

From Case Study to Research Agenda: Justifying Systematic Enquiry into Leveraging Specific Theologies to Promote Christian Unity and Mission

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for research that explores the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging specific Christian traditions to promote Christian unity and mission. It uses insights from a larger qualitative study that used case studies from the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe to present a case for researchers in the area of religious studies and of theology to focus their studies on how the various churches in the Christian landscape may leverage their respective traditions to promote Christian unity and therefore mission. Christian unity is viewed in this article to be a precursor for peace, love and common witness internationally, as envisioned by Apostle Paul who said in Galatians 3 verse 28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are one in Christ Jesus” (RSV). This article provides answers to the central question: How can an investment in research that focus on leveraging specific theologies to promote Christian unity be justified? The article thus highlights the importance for researchers to explore the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging any specific Christian tradition to promote Christian unity and therefore the mission Dei. It challenges researchers and Christian believers across the globe to reimagine Christian tradition and remodel ecclesiastic practices towards the original mission of God, that is, to redeem mankind from slavery to sin. In so doing, it motivates researchers to replicate the original research on restoration theology and the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe, with other Christian traditions, with the aim of establishing the basis for Christian unity and therefore common witness. The central thesis in this article is that, during this era of emerging ecumenical Christianity, unity among Christians, as enunciated in Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17: 18 - 21), should be the focus for any progressive Christian movement, as opposed to negative energy focused on fellow Christians. This study thus argues that research seeking to understand the possibilities to and constraints for leveraging any specific theological traditions to promote Christian unity and therefore mission is a worthwhile endeavour.

Keywords: Churches of Christ; Christian Unity; Inclusive Ecclesiastical Practice; Missio Dei; Restoration theology; Receptive ecumenism.

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to justify the need to motivate researchers to invest time and resources on exploring the possibilities to and constraints for leveraging specific theological traditions to promote Christian unity and mission. It is drawn from the authors’ qualitative, multiple-case studies research on leveraging restoration theology to promote Christian unity in the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe. Informed by this study, the present article challenges Christians and students of Christian theology across the globe to reimagine Christian traditions and to remodel ecclesial practices for the Church to fully participate in the mission of God. This is the mission to redeem mankind from slavery to sin and restore the original relationship between God and humanity prevailing during the time of creation and placement in the Garden of Eden. Furthermore, the seminal work to which the current article is part, challenges researchers in the area of Christian theology and of religious studies to replicate the study on leveraging restoration theology to promote Christian unity, for example, with such other traditions, as Reformation, Lutheranism, Catholicism, Presbyterian, Pentecostalism and Orthodoxy. The current article therefore uses insights from a larger multiple case studies research which focused on the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe to present a case for Christian denominations internationally, including in Africa and therefore in

Zimbabwe, to reimagine how churches can leverage their respective theologies to promote Christian unity and mission as a basis for promoting peace, love and common witness for humanity at all levels of society, internationally. It seeks to provide answers to the central questions: *How can an investment in studies that focus on leveraging specific theologies to promote Christian unity be justified?* The central thesis in this article is that, in this post-modern era, Christian unity, such as enunciated in Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 verses 18 to 21, should be the focus of all progressive Churches internationally. Such a focus speaks to the emerging era of ecumenical Christianity where an understanding of the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging specific theologies to promote Christian unity and therefore mission is seen to be a worthwhile investment. Such type of unity promotes common witness such as encapsulated by Apostle Paul when in Galatians 3 verse 28, he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are one in Christ Jesus" (RSV), a position which illustrates equality of life for mankind before God. The present article explores this thesis based on a previous study, which focused on restoration theology in the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe. This article justifies the importance for researchers internationally, including in Africa, and therefore Zimbabwe to explore the possibilities to and constraints for leveraging specific theological traditions to promote Christian unity and therefore mission. Such studies may also speak to what is viewed in the field of theology as inclusive Christianity, that is, receptive ecumenism. Special interest placed on African context in the present article should not be seen as academic arrogance on the part of the authors, who are also African scholars. Instead, this should be seen as an acknowledgement for the need to motivate scholarship on this continent to embrace Christian unity and mission as a research agenda, with the aim of contributing to making this world a more pleasant place to live by all. The African continent has been defined by analysts as a bleeding continent (Headlam, 2023). This designation justifies effort to promote studies that speak to peace, love and harmony, such as created where Christians respond to their calling to common witness of the love of God.

Definitions of Terms

This section defines the key concepts that frame the article. The concepts that are defined at this stage into the article are: Christian theology; Churches of Christ; Christian unity; Mission; and Restoration theology. All other terms that are seen to be incidental to specific sections of the article are defined as the article continues to unfold.

Christian theology: According to McGrath (2011), Christian theology can be defined as a branch of systematic theology that explores the nature of God, humanity, and the world from a Christian perspective with the aim of articulating beliefs about salvation, the nature of Christ, and the role of the Church. This definition speaks to theology as faith seeking understanding of God. According to Cone (2022: 1), Christian theology is a talk about God's liberating activity in the world on behalf of the freedom of the oppressed. This liberating activity is based on human understanding of God's attributes. These attributes include moral virtues such as kindness, peace, love, respect and equality of life for mankind before God (Buzguța, 2024). Both these definitions are embraced in the present article in which Christian theology, from a practical perspective, is viewed as an endeavour to understand God and His relationship with the entirety of humanity, the physical and spiritual, world from a Christian perspective.

Restoration theology (restorationism): Restoration theology, also known as restorationism, or the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement (SCM) refers to a branch of Christian theology that emphasises the need for the Church to return to the original beliefs and practices of the early Christian Church, positing that these have been lost or distorted over time (Lang, 2019). As a practice, restoration theology is characterised by its focus on restoring the Church's unity and mission, reflecting the Biblical call for believers to be one as articulated in John 17:20-22 and Ephesians 4:4-6 (Horrell, 2020). In the context of this article, restorationism is viewed to be a foundational framework for exploring how sound theology (Grudem, 2020) can be leveraged upon to address challenges associated with the fragmentation of the Church today. This focus would result in fostering renewed commitment to unity and collaborative mission, that is, inclusive Christianity, anchored on the standpoint of receptive ecumenism, among Bible-believing churches, and at every level of society internationally, including in Zimbabwe.

Christian unity: This refers to the oneness and harmony among believers in Christ as grounded in the shared faith and communal life, or to the interconnectedness that reflect the nature of the Christian Church as the body of Christ (Schmidt, 2021) established to promote common witness. A key aspect of Christian unity as embraced

in this study is the concept of *koinonia* (receptive ecumenism). This is a cry for unity through ecclesial simplicity (Greyling, 2016) by promoting fellowship and communal intimacy among believers, without the need to collapse denominational or confessional boundaries (Schreiner, 2019). In this article, Christian unity, is viewed as capable of addressing the conflict characteristic of the present day Church and the negative energy associated with it, and ensuring that Christians celebrate the richness of diversity within the body of Christ and present themselves as the salt of the earth.

Mission: The term mission refers to the Church's essential calling to engage in the work of spreading the Gospel and serving humanity, reflecting God's redemptive purpose for creation (Ashford et al., 2019). Central to the concept of mission as embraced in this study are two key components, namely, the *missio Dei* and the *missio Ecclesiae*. The *missio Dei* emphasises that the mission originates from God's righteous nature and redemptive purpose. It highlights the reality that the mission is a divine initiative by God, aimed at reconciling and restoring all creation to Himself (Horsley, 2020). In contrast, the *missio Ecclesiae* pertains to the specific purpose (mission) of the Church, which acts as the instrument through which God's purpose is fulfilled in the world (Horrell, 2021). This dual understanding of mission underscores the Church's responsibility to actively participate in God's salvation plan for humanity, through evangelism, social concern, community engagement, and development (Guder, 2015a). In this article, the concept of mission thus represents, not only the divine calling to share the Gospel, but also the collective responsibility of the Church to embody God's love to foster unity and collaborative efforts among Christians across denominational or confessional boundaries within the ecclesial landscape, with the aim of making this world a better place to live by all.

Churches of Christ: The Churches of Christ, also known as Christian Churches, comprise part of a broader restoration movement, which seeks to restore the original church established by Christ (Mudzanire, 2022). In principle, this Church is characterised by a commitment to New Testament (NT) Christianity, emphasising Biblical authority, congregational autonomy, and specific practices that reflect believer's understanding of early Christian worship and community life (Harris, 2021). This confessional group "... traces its origin to an international 19th-century movement known as the American Restoration Movement or the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement" (Mudzanire, 2022:28). Conventionally, this movement comprises three branches. These are Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Independent Christian Churches of Christ (Dugan, 2016). For their doctrine and practices, these Churches embrace a congregational polity, and are non-denominational in nature, claiming NT precedence on issues of love, respect, and peace. Reality points to the view that this congregational polity seems to create problems as it is not clear whether this confessional group comprises a church or churches, just as is the case with other confessional groupings that on their individual capacities comprise churches as opposed to the Church. The latter being a universal concept.

Background to the study

According to Hector (2023), the influence of the Church on human society has continued to increase, especially on the African continent where the population has been defined by Mbiti (1969: 2021), as notoriously religious. According to the Pew Research Centre (PRC) (2015), as cited by Sserunjogi and Achar (2023:978), "the Christian population in Africa is set to double by 2050, growing from 517 million in 2010 to 1.9 billion by that year." Following its long history of unending conflicts and economic exploitation, Africa has been defined by Oforka (2015), as a breeding continent. Apparently in agreement with this view, Mahama (2026) defines Africa as a continent trapped in vicious cycles of conflict and poverty, with no end in sight. However, according to Moyo (2019), given its potential to shape human thought and practice, and the apparent readiness of the notoriously religious (Mbiti, 2021) African people to embrace Christian teaching, it is believed, the Church holds the potential to provide a blueprint for human behaviour, recovery and reconciliation, if it functions properly, as a united and uniting front. Paton (2017) thus saw the Church, which was also defined by Todd (2014), as the largest and most significant non-state organisation in the world, to be occupying a unique position of influence. In the same vein, Griffiths (2007) saw the Church in Africa as a sleeping giant with enormous potential, which awaits exploitation, for the good of humanity."

According to Eagleton (2009) the Church has increasingly become such a strong and influential institution internationally, which society across the globe cannot afford to ignore, hoping that, in the near future, it will disappear from the face of the earth. Reality points to the view that the Church is here to stay (Caritas

Internationalis, 2025), and is set to continue shaping human thought and practice, among its adherences, in numerous way. According to De Villiers (2020). The various ways in which the Church may influence humanity if it functions properly include in the area of a peace building, justice, poverty alleviation, protection of the natural environment and a moderating lifestyle. This view is also supported by Tagwirei (2025:1) who believes that, “the diaconal missionary role of the Church involves peacebuilding. The grounding assumption in this article is therefore that, if it works properly, as a united, and a uniting front, the Church has the potential to unite people and thus make this world a better place to leave by all (Anthony, 2025). The need for the Church to unite people, with the aim of making this world a better place to live by all, is more compelling today than ever before. This is because today’s world is marked by unprecedented connectivity yet profound disconnection, where humanity stands at crossroads; divided by conflict, burdened by despair, and desperate for healing, in ways that were never experienced before (Moyo, 2020; Mkhize, & Fomunyam, 2019). In this unfolding drama, and despite its great potential to unite humanity in the body of Christ (Tagwirei, 2025), the Church has almost positioned itself as an observer, if not a perpetrator of the conflicts affecting humanity today. The prevailing situation is such that society is highly connected by, for example, digital technologies and modern transport (Betlej, 2022), but socially disconnected by conflict and individualism, in an environment in which churches, regardless of their potential to promote unity, are also characterised by negative energy focused on each other (Tagwirei, 2023; Magaya, 2024). In many cases, this situation reflects the vestiges of colonialism (Sserunjogi & Achar, 2023), amid unmet expectations of independence, particularly in Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). This scenario has created a paradox defined by Turkle (2015) as a case of people being ‘*alone, together*’. This paradox arises partly from the fact that, whilst modernity has created a supposedly ‘*global village*’, where it should have been easier than before for people to live together in peace, love and harmony, especially in the backdrop of Christianity, reality has it that , the opposite is true for many. In fact, life has become more dangerous in this ‘*global village*’ era than ever before (Porter, 2015; Ngugi wa Thiong’o. 2009; Mararike, 2001). This global village period has become an era characterised by individuality, negativity, conflict of varying proportions, disease, hunger and poverty, amidst plenty, and unprecedented security and comfort for some (Porter, 2015). This situation has created a deep sense of despair from which humanity is desperate for healing and recovery (Moyo, 2020). This condition is especially true in Africa and the rest of the developing world. Needless to say however that countries of the global north also have their fair share of problems, such as characterised by the unending conflicts that threaten to drag humanity into ‘world war’ three. Many people in this supposedly ‘*global village*’, which for now appears to have remained a myth, seem to fit the designation of being ‘*alone, together*’ (Turkle, 2015). This situation prevails in the backdrop of the Christian Church which seems to have failed to attain the level of unity prayed for by Jesus in John 17 verse 18 to 21 (Rausch, 2017; Tagwirei), and is a major theme in the Pauline literature. This unity is envisioned by Apostle Paul, as captured in the book of Ephesians 4: 2-3, as a call to all believers to exhibit "humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace", putting in mind the strong Christian view that, there is one body, and one Spirit, as Christians are called to one hope, that belongs to their call in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God, the Father of all (Ephesians 4: 4-6).

According to Chukwuka (2022), as also echoed by Smith and Brown (2018), the Church, informed by sound doctrine, grounded in appropriate theological hermeneutics that speaks to the context in which Christians find themselves in any specific situation today, can present a blueprint for collective recovery. It is also believed in this article that, on the African continent, for example, this potential for the Church to promote collective recovery may further be enhanced by the continent’s rich tradition of *ubuntu* (humanness) and resilience (Chitando & Taru, 2021, Tutu, 2012; Grange, 2013). Of course, the realisation of this potential also depends with whether this philosophy survives erosion by vestiges of colonialism such as modernity, and cultural imperialism (Sserunjogi & Achar, 2023). Put in another way, benefiting from this ubuntu philosophy is possible if society consciously chose to embrace this important element of the African worldview, which speaks to the communal approach to life as also taught by Christ and Apostle Paul, not individualism taught in the Church today (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2014). The view that the Church holds the potential to provide a blueprint for human behaviour and recovery is also shared by Hector (2023), who avers that, internationally, Christianity has grown to be more than just a set of devotional practices and a moral code. Instead, it has become a way of thinking about God, about humanity, about the world and about history. Modise (2018) further avers that, as the world continues to face unprecedented challenges, the Church’s role should grow beyond the spiritual realm to include shaping the social, political, and economic landscapes of nations, where it can provide the ‘blueprints’

for human behaviour and relationships. This view is also shared by Chireshe (2025), Katongole (2022), and Rausch (2017). Needless to say of course that, the postmodern Church can achieve this end only if it is united, unlike is the case today. Citing earlier work by Buhlmann (1977), Katongole (2022) defines the state of the church today as desirous of what he calls, the ‘third church,’ which, according to Bhabha (1994) exists in the ‘third space’. In this space, the Church, in carrying out its mission is expected to positively respond to changes in the socio-ecological, socio-political and socio-cultural landscape in which it finds itself, rather than being static and nonresponsive. However, the question is whether this ‘third church’ has grown to fulfill its role as commissioned by Christ, especially in Africa, including in Zimbabwe. And if not, why? These questions are therefore relevant not only to restorationist churches, but also to other churches across the ecclesiastic landscape. For this reason this article which speaks to the role of theological traditions in promoting Christians unity and mission is seen to be important.

In an apparent acknowledgement of the failure by the Church to providing a ‘blueprint’ for human behaviour and relationships, Smith and Brown (2018) posit that, if the Church today functions properly and works as a united and uniting front, consistent with Jesus Christ’s high priestly prayer and as also taught by Apostle Paul, it has the potential to offer not only a faith system, but also a guiding philosophy in addressing global injustices, inequality, and informing peace-building efforts in the backdrop of the complex dynamics of present day life. For our purposes, the key is on the constructs: “*functioning properly; working as a united and uniting front; complex dynamics of present day life; and, consistency with Christ’s priestly prayer*”. These constructs speak directly to the *missio Dei*; a concept that refers to the mission of God. This view is also captured in Jesus Christ’s manifesto highlighted in Luke 4, verses 18 to 19 where He said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (RSV). Clearly, this manifesto presents the thinking that Jesus Christ, the Foundation for Christianity came to set the foundation for a holistic mission; one that brings Christians together in witnessing to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation (Rausch, 2017). This is a Church in which Christians are seen as the salt of the earth (Matthew 5: 13); one which from its origin has been dedicated to proclaiming the word, celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and forming Christian communities of love, peace and common witness. However, on the face of it, reality seems to have falsified Jesus Christ’s foundational prophecy for Christianity. According to the founding philosophy of restoration theology, Christ also professed that the Church will not be defeated by the gates of Hades (Matthew 16:19). However, on the face of it, the Church seems to have been corrupted along the way and, as such, it needs to be restored (Mafohla & Sipeyiye, 2024). This view has in part influenced the author to embark on a study that explores the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging restoration theology to promote Christian unity and; therefore, mission in this complex and dynamic world. Restorationism, as an effort to complete the cycle of Protestantism, is arguably seen in the main study informing this article to have the potential to provide humanity with the needed healing and recovery from ‘*modernity*’ inflicted wounds that create problems and despair of being ‘*alone, together*’ (Turkle, 2015). This problem of being ‘*alone, together*’ is also manifested when people who claim to be Christians, cannot see eye to eye. Instead, they have negative energy focused on each other, with one group or the other claiming to be the true Church professed by Jesus Christ and not the other (Tagwirei, 2023). Restoration tradition, on its part is seen, at face value, to be one of the potentially uniting versions of Christian theology. However, in practice, this potential seems to have remained a utopian view. For this reason, a study which explores the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging restoration theology to promote Christian unity and mission-mindedness within the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe, with the aim of developing a practical-theological model that may be embraced in these Churches to achieve transformation was seen to be worthwhile. However, it has been realised through literature review that, American restorationism may not necessarily be the only tradition with the potential for promoting Christian unity and mission which has largely remained unrealised. This view justifies the grounding assumption held in this article that, studies on how churches can leverage their respective theological traditions to promote Christian unity and mission are worthwhile as further explained below.

The Justificatory Turn: From Diagnostic Review to Research Agenda

A review of literature has shown that there are numerous traditions on the Christian landscape today (Chireshe, 2025). Furthermore, there is growing influence of the Church on human thought and practice, especially on the

African continent (Chireshe, 2025; Griffiths, 2007; Mahama, 2026; Moyo, 2019). Given this situation, studies which focus on how the various Christian traditions, such as Reformation, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism and Pentecostalism, can be leveraged to promote Christian unity, at least in the form of receptive ecumenism which promote inclusive Christianity are justified. Such studies would also be aiming at establishing models for leveraging these traditions to promote Christian unity and mission; and positioning them for adoption, as is the case in the study on restoration tradition and the Churches of Christ which inform the present article. This view is also relevant today, given that, as Sserunjogi and Achar (2023), put it, the Church is on this earth to stay, that is, it is not likely to disappear from the face of the earth, any time soon. In addition, Christian history has proven Christian unity, which collapses theological and denominational boundaries to be a utopian ideal, if at all, this is necessary (Leithart, 2016). In fact, Christian traditions such as given above may also be dichotomised into African theologies and Western theologies as the Church continues to be shaped and reshaped to remain contextually relevant. This is in response to the spread and effect of the Church to humanity as it moved from Palestine to other regions of the world. Studies carried out in the area of leveraging various theological traditions to promote Christian unity and mission may follow the thread established in the larger study informing this article, which focuses on promoting inclusive Christianity (receptive ecumenism). This is a study on restoration theology in the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe, which are promisingly ecumenical and evocative with respect to Christian unity and mission, but has largely remained unrealised. Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe comprise a confessional group that embraces restoration theology as a starting point. It is believed, the need to promote Christian unity available in these churches is also available in other confessional groups that align with theologies other than restorationism. The study in the Churches of Christ can therefore be replicated with such divergent traditions as Orthodoxy, Catholic, Reformed, Pentecostal and Lutheran, among others (Van der Merwe, 2020). Such replication, it is believed, would help to establish how the different traditions of the Christian faith can work, each from its own corner toward a vision of unity, such as based on the concept of receptive ecumenism. Put differently, such studies may contribute to agenda setting for the churches to partake in constructing a discourse that promote peaceful human existence at various levels of society internationally and; therefore, make this world a more pleasant place to live on by all.

According to Baloyi (2022), Christianity today has become one of the most fragmented, conflict-ridden, and therefore divisive religions in the world, including in Zimbabwe. This fragmentation is partly because of what Sakupapa (2018) defines as a “*denomination scandal*”. Ficek (2021) sees this scandal creating a further problem of Christian personalism in which some confessional groupings harbour a sense of monopolising the Christian faith as they view themselves to be the only Church ahead of others. This situation, which is also partly believed to have its roots in missionary mapping and therefore missionary regionalism (Kwiyani, 2024), compromises the realisation of the potential of the Church to provide a ‘blueprint’ for human behaviour, relationships and healing necessary in the present era. This is the era in where society is inundated by a plethora of problems, which create among people, a feeling of being *alone, together* (Turkle, 2015); and thus a united and uniting Church can bring solace. This is also an era in which, Africa, for example, seeks to escape from the vestiges of colonialism, effects of climatic change, conflict and poverty, in the backdrop of unmet promises of independence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mahosi, 2025), for which she is defined as a bleeding continent (Headlam, 2023). In acknowledging this discrepancy, especially with respect to Africa, Mitu et al. (2023) and McBride (2020) concur that disunity in the Church today has implications for its evangelical mission and other aspects of human existence, including national and international peace-building efforts. This view is also supported by Tagwirei (2024) who describes disunity in the Church today as a predicament which “... attracts nostalgia, in Zimbabwe, and across Africa, (p. 1)”. This predicament arises, in part, from the reality that, instead of uniting people, the Church, as a result of the denominational scandal, seems systematically to be at the centre of dividing them, creating personal and institutionalised religious hostilities in ways that are inconsistent to the will of Christ. These are also ways that have never been seen in African communities and families before the advent of colonialism and introduction of western Christianity (Elugbaju & Fagunwa, 2024). This hostility, which in many cases is grounded primarily on denominational doctrine differences (Sakupapa, 2018), and not on essentials of the Christian faith, has the potential to polarise Christians at all levels of society across the globe (Vulcan, 2024). These hostilities which polarise communities have the tendency to also affect society even at a family levels, thereby igniting conversations in which Christianity in its missional, theological, political and ecclesiological dimensions, is presented like a beauty contest in which the most beautiful ones will win. This polarisation of society across confessional lines and the resultant discord, if allowed to continue, may create situations where

Christianity is presented as an army that shoots its wounded soldiers. When this situation arises, it surely makes some Christians to develop a sense of being ‘alone, together,’ and society asking questions as to whether Christians pray the same God.

In Zimbabwe, intra-denominational hostilities, such as in the Anglican Church, African Apostolic Church (founded by Paul Mwazha), Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and more recently the discord in the Churches of Christ; together with interdenominational conflicts are manifested through acts of Christian personalism (Ficek, 2021) and negative energy focused on each other. These effects of disunity also affect other areas of human life and relationships such as *ukama* (a Shona word for relatedness) and the potential of the Church to respond as a united front to ecological, social, political and economic challenges faced by humanity today. An example of the negative energy is the language of mockery and celebration by Zimbabweans, including Church leaders, focused on one Church leader, Walter Magaya when he was arrested and detained by police on 1 November, 2025; abruptly ending his planned thirty days of fasting. Before he was even tried, some Church leaders celebrated his downfall in direct contrast to the tenets of Christ’s incarnation ministry which are grounded on love and fellow feeling. It is also now common sight to see preachers, including tele-evangelists, abusing the pulpit, going places insulting other Christians in an effort to position themselves as better Christians than others, and their own churches as the true Church professed by Christ (Matthew 16: 18) ahead of others. From the perspective of Africa, this negative energy characteristic of a disunited Church also jives in the face of the all-time African value of *unhu/ubuntu* (humanness) philosophy (Mhaka, 2010; Tutu, 2012; Grange, 2013). According to Mitu et al. (2023), this reality in the Church is oblivious of the fact that the authority of Christianity, that is, the Bible, asserts in Matthew 5, verse 13 that believers should be “the salt of the earth”.

Viewed from the standpoint of African theological hermeneutics (Adamo, 2015), a philosophical partner of liberation theology, and practical theology, which Rieger and Silva (2023) define as the theology of the future, this scripture metaphorically means that believers “should be good examples of *ubuntu* and should uphold the right standards for life, such as love, honesty, conscientiousness, morality and diligence in work, speech, conduct and thought, while influencing others to do the same” (Tagwirei, 2024:1). In the language of practical theology, this scripture speaks to issues of peace, empathy, compassion, love and respect (Korlipara & Shah, 2024; Ngo, 2023), which undoubtedly are aspects of humanity that the world today, so much needs. It is for this reason that Smith and Brown (2018) view practical Christianity as providing the ‘blueprint’ for human behaviour and relationships. This blueprint is characterised by peace, love and respect in fellowship as desired by Christ so that God’s people are not seen to be ‘*alone, together*’ (Turkle, 2013). Such was the experience of Walter Magaya who was mocked and jeered by fellow Christians during his highest time of need, even before he was tried for the allegations levelled against him. As a Christian, he was alone, in the midst of ‘*fellow Christians*’. This situation is a manifestation of Christian personalism (Ficek, 2021), a by-product of what Sakupapa (2018) defines as the denominational scandal, in which Christianity, instead of uniting people, now appears like a beauty contest in which the most beautiful one will win. Instead of uniting people, Christianity is also presented as an army shooting its own wounded soldiers, instead of treating the wounds to promote healing.

The above reality faced by Christians today is oblivious of the fact that Jesus Christ, the foundation of the Church’s entire teachings may be summed up by his commandments of “love God, and love one another” (Matthew 22:37-39; John 13:34). This love is also manifested by the incarnation nature of Christ’s ministry. Specifically, Jesus Christ said in Matthew 22:37-38 that, “... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...” Furthermore, in John 13:34-35, Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (English Standard Version). These verses agree with Guder (2015b) who sees the essence of Christian mission (*missio Dei*) as rooted in the dual commandment of loving God and neighbour, which fosters unity in Christ and shapes the Church’s mission (*missio Ecclesiae*). Chan (2013: 95) thus said, “If you have experienced the life-changing love of Jesus, you will be overflowing with love for God and others”. Needless to point out that this love is not associated with disunity and toxicity, but unity in Christ. However, what exists in the Church today makes one wonder if ‘Christians’ are serving the same God, or whether what we have today is not ‘Christianities’ (Rausch, 2017; Knitter, 2019), instead of Christianity. In an African perspective, for which Zimbabwe is part, unity, characterised by love, peace and respect as expressed above also speak to the all-time African values of *ukama*

in *ubuntu* philosophy, which binds communities together (Murove, 2014). This reality also shows that the disuniting nature of Christianity is also contrary to African expectations of society. Furthermore, this reality, also shows that some aspects of the African value system are very ethical and that, in an African context, Christianity also needs to speak to African values, if it should be relevant. These values are threatened in situations where the Church becomes divisive and polarising otherwise related people (Kalu, 2013; Baloyi, 2022). Here, Christianity therefore risks irrelevance. Any study focusing on the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging specific theologies to promote Christian unity and mission such as advocated in this article is therefore viewed to be a worthwhile investment of both time and material resources as it also speaks to issues of relevance of the Christian faith in this postmodern era of emerging ecumenism (Rausch, 2017). This is an era in which society is looking forward to being given a blueprint for life by the third church, in this emerging era of receptive ecumenism or inclusive ecumenism (*koinonia*), that the present world so desperately needs. In an African context where issues of relevance are important, this third church, that is, the postmodern church should also speak to restoration of the all-time African values of *ukama* in *ubuntu* philosophy (Murove, 2014), not the toxic landscape seen today.

Baloyi (2022) agrees with the view that the Christian landscape today has become very toxic and divisive, and further affirms that Christianity, as a religious movement, should be grounded on the pillar of unity, which itself is epitomised by love, respect and peace. This grounding is confessed by Christ who, in the book of John Chapter 17: 18- 21, prays thus, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (New Revised Standard Version) (NRSV). Jesus Christ's prayer on this day shows His desire for a Christian community that is grounded on unity, contrary to the prevailing situation. Although the history of the Church seems not to have been rosy, Christ did not desire a Church associated with negative energy that characterises the Christian landscape today (Magaya, 2024). As pointed out above, this negative energy is exemplified by Churches failing to embrace each other, and pastors preaching against each other and/ or engage in "sheep stealing" thereby creating a rift among Christians who should be one in Christ (Mitu et al., 2023). Furthermore, from an African perspective, to which Zimbabwe claims a stake, this type of relationship is anathema to the all-time African values of *ukama* in *ubuntu* philosophy and, therefore, should be discouraged. Today, it is believed that Christian unity ought to be at least in the form of *koinonia*, that is, receptive ecumenism, since full unity, which collapses denominational boundaries, has proven to be elusive (Baloyi, 2022), if at all necessary. This is so, given the variegated nature of the context in which the Church finds itself, as it spreads from its original place in Palestine to all the corners of the world, where it also interacted with different socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic environments.

Scripture, as cited above, confirms that Christ did not only pray for the people seated with Him at the table that evening only, but also for future converts who, undoubtedly, include present day believers comprising the outcomes of the Great Commission in Mathew 28:18. Here, after realising that He had mentored His disciples enough, Christ commanded them thus, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (New International Version) (NIV). Clearly, Christ commissioned his disciples for the mission and had it in mind that the Church, whose foundation He had set through mentorship of His disciples, was bound to grow and spread into different cultures. Put in another way, Christ envisioned an inclusive Church grounded on God's salvation plan whose foundation He had come to put in place. His prayer in John 17: 18 -21 focuses on unity for Christian converts internationally and across denominations throughout the ages. These denominations appear to be unavoidable, as they seem to result from the expansion of the Church into cultures outside Palestine and the surrounding areas that germinated the seeds of the early Church, but should be managed to maintain unity on the body of Christ. Jesus Christ's desire for unity is eloquently captured in the words, "*all being one*" (Griswold, 2024:255). In an African context, this is supported by Sakupapa (2018) who views Christian unity in Africa as an expression of *ubuntu* (humanness). Jesus' prayer here was a prayer for unity and not for sameness, which humanity today seems to desire. This is unity in diversity, in which the cruciform is the binding factor. It is the type of unity confessed by the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement's maxim, "On essentials, unity; non-essentials liberty; and everything else, love" (Stanley, 2019:103).

The Psalmist (Psalms, 133:1) confirms the desire of the SCM maxim by saying, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” This verse shows that the Bible, the foundational book of Christianity, has always expected God’s people to be guided by unity. In the book of 2 Corinthians 13: 11, Paul, the greatest apostle of all times, also reaffirmed this Christian foundation of unity (Baloyi, 2022), in saying, “Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (ESV: Helpful notes: 197). Theologically, this Scripture suggests that the God of Christians favoured unity (Van der Merwe, 2020 b), and that the universal Church should be missional (Schendel, 2023). In fact, the *missio Ecclesiae* (mission of the Church) in all its dealings with humanity should be to achieve the *missio Dei* (*mission of God*) by saving souls for the one God through Christ (Friend, 2004), and to unite them in Christ. Bonhoeffer (1945:423) thus said, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others ... not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ; to exist for others”. This view is also supported by Whitehead (2023) who affirms that the Church should embody Christ's teachings by uniting believers and serve the needs of the community rather than exercising power and/ or dividing people who according to the will of Christ should live together in harmony.

However, the situation in the Church today, both in Zimbabwe and beyond, as also observed by Adebayo and Obasola (2024), Baloyi (2022), Tagwirei (2024) and Magaya (2024), seems not to be speaking to the standards expected by Christ, with respect to the believers’ unity. Mitu et al. (2023:178) thus acknowledge that, “One of the major challenges in achieving the Church's mission is that, throughout the world, Churches are facing ecumenical challenges”. Oliver (2021) and Wilhite (2022) also view disunity in the Church as a dire spiritual problem which is particularly pressing today. In fact, Wilhite (2022) sees the number one sin recorded in the New Testament to be contentious relationships and strife between brethren. Theologically, this view is seen to be the major theme of two New Testament (NT) books, namely, 1 Corinthians and Philipians (Meyer et al., 2024). In effect, love, peace and respect, the foundational elements of Christian unity (McCoy, 2020), appear as key themes in nearly all the books of the NT (Kirk, 2020). McKnight (2018) thus moves the view that disunity among believers is the greatest sin recorded in the NT. In fact, this is the sin that the Church today, in its various confessional groupings, should seek to confront and not promote. In this view, any effort by Christian scholars to explore the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging specific theologies to promote Christian unity, such as encouraged in the present article, is thus seen to be a worthwhile investment of both time and material resources. This is true, especially in Africa, a continent often defined as a bleeding continent as a result of the vestiges of colonialism, namely conflict, corruption, poverty and plunder (Headlam, 2023).

Christian history juxtaposed with the mind of Christ and reality has shown that the universal Church, because of denominationalism (Sakupapa, 2018), has often struggled to achieve the level of love and lasting peace (Scholer, 2021) envisioned by Christ. Put in another way, the situation prevailing today, as literature seems to suggest, does not certainly resemble the Church, which Jesus Christ envisioned when He professed to Peter thus “...on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). According to Gousmett (2020), the phrase “the gates of hades” is read to mean the gates of hell. Plainly, this phrase refers to the powers of death or the powers of evil. This Bible verse therefore captures one of Jesus Christ’s key promises to humanity that death and evil will not permanently overpower the Church and thus illuminates the paradox we see in the Church today, where the Church appears as a divided institution, with each group claiming to be the true Church professed by Jesus Christ and not the other. It is also important to note that Jesus Christ talks about His Church and not His Churches. His will is to see believers united in Him. From a Christian theology viewpoint, disunity seen in the Church today should therefore be a transitory and not a permanent feature of the Christian faith. If it continues, disunity may result in the death of the Church and the collapse of God’s mission of salvation (Sakupapa, 2018; Smith, 2023). For this reason, instead of focusing on the personal correctness doctrine (Rausch, 2017), Christians from every confessional grouping should seek to promote Christian unity. The personal correctness doctrine perspective is, in practice, dividing Christians instead of uniting them in line with Jesus Christ’s high priestly prayer (John 17: 18 – 22). Disunity is oblivious the perspective captured in the restorationist dictum which calls for unity on essentials; liberty on non-essentials and love on everything else. This approach to Christianity appeals to inclusive ecclesiastic practice and the incarnational nature of Christ’s ministry, which also speaks to salvation by grace and not by a legalistic faith system, such propagated by some Christian denominations that focus on doctrinal correctness and sameness.

Beyond the Chasm: Toward an Integrated Tradition for Common Witness

Given the extent to which the Word has permeated society, and the extent to which people seem prepared to embrace it, especially in Africa, including in Zimbabwe, it is believed Christianity could effectively contribute to far-reaching social and spiritual cohesion, if only the Church embodies unity (Mokgoatsana & Mudyiwa, 2022; Sakupapa, 2018). The opposite has already proven to be true that, if churches are not properly guided to preach love, peace and common witness, that is, the cornerstone of sound theology (Doyah, 2024), harmony among God's people is sacrificed. The social and spiritual cohesion that could be realised when the Church embraces sound theology in the pursuit of common witness is that this unity would promote social harmony and enhance successful conflict resolution efforts across the social divide. Put differently, this situation could foster peace, love and respect in the broader communities and nations. In the perspective of African theological hermeneutics (Adamo, 2015), it is also believed that this state of affairs could promote *ukama* (relatedness) (Murove, 2014; Mhaka, 2010; Sakupapa, 2018). This is important because it is also in line with Jesus Christ's prophecy that envisioned one Church, united in Him (John 17:20-21). This view is shared by Tucker (2021) who emphasises the theological and practical aspects of Christian unity as manifested through love, peace and respect for one another and of God. According to Headlam (2023:10), a search for Christian unity is therefore more compelling today than before, especially in Africa, which has been defined as a bleeding continent. As a result, such unity should consciously be pursued through ecumenical focus such as encouraged in the present article. The reason for this focus is that society should be made to understand that the points on which Churches conflict are not as important as they were once thought to be. In addition, Christians should come to understand that, if Christianity must influence the world, as it should do, it should manage to present a more united front, at least in the form of *koinonia*, than is the situation today. People may not be keen to be part of a system which is confused, and therefore the Church fails to fulfill its mandate to participate in the *missio Dei*.

Paradoxically, the situation on the ground seems to suggest a different picture as also observed by Baloyi (2022) and captured in the opening paragraph to this section. Christianity is shown as one of the most fragmented, conflict-ridden and divisive religions in the world, including in Zimbabwe. This fragmentation, which Tagwirei (2024) describes as a predicament, and McKnight (2018) views as a crisis given its influence on social and spiritual cohesion, as characterised by numerous denominational and/ or confessional groupings, should be managed and prevented from being toxic. Existence of confessional grouping, which are epitomised by negative energy focused on each other (Magaya, 2024), thereby depicting Christianity as an army which shoots its wounded soldiers (McCammon, 2024), should be avoided. Apparently, in agreement with the fragmentation which characterise the Church today and the contradiction between this division with the will of Christ, including the negative energy associated with it, McKnight (2018), Horsley (2019) and Kirk (2020), concur that many of the confessional groupings that characterise the Church today differ more than they agree on what should be the key tenets of Christianity, that is, the essential elements of the Christian faith. As a result, their teachings and activities are very divisive, even as this disunity is against the will and mission of God (Wax, 2022). This toxic relationships in the Christian landscape today, which is contrary to Jesus' will, as expressed in His high priestly prayer, is what is also expressed in this article as anathema to the all-time African value of *ukama* in *ubuntu* philosophy and should be a cause of concern for all Christians, and Africa. If the prevailing situation is allowed to continue, it can justifiably be argued that, instead of uniting people as willed by Christ, the Church suits the label of a divisive institution; an army which shoots its wounded soldiers. This description also concurs with what Sakupapa (2018) terms a '*denominational scandal*'.

The Church today should embrace a theology that focuses on seeking unity on essential; liberty, on non-essential; and love, on everything else. This is the theology that is summarised in the dictum: "On essentials unity, non-essentials liberty and everything else, love" (Baker, 2011:15). It is believed, if all Churches would embrace this type of thinking, the Christian community would contribute in making this world a better place to live by all, as envisioned by the United Nations (UN) and actualised through the promulgation of the UN Sustainable goals, specifically goal number 16. This is a goal which speaks to unity among God's people with this same aim of seeking to make this world a better place to live by all. In the Zimbabwean context, this goal is operationalised by the enactment of a national constitution which speaks to an inclusive approach to life. This is an approach to life which is based on equity and equality of mankind before the creator; one that is based on collaboration as opposed to competition, including competition for God's attention ahead of others. This desired state is unlike

the situation prevailing today, where unending Reformation and Counter Reformation continue promoting formations of various confessional groupings characterised by negative energy focused towards each other. The Orthodoxy, for example, continue to advocate for churches to embrace what has crystallised as the ‘correct doctrine’ hypothesis.

The Zimbabwean constitution also speaks to issues of unity in diversity as opposed to unity in sameness. In many cases, the latter has caused bloody conflicts such as the genocide in Rwanda and *Gukurahundi* (wipe away the chaff), in Zimbabwe, and the Church may not claim innocence. The *Gukurahundi* atrocities were admittedly defined by Robert Mugabe, the then President, of the Republic of Zimbabwe, as a moment of madness which should not be allowed in a civilised society (Newsday Zimbabwe, 26 June, 2025). We may add: where there is a living Church. However, as reality seems to show that progressive policy frameworks such as mentioned above exist in the backdrop of a Christian landscape which is toxic, divisive and therefore unsustainable in the post postmodern era. This is regardless of the fact that Jesus Christ, the foundation for the Christian faith, challenges believers to be the salt of the earth; providing a blueprint for human behaviour. This discrepancy is also oblivious of the fact that, with sound doctrine grounded in the will of Christ, Christianity as a religious movement has the potential to grow to be more than just a set of devotional practices and a moral code. In addition, it also has the potential to become a way of thinking about God, about humanity, about the world and about history, which if appropriately harnessed, presents the blueprint for unity and collective recovery of society, especially in Africa, the bleeding continent.

In the light of this background, the present article therefore challenges Christians and students of religious studies and of theology to refocus research on how the various confessional groups in the Christian landscape can leverage their various theological traditions for Christian unity and mission. For example, before the main study, informing the present article, it was not clearly understood if Christians within the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe agreed on what comprises essentials and non-essentials of the Christian faith, which seems to be at the centre of conflict within and among churches. No research had been carried out in this area. In addition, it was also not clearly understood whether these churches preach and practises peace, love, and fellowship that their guiding theology claim to stand for. Furthermore, in the event that they practised the contrary, the why questions would remain unanswered. To the best of the researchers’ knowledge, this area had not been fully explored. However, on the face of it, issues of essentials and non-essentials of the Christian faith seemed to be creating divisions in the Churches of Christ, just as is the case in other Churches that have become victims of the denominational scandal (Sakupapa, 2018). This reality motivated the study which sought to explore the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging restoration theology to promote Christian unity and mission in the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe. This study may be replicated with other traditions that are informed by different theological orientations such as Reformation theology, Catholicism, Lutherans, Presbyterianism, Pentecostalism and Orthodoxy theology. Such studies would come up with ways in which Christians may speak and practice unity for mission in response to Jesus Christ prophecy that, He will build His Church, not His churches. It is believed, such studies would set the agenda for renewed discourse on Christian unity and mission. This would be contrary to the toxic relations that characterise the Christian landscape today, where churches have negative energy focused on each other, fuelled by the correct doctrine hypothesis, which itself seem to have a cultural bias.

Reality on the ground, as revealed by existing literature regarding disagreements among Church organisations, and the negative energy focused on each other, should motivate students of religious studies and of theology to ask questions on whether Christians are worshipping the same God or not (Mitu et al., 2023), and whether society should talk of Christianity or *Christianities* (Knitter, 2019; Rausch, 2017). Questions may further be asked as to which one of these “Christianities”, if ever society should adopt such a term, comprises the Church that Christ referred to as His Church, which the power of evil will not destroy (Robbins, 2003). This reality also notably raises questions on how and who determines Christian essentials (Packer, 2021), if Christians themselves do not agree. Furthermore, questions may be asked as to whether the state of the Church today also speaks to the needs of the African person as perceived by Africans. These questions arise from the fact that there appears to be tension between Christ’s promise of a singular Church and the reality of multiple confessional groupings, with negative energy directed toward each other, in direct conflict with Jesus’ prophecy. In addition, tension also seems to exist between mainline Christianity and the all-time African values and philosophy of *ukama* in *ubuntu* philosophy. Such tension also risks the Church pursuing ends other than the *missio Dei*, culminating in its defeat

by the gates of hades, whilst at the same time destroying the African cultural fabric. This situation has created a theological paradox as Christianity, in its current state, is an institution that is not compatible with the will of Jesus Christ. In an African context, the paradox is also epitomised by being toxic, as exemplified by the negative energy focused on fellow Christians. Christianity fails to speak to African ethics and culture embodied in *ubuntu* (Gitegi, 2025), which defines the African person. Answers to these questions should influence students of theology and researchers to question whether Christ was wrong when He professed to Peter that He will build His Church, and not Churches (Wright, & Bird, 2019); a thesis which, viewed from the perspective of systematic Christian theology, does not stand, and therefore a paradox.

The paradox is further exacerbated by the reality that, whilst the Church professed by Jesus Christ should be one, and should not be overpowered by evil (Hahn, 2022; Horsley, 2020), the situation on the ground suggests otherwise. In contrast to what Christ envisioned, that is, His Church will not be overpowered by evil or death (John 1: 20); universally, the Church today, in addition to being fragmented with each grouping claiming to be the true Church and not the other, is seen to be losing traction. This loss of traction by the Church, which also threatens its mission, is viewed to have its roots in the countries of the Global North (Smith, 2018; Horrell, 2020) and in its failure to move forward as a united and uniting front. This discrepancy may also affect the Church in Africa, including in Zimbabwe. According to McGarry (2018), with respect to the countries of the Global North, this weaning influence of the Church arose at the advent of the millennial generation and has been embraced by the Alpha generation. However, according to Serhal (2025), whilst the Church is losing traction internationally, the situation in Africa, including Zimbabwe, is still much better and more promising than in the countries of the Global North. Considering this view, Serhal (2025) thus calls for the Church in Africa to be more missional and evangelical than before, and be ready to evangelise the world. Mitu (2023), as is also the case in the present article, also weighs in and says that the Church in Africa today needs to work towards unity for effective evangelisation of the gospel of Christ internationally. This call for unity as the gateway for evangelism is supported by McCoy (2021) who argues that, when Christians work together in unity, they can address social issues effectively and promote a message of reconciliation and hope in ways that show the humanness of the human creatures in this divided and fragile world. For this reason, the present article, which challenges students of theology and researchers to focus on how Churches may leverage their respective theologies to promote unity, is very well placed and worthwhile. These studies seeking to establish models on how the Church may embrace Christian unity and mission characterised by peace, love and respect for the sanctity of the life of fellow humans, including those who may not share the same faith with them, are important, not only for the Church, but also society in general, both in Africa and beyond.

Whilst the state of the Church in Africa is more promising than is the case in the countries of the Global North, as observed by Serhal (2025), the fragmented nature of Christianity (Baloyi, 2022) points to the view that the Church in Africa and in Zimbabwe, may not be ready to evangelise the world. This view is also supported by Bediako (2016), who avers that a lack of unity among believers creates a major problem that drives away prospective converts from Christianity and thus militates against the evangelical mission of the Church. This discrepancy arises from the fact that many people who are outside the Church may not be attracted to join Christianity, in the backdrop of Christians who are not living according to the teachings of the Bible. This discrepancy also works against the *missio Dei* and Christ's prophecy for a Church that will not be defeated by the gates of hades and; consequently, resulting in a paradox referred to in this article. Overriding this paradox requires students and researchers in the field of religious studies and of theology to reimagine research projects towards a focus on how churches may leverage on their respective theologies to promote Christian unity and mission such as embraced in the main study on restoration theology and Christian unity in the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe. This is the research informing the present article.

The original study to which this article refers showed that, it is possible for society to leverage restoration theology to promote Christian unity and mission. It also emerged from this same study, and in the perspective of promoting Christian unity without collapsing denominational boundaries that, traditions other than restorationism may be studied with a view to explore how such traditions may be leveraged on, to promote Christian unity and mission. By no means, should studies such as with restoration theology should be read to imply that other theologies, such as Reformation, Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecost and even African initiated Churches' tradition do not have the potential to speak to ecumenical ecclesiastic practices. It is this potential that studies

such as proposed in this article are designed to explore and actualise. However, questions abound concern the how part of leveraging these traditions to promote Christian unity and mission, each church beginning from its own corner, until convergence is realised. At the beginning of the major study to which the present study is part, it was not clearly understood as to how the Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe can leverage restoration theology to promote Christian unity and mission. In the same way, is also not clearly understood how various confessional groups in the Christian landscape can leverage their respective traditions to promote the so much desired unity, at least in the perspective of *koinonia*. This is particularly so given that full unity, which collapses denominational boundaries, has through history proven to be untenable, if at all necessary (Leithart, 2016). What is clearly understood, as literature seems to suggest and as discussed in the present article, is that the Christian landscape comprise numerous confessional groups which are characterised by negative energy focused towards each other. Many of these churches claim to be the true Church professed by Christ when he said to Peter, “On this rock, I will build my Church” (Matt 16: 18), and not the other. What is also understood is that the Church, given sound theology, is capable of providing a blue print for human behaviour which speaks to Christian unity and mission. Such a blueprint has ramifications on global peace and reconciliation initiatives. In Africa, this blueprint provides collective recovery to a bleeding continent where, even Christians, experience the life of being alone together. This prevailing situation is contrary to the founding principles of Christianity, as is also the case to the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. Instead of calling other Christians to unite on essentials, have freedom on non-essential and to be guided by love in all other things, Churches are characterised by conflicts. Examples of such conflict include the intra-denominational hostilities, in the Anglican Church, African Apostolic Church (AAC) (founded by Paul Mwazha), Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and more recently Churches of Christ; together with interdenominational conflicts, manifested through acts of Christian personalism (Ficek, 2021; Masengwe and Dube (2023). The Churches of Christ, which in principle claims to be non-denominational, seem to be facing the same predicament of splitting and spewing negative energy such as experienced by many other churches internationally, apparently presenting itself as a non-denominational denomination. This phenomenon of splitting churches seems to be a common occurrence internationally, creating a toxic environment in which people may ask as to whether Christians are praying the same God, and/or whether what we have today is Christianity or Christianities.

Given the kind of scenario described above, studies suggested in the present article are therefore seen to be worthwhile. These are studies that explore the possibilities and constraints for churches to leverage their respective theological orientation to promote Christian unity in line with the *missio ecclesiae* as the gateway to the *missio Dei*. Whilst Christian unity seems to be elusive throughout Christian history, studies which focus on how Churches can leverage their respective traditions to promote Christian unity and mission are more urgent today than was the case in previous years, especially in Africa. This urgency arises in part from the realisation that, what divides Christians may not necessarily be the essentials of the Christian faith system. Secondly it is increasingly being realised that disunity that characterise the Christian landscape is against the will of God. In the African context, disunity and the negative energy focused by Christians on each other is against the African the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Furthermore, it has been found that Christian unity founded on collapsing denominational boundaries is not even necessary (Baloyi, 2022). What is necessary is Christian unity in the perspective of unity in diversity and not unity in the perspective of sameness.

At a global perspective, the discourse on Christian unity has also attained the agency status in response to the emerging ecumenical paradigm of Christian thought and practice. This paradigm also speaks to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, this speaks to goal number 16 on social justice, peace and inclusivity. Specific to the Zimbabwean context, studies that focus on Christian unity and mission, in the perspective envisioned in this article, also speak to the Heritage-based Education 5.0 framework, and the all-time African values of *ukama* in *ubuntu* philosophy (Mhaka, 2010; Murove, 2014). The present article thus seeks to justify the case for studies that explore the possibilities to and opportunities for leveraging specific theologies to promote Christian unity and missions, with the aim of rediscovering Christian unity in the way that was envisioned by Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul. This is the way that was also envisioned in the main study that informs the present article, and is recommended for replication with traditions other than restorationism. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, the issues recommended in this article have not been fully explored, even as they may have implications to global peace and reconciliation initiatives. Special mention of Africa and the African situation in the present article should not be seen as academic arrogance, but an attempt to domesticate and

acculturate such key issues in this article within a continent that has been defined by analysts as a bleeding continent which requires healing. This is the same continent in which the Church is being challenged to become more missional and evangelical, in preparation to evangelise the world. This reality has made studies as such as recommended in this article to become an area which needs urgent attention. The theoretical, practical and contextual relevance of the issues at stake in area of study recommended for attention in this article speak to what the former president of America, Barack Obama meant in his public addresses: “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” (Obama, 5 February, 2008). Researchers in the area of religious studies and of theology are encouraged to motivate and provide models for the churches to reimagine their various theologies to speak to issues of Christian unity and the *missio Dei* and thus fit into God’s salvation plan of redeeming humanity from the state of being slaves to sin to heirs of God’s kingdom.

CONCLUSION

This article argues the case for a new research agenda aimed at systematically investigating the possibilities for and constraints to leveraging specific theological traditions to promote Christian unity and mission. It challenges both, emerging and established theologians to join in this promising line of inquiry. Drawing upon an earlier study on the possibilities for and constraints of leveraging restoration theology to promote Christian unity and mission, this article justifies scholarly replication of this seminal work to model similar researches, focusing on other theological traditions, ranging from Catholicism, through Orthodoxy, and Protestantism to Pentecostalism. The aim of such replication is to create a comprehensive understanding on how Christians across the social divide could leverage their respective traditions to promote a new ecumenical discourse. This is a discourse that is characterised by peace, love and respect of all humanity for common witness, as opposed to the toxic environment characteristic of the ecclesiastical landscape today. This replication is good for both the Church as the body of Christ and society in general. If attained, this renewed approach to Christianity, characterised by unity in the body of Christ is in line with Christ’s high priestly prayer for (John 17: 18-21) as also taught by Apostle Paul (Ephesians 4: 4 – 6). In an African worldview, this focus on unity also speaks to the all-time African value of *ukama* in *ubuntu* philosophy. Studies that explore the possibilities and opportunities for leveraging specific Christian traditions to promote Christian unity and therefore mission-mindedness hold profound significance for stakeholders across the social divide. By examining Christian unity and mission through multiple lenses of theological orientation, such as envisioned in this article, researchers would address critical gaps in understanding how ecclesiastical practices could foster unity among Bible-believing Churches in Zimbabwe, and beyond. This understanding has implications on peace-building efforts in various contexts, as Christian unity in this context may also speak to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, this article has implications on goal number 16, which seeks to promote social justice, peaceful and inclusive societies. Specific to the Zimbabwean context, this article also speaks to the Heritage-based Education 5.0 framework and to the all-time African values of *ukama* (relatedness) in *ubuntu* philosophy (Mhaka, 2010, Murove, 2014, Rutsviga, 2024) as it also has implications on peace-building efforts in various contexts at family, community, national and international levels. Studies as recommended in this article are therefore, worthwhile.

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