-depth interviews with the congregations’ leadership (pastor and lay leadership) to understand and describe the role of ordained and lay leadership within and beyond congregations.

The empirical data used in this study is obtained from in-depth interviews conducted with the ordained leadership (pastors). The researcher sent written semi-structured interview questions to the participants. These questions were in English and participants responded in English. The selection of participants followed a purposeful sampling of five church leaders of the minister fraternals. The researcher interacts regularly during workshops with pastors in the township. For the sake of identity confidentiality, the participants were given identity M1, M2, M3, M4, and M5. One participant is from Qwaqwa in the eastern Free State province of South Africa, and four participants are from the township of Mangaung, Bloemfontein. All of the five pastors have more than ten years’ experience in the ministry and the congregations. Participants M1, M2, and M5 belong to a Charismatic denomination; participant M3 belongs to an African Independent Church denomination, and participant M4 is from a Reformed denomination. Only participant M4 has a postgraduate theological qualification (Master’s degree) and the other participants have either a three-year diploma or a Bachelor degree in theology. The five pastors are founders and chairpersons of their fraternals for many years. They have in-depth information about the history, role, and challenges of their fraternals and their communities. All the participants network with other larger ecumenical organisations that function on a provincial and national level, and they mostly represent their organisation in their personal capacity. The data analysis used in this study is content analysis of the written response of the participants, inductive and deductive coding

(Nieuwenhuis 2010:101, 105). Mostly inductive coding was done in analysing the significance and purpose of the minister fraternal. More deductive coding was done in analysing the role of the minister fraternal in society, the levels of engagement, the types of challenges, and so on.

### 3. CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory is a theoretical approach that focuses on society and culture to reveal subtle forms of injustices; critique particular ideologies, ethics and prevailing systems; challenge power structures, and diagnose social pathologies such as racism, sexism, and colonialism (Morrow & Brown 1994:10, 11; Thompson 2017:1). It strives to challenge the dominant cultural narrative; promote the voices of the marginalised, and transform existing societal structures to emancipate its members (Devetak 2013:167, 169). Critical theory views social reality as an ongoing construction process that can change the mindset of those affected by power imbalance (Nieuwenhuis 2016:63). According to Nieuwenhuis (2016:63), critical theory explains what is wrong with the current social reality; identifies the actors to change it, and provides both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation. The objective of critical theory is to contribute to human emancipation and explore social relations and institutions, in order to unmask forms of domination and enhance resistance and human liberation (Osmer 2008:77).

In this article, critical theory is used to critique the legacy of early missionaries that promotes denominationalism and parochial ministry without any intention to transform. Critical theory is engaged to advance the practice of ecumenism as a tool to facilitate the transformation of society.

### 4. TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING ECCLESIOLOGY

Ecclesiology is the study of the church. In the context of this study, a church can be described as a visible community of Christians coming together for worship, prayer, communal sharing, instruction, reflection, and mission (Schoeman 2015:65; Schoeman 2020a:95). Furthermore, a church can be a local worshipping community or congregation, a denomination, a worldwide religious organisation, or an ecumenical body (Smit 2008:70,71). A church can also be described as a sacred institution (it is believed that it has divine origin) and a social institution (it is viewed as a unit of society

that interacts with other units of society) (Hendriks 2004:51). In biblical terms, a church is also the people of God (Heb. 4:9; 1 Pet. 2:10), and the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:4-6).

The study of ecclesiology has an important role to play in Africa, especially in the context of the remarkable growth of Christianity in Africa. On the one hand, Schoeman (2020a:96) states that the study of ecclesiology can be engaged from historical, theological, and doctrinal dimensions, in order to emphasise deductive understanding based on Scripture and the confessions. On the other hand, Schoeman mentions that ecclesiology can be practised from the actual local context of the congregation, with the emphasis on inductive, empirical, and existential historical community of believers. Schoeman termed the first approach, ecclesiology from above, and the second approach, ecclesiology from below. The first section of this study briefly reflects theoretically on the literature of ecclesiology. The second section of this study focuses on the empirical information derived from the leadership of the community of believers.

The traditions, denominations, types of congregations, and context contribute to a diversity of ecclesiologies. Schoeman (2020a:98, 99) argues that a denominational ecclesiology may be restricted, by inclination, to a specific tradition, whereas a comparative ecclesiology goes beyond traditions and denominations. Therefore, ecumenical church organisations contribute to the practice of comparative ecclesiology through comparative and descriptive ecclesiologies beyond denominations and traditions. This study does not focus on denominational ecclesiology but rather on comparative ecclesiology, as promoted by the ecumenical church organisations.

In order to facilitate the transformation of humanity and societal structures, ecclesiology must be contextual and missional. Schoeman (2014:3-6) relates that mission of the contextual and missional ecclesiology is derived from the *Missio Dei* and is about radical involvement in the world to proclaim the Lordship of our Lord, Jesus Christ, peace, reconciliation, and the reigning and coming of the Kingdom of God. It is important to note that the proclamation about the presence of the Kingdom of God must permeate our context through active listening, telling remarkable stories about our encounter with our Lord, as well as incarnating and living the values of the gospel with integrity. It must also help build relationships and networks of believers in the church and in social institutions, so that the state and powers that undermine the well-being of humanity can be engaged with unique and united voice. Lastly, contextual and missional

ecclesiology needs to develop a leadership that has the passion to transform humanity and societal structures through programmes that provide relevant skills, knowledge, and the ability to discern the direction of the Holy Spirit.

We need to regularly review our ecclesiologies because of the fast-growing changes in our context and ongoing contestation between gospel and culture. Schoeman (2020b:324) suggests that three aspects are essential for ecclesiological reimagination, namely the ecclesiological identity needs to be embedded in the Triune God; the calling of the church emphasises the direction, purpose, and living out the identity of the church, and the ministry of the church which is informed by understanding the identity and calling of the church. Burger (1999:112, 132) summarises the basic ministries of the congregations as worship (leiturgia), service (diakonia), communion (koinonia), and preaching (kerugma). In summary, the ecumenical body as a church is responsible for maintaining the primary identity of the church, focusing the calling of the ecumenical body with *Missio Dei*, and practising basic church ministries.

#### 4.1 Ecclesiological challenges

Ecclesiological practices find it difficult to escape the influence of globalisation. Hence, according to Mwambazambi (2011:1), globalisation has a definite impact on the religious universe of African civilisations. For example, what happens globally impacts on the local and vice versa. The COVID-19 pandemic, through its lockdown and restricted movement of people, had a serious impact on global ecclesiological practices, including Africa and South Africa, as some churches were closed for some time. Other churches shifted to digital ecclesiology to do ministry and more impact was felt in the hermeneutics of Scripture and the context, as people tried to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic (Baloyi & Pali 2023:3).

Africa has its own models of ecclesiology such as church as clan, family, and community with their own fair share of challenges (Sakupapa 2018:1). The following potential challenges can be inherited from these ecclesiologies, namely emphasis on hierarchy and parochial practices that may lead to nepotism, overrating, and dominance of leadership. The more serious challenge to African ecclesiology is the type of mission that birthed it. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionaries imbued with the Western ideology of superiority, viewed African culture as demonic and their pietistic faith undermined the radical societal transformation, and transferred, to Africa, an ecclesiology that failed to address the African social-cultural-religious context (Biko 1978:40-41; De Jong 2001:51-65). The modern missionaries

in Africa have a significant role to play in directing and influencing African ecclesiology to engage the impact of globalisation, incarnate the values of the gospel, and integrate Christian ethics into the worldwide socio-economic-cultural context for the sake of promoting an African community of well-being (Mwambazambi 2011:3, 4).

Ecclesiologies imported from North America and Western Europe tend to be parochial and passive to their local and global context. This is not because the churches do not make an effort to engage their own context, but because many churches, in their engagement of the context, address only the symptoms of societal injustice, due to the limited resources available. Paul (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15; Romans 15:14-32) demonstrated the significance of churches that collaborate on the ecumenical level in order to deal with global and common challenges that affect the church. It is crucial that churches develop the kingdom perspective to enable them to work beyond their own denomination and local context to global context. This includes both the churches established by the missionaries (Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, and so on) and those initiated by Africans (African Independent Churches and emerging Charismatic-Pentecostal churches that align with prosperity gospel). Ecclesiologies in Africa need not compete for dominance or be deceived by pre-occupation with doctrinal purity, ancestral veneration or prosperity. They need to be concerned with witnessing about the Kingdom of God and living out their lives as citizens of the Kingdom of God. This can happen if churches agree to function and collaborate on the ecumenical level.

## **5. TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE ECUMENICAL CHURCH ORGANISATION**

According to Duncan and Egan (2019:2), South Africa is not new to ecumenical church organisations, because, during the White imperialist era, there were the General Missionary Conference of South Africa (GMCSA) (1904-1936), the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC), and the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA) (1936-1968). In democratic South Africa, there are new ecumenical organisations such as the National Initiative for Reformation in South Africa (NIRSA), the Southern African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA), the National Interfaith Leaders' Council (NILC), and the South African Council of Churches (SACC). Continental and international ecumenical bodies that had contact with South Africa include the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC), the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The

above shows that South African churches are committed to participation in ecumenical organisations, whether within the local, continental or global context.

According to Donald (2015:188) and Tachin (2022:3), the concept “ecumenism” is derived from the Greek word “*oikumene*”, meaning “*inhabiting, occupying or possessing the inhabited earth or the whole habitable world*”. The concept “ecumenism” means striving for the global unity of Christians, even though their doctrines may differ. The concept “ecumenical” means being open or belonging to the whole world. In the Christian context, ecumenical body refers to belonging to the whole universal church or representing Christians of various denominations. It also implies working together, collaborating on local, regional, national or international levels in pursuit of justice, human dignity, equality, freedom, and human rights. Tachin (2022:3) explains that ecumenism can be practised as an interfaith movement striving for greater mutual respect, toleration, and co-operation among the world’s religions. Ecumenism as interfaith dialogue between representatives of diverse faiths does not necessarily intend reconciling their adherents to a full, organic unity with one another, but simply to promote better relations. Tachin (2022:4) also states that ecumenism refers to the universal assembly of various Christian traditions or denominations in pursuit of the unity of the church, despite their confessional differences.

## 5.1 Significance of ecumenical church organisations

Ecumenical church organisations have a transformative and critical role to play in society. Their voice should be heard when people suffer because of unjust labour practices. They must fight for childrens’ rights, advocate against gender-based violence, and contribute to alleviating poverty. The ecumenical church organisations as representatives of churches have the responsibility to critically engage the state and the courage to continue to speak truth to the power (Kgatle 2022:5).

Kgatle (2022:5) argues that ecumenical church organisations are better equipped to collaborate with the state on matters of discipline and regulation of the churches and pastors who abuse their rights. This responsibility should not be delegated to other entities such as the state or secular courts. Within the South African context, ecumenical church organisations must be instrumental in helping the government identify churches that are registered and the ones that are not registered through administrative bodies. When dealing with pastors’ abuses of congregation members, the ecumenical church organisations must be instrumental in helping the government not to generalise but to directly hold the culprits accountable.

Ecumenical church organisations are responsible for cultivating shared praxis and developing a common vision to deal with issues that concern the vast majority of the member churches and their context rather than being concerned with dogmas (Colberg 2018:2). Hendriks (2004:10) defines praxis as the reflective prayerful involvement in the world. In my own understanding, it is the embodiment of the scriptural doctrines and gospel values as an individual Christian, member of both the church and the ecumenical church organisation. It is imperative that, based on their capacity and vision, ecumenical church organisations focus their shared praxis on the local or other levels of society. Plueddemann (2009:192) avers that vision is about *Where are we going? Why do we exist?* In the Christian context, vision implies how we discern the leadership of the Holy Spirit into the future (Van Gelder 2007:147). It is about what God is doing and intends to do in a particular context (Van Gelder 2007:147). The ecumenical church organisations' visions must always be embedded in the vision of the Triune God and nurtured by the study of Scripture, prayer, and dialogue. It must urge people to be active disciples and citizens in their own context and bring humanity into communion with the triune God and other creations of God.

## 5.2 Challenges of ecumenical church organisations

The 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced a proliferation of ecumenical church organisations locally and globally (Tachin 2022:7). During the era of White imperialism, the vast majority of these ecumenical church organisations were active and had a common enemy, namely slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. The efforts to destroy this common enemy compelled most of these ecumenical church organisations to collaborate and voice their opinions against social injustices. However, after the official demise of the White imperialist forces (slavery, colonialism, apartheid), many of these ecumenical church organisations lost valuable human and financial resources because they believed that they had achieved their goal of destroying the White imperialist forces (Kumalo 2009:250). Post-1994, some of the best known leaders of the SACC retired from politics after the inauguration of the new democratic South African government.

However, soon after the new government was inaugurated in a ceremony that was opened and blessed by religious leaders from the diverse faiths of SA, church leaders began to retreat from the public platforms to denominational enclaves. Some of the leaders of the church who had left the struggle joined government whilst others went to work for NGOs and the private sector (Kumalo 2009:250).

Kumalo (2009:250) further asserts that the departure of famous leaders such as Bishop Manas Buthelezi and Archbishop Desmond Tutu symbolised their departure, in the mainline churches, from politics to their enclaves. The departure of the prominent leaders from ecumenical church organisations such as SACC left a vacuum. Who will now be the prophetic voice against social injustices that occur in the social, economic, and political contexts of democratic South Africa? According to Kumalo (2009:250), this vacuum was filled by charismatic church groups that established their own ecumenical church organisations to oppose government's policies on moral issues such as abortion and same-sex relationships. The charismatic church groups' ascent to the social, economic, and political podiums led to the proliferation of new ecumenical organisations that engaged the South African democratic government on issues of moral and public concern. This weakened and led to the demise of some of the ecumenical organisations that were active and vocal against the apartheid government.

According to Tachin (2022:51) and Pillay (2017:2), the proliferation of the new ecumenical church organisations weakened most of the historical ecumenical church organisations in the new independent and democratic era. For example, after SACC lost most of its prominent leaders, who went to serve their churches, other leaders such as Frank Chikane and Brigalia Bam joined the government. SACC was criticised for being passive and in solidarity with the ruling party in the government. Other church leaders, at their own initiatives and some at the call of the political leadership to unite and have one voice, established new ecumenical church organisations such as NIRSA, SACLA, NILC, and the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF). During its heyday under the apartheid regime, SACC was financed by international organisations and states. However, soon after the advent of the new democratic South Africa, it lost much financial sponsorship. Many of the newly established ecumenical associations even became dormant, due to lack of funds for administration and ecumenical activities, while others died a slow death.

Ecumenical church organisations are responsible for theologically enlightening their own membership through workshops, creating opportunities for further study in higher education institutions, and reaching out to other churches that may experience hardship. However, due to a lack of human resources and funds, many of these ecumenical church organisations lost members and fell away. Ecumenical church organisations are also responsible for embracing multiculturalism through their leadership appointment and practice. To enable multiculturalism to thrive, no denomination should dominate others, but diversity in unity and the sharing of resources for enabling the other should be encouraged.

The other challenge of ecumenical church organisations is unity in the context of challenges (Tachin 2022:53; Pillay 2017:2). During apartheid, churches became united to fight against the apartheid regime and its policies of racial discrimination. After the advent of democracy, South Africa experienced a proliferation of new ecumenical church organisations that spoke with a divided voice against society's social ills. For example, some of these ecumenical church organisations were in solidarity with the ruling party. They became entangled in party politics to such an extent that they ordained some politicians with dubious character as honorary pastors (see [www.mg.co.za](http://www.mg.co.za); [www.news24.com](http://www.news24.com)).

In his analysis of the role of ecumenical church organisations in South Africa, Pillay (2017:2) mentions the following as their weakness in South Africa, in particular SACC after the advent of democracy. First, SACC lost a clear vision and lacked a corporate identity of what it represents. SACC lost many of its quality leaders who returned to their congregations, retired or joined the state to serve in public offices. SACC assumed that it had achieved its goal of destroying apartheid and it became in solidarity with the state because it was led by the dominant Black majority who were comrades and family members. Unfortunately, this diminished the prophetic role of SACC because of its fear and reluctance to speak out on governance and moral issues such as abortion, same-sex marriages, and the situation in Zimbabwe.

## **6. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ECUMENICAL CHURCH ORGANISATIONS, LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY?**

Pillay (2017:4) summarises the lessons learnt by SACC from its critical engagement with the South African democratic government. All went well when SACC gave its support for government but not so well when it decided to be critical of the Presidency. It has learnt that it must remain at a distance in its relationship with the government, so that it may keep the way clear for prophetic engagement. SACC discovered that the government had a way to fragment the ecumenical voice and muster support for itself. It realised that it must never lose its focus on the poor and the marginalised; therefore, it identified itself with the poor. In short, its focus was on issues of justice, reconciliation, healing of the nation, eradicating poverty, and taking up the challenges of the marginalised.

Using Calvin's five principles, Meiring (2010:313-326) reflects as follows on the lessons learnt from SACC. First, the ecumenical church organisations are responsible for uniting churches and living that unity through worship, collaboration in matters that concern the community, and reaching out to each other. Secondly, they need to develop concern for mission. God's mission is one of reconciliation with humanity and striving for peace. The church's mission should be derived from and aligned with God's mission. Thirdly, they need to covenant for justice in all their activities. Fourthly, in their prophetic witness, they need to have the courage to confront social injustice and critically engage the state in matters that concern the community. Fifth and lastly, is a lesson about relationship between ecumenical church organisations and the government. The ecumenical church organisations have responsibility to confront the government if it deviates from the just and well regulated government that disadvantage its own citizens.

According to Donald (2015:199), the ecumenical church organisations can serve society by adopting the office of Christ. For example, through the office of the prophet, they could help society envision a new society, driven by justice, dignity, and human rights. In terms of the priest's office, they can inspire everybody to overcome alienation, work for social solidarity, and become hospitable. As royal servants, they are called to serve God and the people of God.

Delaney (1996:80) summarises four responsibilities of ecumenical church organisations from various countries in the world. They need to do formation for all the people of God, namely lay leaders, clerical leaders, and the general church population; they must network with other societal organisations and structures; they are responsible for cultivating ecumenical spirituality through common fellowship, Bible studies, prayers, meditation, and retreats, and they need to foster ecumenical experience through interreligious dialogue and unity of humankind.

## 7. DISCUSSION OF THE EMPIRICAL DATA ON THE MINISTER FRATERNALS IN TOWNSHIPS

This section shares the empirical information on five minister fraternal with whom the researcher worked in the Free State. The word "fraternal" is derived from the Latin word "*frater*", meaning a brother or comrade. The Latin word "*fraternus*" means fraternal and refers to the relationship among brothers or a group of people with common interests who decided to form an association or organisation, in order to achieve a specific task. Within the Christian context, it can refer to a relationship among Christian

leaders with common interests and a passion for fellowship, reaching out to each other, and witnessing the Lordship of Jesus Christ within their own context. A minister fraternal represents various denominations in a specific context and is open to all Christian leaders within a specific context. Often, fraternal address societal and church needs on the local level, in a town, a city or a municipal district. Some fraternal affiliate to larger and established ecumenical bodies such as the SACC, the AACC or the WCC to contribute and acquire some knowledge, skills, and resources not available within their local context. It can thus be said that minister fraternal are, in a way, a form of ecumenical church organisation functioning on the local level and doing the same functions as established ecumenical bodies.

As part of the interview questions, the participants were asked to provide short introductory details about their minister fraternal. I would first like to discuss the Bloemfontein Minister Fraternal (BMF) that was established in 1994. It started off as a multiracial fellowship with a large representation of predominantly White church leaders in senior leadership positions. Nowadays, White people have left altogether and the fraternal is left with 40 Black and Coloured pastors. The aim of this fraternal is to do fellowship together and to develop a relationship with each other with the purpose of developing leaders who will facilitate the spread of the Kingdom of God.

The second minister fraternal is the Kingdom Economic Development (KED), which was established in 2021 in Qwaqwa. Its 55 members are predominantly Black. The KED fraternal goal is to promote faith-based economic development, by organising entrepreneurs workshops to share the business information from government and other institutions. The KED fraternal provides pastoral development and trainings for the capacity-building of church leaders to engage effectively in community development projects, in order to facilitate change in the church members' economic status and the meaningful engagement of social ills.

The third minister fraternal is Mangaung Minister Fraternal (MMF), which was established in 2001 in Bloemfontein. Its 35 pastors are predominantly Black. The objective of this fraternal is to worship together with the purpose of developing each other in matters that concern living Christian values, in order to enhance their community involvement.

The fourth minister fraternal is the Christian Network in the Free State (CNFS), which was established in 2017 in Bloemfontein. This fraternal is in partnership with more than ten minister fraternal in and outside Bloemfontein. Its workshop are regularly attended by 30 to 80 people from

various towns in the Free State province. The CNFS intends to pursue the goals of the mission of the triune God in both private and public life. The goals of the mission of the triune God are the reconciliation of humanity with God and the transformation of social structures to serve the will of the Kingdom of God. It intends to achieve specific objectives:

- To promote fellowship in diverse families, denominations, races, and fraternals.
- To inculcate a better understanding and interpretation of the Word of God, by uplifting, encouraging, and empowering one another.
- To encourage involvement in societal projects and activities for the purpose of transforming evil societal structures, in order to serve the will of the Kingdom of the Triune God.
- To develop, teach, and mentor present and future leaders.
- To liaise with local structures, theological institutions, and fraternals.

The last fraternal is the Episcopal Congress of Charismatic Bishops and Apostles (ECOCBA), which was established in Bloemfontein in 2018. It has 55 members. ECOCBA is an overarching and regulatory body that intends to set order in the Kingdom of God and establish the community of faith through development, growth, training of leaders, and upholding theological standards integral and authentic to global episcopal charismatic and Pentecostal organisations. Its sense of belonging is part of the whole episcopal governance. It is a non-denominational, non-racial, non-sexist, and non-political organisation and entity.

The goals of the above minister fraternals are similar in that they seek fellowship and empowerment their members. However, the difference is the goals of empowerment as given for the Kingdom of God: setting order in the Kingdom of God, facilitating economic involvement, living Christian values, and pursuing the mission of God in both private and public life.

## 7.1 The function of the minister fraternals in the townships

The following discussion focuses on the functions and challenges of each of the above fraternals. The participants were asked several questions to share information on the function of their minister fraternal within their own context.

### 7.1.1 Empirical data from Bloemfontein Minister Fraternal (BMF)

On the question “What did your fraternal do to live and maintain the unity of churches?”, participant M1 from the BMF mentioned that, in their effort to live and maintain the unity of churches, members of the BMF have fellowship with each other and endeavour to reach out to members of other fraternals, in order to establish healthy partnerships between different denominations and racial groups. In their monthly fellowship, they pray and share the Word of God with each other, discuss a selected topic relevant to their needs and challenges, and conclude with announcements on upcoming events of the fraternal and the community.

Concerning missional involvement within their own context, the BMF fraternal is holding an annual leadership prayer conference on 16<sup>th</sup> of December, which is a public holiday and Reconciliation day in South Africa. The leadership prayer conference is a joint annual project organised with the Mangaung Metro Municipality and local minister fraternals. The purpose is to read Scripture and pray for the progress and challenges encountered by the municipality and the country. As part of their contribution to the alleviation of poverty, the BMF fraternal collects food and clothes from its members and community to be distributed to the poor and those in need. The BMF fraternal has organised peaceful marches against social injustices with relevant state departments, in order to raise awareness of the injustices that continue to plague their communities. In terms of state-church relationships, this fraternal has a policy of critical engagement; they are free to consult the local municipality to express their concerns and, where possible, to collaborate with the municipality in matters that concern the public such as the prayer conference. Concerning the climate change, the organisation has not yet acted remarkably, except praying for the rain during the drought.

As to whether BMF as a Christian organisation collaborates with other leaders from Islam and African traditional religions, participant M1 responded that his fraternal participates in interfaith dialogue but that

it has been a challenge to work with Interfaith structures because of the difference in doctrinal and theological beliefs. Spiritual leaders therefore refuse to work with Traditional Leaders where the platforms should be shared as one as they strongly believe it will compromise the Beliefs, Principles and Biblical Values they seek to stand for and represent.

The BMF fraternal functions mostly on the local level, in the township of Mangaung and has not yet expanded its service to provincial, national, or international level. However, participant M1 is a member of the national ecumenical organisation where he serves as the Free State ambassador of the National Pastors Indaba-Advocacy Association. Internationally, he is a member of the International Confederation Institute of Church Leaders (ICICL), an international ecumenical organisation that believes in fellowship and empowerment of Christian leaders for service in the world.

Ecumenical church organisations on various levels have challenges, some of which threaten their existence. The fraternal even have their own fair share of challenges. Concerning the internal challenges of the BMF, participant M1 mentioned the following: lack of resources such as transport, stationary, finances, and office buildings; some of its members show low levels of commitment by not attending meetings or events organised by the BMF; there are racial, cultural, and language barriers because, initially, the membership of BMF was predominantly White, followed by the Coloured and then the Blacks. This caused much tension in terms of what should be the dominant language used in the assemblies of the BMF. Regrettably, this tension caused some members to leave the BMF; there is no skilled leadership because of a lack of formal training of most of the pastors. It is a well-known challenge that many of the pastors in the township have no or very minimal formal training. This has adverse effects on the organisation and administration of the fraternal's programme, and since some pastors have no formal and steady income, they struggle to have money for transport to BMF meetings or events and even to pay for their annual membership.

The BMF also experiences the following external challenges: there are too many fraternal, and most of them do not have proper leadership structures; many of the pastors from independent churches tend to form a group, a fraternal, that serves their needs instead of joining the already established fraternal in their area. This kind of practice impedes the unity of churches and limits their capacity to engage pastors' existing societal challenges; the proliferation of minister fraternal in the townships leads to the formation of ghost fraternal that claim to be speaking on behalf of pastors and churches at government engagements. This promotes feuds among fraternal leaders because of their dubious doctrinal and theological beliefs and manner of operation. For example, some of the leaders from these ghost fraternal tarnish the image of the church and pastors. They are involved in gross human rights abuse of their church members, and support and defend some political leaders allegedly involved in the abuse of the state's resources; lack of training of some pastors is another factor

that has tempted many pastors to obtain fraudulent honorary degrees from local and international private Bible colleges. Many of them are not even registered with the Council of Higher Education (CHE) or another reputable higher education body. This practice results in pastors stealing undeserved qualifications which they use to raise their social status as being educated, whereas in fact they have fake qualifications; the membership of BMF seems to be predominantly people of colour and this has made it difficult to attract members of other races such as Blacks, Indians or Whites. This has impeded the collaboration of pastors and churches to unite and make a visible impact in their own community; political interference impedes unity and collaboration of fraternals in the township. The factions in the ruling party and the divisions among political parties have adversely tempted some pastors in fraternals to take sides and be involved in party politics. This irresponsible involvement in party politics consequently leads to tension, divisions, and lack of the prophetic voice of the fraternals. Political interference has also shown that some political leaders practise favouritism in their relationship with the pastors. For example, when some church leaders are critical of the ruling party or of a specific political party, they are removed from the sites of their church, on the pretext of the site being illegally occupied and meant for community development. They only find out later that the site has been offered to the other church that supports a specific politician or political party, and, according to participant M1, some pastors in various fraternals have shown lack of humility and servanthood by being power hungry and position mongers. When some pastors are not elected in the position of leadership, they leave their fraternal to start a new one and establish fraternals based on denominational criteria, race or ethnic group.

In light of the above, participant M1 advised that it is extremely difficult to work with the pastors because of a lack of resources and systems in place to run the fraternals. However, help may be needed in the form of support and development of capacity-building programmes and facilitation of registration of churches and existing minister fraternals.

### **7.1.2 Empirical data from Kingdom Economic Development (KED)**

Participant M2 is the leader of the KED fraternal in Qwaqwa. In his response to “What did your fraternal do to live and maintain the unity of the churches?”, M2 stated that they invite church leaders from various denominations and encourage them to work together as a team, in order to promote social cohesion, cooperation among churches, and establish partnerships.

Concerning their missional involvement in the community, the KED fraternal does evangelism in its own community, arranges workshops on marriages and economic involvement, and visits efficient ministries for the purpose of learning and motivating the pastors. In terms of the relationship with the state, this fraternal prays for the state and, in its gatherings, encourages pastors not to allow party politics to interfere with their ministries. Concerning the environment and climate change, they share information with pastors to encourage their members to care for the environment, and those who can are encouraged to participate in the recycling business.

With regard to the facilitation of interfaith dialogue, participant M2 stated that, since all human beings are "*homo religiosus*", freedom of religion and ecumenical relations with other churches and faiths are beneficial to ensure that people live in harmony with their fellow human beings. Most of the activities of this fraternal occur on the local level. However, participant M2 regularly consults and partners with other ecumenical organisations beyond Qwaqwa and invites them to share some skills and knowledge with the local fraternals.

In his discussion on internal challenges, participant M2 stated that church leaders are mostly not willing to participate in socio-economic issues and ecumenical relationships. Many pastors in Qwaqwa do not have a formal income and depend on their church members for their income. Many of the church sites in Qwaqwa have some land available for gardening and subsistence farming. However, most of the church leaders are not committed to participating in garden and economic projects meant to alleviate poverty in their own area.

Concerning external challenges, participant M2 shared them as the government has reduced the role of church leaders to opening and closing with a prayer instead of engaging and involving them in robust discussions on societal and environmental issues. The other challenge is that, since churches are struggling financially, people no longer value churches and prefer political activities. Lastly, participant M2 mentioned that there are many established fraternals with narrow religious interests and leaders without formal qualifications, thus leading to lack of cooperation with one another.

In light of the above, participant M2 raised his concerns that the vast majority of people in the churches are not employed, and struggle to give offerings and tithes. Therefore, they depend on pastors to assist with their livelihood.

### 7.1.3 Empirical data from the Mangaung Minister Fraternal (MMF)

Participant M3 stated that, in line with living and maintaining the unity of the churches, they usually have fellowship once a month on a Saturday to share the Word of God, pray for each other, and get updated about the progress in the MMF's activities. Furthermore, they reach out and invite other fraternal to collaborate on matters that concern the development of fraternal and community involvement.

Concerning missional involvement, MMF has adopted schools which their members visit once a week to help with discipline, spiritual matters such as prayers, and pastoral counselling. Once a quarter, MMF visits the old age centres to share the gospel and holy communion and give some gifts donated by the members for the old age centre. Concerning social justice matters, MMF has arranged a march involving pastors and members of the community to the relevant government department to hand over their memorandum of concerns regarding xenophobia and violence in their community. Moreover, the fraternal has held several community workshops and awareness campaigns to warn and conscientise people against false prophets who abuse their members and extort money from them in the name of religion. In terms of the state, the fraternal has established a partnership with government departments such as the SAPS, Social Development, Health and Correctional Services, Deste, Education, and other NGOs to enhance service delivery in its various dimensions in their community. Concerning environmental care and climate change, the fraternal has partnered with the Mangaung Metro Municipality to address the environmental and climate challenges via the committees established by the Executive Mayor. Regarding the facilitation of interfaith dialogue with members of other religions, the fraternal appreciates the workshop with the academic staff from the University of the Free State's Faculty of Theology and Religion in assisting them to develop vision and strategies for involvement in interfaith dialogue with members of other religions, in order to witness the gospel and collaborate in matters that concern the community.

MMF is functioning mostly on the local level and partners with other fraternal to make an impact on other levels such as the provincial and national levels. Participant M3 indicated that he liaises between his fraternal and others such as the South African Religious Forum (SARF) that functions on a national level.

The internal challenges of the MMF are as follows: lack of commitment of members to attend meetings and events of the fraternal because of the financial constraints or too many commitments of pastors in their ministries; lack of funds to finance the running of an office, buy stationary or book a venue for the activities of the fraternal; lack of skills among pastors to properly analyse their context, in order to effectively address societal challenges, and lack of intellectuals to partner with fraternalists to share skills and knowledge and to inspire more pastors to further their studies for the benefit of the ministry and community development.

MMF describes its external challenges as follows: poor collaboration among local fraternalists because some pastors are greedy for positions, titles, and their inability to submit under someone's leadership; lack of a clear policy of how pastors must relate and collaborate with politicians and the state. In line with the above, participant M3 indicated that his fraternal is now engaging with more female pastors to be part of the ministerial fraternal, because it has been a male-dominated fraternal.

#### 7.1.4 Empirical data from the Christian Network in the Free State

Participant M4 indicated that his fraternal lives and maintains the unity of the churches by calling together other fraternalists and pastors for fellowship, in order to share the Word of God, recent research published, and knowledge about ministry in the church and community. Furthermore, the fraternal collaborates with state departments such as SEDA, Desteza, and higher education institutions like the University of the Free State's Faculty of Theology and Religion and other societal entities to participate in the empowerment of religious leadership, churches, and community members.

Concerning missional involvement, in its assemblies, the fraternal shares the Word of God in the form of Bible study, preaching, and meditation. In terms of social justice, the CNFS partners with other fraternalists in their marches to protest against social ills, but the CNFS focuses more on arranging workshops to discuss urgent and existing social ills, and the strategies that may be used to engage them. Concerning the state, the CNFS provides training on possible and effective ways to engage with the state. Generally, CNFS propagates critical engagement with the state and what it implies. It invites state departments to partner with CNFS in community development projects. In terms of climate change and the environment, the CNFS has provided training via workshops, reading material, inviting experts on the topic, and encouraging members to establish a recycling business to contribute towards alleviating problems of

environmental care. In facilitating interfaith dialogue, CNFS has partnered with interfaith organisations in matters that concern the public and the fraternals. In addition, the CNFS provides training to other fraternals on the need to collaborate with interfaith organisations in matters that concern the common agenda.

This fraternal intends to empower pastors, congregations, and community members in matters that concern the community's challenges and strategies that may be used to address them. This is done on both local and provincial level. Beyond the township of Mangaung, the CNFS partners with fraternals in Botshabelo, Qwaqwa, Welkom, Bultfontein, and others. On the national and international level, the CNFS intends to partner with other ecumenical organisations that have the same goals and vision about living and spreading the Kingdom of God.

The internal challenges are as follows: lack of financial resources to open an office and have a venue to provide trainings, and some office members are committed to attend meetings and events, due to their personal and ministerial commitments in their churches.

The main external challenge experienced by CNFS is the establishment of fraternals who are unwilling to collaborate with each other and voice matters that concern the public. In relation to the above, CNFS has realised that there is a gap of leadership with formal training to empower and advise the pastors in different fraternals about the need to enrol for formal training in ministry and do responsible ministry in their own context.

### **7.1.5 Empirical data from the Episcopal Congress of Charismatic Bishops and Apostles (ECOCBA)**

According to participant M5, to live and maintain the unity of churches, ECOCBA believes that God is exalted when church leaders work together to serve God. Furthermore, all indigenous churches such as Charismatic, Pentecostal, Zionist, and Apostolic, must collaborate. ECOCBA cooperates closely with other community structures and government departments in matters that concern the community. They offer church administration skills to bishops and apostles to enable them to deal with other pastors under their authority.

In missional involvement, ECOCBA offers a service to church community members such as church leaders by reaching out to them when they are lonely after starting ministry. They offer training on the liturgy of the public worship service because many church leaders do not have formal training to understand the significance of liturgy in a formal public worship service. They share their vision with their members, in order to

strive for the restoration of a proper bishopric and Apostolic foundation. They encourage their members to bring order and maintain integrity in the Lord's church. They offer knowledge about the offices and reformation to enhance Episcopal integrity. ECOGBA operates almost on the local, national, and international levels, as it even has members beyond South Africa. It also cooperates with similar organisations globally.

Participant M5 shared that the vast majority of church leaders like to use titles such as bishop, apostle, and so on, without understanding the true meaning and worth of those titles. These church leaders are not aware that the title of bishop, apostle, or any other title is not merely an ordinary position; but it is also the office in which they are called to operate, with its policies, rules, and regulations, in a biblical standard.

## 8. SUMMARY INTERPRETATION OF DATA FROM THE MINISTER FRATERNAL INTERVIEWS

All the abovementioned fraternals practise fellowship in various ways. The common way is sharing the Word of God, in order to spiritually uplift, nurture, and enlighten each other. They differ on how they reach out to each other because each pastor's challenges are different. Lastly, fellowship and unity among members of the abovementioned fraternals is shown by collaborating in matters that concern their society. The above minister fraternals are ecumenical organisations consisting of different denominations. They are also contextual and missional in their practice.

Minister fraternals in the township are contextual in the sense that they address contemporary challenges experienced by the church in general within its context. They are missional because they proclaim the Lordship of Christ, peace, and reconciliation. They strive to build a network of believers in both the church and society and strive to empower the church leadership to develop a passion for transforming humanity and societal structures. Considering the data presented, the fraternals practise missional involvement by praying, counselling, meditating, and doing Bible study to share the Word of God in their midst and uplift each other. The following Christian services are offered in the community: marches against social injustices such as gender-based violence and xenophobia; provision of food and clothes to those in need; visiting old age and orphanage centres; setting order in the church leadership hierarchy, and partnership with various societal structures such as the University of the Free State for sharing academic knowledge and skills for ministerial and church involvement in society. They critically engage the state by collaborating with the state and government departments on matters that concern the community and by critiquing the state when it marginalises

and undermines the church's involvement in society. They organise workshops on community, economic, environmental care, family, and ministerial development to empower the church leaders for their effective involvement in the communities they serve. The minister fraternals have not done much on climate change and its related consequences, except awareness and workshops presented by the CNFS and partnership of the MMF with the local municipality to deal with the problem of littering in the townships.

The vast majority of the fraternals mentioned that they function mainly on the local level, except the CNFS and the ECOCBA fraternals who play an overarching role in many of the local fraternals. For example, the CNFS fraternal has a partnership with more than ten fraternals in the Free State province and the ECOCBA is a fraternal with members from various countries in the world. Despite the majority of the fraternals focusing on the local context, their leadership made efforts to link and collaborate with other ecumenical bodies on a higher level such as SACC, ICICL, SARF, and so on. In my observation, this link of local leadership of fraternals with larger and higher ecumenical church bodies benefits both the leader and the local fraternal. It enriches the leader of the local fraternal in terms of the vision and the possible impact the local fraternal can have in its context. Lastly, it enables the local fraternal to develop networks and acquire knowledge and skills necessary to engage local challenges.

The abovementioned fraternals have internal and external challenges that need attention for the sake of their survival. Concerning the internal challenges, the following needs attention: lack of resources such as finances to run the office and the activities of the fraternal; lack of formal training which tempted some church leaders to seek fraudulent qualifications for the sake of status and power or claim to a church title without following proper protocol. On this point, the researcher would like to congratulate the CNFS leadership's significant role in encouraging pastors to enrol with reputable and registered institutions for obtaining formal qualifications. So far it has managed to help more than three pastors enrol and study theology at the University of the Free State. ECOCBA also needs to be applauded for its critical role in persuading pastors to follow the protocol. The lack of income from the church leaders inhibits attendance at fraternal meetings and activities. The KED and the CNFS fraternals must be applauded on their effort to organise workshops that focus on economic empowerment to address lack of income, funds, and poverty among church leaders and members.

Concerning the external challenges, the following needs attention: establishing the fraternal based on race and denomination. This problem contributes to the unnecessary proliferation of fraternals when a specific

church leader, who is obsessed with greed and power, uses race, denomination, or solidarity with a ruling party as a reason to establish a new fraternal; lack of collaboration with academics to share knowledge and skills with church leaders for the sake of transforming ministry and societal engagement. Interfaith dialogue, where MMF appreciates the training it received from the CNFS on that point, while other minister fraternals, although they acknowledge its necessity, are reluctant to engage in such practice for fear of other religions contaminating the quality of the gospel through interaction and collaboration. Political interference is shown by the biased issuing of church sites, favouritism shown by a political leader to prefer working with specific pastors. The limited number of women pastors involved in the minister fraternals impedes gender balance and societal engagement of women.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The presence of local ecumenical church organisations has significant benefits to facilitate fellowship, reach out to each other, and collaborate on matters that concern the community. For the vast majority of the participants, their minister fraternals play a positive role in promoting unity through fellowship and collaboration with members, other fraternals, and government departments. In terms of missional involvement in society, the participants stated that their minister fraternals strive to maintain their identity by focusing on proclaiming the Word through prayer, meditation, and Bible study. In their missional involvement in society, the minister fraternals made an effort to address the basic needs of those in need, to be involved in social justice matters by marching, creating awareness, and partnering with other societal structures such as the local fraternals, government, and members of society. Furthermore, the minister fraternals play a contextual and missional role in their community, by visiting old age and orphanage centres, facilitating the mindset shift via workshops for members of the community, and pastors being passionate for the transformation of society and churches.

This study would like to convey a message that the internal and external challenges of the minister fraternals need urgent attention if they are to survive. Hence, the assistance of theologians, politicians, business, and cultural leaders is essential to sustain the existence of the minister fraternals in the communities. Lastly, in order for minister fraternals as local ecumenical church organisations to survive, there is a need to facilitate a consciousness of their identity and passion for missional involvement in their respective contexts.

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