

Pentecostal missional ecclesiology based on Acts 2:42-47 contributes towards sustainable development in communities¹

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Abstract

Pentecostal missional ecclesiology of Acts 2:42-47, through its apostolic doctrine, fellowship, prayer, and sharing, contributes towards sustainable development. The study of this text demonstrates that Pentecostal missional ecclesiology contributes towards mental and emotional health towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals, known as Global Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The objectives are, firstly, to demonstrate that missiology remains crucial as the expression of faith. Secondly, fellowship keeps Pentecostals together. It ignites their passion for missional tasks. Thirdly, sharing enthuses Pentecostal missionality. Fourthly, prayer promotes emotional and physical health. These four aspects are interrogated to demonstrate the Pentecostal missional role in community sustainable development. Conclusion is an appeal to Pentecostals to return to missional ecclesiology of Acts 2 towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals.

Key words: community; ecclesia; koinonia; missional, Pentecostal, sharing, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Acts 2 is the foundation of Pentecostal missions and praxis historically and ecclesiastically because the new converts “were formed into a distinct community” (Bruce, 1988:79). It is a missional text in that it demonstrates what the Petrine community of God’s people did to fulfil its mission. From verse 42, the reader sees the summary of the daily life of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem. Their post-pentecostal experience activities characterised their ongoing communal life. This life is introduced in verse 42 and has become a Pentecostal missional culture since then (Wagner, 1994:106). Acts 2:42-47 exists as a constituent piece of the Spirit’s witness concerning the resurrected Jesus. God calls people to salvation through the Spirit; God

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also creates a *community* comprising those who are called. In this article, the word missional is used to mean a Christian lifestyle and practices to expand the Christian faith by engaging others in the sharing of the gospel message. This missional lifestyle and practices are unravelled in this article to see how they contribute towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations in 2015.

2. The ecclesiology of Acts 2:42-47

The newly formed community became the apostolic fellowship (*koinonia*), constituted on the basis of apostolic teaching. This apostles' teaching was authoritative because it was Christocentric and pneumatic. It was a centrifugal activity that bound them together. The disciples devoted themselves to the 'apostles' teaching. They had no particular credentials as teachers in terms of being recognised by religious authorities. None of the apostles had any formal religious training. They had been fishermen, tax collectors, and ordinary citizens. Yet, it was clear to the believers that the apostles had come due to a missional mandate and in the power and authority of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). They had the experience of being with Jesus and being taught by him directly. For these reasons, the new converts were careful to listen to and put into practice the apostles' teachings.

Koinonia is a fellowship, not just for togetherness (*homothumadon*), but includes eating together, which has become an essence of Christian life in the newly formed community. The lasting legacy for the Pentecostals, derived from Acts 2:42-47, tends to use the 'fellowship' language instead of institutionalisation of the church where hierarchy is visible to govern the church. It is basically a missional ecclesiology of the fellowship of, with, and in the community. This fellowship is pneumatologically constituted and is experienced as such... the work and the supremacy of the Spirit, so the church is where the Spirit is. This makes the church essentially a pneumatocracy, not an autocracy, aristocracy, or bureaucracy (Van der Ven, 1996:91). Fellowship is the realisation of the indissoluble relationship of the Spirit and *ecclesia*. It is indeed an experience that the Cappadocian Fathers called *perichoresis*, "to describe the communal nature of God" (De Kock, 2010:52). This is captured by Kärkkäinen (2002:75), "This fellowship is something to be experienced, a shared experience in the everyday life of the community." It is, therefore, the church as *communio fidelium*, where people experience freedom and equality based on *charismata*. "The dynamic of the fellowship is concretely lived out through the charismata" (Kärkkäinen, 2002:75). These are the gifts of the Spirit given liberally to individuals in the fellowship to missionally perform activities in the fields of *kerygma*, *liturgia*, and *diakonia*.

Furthermore, the church as *koinonia* is nourished by the *charismata* (Van der Ven, 1996:93) in order to *incarnate* itself in the world. The Pentecostal fellowship is

equipped through *charismata* for self-edification and service to the community. Spiritual gifts are relational and interactive (Welker, 1994:269); therefore, are here to serve “to structure the church as a community of graced relationships that facilitate communion and show forth signs of grace to the world” (Macchia, 2006:242). In this charismatic *koinonia*, they deemed each other equal partners, sharing common interests.

In line with Pauline’s exhortation (1 Cor 11:17-34), the Lord’s Supper was both the Eucharist and a meal generally shared amongst the congregants (Yong, 2014:140). These early Jewish believers essentially lived their entire daily lives with one another, breaking bread from house to house, and sharing meals and living spaces. None of this was done from obligation; rather voluntarily, *they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart*. This was not just an ordinary lifestyle; it encompassed a celebration. It was a voluntary organisation called *baburab* – a communal meal. This meal could not be eaten within the Temple precincts, so the households became their ideal and safe rendezvous.

They were experiencing human relationships as God had intended them to be, one of harmonious living where everyone seeks the best for one another, where there is no exploitation or taking advantage of each other. This is communality found in African *Ubuntu*, where having a meal together is significant. “Eating together is a mark of unity, solidarity, and deep friendship, a visible sign that social barriers which once plagued these people have broken down” (Willimon, 1988:42). Eating together symbolises shared trust. A shared meal shows oneness, togetherness, and harmony. The African proverb from South Sudan says, ‘Reconciliation is deeper in eating together.’ There is bonding power in the meal, enhancing friendship and reconciliation. This is why the disciples were shocked to hear Jesus mention that one of the participants in the meal would betray him (Matthew 26:20-25). These *meals* were shared *together with gladness and sincerity of heart*: the believers shared because they wanted to share, and they were filled with *gladness* and good feeling. They lived in a state of joy and mutual benefit. This leads to the *ecclesiastical* duty of sharing, which is missions in reality. A missional church is a sharing church.

Sharing is whereby members of the community sell their possessions, hold all things jointly, and distribute to others as there is a need. This articulated the New Testament’s concern for the poor and economic oppression as observed in Paul’s letters, James, and Revelation. The bottom line is that where God is especially at work and where God’s presence is especially experienced, such giving and sharing is the natural Christian response. The passage is not about the structure or organogram of how the church is to be governed, but a *communion ecclesiology* in action, where the reign of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ creates the potential for mutual service that embodies God’s justice. The life and work of *missional ecclesia* can

reflect, even if only dimly, the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed while on earth and secured through his death, resurrection, and exaltation. *Ecclesia* exists not for its own sake, but to care for its most vulnerable members and to be a means by which God extends holistic salvation to others (2:47).

Filled with such a generous and charitable spirit, the community shared what they already had. They *began selling their property and possessions* to accrue more money for the purpose of *sharing them with all (apanta koina)* other believers, specifically *as anyone might have need*. The main reason for their fundraising and sharing was to care for the believers who had little food, clothing, or possessions. The selling of possessions to meet community needs became an ongoing process rather than a one-time total divestment. It became a community where everyone was concerned about everyone else and willing to part with their possessions on behalf of others when needed. This practice is epitomised in Acts 11:27-30. A famine spread throughout the world, hitting Judea especially hard. The church in Antioch of Syria made provisions to help its suffering neighbours in Jerusalem (Powell, 1991:78). This demonstrates that *ecclesia* was missionally conscious of the needs of others in the world and, therefore, took some initiatives to address and attend to those needs.

The community lived a desirable life that the outsiders craved. These outsiders observed an ethic of friendship, justice, generosity, meaning, and mutuality realised through ideal social interaction and political arrangement. They were bound together in fellowship by the Spirit, sharing themselves and imparting knowledge to each other. Their *koinonia* was bound by the fact that:

The Spirit is to be understood in terms of relation, of meeting with otherness, of the identity of the self as the dynamic of self-relation, and of the relation of the self-related and other-related self to God (Heron, 1983:139).

Individuals' activities went beyond self, but to others. Mission is stretching oneself in order to reach out to others. No one lives for himself but for others. Greater weight should be placed proportionately on one or on the other for each other. The gap between the poor and the rich will thus be narrowed, if not diminished.

3. Pentecostal ecclesiology and sustainable development in Africa

SDGs stand on two pillars of hope, namely economic security and environmental sustainability. When considering socio-cultural endeavours for living and sustainability, these two pillars are important and, therefore, need to be the benchmarks for a missiological discipline. However, in this paper, the intent is economic secu-

ity, since “Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are established to end poverty, improve health and education, and promote prosperity and well-being through environmental sustainability” (Barawi, 2019:644).

Since 2015, drawbacks and impediments towards SDG implementation have been a reality to reckon with. Barriers between the richer and the poorer countries widened. Many countries, including South Africa, face challenges implementing SDGs as anticipated. The challenges include failure or mismanagement of finances to invest in implementation in the poorer countries, barriers in technology transfer (in South Africa perpetrated by erratic electricity supply) from developed regions to less developed regions, trade impediments that disadvantage middle and low-income countries, failure of governments to commit sustainable plans, lack of coherent partnerships, and the lack of accountability due to inadequate and incompetent evaluation mechanisms. These drawbacks challenge Pentecostal missions, while at the same time, they create a platform for the enhancement thereof.

The gathered and the gathering community reflects the thesis that the church is both the redeemed and the redeeming church. As people are liberated from the clutches of poverty, *ecclesia* is now expected to continue doing the same for others. As the redeemed people, *ecclesia* is immersed in the world where “Greed and economic-myopia have caused financial pain... especially in economically marginalised people” (De Kock, 2010:60). As the redeeming community, the church is expected to partner with God in the missional initiatives of liberating the economically poor and the politically oppressed. The Pentecostal Spirit-imbuement goes beyond self or parochial outlook, but for the ongoing missional deliberations for the world in need. After all, “God provides Pentecostal power for a Pentecostal task” (De Kock, 2000:103), which in character is missional. Its missionality flows out of the energy, which is the Spirit’s power dwelling *perichoretically* with them. The Pentecostal focus is that “The Holy Spirit is looked upon as the One who empowers people with the charisms for witness and social work” (Kärkkäinen, 2005:46). Moltmann (1999:196) points out that “This reciprocal community is an immense, outflowing source of energy.” Indeed, “Their lives had been given new significance, since they had been engaged in God’s redemptive mission on earth” (De Kock, 2010:66). This community is indeed “a charismatic community in the service of God’s mission” (Kärkkäinen, 2017:236).

It is, therefore, logically ontological to link the Pentecostal missional ecclesiology of Acts 2:42-47 as a learning object for SDGs. It has been demonstrated through this ecclesiology that the Pentecostal church, “by virtue of its reception of the Pentecostal gift, is a prophetic community of empowerment for missionary service, healing and reconciliation” (Kärkkäinen, 2005:46) to be extended to the world suffering under socio-economic miseries.

- i. **Apostles' doctrine sustains unity and promotes human dignity:** The adage that 'doctrine divides, service unites' sounds like a Pentecostal oxymoron. They are known for splinters and dissensions more than any Protestant group. Their secessionist tendencies are either political, doctrinal, or egoistic rather than spiritual. In their different cohorts, they continue to claim Pentecostal Spirit encounter. One of the reasons for these dissensions is the lack of one common orientation, doctrinal formation, assimilation, or integration. However, with the Pentecostal *ecclesia* of Acts 2, the doctrine was glueing the community into the fellowship to enable it towards a continuous sharing *praxis*. Teaching became a powerful tool that gathers the minds of people into harmony. When people are taught their beliefs or ideological systems, they are able to draw closer to each other to sociologically move forward into harmony.

A typical example is when some sectors of South African societies were taught the theological justification of apartheid ideology, that sector symphonically moved towards embracing the ideology. There was either ignorance or overlooking of the Pentecostal missional ecclesiology of Acts 2, which promotes and embraces human dignity. De Kock (2010: 49) elaborates on the experiences of Frank Chikane that "White Pentecostals participated in the suppression and even torture of those considered 'enemies of the state'," showing that even the redeemed community needs redemption. It is through teaching, education, and training that the community can be oriented towards sustainable development where people are empowered in ethics and morals regarding human dignity. Pentecostalism exists in the context where the poor and the marginalised are ill-treated, devalued, and considered unworthy human beings. This calls for a well-taught missional doctrine, which is "a holistic, integral salvation which liberates human beings from all oppression" (Rodriguez, 2010:70). This doctrine is "a counterculture which affirms and defends life and human dignity as a gift from God" (Rodriguez, 2010:75). It works towards fighting against the cosmic powers which oppress human beings. The undignified people and those under the oppression of cosmic powers need the liberation that comes through the knowledge of the belief system that provides the mechanisms for escaping and survival, which is the sustainable development towards the fullness of life. Sustainable development requires educational and value changes, as well as cultural adjustments, shaped by apostles' doctrine in order to produce empirically balanced societies that contribute towards peace, social stability, and mental competence. This mental competence has progress indicators identified by Yamamori (1993:130) as "experimentation with and sharing of new ideas; sustainable availability and use of vocational training and at least primary education." Since the term "apostles' doctrine"

means teaching or education in general, not just theology per se (Wagner, 1994:103), Pentecostal ecclesiology should aim to incorporate sustainable development into their theological educational policies to promote national and international cooperation. Practically, this will contribute towards the achievement of reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and building towards peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

The Pentecostal church is doctrinally missional and missionally doctrinal because her important duty “is attending to the margins of the globalised and hurting world” (Kärkkäinen, 2017:354). The doctrine, which is the knowledge of one’s persuasion or conviction, can be ideological or pragmatic. It is the unifying activity with edifying effects of the *ecclesia* living in the Spirit; therefore, it has a missional dimension and application (Yong, 2014:187). Pentecostal doctrine is not just pragmatic, but conversational. *Koinonia* took place in houses where seating was probably informal, facilitating interaction and conversation. The apostles were engaged conversationally, imparting the doctrinal content and faith substance. This conversation furnished hope and new possibilities because “Talk provides catharsis, dialogue opens window on fresh perspective” (Demaray, 1983:21). In this kind of environment, there is an equal voice regardless of whether the voice is male or female, therefore, working towards gender equality (SDG 5), due to strong participation that works towards sustainable development goal (SDG 17).

- ii. **Fellowship and sustainable development:** Fellowship (*koinonia*) keeps Pentecostals together. It enables their growth, enhances their emotional health, and, of course, ignites their passion to reach out to the miserable world. Pentecostals embrace fellowship above denominational affiliation, structure, policy, and procedures. It is within the fellowship that Pentecostals experience growth since it is a platform where they *consider how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds* (Hebrews 10:24). Wagner (1994:104) highlights the fact that “While they were growing in their vertical relationship to God, the new believers were also growing in their horizontal relationship to each other in Christian fellowship.” Growth through fellowship evolved towards sharing. Pentecostal fellowship is a community of self-sharing with the other. . . “a communal life of radical hospitality (*philoxenia*) marked by unconditional love for the other. . .” (Augustine, 2019:48).

There is some healing in relationships. The ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships is an important aspect of wholeness and holiness (Jansen, Newman & Carmichael, 1989; Cloud, 1992), giving healthy mental stability. This means Pentecostal fellowship offers emotional health because, through open worship and sharing, they address or treat a variety of emotional

conditions such as trauma, anxiety, depression, etc. Blumhofer (1993:14) captures it well, “The Pentecostal message offered wholeness and healing because it presented a frame of reference for understanding human experience and defining ultimate concerns.” *Charismata* operate in a spirit of sharing and appreciating the varying gifts expressed by members of *koinonia*. Hence, “any breakdown in a significant relationship, with other people or with God himself, can contribute to health problems” (Hillman, Chamberlain & Harding, 2002:123). This community is the fruit of the Spirit’s socio-transformative work, a divine hospitality which is an all-inclusive justice. *Koinonia* reunites economics and spiritual foundations, leading to economic relationships that embrace the other and provide for their need out of one’s own resources. This reflects the assertion in Acts 2:44 of *having all things in common*, sharing with each other for sustainability. Regular fellowship with others contributes towards sustainable development as it enhances the quality of life. Therefore, it can be surmised that “The Spirit is the one who initiates and sustains the conditions that make this radical economic justice possible, for such justice is an outcome of one’s act of worship in Spirit and truth” (Augustine, 2019:144).

The essence of Pentecostal fellowship is characterised by inclusiveness and participation, the key features of pluralism. In agreement with the sentiment of strong partnerships (SDG 17), “Participatory and inclusive structures tend to facilitate decision making, implementation, and acceptance as well as ensuring transparency and accountability” (Enechi & Pattberg, 2020:29). Pentecostalism contributes towards this missional culture through the vehicle of *koinonia*. Therefore, it is important to note that Pentecostal missiology in action contributes towards sustainable development as healthy people experience longevity in order to contribute towards the quality of life. This sustainable development is promoted by *koinonia* because it is within this *koinonia* that “We learn compassion by our interdependence. When we cry in close circles, we taste the salt of each other’s tears” (Doering, 1982:157). The well-being of humanity is dependent on innovative technology to steer the climate, health, social equity, societal cohesion, and stability. It is through *homothumadon* with each other that these can be experienced, and out of the *koinonia*, the ripple effect into the global community can be empirical, leading towards healthy living anticipated transitioning to good health and well-being (SDG 3).

iii. Sharing is a missional task towards sustainable development: Pentecostal mission carries the undertone of the South African famous manifesto, The Freedom Charter³ of 1955, which reverberates, The People Shall Share In

³ <https://www.anc1912.org.za/the-freedom-charter-2/>

The Country's Wealth! It continues to elaborate that *The national wealth of our country, the heritage of South Africans, shall be restored to the people*. The political or even economic implementation of this hangs in the balance as this is not practically observable in the public domain. Pentecostal *koinonia* possesses the intrinsic culture of sharing. Eating together was important."Many scholars feel that the breaking of bread in 2:42 can mean the Lord's Supper, but that breaking bread from house to house in 2:46 means sharing meals with other believers at home" (Wagner, 1994:104). All the believers were together and *had everything in common*. They sold property and possessions *to give to anyone who had need* (Acts 2:44-45). As Bruce (1988:81) comments, "Within the community, there was a spirit of rejoicing and generosity." Generosity and hospitality are motivated by the spirit of sharing within the community. The profits from their property sales were distributed equally according to each person's needs. The administration of the distribution was done by the apostles, who called for responsible, ethical, and accountable leadership.

Members of the Pentecostal churches often experience upward social mobility because the focus changes from selfishness to sharing, becoming responsible economic role players, and practising sound financial management. For instance, the money wasted on alcohol, gambling, and extra-marital affairs is now available to improve the quality of life, such as personal quality of life, children's education, investing in small businesses, etc. In reference to the Assemblies of God, McGee (1986:168) elaborates that acts and practices of compassion, represented by relief efforts and the establishment of orphanages, hospitals, schools, and leprosariums, have not been neglected. These practices impact societies positively as they contribute towards poverty elimination (SDG 1), where there is no hunger (SDG 2), thus ushering in some quality education (SDG 4). The new Pentecostal converts abandon these activities by seeking decent work contributing to economic growth (SDG 8). There is an abundance of testimonies of how gangsters, drug addicts, rapists, thieves, etc., experience revolutionised lives due to Pentecostal sharing missional activities. One example is Pastor Vuyo Ndlela, the founder of Centre of Hope Community Church in Cape Town, who, together with his team, feeds the hungry in a community riddled with alcohol and drug abuse.⁴

All over the world, Pentecostal communities continue to be participants in alleviating poverty (SDG 1), feeding the hungry (SDG 2), promoting good health and well-being (SDG 3), providing quality education (SDG 4), facilitating peace, justice and strong institutional structures (SDG 16) through strong

⁴ <https://missionliberty.wordpress.com/2020/09/02/gugulethu-gangster-now-feeds-thousands/> (Viewed 18 May 2024).

partnerships (SDG 17). They do these by sharing expertise, such as creating social ministries that provide food for the hungry or shelter for the homeless. Pentecostal communities run daycare centres for children and babies of employed parents, schools that are significantly superior to public schools run by the government. Some places provide medical assistance at a low cost, while others enter into partnerships with international agencies for small business initiatives, capacity building, etc. Pentecostal communities in some places run projects to tackle pandemics such as AIDS, TB, leprosy, etc.

- iv. **Prayer and sustainable development:** Prayer within *koinonia* was uttered in a hostile environment. The first believers had enemies from two fronts: The Jews, who regarded them as heretics and, therefore, deserved to be eliminated, and the Romans, who opposed them for undermining the “emperor worship” and despising the Graeco-Roman culture with its pagan or heathen practices (Salzman, 2008:187). Believers created an open platform that did not discriminate against race, nationality, or economic viability. It became a threat to the *status quo* where classism and racial stratification were the norm; hence, they were always suspected or accused of state repression that may lead to civil revolution. From its inception in the early years of the 20th century, Pentecostalism is characterised by prayer. In fact, it was born out of prayer meetings. During prayers, Pentecostals hear the voice of God giving directions on certain decisions, tasks, and problem solutions, including healings and miracles.

Contrary to the popular notion, Pentecostals do not perceive a dichotomy between the mind and the body. Like other secular disciplines, such as psychology and philosophy, Pentecostalism increasingly shows some interest in affirming the unity of mind and body, leading to the validity of religious experience. They draw this from Pauline’s exhortation: *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding (1 Cor 14:14-15 NIV)*. The postmodern generation deems equating religion with beliefs as artificial and excessively cognitive, yet Pentecostal worship combines beliefs and experience through prayer that individuals take charge of both the interpretation and the validation of doctrine. In other words, doctrine and experience are prayerfully analysed rather than dogmatically opinionated. It is through prayer that Pentecostals engage socially or politically. The mind is applied to intervene missionally to meet the needs of the physical realm, where human miseries are rampaging human quality of life and dignity.

Wagner (1994:105) conscientises us that there is an emerging and growing trend of worship and prayer within Pentecostalism. This phenomenon is

becoming a powerful unifying factor among the postdenominational Charismatic churches. This phenomenon is characterised by long periods of praise and worship based on contemporary spiritual songs composed regularly by congregation members of particular networks they are affiliated with. Think of Lara Thomas from New Life Church in Great Britain, Darlene Zschech's legacy at Hillsong Australia, Brian and Jenn Johnson of Bethel Music from California, who raise up worshipers who take hold of their true identity and pursue intimacy with God above all else, and lately, Steven Furtick, founder and lead pastor, who has helped grow the multi-site Elevation Church into a global ministry through online streaming, television, and the music of Elevation Worship. Back home in our own continent, Africa, famous Nigerian gospel minister Nathaniel Bassey's output of the incredible soundtrack entitled *See What The Lord Has Done*. Here, in South Africa, we have Joyous Celebration. This gospel choir has been a significant force in the South African Gospel music industry since its formation in 1996, with many of its members branching out into successful solo careers. Scrutinising these music trailblazers and their formations, one observes that their intergenerational and cultural components contribute towards emotional and mental health through worship and prayer. Undoubtedly, this is towards the achievement of gender equality (SDG 5), reduction of inequality (SDG 10), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). Finally, Pentecostal *koinonia* is both a premise and precedence for inclusiveness and participation in world sustainability (SDG 17).

4. Conclusion

The Pentecostal missional ecclesiology of Acts 2:42-47 is the demonstration fair enough to compel Pentecostals to return to it as a way of contributing towards SDGs. This missional ecclesiology emphasises education, as demonstrated by the early disciples' devotion to the apostles' teaching. The charismatic fellowship nature of the Pentecostal faith empowers it for missionality. Their fellowship (*koinonia*) is not just an event, but an encounter in which members experience love, thereby contributing to emotional stability, which is crucial to mental health. This fellowship comprises all who believe regardless of gender; therefore, a Pentecostal fellowship is where gender equality can be experienced. Breaking bread, which was sharing meals together, is pivotal to poverty alleviation; by sharing, there is a positive movement towards alleviating poverty and hunger. Sharing amongst themselves closes the inequality gap and empowers each other for a quality life. Pentecostal prayer and worship cement the unity of humanity and improve relationships both vertically (with God) and horizontally (with each other), improving social and political engagement. The engagement itself is accurately a missional task.

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