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Expressions of whiteness? A Black ecclesiological reflection on Fresh Expressions of Church

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The article presents a critical literary analysis of the Fresh Expressions of Church movement, which started in the United Kingdom (UK) and was subsequently adopted by some mainline churches in South Africa. The authors review the genesis of the movement and its models, development and approaches in order to understand its relevance for the post-apartheid South African context. The authors then critically compare, through a literary analysis, the theological praxis of the Fresh Expressions movement and bring it into critical dialogue with some Black Liberation Theologians and Steve Biko of the Black Consciousness Movement who, when apartheid was at its height in South Africa, argued for a 'Black expression' of church. In the article, the authors reach a dramatic point by asking whether a 'fresh expression' is indeed needed, in the light of an existing 'Black expression' of faith and lived religion in South Africa that has historically been ignored and stifled. The article concludes with a call to embrace Black Ecclesiology in the post-apartheid context.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article concludes with a call to embrace Black Ecclesiology in the post-apartheid context.

Keywords: fresh expressions movement; Black Ecclesiology; United Kingdom; South Africa; Black Theology of Liberation.

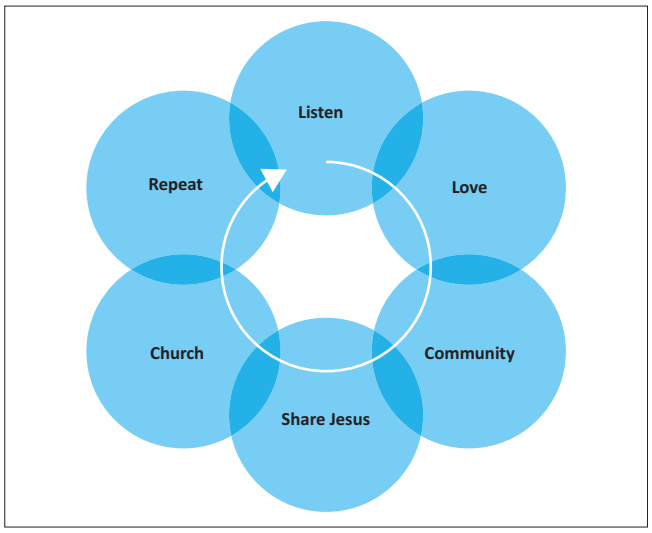
Introduction

At the International Association of Mission Studies one of the authors recounted the following (Aldous 2018):

> About thirteen years ago, in 2011, whilst still a new priest in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa in the diocese of Natal I was offered an opportunity by the then Bishop to speak off the cuff on 'Fresh Expressions' during a clergy gathering. Although I had never planted a 'Fresh Expression of Church' (FXoC), I was sympathetic to the movement through what I had read, observed and through interaction with some of the leading protagonists in the United Kingdom (UK). I tried to give a simple account of the shifts in culture and the church's (non) response whilst explaining the missional impetus of Fresh Expressions of Church and its potential in a country reeling from its apartheid, colonial experiences. I then asked the clergy if they wish to respond to my presentation. It is then, when a senior Black priest, stood up and stated, 'This sounds like neo-colonialism to me. It's just the import of British ideas'. (p. 3)

This account prompted the authors of the present article to reflect on this idea and assess whether it might hold any truth, because although the author of the original account had expressed serious concerns and raised questions about the movement, he had not engaged in further academic reflection on the subject. This article, therefore, is an attempt to do just that.

The Fresh Expressions of Church (FXoC) movement was established in 2004, following the publication by Church House of the report *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (Cray, G., Aston, M., Clark, J., Dennen, L., Feeney, D., Freeman, R., Gaze, S. et al. 2004). Within the first 5 years or so following its publication the report had 'sold over 30,000 copies, reached an international audience and has been credited with reshaping the Church of England's ecclesiology' (Moynagh 2012:52). While FXoC can be credited with bringing about a relaxing and freeing of certain ecclesiastical structures in a number of denominations and has seen a new wave of creativity and improvisation in following the missionary Spirit, concerns about it can nevertheless be raised. Its international growth has, by and large, been restricted to North America, Australia, parts of Europe and South Africa. Its impact on the Church of England and the enthusiasm with which it was received by key figures such as Archbishop Rowan Williams were initially significant. However, in the United Kingdom (UK) context, the appeal of FXoC began to dwindle from 2018 onwards with many national and



Source: Aldous, B.J. & Moynagh, M., 2021, 'A Mission methodology: Learning from "Fresh Expressions of Church," and the "Loving-First Cycle" through a case study from Cape Town', Mission Studies 38(2), 189–212. https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341790

FIGURE 1: Loving-first cycle.

diocesan posts that had previously supported its work being replaced with new models considered to ensure speedy growth, and supported by strategic development funding[1] initiated by the Church Commissioners (cf. Aldous et al. 2022:46–60).

The critiques of FXoC have been robust (Davidson & Milbank 2010; Duraisingh 2010; Milbank 2008; Percy 2009) but almost none have attempted to consider the movement from the perspective of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL). Although theologically diverse, initially the majority of the proponents of FXoC were middle class and white, and apart from the work of Aldous (2018, 2019, 2021), little academic reflection on FXoC has focussed on a theological vision for and liberation in the post-apartheid South African context. It appears, on the surface at least, that the methodology and priorities of FXoC have failed to transform the movement when confronted with contexts shaped by structural poverty, inequality, and social and racial injustice. To remedy this, the authors of the present article ask: Do we really need FXoC in contexts where various forms of oppression in a neo-colonial context occur?

Defining Fresh Expressions

Fresh Expressions of Church are Christian communities formed for those who are not yet members of any church, with these communities being birthed through the process of what is known as the 'loving-first cycle' (Aldous & Moynagh 2021:189–212) (see Figure 1). The loving-first cycle was developed retrospectively as a way of reflecting on the process of how new Christian communities come into being and as a way of helping those engaged in the process to work out where they are during that journey. Figure 1 shows the cyclical process of listening, loving, forming community, sharing the Jesus story, seeing church formed and repeating the journey again. This cycle is used in contradistinction to what Moynagh (2017:39–45) has termed a 'worship-first' model for starting new churches. The worship-first model is an attractional one that progresses relatively quickly to the launch of a new congregation. A church planting opportunity is identified, a leader is appointed, the leader gathers a team of perhaps 30 or more from among the churchgoers or lapsed churchgoers and the team embarks on a preparation phase. This includes events and courses (such as the Alpha course) designed to draw others in (Aldous & Moynagh 2021).

The FXoC approach is therefore:

- Missional (it serves those outside the church);
- Contextual (it listens to people and enters their culture);
- Formational (it makes discipleship a priority); and
- Ecclesial (it forms church).

Because FXoC takes the context of place seriously, it can in theory birth a very wide range of ecclesiologies. In the UK setting, this most commonly manifests as Messy Church,[2] Café Church and Youth Church (such as Sorted),[3] but also as churches formed around rough sleepers and addicts,[4] car enthusiasts[5] or through Networks.[6] However, as we shall see, the focus on church as the outcome of *missio Dei* has been the subject of severe criticism (Duraisingh 2010; Hull 2006).

A historic positioning

The original Church House report of 2004 spawned a number of mission-shaped publications, including *Mission Shaped Children* (Withers 2010), *Mission Shaped Youth* (Sudworth 2007), *Mission Shaped Spirituality* (Hope 2006) and *Mission Shaped and Rural* (Gaze 2006), all setting a theology of mission at the centre of the church life (Cray 2006:61–74). These were initially supplemented by introductory works aimed at practitioners by Shier-Jones (2009) and Goodhew, Roberts and Volland (2012) as well as volumes of essays hoping to attract those outside the evangelical stable entitled *Ancient Faith Future Mission*, aimed at the Anglo-Catholic tradition (eds. Croft & Mobsby 2009) and contemplative neo-monasticism. Theologically and ecclesiologically, FXoC came under close scrutiny, drawing robust critiques from Davidson and Milbank (2010), Hull (2006), Percy (2008), Milbank (2008), King (2011) and Duraisingh (2010) based on the view that FXoC was theologically 'lite' and demonstrated a tendency to pander to consumerism and hyper individualism.

Historically, FXoC grew from a number of foundations. The first is evangelical Anglican missiology, which might be considered to have started with Henry Venn, Roland Allen, Max Warren, John V. Taylor, John Corrie and Timothy Yates, and proceeded to contemporaries such as Graham Cray,

1.The Strategic Development Fund is overseen by the Church of England Commissioners and financially supports major change projects which lead to a significant difference in dioceses' mission and financial strength. It is available only to dioceses, and the projects should fit with their strategic plans.

2.See https://www.messychurch.org.uk

3.See https://freshexpressions.org.uk/sorted-bradford/

4.57 West in Southend on Sea https://57west.org.uk

5.See Revs Limiter https://freshexpressions.org.uk/revs-limiter/

6.See Exeter Network Church https://www.enc.uk.net

Stephen Croft, Michael Moynagh and Jonny Baker. A second foundation is the patriarchs of the missional movement, most notably David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin (Powell 2013:53–59), but also including members of the missional movement such as Darrell Guder, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. A third historic foundation could be considered to be the 1970s Charismatic movement, characterised by the influence of John Wimber on the evangelicals of the Church of England such as David Watson, Sandy Miller, Nicky Gumble, and the subsequent New Wine movement (Percy 2008).

Michael Moynagh's understanding of the historical foundations of FXoC can be considered to rest on evangelical pragmatism. Aldous (2018) suggests three reasons for adopting evangelical missional pragmatism. Firstly, an almost reflexive commitment to evangelism has over the past 40 years expanded into mission more broadly understood. This has bred an attitude of – almost – 'evangelism at any cost'. Secondly, none of an endless number of movements from various degrees of charismatic renewal through to church growth, cell church and so on have worked evangelistically. This has fuelled a search for something that does work. Thirdly, a low church approach to worship coupled with a pragmatic ecclesiology has emerged, in contrast to an Anglo-Catholic ecclesiology, which is so tied to a specific liturgical form that it is becoming much harder to imagine being church in a different way. The most in-depth work on these historical sources has been carried out by Powell (2013:49), who traces a clear genealogy both ecclesiologically and missiologically in his doctoral work on the *Mission Shaped Church* report. Essentially, Powell (2013:49) is of the view that, '*MSC* largely deduces its own pool of literature from which it develops its particular ecclesiological and missiological direction'. Initially the FXoC movement saw itself as falling within the tradition of previous reports on church planting and growth such as *Breaking New Ground* (General Board of Finance 1994) however, Hull (2006:34) argues that the movement is better seen as a 40-year follow-up to the World Council of Churches (WCC) 1968 report entitled *The Missionary Structure of the Congregation* because it has a more satisfactory theological vision.

Fresh Expressions training, theology and research

Earlier theological critiques of FXoC took the form of a growing corpus of PhD studies. Michael Moynagh continued to be the doyen of FXoC theology, offering a lucid and creative defence of these new ways of being church. By the end of the 2010s into the third decade of the 21st century, FXoC was embedded in the majority of Anglican dioceses, Methodist districts and some United Reformed Church Synods. Research, rather than mere anecdote, also provided insight into how impactful the movement had been. The Church Army Research Unit[7] published *The Day of Small Things: An Analysis of Fresh Expressions of Church in 21 Dioceses of the Church of England*.[8] The report surveyed over 1100 FXoC, consisting of over 50 000 people. Most were relatively small, consisting of between 35 and 55 people, and were twice as likely to attract under 16's than the local parish church (Lings 2016:10–11). Other research on Messy Church (*Playfully Serious: How Messy Churches Create New Space for Faith*)[9] celebrated the ways in which this form connected with de-churched or unchurched families.

Fresh Expressions and *missio Dei*

From a missiological perspective, understanding the FXoC interpretation of *missio Dei* is not straightforward. On one level, FXoC sees itself very much in the wake of Willingen in 1952 and the subsequent focus on *mission Dei* as a corrective to *missio ecclesia*. Moynagh (2012:120–134) devotes a considerable portion of his magnum opus, *Church for Every Context*, to emphasising that mission is both a divine attribute of God and an eternal step for God (Moynagh 2012):

> Mission is thus not a consequence of God's being. In God's will it is fundamental to God's being. The Trinity is the exact opposite of a community that exists for itself. (p. 124)

The report of the Anglican-Methodist working party of FXoC proposes that FXoC stems from a limited view of *missio Dei* – there appears to be a one-way dynamic between the church and the world. 'This encourages a view of the church in its missionary endeavors as always being the carrier of Christ, bringing him into the world and rarely, if ever being a recipient from God anywhere other than the gathered church' (*Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party* 2012:122). In essence, this 'narrowly church-centred perception of the *missio Dei* means that Christians fail to catch glimpses of God at work in the world' (RAMWP 2012:123). Therefore, while there remains an expansive vision of *missio Dei* in theory, this is easily domesticated and reduced. Male and Weston (2019:282) in their brief reflection on *missio Dei* return to the idea that 'the church is the fruit of God's mission'. In their anxiety about the future, church denominations are looking for models of growth that will be efficient and culturally relevant. Some find an expansive vision of *missio Dei* which does not ultimately result in the establishment of a new Christian community difficult to accept. However, even with this more expansive vision of *missio Dei* the ecclesio-centric nature of the movement is overwhelming. The pioneer spectrum, and indeed much of FXoC, fails to explicitly cite the liberative dimensions of *missio Dei*, and it appears not to be explicitly concerned with justice issues. Moreover, use of the term 'pioneer' has been adopted without sufficient reflection; this language in the global South can be unhelpful (Aldous et al. 2022).

Fresh Expressions in South Africa

Two or three figures in the UK have been primarily responsible for the introduction of FXoC into the South African context. Crowther (2014) reports,

7.https://churcharmy.org/our-work/research/

8.http://churcharmy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/encounteringthedayofsmallthings-web.pdf?x71717

9.Diocese of Bristol, 2019. *Playfully Serious: How Messy Churches Create New Space for Faith*. Sheffield: Church Army's Research Unit.

> Bishop Graham Cray visited South Africa several times whilst FXoC team leader and was used as a catalyst to envision academics, senior church leaders and those with a heart for mission. (2014:9)

Other denominations were also considering more innovative approaches to mission. Perhaps most notably the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), who at their General Synod in October 2013 amended Article 9 of their Church order to add church planting as one of the responsibilities of every minister in the DRC. This decision was based on a paper entitled *Framework Document on the Missional Nature and Calling of the Dutch Reformed Church*. In the same month and year, the Provincial Synod of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) passed a resolution encouraging the active exploration of FXoC.

Fresh Expressions of Church in the South African context was initially driven by the two churches aforementioned as represented by Philip Botha of the DRC and Gordon Crowther of ACSA. In 2013, a task team launched two pilot *Mission Shaped Ministry* courses in Cape Town and George, respectively. Courses were run in Stellenbosch, Johannesburg and other centres. One of the authors of this article ran the course in Cape Town in 2015. A partnership agreement between Ekklesia at Stellenbosch University,[10] ACSA (through Growing the Church)[11] and Fresh Expressions of Church in the UK was signed on 06 February 2013 to authorise the offering of the *Mission Shaped Ministry* course (Crowther 2014:10). In this way, South Africans became responsible for the development and direction of FXoC in their own context. This transfer is a key element in terms of the agency of the South African arm of FXoC.

Nevertheless, we should also take cautious note of the architectural or structural dimensions of the movement which came from outside the South African borders; for instance, the participating dominations include the Association of Vineyard Churches, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa. Bishop Martin Breytenbach of St Mark the Evangelist took a leading role in ACSA. In 2019, the name FXoC was changed to Fresh Africa; perhaps to signal a move away from the potentially colonial overtones of a movement founded in the UK. Siegfried Ngubane,[12] Regional Director of SIM[13] Southern Africa, took over as the National Director of Fresh Africa in March 2020. Initially registered as a non-profit company (NPC), it was deregistered in 2023, as there was no income to sustain its operations. The Fresh Africa name and the assets of the NPC were moved to under the SIM umbrella, and the website was moved to OC Africa.[14]

10.http://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/ekklesia

11.https://growingthechurch.org.za

12.Ngubane was appointed 8th Presiding Bishop of the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa in September 2023.

13.More information on SIM International can be found at the following website: https://www.sim.org/about

14.https://ocafrica.org/faith-community-multiplication/

As already stated, apart from the work of Aldous (2018, 2019, 2021) in the form of an ethnographic study of a Fresh Expressions community in Cape Town, little meaningful academic research on FXoC in South Africa had been carried out at the time of writing. Aldous (2018) suggests that any authentic FXoC in South Africa will be a place committed to being human together, practising 'sawubona' and creating faith communities where liturgy is shaped from below by the joys and pains of the people. However, perhaps it would have been better to ask whether it was in fact necessary to re-think liturgy, as if no African, Black liturgy existed already?

Therefore, in the spirit of decolonisation, the authors wish to take a different approach altogether and ask whether the FXoC project should perhaps be dismissed entirely, because an African, indigenous expression of church already exists, and is merely awaiting legitimisation and to be embraced in Africa and by Western Christianity?

What currently exists are reflections on FXoC by South Africans considering the movement in the UK, notably the work of Nell and Grobler (2014) and Nell and Mellors (2017). Both academic contributions essentially advocate for the implementation of FXoC in the South African context, but lack theological robustness. Likewise, Paul Siaki's (2017) self-published *Becoming Church Unusual* is almost exclusively focussed on the story of the UK and his own reflections on starting a FXoC, and lacks the theological and contextual insights for the post-apartheid South African landscape. In short, the gruel is thin and the theological work is poor. It would seem that the Black priest mentioned in the vignette in the introduction was right!

In the closing section of his self-published book *The Story of the Church Reshaping. Fresh Expressions SA (2014)*, Gordon Crowther (2014:11) states, 'What is the future of the church as we know it? God is missional – moving in love towards all created things to recreate, redeem and renew'. While this may be true, it would appear that the expansive vision of the *missio Dei* in the South African context has by and large been narrowly confined to church planting activity in the FXoC and other missional church movements.

A Black Theology of Liberation interrogation of the Fresh Expressions of Church movement in South Africa

The FXoC movement was introduced into the South African context by white English men and was taken up and developed largely by white Afrikaans-speaking men. This would suggest that the monopoly on decision-making was initially in the hands of white people, which is problematic in its denial of the agency of Black people and Black churches.[15]

15.See specifically Ntwasa's (1973:110) argument on the oppression of Black churches through decision making that was mainly in the hands of white people, thus denying Black churches' agency.

While white people might not be the actual decision-makers (having transferred the decision-making to Black people), they would already have created the decision-making processes and structures leading to suppression of the Black church.[16] While these white English and/or Afrikaans men were sensitive and wanted to be contextually appropriate, they nevertheless embodied, perhaps unknowingly, the symbols of oppression from the past. By and large, the movement has had the greatest impact on the white DRC in South Africa. As Aldous (2022:11) has written elsewhere, 'when the main protagonists of the movement in South Africa were initially white, middle class, heterosexual, evangelical men what does the movement have to say, with any cultural and ecclesial sensitivity to the largely Black, poor, high Anglo-Catholic Anglican church?'

Nevertheless, the issue at stake is more than the colour of the skin of those coming to South African soil and initiating and promoting a new way of being church referred to as FXoC. It is more aptly captured by the works of Frantz Fanon,[17] and in the South African context through the work of Steve Bantu Biko and his lecture entitled *I Write What I Like*.[18] When Biko critiqued the missionaries and their influence on the church he lamented that Blacks were being de-valued, treated as non-beings and being preached to most of the time as corrupt and sinful human beings.[19] Although this kind of preaching might have been applied in certain cases to white Christians in terms of the Calvinistic acronym TULIP,[20] the doctrine was not projected onto all race groups in South Africa equally. There was consequently something sinister about this gospel as it was presented to Black people, making them objects of missionary action rather than missionary agents themselves. Coincident with the 1952 Willingen World Mission Conference and the emergence of the notion of *missio Dei* affirming mission as God's mission was the coming to power in 1948 in South Africa of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party (NP), which promulgated the apartheid laws. The idea that mission belongs not to the church (*missio ecclesia*) but to God (*missio Dei*) made no difference to the way in which mission was appropriated by missionaries and the church in South Africa. In fact, the church in South Africa was often a proxy of the colonial project.

Nevertheless, it was during those times that the church that was on the 'other side of whiteness', in other words, the Black church, challenged the way in which the church was primarily projecting white people as the primary agents of God's mission (*missio Dei*). It is in fact mainly white bodies[21] that came up with the notion of *missio Dei*, which the historical background of FXoC movement also embraced and articulates as its main theological notions and motives. It again starts from a conceptualisation in the West and subsequently reduces all forms of church to a similar epistemological framework and thinking. Baron (2024) shows that Black theology and epistemology[22] emerge from a post-foundationalist and narrative epistemology that does not operate from a foundationalist, conceptualised and narrow rationalist epistemology rooted in Western modernism, which was made redundant by Black theology. However, it is more than the matter of a theological and epistemological approach that lies at the heart of making Black people invisible; there is also the apparent intention to eradicate among Black people other forms of religion not afforded space or place in the reductionist Western form of ecclesiology of white people. The prime example is the suggestion by the FXoC movement itself and the assumption that the church created in the West is the basis from which 'fresh' expressions will have to emerge. However, what if churches are based entirely on an African worldview, which is in stark contrast to a church who is based on a western worldview? This has been aptly explored in the work of the missiologist Paul Hiebert (1999) in his appraisal of the operation of a different worldview in Africa, which needs to be embraced. He points out the clashes between the Western and African worldviews that often complicate processes of contextualisation and which were overlooked by those constructing, and contextualising, Christianity.

The early forms adopted by the FXoC were often rooted in the UK context. Ideas such as Café Church and Messy Church, while appropriate in a post-Christendom secular UK setting, where they were helpful and even dynamic, were, by and large, experienced as odd, inappropriate and confusing in economically marginalised communities. Therefore, while proclaiming to be proponents of contextual missiology, they failed to appropriately recontextualise for the South African setting. We acknowledge that some training materials have been translated into Afrikaans, isiXhosa and isiZulu, yet the deep contextualisation of materials needed seems to be missing; the Mission Shaped Ministry training offered currently resembles nothing more than a copy and paste of the materials from the UK. As the Malawian missiologist Harvey Kwiyani (2023) has recently noted,

> We cannot effectively talk about mission in a postcolonial world while replicating colonial structures. Western institutions still define mission for the world. Most of what we read in mission is written by English-speaking Westerners for other Westerners, for their service somewhere in the world, outside the West. Even books written by non-Western scholars tend to be shaped, to a great extent, by Western theological thought. (Kwiyani 2023)

16.This applies to most missionary churches in South Africa, for instance the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, which functioned independently of the white church, but that still had to abide by church orders written in the spirit and letter of the white church.

17.See his works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), (1967 translation by Charles Lam Markmann: New York: Grove Press) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), (1963 translation by Constance Farrington: New York: Grove Weidenfeld).

18.The original publication with the collections of his speeches and writings, was on 01 January 1978.

19.See his critique of the Black missionaries in his collated writing found in the book *I Write What I Like*.

20.Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.

21.Although it must be acknowledged that there were some Black people present at the World Mission Conference in Willingen.

22.See for instance references to his work in a forthcoming book (2025) *Pentecostal Mission and Ecological Degradation*, containing a proposed chapter entitled, Pentecostal Epistemology, Ecclesiology, and the challenge of Ecological Degradation in pursuit of the *missio Dei*.

The FXoC movement has failed to engage African Indigenous Churches (AICs) and more indigenous church planting methodologies. Furthermore, if there are already, as Vatican II claims, seeds of faith in every religion, why would there be a need to work from the kind of ecclesiology that has been developed in the West? This assumes that even African churches need a 'fresh' expression. Of course, this is because most Western churches in Africa came to their daughter churches to implement the same! But would this not have been a good moment to reflect on their mission praxis? The question to be asked is: What kind of ecclesiologies were present before the birth of this concept [Fresh Expressions] or making them 'fresh' – in other words, what ecclesiologies was already functioning within South African churches at the time? For instance, one will not find embedded in African worship the sense that you are removed from the world, or that you will have to step out of the world into a different world that is far removed from your own. Rather, there is a sense of engaging the world and being situated squarely within the cosmos and social reality. This is well articulated in the words of the Black Liberation theologian, Mabona (1973:107), in the 1970s. Did he perhaps already have a 'Fresh Expression of Church' in mind in asking (Mabona 1973):

> Why are forms of Christian worship so stilted and restrained? Are we in worship communicating with an aristocratic or a capitalistic God who wants the little people to be very well behaved or even muted when they approach his majesty? Let there be less cringing and scrapping in Liturgy. Let us be Apostles of more freedom and spontaneity in Worship. Why the awkward gap between people and ministers? Sometimes the attitude of the assembly towards the president and the ministers is like that of the crowd towards an emperor and his retinue. Let there be no spectators and participants in our worship. We are all participators of God's bounty and spectators of his works of loving kindness. (p. 107)

Goba (1979:6), as long ago as the late 1970s, could write, 'Protestant Churches from the West have ruthlessly imposed a kind of Christianity that denies the authenticity of our Africanness as well as our cultural heritage'. Ten years later, Pato (1989:160) continued to ask whether 'African Christians pray with borrowed words, think by proxy, and operate by way of Rome, Paris, London and other European capitals?' Given the obvious colonial and imperial history of the birth of the Anglican church in South Africa, any movement that even hints at neo-colonialism is to be rejected. The idea of imperialism might take much more subtle forms in the FXoC movement. Could it be that the harnessing of resources such as sophisticated websites, slick documentary style stories of UK fresh expression on DVD, well-honed, structured and thought-out training material such as MSM and MSI, while being excellent on one level, can also feel like another pre-packaged 'it worked here so it will work there' form of imperialism? Ntwasa (1973:110) also makes reference to a liturgy that continued to be Western and white-oriented, not allowing Black men and women to be themselves and to express their characters in more spontaneous ways. The question, therefore, is whether FXoC in any way rejects the imposition of Western styles of worship on African churches, often observed through the devaluing of African-initiated forms of worship, in which sermons and other forms of worship conducted through dance, testimonies and so on are embraced as part of the epistemological resources in the quest for truth and *episteme* on God, and in which folktales, faith stories, and various forms of rituals are central.[23]

Fresh Expressions of Church would thus not explicitly and openly fight the system of apartheid, and now neo-colonial apartheid, and proclaim the 'God of the oppressed' to liberate people from the evil of the white church. Ironically, it was these Black churches[24] that had a 'fresh' contextual way of responding to their current situation in South Africa, in which the white church was irrelevant in a context plagued by oppression and segregation. One could in truth say that whatever is 'fresh' in fact came from the 'daughter' or 'Black' churches during apartheid, which spiritually discerned God's movement in the world and which broke away from theologies that would further oppress the Black person.

One could then rightfully say that the Black church gave birth to a 'fresh' response to South African society before the introduction of the FXoC movement. Therefore, Vellem (2015) describes a Black ecclesiology to be one formed in the 'streets of struggle'. We immediately recall the witness of Nico Smith, a white Dutch Reformed minister, but who left the church to join a former Black church in a Black township in South Africa (Mamelodi). He tells how he was confronted with a different way of witnessing for Christ: being on the streets, protesting, so that the *shalom* and reign of God might come for Black people in South Africa (Smith 2002:16). This occurred while the white churches, and Smith's former denomination (the DRC) were trapped between their four walls, while he chose to join the Black masses – having church on the streets of Mamelodi in Pretoria.

As we stated at the commencement of this critique, the issue is not the pigmentation of one's skin – about being white or Black – yet often colour becomes the condition according to which people are defined. It was this condition that Biko and others were concerned about in the search for liberation. Therefore, it would be wrong to reject the FXoC movement outright based solely on the skin colour of the progenitors of the movement. However, the frequency with which whiteness becomes the signifier of what is normative, and the basis of what is beautiful, ethical and acceptable and to which all other races should conform if they wish to be awarded such status lies at the heart of this critique. As Kritzinger (1990:197–199) would state, it was not the culture of white people that was problematic; however, it was when they came to assume absolute power over others, became the owners of the means of production, that the problem of whiteness emerged. Therefore, it is when the white person does not question their own hermeneutic, but sees it as a lens

23. See for instance Baron's (2023) argument concerning the rejection of narrative as a form of faith knowledge by mainline churches in South Africa, which followed a Western modernist approach to epistemology of God.

24. See for instance the Belhar Confession by the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa.

through which all beings should assess and be assessed and understood that it corrupts humanity and leads to racial oppression. Those white people who become racist in their approach could be distinguished from those white people who might be fighting against oppression of the Black person, fighting for a human face, as Biko asserts. However, this is a struggle. It is a messy process in which those imbued with whiteness need to be willing to set aside their prejudices against Blacks and stand in solidarity against all forms of oppression.

Essentially, Black ontology was crippled by white theology because it allowed Black Christians to focus on individual and spiritual dimensions of the person, weakening the interaction of the person with society in the first instance, and also to see their relationship with God as a purely spiritual exercise (Ntwasa 1973:112). In this regard, Ntwasa argues, 'For it is only when the physical obstacles in the way between God and man are removed that man can fully realise his spiritual dimension' (Ntwasa 1973:112). Therefore, in essence, Africa is a communal (not individualistic) and human-centred (not only spiritually-centred) society which does not correlate with a white ecclesiological and ontological reflection of what a person is. Black Theology and ecclesiology espouses a Christology of a fighting God (Boesak 2020), one that grapples with existential dilemmas, and not one that works solely from the established Christian foundations. It reads God from its context – especially an oppressive one. Ntwasa (1973:115–116) articulates the unity of the church through Paul's metaphor of 'dying with Christ'. It is not exclusively a spiritual unity, as many white, reformed theologians suggest, but instead entails becoming one with the life of Christ in the quest for liberation and fighting against the evil forces to make liberation possible. Therefore, for Ntwasa, the church is during the eucharist confessing to be God's liberated people. The church will only then be the church, and not 'something else'. Fundamentally seeking the equality of all human beings is a vital test of being of God's people, and this should have been the main way of testing the authenticity of the FXoC approach in Africa. Ntwasa (1974:116–117) suggests that the church brings this gift of community, which is an essential characteristic of Black life in their church life, and should invite white people to join them and break with their individualist culture of church. He states (Ntwasa 1973):

> Blacks must take the lead, a lead from which our Blackness debars us in the white-controlled churches. For the sake of the church, therefore we must do it. Then, having done it, we will have the responsibility of bringing the Gospel to the white man. We will have the responsibility of offering him the joy of belonging to a community which is marked by a known and felt unity in the dynamic cooperate life which surges on to break every yoke of human bondage. (p. 117)

On the issue of community, Boesak (1984:23), too, argues that the Black Church can only address Blacks if they identify with the community they serve. You cannot do church without understanding the context and reading the text that informs one's Christian worship. For instance, in the current neo-colonial setting in South Africa in which FXoC has evolved, it would be impossible to dismiss the issues of race and racism that are still so prominent and remain entrenched in South African society. Boesak reminds us that context has always influenced and guided us regarding the kind of gospel that the church preaches. For Boesak (2020:24), it is necessary to be involved in society when societal conditions are in direct opposition to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Boesak makes a plea for a 'Christian presence' in the struggle against apartheid. Authors find it difficult to view FXoC as 'fresh' if the role of the gospel is also to identify with the community. Or is it about who joins and who initiates the agency of the other?

The problem with imposing the FXoC model lies with the Black missionary church during apartheid, which accepted the theology of the West, and once again accommodated a foreign spirituality that preached to its members that they should accept the prevalent social order as God-ordained and to wait for the new one to come at the end of days, when Christ comes (Boesak 2020:24). This would be in direct opposition to the God of Black Theology, who does not stand by passively, but is instead a fighting God, a revolutionary God, who will not allow the situation to remain as is, but calls for Christians to be co-fighters with God. This entails fighting for God in politics, against whiteness. If this is not categorically expressed in FXoC for the Black Church, then FXoC embodies a context which is still deeply embedded in whiteness. The same argument has been raised by Baron and Maponya (2023) that confirms the missional church epistemology but is critical in terms of its contextualisation in South Africa, and that the movement does not outrightly address issues of racism in post-apartheid South Africa. Tshaka (2023:15) suggests as well that perhaps the best way to address western ecclesiology and to start re-imagining is to study the church located in the 'zinc villages'.

Conclusion

In this article, the authors engage with the early writings of theologians from the BTL to explore whether FXoC is indeed necessary. The article focusses on their articulation of a Black ecclesiology in search of an appropriate expression of church at the height of apartheid. The authors find FXoC to be yet another expression lacking the power and intention to offer a meaningful solution to racial oppression. The article concludes with a call to embrace Black Ecclesiology in the post-apartheid context.

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