

‘Touch the screen’: Christian Television and its Influence and Challenge to the Church in South Africa

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Abstract

The advent of Christian television broadcasting in South Africa around the 1980s brought about innovative methods of evangelism. While this presented a welcome and dynamic approach to doing missions, it simultaneously exposed Christianity and its traditional way of doing ministry to numerous challenges, including loss of membership and revenue. This article provides a brief historical background to televangelism in South Africa, from its inception to the explosion noticeable to date. The critical and dynamic features arising from this ‘phenomenon’ are outlined in the development of the argument. These dynamics present both vulnerabilities as well as opportunities for the traditional church as understood in South Africa. The argument proposes new names and concepts arising from the peculiar features of the new church, which are born out of televangelism. The traditional church is advised to contend with this new environment if it has to survive the new realities going into the future. Finally, the church is encouraged to constructively embrace this technology.

Keywords: Televangelism, Televangelists, Christian Broadcasting, New Methods, Mainline Churches, Technologies, Church Growth, Abuse.

Introduction

Background to Television in South Africa

Resistance to the introduction of television has a long history in the South African landscape as demonstrated by the leadership of the National Party in

the 1960s. When the Nationalist Party, then the ruling party of the Whites-only South African government, initially refused to allow TV into the country, it was out of fear of the ‘evils’ of the silver screen, which brought the then Prime Minister, Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, to liken it to an ‘atomic bomb’ or ‘poison gas’, arguing that ‘the government has to watch for any dangers to the people, both spiritual and physical’ (*Time* 1964). In fact, his Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Dr. Albert Hertzog, went further to call television the ‘devil’s own box for disseminating communism and immorality’ (Bevan 2008). Due to their standing in society, the position of these two¹ influential political figures undoubtedly carried sentiments that, in the first instance, underlined a fear of ‘political and antichristian’ influence, and in the second, a fear of moral degeneration and all kinds of perceived evils that they thought might harm the nation. Opposed to these sentiments were the views of their political counterparts, which included the official opposition party, namely the United Party, which pointed to an embarrassing situation² the country had placed itself in amidst a technologically evolving world. There were also additional dissenting public voices (Bevan 2008). It was not until 1976 that South Africa started TV broadcasting, initially screening limited recorded programmes over very limited hours per day, in the morning and in the evening.

It does appear that there was no clear response to this challenge to the political stance on television by the Church³ in South Africa, except to assume that the National Party always had its spiritual guidance from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). The DRC was regarded as the State Church and was even regarded by its critics as the ‘National Party at prayer’ (Tutu 2017). Be that as it may, it can be adduced that despite Christian television having started

¹ The two are an oversimplification of the resistance in the party, especially J.F. Naudé (1950-1954), J.J. Serfontein (1954-1958), A. Hertzog (1958-1968) and M.C.G.J. (Basie) van Rensburg (1968-1970) (Bevan 2008:62-63).

² South Africa missed the live broadcast of the moon landing of Neil Armstrong; The less economically strong Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) had TV as early as 1961.

³ In this article, unless specifically indicated, ‘Church’ is used as a multifarious entity with pluriform applications; that is, regardless of the notion that divided churches as mainline (official) churches, sects (Pentecostals, Charismatic and Pentecostals, African Independent (Initiated) Churches, etc.) and the current nomenclature of ‘ministries’.

in the United States of America in the late 1950s, the Church in South Africa and the 1960s is not known to have supported the introduction of TV, including Christian broadcasting. This background is sketched so as to provide the backdrop against which the evaluation of the Church and its mission⁴ in South Africa with regard to televangelism ministries is done.

It may be argued that the tardiness or reluctance of the mainline churches to embrace television as a means of spreading the gospel, then and now, can be seen from the fact that none of the traditional or mainline churches in South Africa owns a TV channel or has slots of their own across the public TV broadcasting networks. This can be said of all of the well-known mainline churches, including the Reformed Churches, the Anglicans, Methodists, and the Lutheran Churches, to name but a few. On the other hand, many Charismatic⁵ and Pentecostal Churches, many of whom are comparatively less economically viable, own their own TV channels today. One may ask: Are the mainline churches perhaps suffering from the Verwoerdian fear of ‘communism and immorality’, or are they under the Hertzogian curse of the ‘the little black box’ or ‘the devil’s own box’? (*Sunday Times* 2007; Dickens 2018). The constraints this group of churches suffer from are a matter that needs to be fully explored, not least because the apparent lack of church growth and loss of membership might be good reason to utilise TV for the expansion and growth of the church. This is what happens due to the televangelist ministries, which are all growing and gaining popularity through the use of public electronic ministries. Other reasons for such a research focus would be to inquire after the doctrines and traditional notions that feed these churches’ inability to embrace such a paradigm shift in theology and liturgy.

Against this brief political and historical background, the focus of this article is to study the existing phenomenon as located mostly among Charismatic-Pentecostal churches. The data generated may provide some information as to how this Christian movement that utilises TV, amongst other electronic media, might inform and challenge, or even transform, traditional ways of religious practices among the mainline churches in South Africa.

⁴ I use Church and mission both as congenial and juxtaposed entities in the similar sense used by Saayman (1991:7).

⁵ Wagner (1988) notes the historical development of the charismatic movement from around the 1980s to the neo-Charismatic movements around 2000 and beyond. In this article ‘Charismatic’ will encompass both movements.

Asking Pertinent Questions

In order to unpack the crux of this study about the influence of televangelism on the Church and mission in South Africa, we need to ask a few critical questions. Foremost among the research questions below is the need to appreciate the theological argument concerning the so-called ‘God’s move’ in the history of missions, which has been divided into the ‘first’, ‘second’, and ‘third’ waves of the Holy Spirit. It is a treatise attributed to C. Peter Wagner (1988).

Theologically perceived, these waves, in Wagner’s view, comprise the first wave, or the birth of the ‘Pentecostal movement’ occurring in the early 20th century with the well-known Azusa Street Revival taking centre stage. The second wave is associated with religious revivals in the 1960s and are generally referred to as the ‘Charismatic movement’. The third wave, according to Wagner (in Bauder 2013) is labelled the ‘Signs and wonders movement’, occurring from the mid-1980s into the 1990s.

Goll (2012) makes a further observation, namely that these three historical developments are also present in the third wave, e.g. ‘all three wings of the Pentecostal movement ...: (1) Classical Pentecostals; (2) Protestant Charismatics; and (3) Catholic Charismatics’ (Goll 2012)⁶. He goes further by proposing a ‘Fourth Wave’, which would impact the so-called seven ‘Cultural Mountains’ of ‘Religion, Government, Education, Business, Family, Media, and the Arts and Entertainment’ (Goll 2012). A correlational analysis of this fourth wave can also be drawn in respect of the radical growth of televangelism, the numerical explosion of Charismatic Pentecostal groupings, and the so-called Fourth Wave Feminism (Cochrane 2013) in which the media play such a central role, which started around 2012.

A boom in the numerical growth in the number of the mushrooming of Charismatic-Pentecostal churches can be noticed in the period towards the end of the 20th century. This also correlates with the period through which we find the introduction and growth of the Christian Channels (cf. White and Assimeng (2016)⁷. Thus, trends in the Church growth phenomenon and the proliferation

⁶ The mention of Catholics is particularly interesting, as the Catholic Church is a mainline church that has embraced the air wave technology through Radio Veritas (in SA) (<https://www.radioveritas.co.za>) and Catholic TV (<http://www.catholictv.org/shows/the-catholictv-network>).

⁷ Compare a similar study on the influence of televangelism on church growth by White and Assimeng (2016).

of Charismatic churches can clearly be attributed, among others, to the influence of televangelism.

Another indicator is the stagnation in and the decline of membership numbers in the mainline churches in the same period. This trend is statistically affirmed by Goodhew (2000:365) when he states,

The [numerical] decline accelerated in later years and mainline Protestantism is a much reduced force compared to the middle of the century. Roman Catholicism is the one mainline denomination to contradict this trend, growing strongly until the 1980s. By contrast African Independent Churches and 'other churches' saw a remarkable flowering in the thirty years since 1960. They moved from the margins to the centre in three decades.

In his analysis Goodhew proffers as reasons for the decline the church's 1) secularisation; 2) political fiddling; 3) socio-economic factors impacting the church; and 4) theological factors such as the lack of liturgical renewal, among others. However, this study does not mention the role of televangelism in these trends.

In order to inquire deeper into this matter, we need to ask a few guiding questions, as well as provide their hypotheses, namely,

- 1) What is the significance of televangelism?⁸
- 2) What are the results of Televangelism in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement, and do they challenge the mainline Churches and their mission today?
- 3) How does the Church disentangle herself from the resulting conflicts arising from the televangelistic era?

In my analysis it is critical to also include the present and future imperatives to think of, deconstructing and decolonising Church traditions, and the re-theologising and reconstruction of the Church, mission and training.

⁸ Note that in several instances there is a correspondence between TV broadcasting, YouTube and Internet Live streaming, as well as with podcasts. While my focus is on TV, this does exclude the viewing of the same material on the internet, especially on YouTube and Facebook.

Methodology and Terminology

In order to tackle the research questions above, the next paragraphs shall establish appropriate methodologies that will facilitate this inquiry.

Televangelism is a phenomenon that requires our careful attention because of its vast and deep impact on the church and mission. Since it is a phenomenon, it makes sense to apply phenomenological tools of investigation, as well as related methodological research approaches in social science, for instance, ethnographical studies. To my knowledge, little has been written about televangelism in South Africa, such that a literature study of the phenomenon cannot be conducted without remaining superficial or rather imposing foreign experiences onto the South African contexts based on existing literature. Since South Africa finds itself in the brewing and seemingly escalating events of Christian television broadcasting, I have been following the phenomenon on channels on most of the major Christian networks keenly by observation. Furthermore, I have occasionally attended some of the worship services and gained first-hand experience on what these churches and their pastors are doing. Hence, I adopted an approach of a ‘Complete observer’⁹ (cf. Sauro). For better clarity and perspective, I discuss a few concepts of this approach in the next paragraph.

The word ‘televangelism’ is a composite noun formed by two words, ‘television’ and ‘evangelism’. (‘Tele’ as meaning ‘distant’, portrays the wonderful effect use of television’s ability to reach far and remote places.) It came into vocabulary use ‘in the fall of 1958 by the Southern Baptist Convention as a name of a TV show’ (Stewart 2015) in America. Preachers who became regular hosts and guests of this form of broadcasting earned themselves the title of ‘televangelists’. As indicated above, televangelism seemingly took eminence in Charismatic-Pentecostal movement, making it its home, despite a few mainline churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, joining in. ‘Touch the screen’ is a catchphrase that speaks to the appeal some

⁹ Sauro (2015) states, ‘observation is a key data collection technique for Ux⁹ (User Experience) research’ and has four categories: 1) ‘Complete observer’, whose position is neither seen nor noticed by participants. The advantage of which is that the ‘participants’ are likely to behave in a natural manner when they are not aware they are subjects in an investigation (cf. Hawthorne effect), 2) ‘Observer as participant’, 3) ‘Participant as observer’ and 4) ‘Complete participant’).

of the televangelists make to their audience to exercise their faith and receive healing remotely by physically touching the ‘screen’ of the televisions¹⁰.

Literature Review

Data Collection

As already indicated above, I have not found any South African scientific televangelistic writings. Therefore, the acquisition of information used for discussion has been a painstaking exercise. For purposes of information on how data collection was conducted, I have divided the sources according to the following categories: 1) Personal viewing of the programmes on Television networks; 2) Collection of available recorded DVDs of some of the Televangelists; 3) Search on Internet based platforms, including, YouTube and other social media, such as, WhatsApp and Facebook; and 4) Personal visits to the services and functions of some of the televangelists. The information gathered will provide a general observation of the workings of the televangelists and their churches. Where necessary, I will zoom onto specific incidents or queries to clarify or extrapolate information.

Discussing the Introduction and Modes of Televangelism

The introduction of Christian TV Channels happened in several stages. At its infancy, Christian broadcasting appeared in the SABC channels, followed by e.TV and in later stages DSTv and Free-to-Air (FTA) networks followed. The discussion of these presentations will preferably be discussed from the aspect of their affinity. We will discuss the introduction of televangelism under the SABC and e.TV first.

The Inception of Televangelism through the SABC and e-Services

In this section we will focus on SABC Christian channels followed by e.TV. The broadcasting of Christian programmes started a short while after SABC

¹⁰ In Emmanuel.TV, a demo shows how viewers touchscreens of TVs, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, etc. (2019).

had started its TV network¹¹. These were daily brief episodes, mostly of a five-minute timespan, named ‘Oordenkings’ and ‘Epilogues’ at the beginning and close of each day’s broadcasting at the time TV shows ran for 37 hours a week. (Bevan 2008:165). Later, as viewing time increased, and SABC2 and 3 were introduced, Christian programmes were substantially increased too. They then included, among others, talk shows, documentaries and Christian choir music. At this juncture, from 1981, African preachers were introduced. These were predominantly from mainline churches as preachers from AICs and Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, were referred to as ‘sects’ and not properly or theologically trained and inclined to heretical teachings (cf. Van Staden 1977:129-131; GKSA n.d.)

In the early 1980s, SABC ran some Trinity Broadcasting Network programmes for a few weeks. There was a slight twist when the privately owned e.TV came onto the scene in 1998 (Bevan 2008:175). They introduced preachers from other church traditions, especially the Universal Church of God. During these early days, the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement was still subdued, as the focus of research Kritzinger (1986) and interest was the African Initiated (Independent) Churches (AICs)¹², that were viewed as a threat to the growth and stability of mainline churches.

The Impact of DSTv and FTA on Televangelism

The arrival of satellite television, especially DSTv (alternatively, MultiChoice) in 1995, brought about a radical transformation in Christian television broadcasting. It is this era where a distinct explosion in Christian broadcasting in South Africa became noticeable, and the mainline churches were affected.

¹¹ In terms of its programmes, for the first few years, the SABC maintained a policy of using White people in White programmes. But during the 1980s, this racial policy became more relaxed. Already in 1979, the SABC started using Indian and Coloured Christian ministers as regular presenters on the religious broadcasts with which SABC-TV/TV1 closed every night.

¹² These included the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) with its headquarters in Morija, in Limpopo, the St John Apostolic Faith Mission of SA, at Katlehong, Gauteng and the Nazareth Baptist Church (Shembe). Besides the AICs, ‘Bazalwane’, namely the AFM, Baptist, Full Gospel and Assemblies of God, etc. (cf. Anderson 1992) were viewed negatively.

Four electronic media housed were catalysts, namely DSTv under MultiChoice and Free-to-Air (FTA), which comprise Christian channels using their own exclusive decoders via the KU Band LNB (Net-life 2010), e.TV and the SABC, to a lesser extent. Never before were South Africans bombarded with such a vast number of Christian channels to choose from. Because of their great influence, MultiChoice and FTA television deserve special discussion next. Of significance were the following networks:

- 1) The first and largest of Christian programmes were on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (popularly called TBN). Initially, many televangelists were American-based, followed by Nigerians (see below). TBN evolved into several regional networks and South Africa fell under 'TBN in Africa'. Later, the Faith Broadcasting Network (Gateway News 2014)¹³ was introduced under the management of Andre and Jenny Roebert, based in East London (SA). South African preachers and their ministries also increasingly began to buy their own slots.
- 2) The FTA Christian channels have gradually increased in number. At some stage the number of Christian Channels on the FTA was in excess of 70 (Net-life 2010). This number fluctuated, apparently because of the high broadcasting fees (Ric 2017)¹⁴. The advantage in this network is a '24/7' uninterrupted and, apparently, uncensored productions. On these programmes, many South Africans were exposed to diverse models and practices of the Christian faith and a few other religions, some viewed as repulsive or attractive by different viewers. Some noteworthy channels of the FTA stations include the Emmanuel TV of Bishop TB Joshua (2019), the pastor of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN)¹⁵, in Lagos,

¹³ This was a 'name change and branding strategy' of TBN Africa 'For Africa, by Africans'.

¹⁴ A TV channel on IS20 Satellite then cost R90 000 or more per month (Ric 2017).

¹⁵ The fame of Bishop Joshua continues to attract South Africans to Nigeria, despite the 12 September 2014 tragedy that saw a SCOAN six-storey building (guesthouse) collapse killing 116 victims, of whom 85 were South Africans, to what was alleged as 'scandalous' by observers and the bereaved families (Sifile & Mashaba 2020).

Nigeria, but with several branches around the world, the KICC (Kingsway International Christian Centre) of Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, a Nigerian pastor who is senior pastor of several congregations across the United Kingdom (KICC 2019), the GNF-Tv (God-Never-Fails TV Channel) of Bishop ND Nhlapho — which allows several independent pastors and ministries to buy slots under their channel (GNF-Tv 2019), the Living Waters Ministries International of Archbishop Bafana Steven Zondo, a South African pastor based in Evaton, with several branches across South Africa (RLW 2019), and the Miracle TV (2019) of Prophet Uebert Angel, a Zimbabwean pastor now resident in the United Kingdom; the Ezekiel TV (2019) of Archbishop Ezekiel Guti, another Zimbabwean pastor based in Harare, with a comprehensive reach in Zimbabwe and South Africa. These channels, like several others not covered above, have made a great impact on South Africans. This has been noticed by their ‘roadshows’ and huge gatherings at their meetings at stadiums and other big venues.

My First-hand Experience at Evangelistic Meetings of Televangelists

In my adopted disposition as ‘complete observer’ (cf. Sauro 2015), I had the opportunity of visiting the worship meetings and miracle services of the hosts of some of the Televangelists, including, UBN¹⁶, World Restoration Service (see below), Rabboni Centre Ministries, and Impact for Christ TV. The services are recorded, edited and submitted to preferred broadcasting networks for showing during the allocated time slots.

Broadcasts are modified versions of actual live recording, by the communication technical teams, sometimes because of ethical reasons. Prior to the recordings, some ministries, like Impact for Christ, would require people who intend standing in the ‘prayer line’ to be prayed for, to sign ‘indemnity forms’. Should attendees feel uncomfortable with any footage on which they appear, they may approach the ministry to remove it. Another reason for editing is to focus only on select highlights of the service to fit an allocated

¹⁶ This is Pastor Mukhuba’s TV ministry, which has been broadcasting from 2006 to 2010 in different open-air TV channels, and then, according to her, ‘Through the enablement of the Lord, in February 2011, I established my own TV channel, Unity Broadcasting Network (UBN)’ (Mukhuba 2017).

channel slot. Herein also lies the possibility of sanitizing the broadcasting. Although some tele-broadcasts might indicate on the screen ‘Live’, like those of Prophet Bushiri, they are in fact recorded services¹⁷.

An Overview of selected DVDs, Facebook pages and Video Clips of Televangelists

In most cases, the televised messages are excerpts from broadcasts from services that normally run for five to eight hours, especially in the case of Sunday services, or evangelistic campaigns often labelled as ‘salvation, healing and miracle services’. These are normally daylight services. However, ‘all-night services’ run for about 10 hours or more. After the services, the technical teams of these ministries do a lot of editing on the recordings and then package the finished product into DVDs that they sell. The DVDs will, in addition, contain carefully crafted ‘commercial’ material that advertise the televangelist, his/her ministry and other products. Some content might be enhanced with fancy graphical designs. The DVD are available on sale immediately after the services or later elsewhere. Orders can also be made by phone for delivery by post or other arrangements. Moreover, most of these ministries have found a way of broadcasting through social media. Many audio and video material are made available on sale on Facebook and Twitter handles. As a consequence of the social media, the ministries’ offerings are engaged by viewers who have the latitude to make their own critical comments and observations. Some of these observations are insightful, while some are dis-tasteful, as they merely slander the activities of the concerned televangelists or the content on the audio-visuals. By the audio-visual material and social media capabilities we are able to see how the Christian television broadcasting has become a business with multifaceted capabilities and overreach. Their advantage is that they have better longevity than the once-off broadcast on TV and can be distributed far and wide even to those without TV or Satellite technologies.

Print Media

Apart from these audio-visual materials, a few of the ministries have produced

¹⁷ I was personally able to request a section of a filming in which I would have appeared to be removed, as one of the people I was in attendance with felt it would compromise her integrity.

magazines arranged in such a manner as to give an impression of what their ministries are all about. Many of them highlight the miracles and testimonies of those who have been helped by them. They also contain advertisements of the products they sell. There are also numerous news clips on public print media, especially *The Daily Sun*, followed by the *Sowetan*, that provide other perspectives to the many issues that have surrounded the televangelists, especially on the controversial side more than on the complimentary side of their work.

A Critique of Televangelists by Justin Peters in his DVD, ‘A Call for Discernment on Televangelism’

In his DVD, Justin Peters (2013a)¹⁸ has compiled messages and activities of several televangelists. The DVD contains several video clips which he analyses and critiques for what he sees and hears. In my view, like any recorded audio-visual material, the evidence presented in the DVD is susceptible distortion and the video should itself be viewed with a sense of ‘discernment’, as the possibility of distortion and misrepresentation cannot be discounted.

Furthermore, on YouTube, Peters confronts a ‘member’ of Word of Faith movement, Evangelist Todd Bentley during a ‘miracle’ service. He labels him ‘a worker of iniquity’ (YouTube 2014) after Bentley had apparently ‘failed’ to heal Peters. In 2013, Bentley had conducted a revival in Tongaat (KZN), South Africa, that was beamed live on God-TV, thus attracting scores of people to the venue, also claiming a viewership of 220 million homes (Viljoen 2013).

Televangelists Placed under Governmental Scrutiny

The recent spate of weird incidents in some of the Charismatic-Pentecostal churches caused a huge public outcry (cf. Mashau & Kgatle 2019). This prompted the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural,

¹⁸ Justin Peters, born with disabilities in his limbs, gives his testimony of a life of struggle with faith and belief from childhood because of his condition. This condition created a desire to understand faith and healing and the discovery of ‘fake’ miracles through the study of the Scriptures and a process of discernment. This established him as one of the chief critiques of the so-called ‘Word of faith’ movement, or ‘Health and wealth or prosperity gospel’ (Peters 2013b).

Religious and Linguistic Communities¹⁹, popularly known as the CRL Commission, to conduct its own research. *The Report* (CRL 2017), as the title suggests, is a summation of a few media clips and interviews conducted by the commission with 85 heads or representatives of churches, African religions, Judaism, Hinduism and other religious institutions. Televangelists formed part of the 55% Charismatic-Pentecostal leaders and only 13% were from mainline churches. Some of the renowned televangelists arrived at a venue with hundreds of their supporters in buses and other modes of transport, marching and flanking their leaders, including holding placards with statements of support, and denouncing the Commission about what they regarded as interference with their faith and their leaders. Among them were Prophet Paseka ‘Mboro’ Motsoeneng who is aired on Incredible Happenings TV and Soweto TV (YouTube 2019), King Dr. Prophet Bishop Apostle Hamilton Q Nala of Rebirth Family Centre (Wopnews 2019), Pastor Lesego Daniel²⁰ of Rabboni Centre Ministries (Molobi 2018), Archbishop Zondo of the Rivers of Living Waters Ministries International (RLW 2019), and others. Banda (2019) and (Kgatlé 2017) make critical observations on this report, especially on the merits of the Commission, to make rulings. Despite possible flaws by the CRL Commission in handling this matter, it does seem it had genuine concerns to address²¹.

Observations on Broadcasted Church Services of Televangelists from a South African Perspective

Most televangelist run church services apart from mission outreach campaigns. These services are either televised live or recorded and then broadcasted in

¹⁹ This is a South African Commission instituted under Chapter 9 of the Constitution.

²⁰ Pastor Lesego, dubbed ‘the snake or grass pastor’. For more on his bizarre ‘miracles’ cf. Kgatlé (2017), Punchng (2018) and Molobi (2018). The Trinity International Bible University has honoured ‘Daniel Mokgethi Lesego Mosuo’ with the Degree Doctor of Ministry in Church Administration and Christian Therapy on 9/12/2017 (Facebook 2017.)

²¹ This is the view of the majority attending the national summit of religious and church leaders convened by Pastor Ray McCauley (in his capacity as Chair of the National Religious Leaders Council) at Rhema on 13 February 2019, which I personally attended.

different channels of their choice. In order to have a better view of the praxis of televangelists let us obtain insight from these services, by looking generally at major elements of their worship services:

- 1) The *intercession* is purportedly a spiritual preparation for the major service. It serves to protect the service and the ministry from malicious attacks from demonic activities, witches, criminals and Satanists. It also seeks the blessing of the presence of the Holy Spirit and God's favour on pastors and the whole ministry.
- 2) *Praise and Worship* – this session sets the spiritual tone for the service and prepares for an atmosphere of divine intervention in the word and deed of the pastor and worshipers.
- 3) *Testimonies* – these are faith evidences of conversion, healing, blessing or any miraculous intervention in the life of worshippers. Often some tell how from simply 'touching the screen' they were healed or blessed in one way or another. Testimonies also serve as a marketing strategy.
- 4) The *Sermon*²², is a 'teaching' ministry that constitutes the climax of the service. The dynamic exegesis of the biblical passage, sometimes with visual aids on large screens, is concluded with a 'challenge' to repentance and salvation to the viewers – this climax is called an 'Alter Call'.
- 5) An *Alter Call*, while it may be done any time during the course of the service, very often it happens after the sermon for purposes of confession of sin and declaration of forgiveness and prayers.
- 6) *Prayers for Healing, Deliverance and Blessings* are the 'miracle' moments of the service. Televangelists use this moment to pray for the bodily and spiritually afflicted. For some it is the time to 'demonstrate' power and anointing vested in them.

The above-mentioned components of the worship service do not always follow the same order. 'As the Spirit leads' pastors are 'led' to perform any of these elements on a tangent.

The Challenge to the Church

In the paragraphs above we have looked at various facets of televangelism.

²² Often, sermons are interrupted by a word of prophecy or acts healing or deliverance.

These may tend to be merely a compilation of stories, unless one analyses them and presents an understanding of what they purport to be in missiology. In the next paragraph I present a critical discussion on televangelism and the type of challenges it presents to the church. In my critique I have chosen to use analogies that have missiological significance in as much as they relate to existing theological or biblical models. These models are merely prisms I use to analyse the televangelistic phenomena and are thus not an end in themselves. However, I have personally coined some models as an exploration of new tools or concepts in extending new knowledge and debate in missiological thinking; that is, unless proven otherwise.

The ‘church without walls’

Until the coming of the Christian Television, Church practice was confined within the walls of each denomination. What happened in there only attendees knew. Modern Christian broadcasting has, proverbially, ‘torn the temple curtain’ and has exposed the Church to the outside world. This compares well with the image on Jonker’s (1969) book cover, *Leve de Kerk*, on which two church buildings are depicted; one a medieval church building representing a closed, rigid and cold structure with no human movement into and out of it, and another a modern ‘church’ structure with broken walls and a crib of ‘little Jesu’ is visible from the outside. It is also accessible to the human traffic, apparently busy with their daily chores. This scenario, I suppose, suggests a ‘window’ whereby lovers and enemies of the church can have a view of internal affairs of the church. Jesus’ ministry, generally, was a ‘church without walls’ (cf. Churchwwalls 2019 and Churchwithoutwalls 2019)²³. Wherever he went, throngs of people followed and gathered around him (Matt. 4:25; Mark 3:7-9 Biblica, New International Version)²⁴. These included his adversaries, the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Scribes who most of the time tried to find fault with him (Mark 8:11, Matt. 22:34ff, Mark 7:5). Without walls, Jesus was exposed

²³ This concept has taken ground locally (e.g. in Boksburg, https://web.facebook.com/churchwwalls/?_rdc=1&_rdr) and abroad (e.g. Houston, TX, <https://churchwithoutwalls.org/>)

²⁴ Please Note: Unless otherwise stated, all Biblical text references are sourced online using the Biblica, New International Version (NIV) at <https://www.biblegateway.com/> (Accessed 19/5/2019 - 19/9/2019).

to ‘touch Jesus’ for healing urge (Mark 5:25ff). Even where walls existed, they were broken down. A patient was let down a dismantled roof (Luke 5:17ff). Similarly, televangelism has broken down church walls and has exposed the Jesus preached by televangelists. Notwithstanding the negativity it has generated, it has worked hugely to the advantage of televangelists who have drawn massive viewers to their meetings, unfortunately, to the detriment of mainline churches.

The Church has Come ‘Home’ to Stay

There is a traditional understanding of the ‘house church’ according to the New Testament church (Rom. 16:3, 5; Col. 4:15) and a recent phenomenon of Small Christian Communities (Kleissle, LeBert & McGuinness 2003) or Basic Christian Communities (Bissonnette 1976). Christian broadcasting has broken both modes and have come up with what I call the ‘virtual church’ (Roberts 2009)²⁵. Participation in church worship, including offering, albeit remotely, is now become a reality for the ‘church shy’ or those incapacitated by ill health or any other reason. The ‘home’ has assumed a sacred space where believers can experience religious aura or church critics view disparagingly, in the comfort of their homes (cf. Mark 2:1ff).

Diversified Church

At the press of a button, viewers can ‘move’ from one form of church practice to another. Churches and preachers represent different forms of spirituality. They are modelled according to specific traditions and orientations, which have also evolved over time. Visual impressions created by televangelists have had a strong impact on viewers, thus attracting many according to their likings. Unfortunately, some footages are rehearsed stunts with the purpose to deceive²⁶. Kgatle (2017) also critically engages these gimmicks by televangelists and calls for discernment. Jesus’ ministry also experienced foreign

²⁵ This concept as argued by Roberts (2009) has mostly applied to the internet. This has become even more apparent with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown restrictions in SA.

²⁶ Prophet Bushiri has been accused of such gimmicks, e.g. ‘calling fire from heaven’ (2019a) and ‘claiming the visual presence of angels’ (2019b).

admiration and adversarial competition. His disciples once envied John the Baptist's ministry (Luke 11:1ff) but were incensed by another copycat ministry that invoked Jesus' name to cast out demons (Mark 9:38ff). Jesus' wise reply was, 'for whoever is not against us is for us' (Mark 9.40). Jesus' response is a call for discernment. When viewers are inundated with a plethora of televangelistic ministries they need to know the essence of their bearings and theological anchorage.

Spirituality of Churches Placed on the Judgement Scales

Religions, Christianity in particular, express different types of spirituality. Cannon (1994:321) has identified six types of spirituality that influence Christian faith and action, namely 1) sacred rite; 2) right action; 3) devotion; 4) shamanic meditation; 5) meditative contemplation; and 6) wisdom. For instance, ministries inclined to 'right action' may put heavy emphasis on 'holy life' or 'righteousness' and would openly condemn sinful life. This is evident in the preaching of Pastor Mukhuba cited above. In light of the above viewers are thus exposed to a range of spiritualities. This is enriching for faith and practice. It does not even require the viewer to desert his/her own church.

Participation in the 'Services of other Churches'

Televangelists are aware of the power and influence of the electronic media. They speak and act accordingly, looking beyond the audience in front of them. They intentionally address the viewers at home, even inviting them to 'touch the screen' as they pray, or to fetch a glass of water upon which they would pray²⁷. This voluntary participation enables viewers to do those things that agree with their reason and faith of the moment, even if their churches might be opposed to them. This 'freedom of religion' is what restrictive churches cannot contain. Jesus' ministry created a similar context. In John 9.22f, the man who received sight from Jesus and his parents feared excommunication from synagogue leaders for participating in Jesus' ministry. Participation in televangelists' ministries goes further to include making offerings to them by electronic or other means, of which banking details are placed on the screen.

²⁷ This is especially the practice of the Universal Church of God televangelists (as seen on e.TV, 16/5/2017).

Church-planting Re-modelled

Christian TV Broadcasting has introduced new methods of Church planting.

The Virtual Church

As hinted above, the virtual church, also called ‘internet church’, is a very recent phenomenon. ‘Virtual’ means ‘(1) very close to being something without actually being it; (2) existing or occurring on computers or on the Internet (Anon 2019). Therefore, ‘virtual’ is viewed as something that exists, but in a hypothetical or unorthodox form. There is a great measure of fluidity, as opposed to something concrete and structural. In the same manner, many believers who have testified at the services of televangelists attest to committed attendance to their services. But some, like the late Pastor Tshifiwa Irene (Ramashia) of World Restoration Service, never opened a church with an address, as she herself claimed to belong to the church of Rev. Dr. Madzingo (Mzansistories 2019). Pastor Oyakhilome (popularly known as Pastor Chris) claims to have several church branches in many countries across the globe (Halon 2018) but has recently initiated the Christ Embassy Virtual Church, which is internet based (CEVirtualChurch 2019). Similarly, the Hillsong Church South Africa has an internet-based church, but this church model is a combination of Internet, TV and actual Church. For instance, its church that meets at the Sinoville branch²⁸, City of Tshwane, is often linked to the Cape Town branch by internet by means of a simulcast broadcast. Sometimes all the branches in South Africa are linked virtually to a live sermon of the Senior Pastor, Brian Houston, who is in Australia, by TV and Internet. This means that the ‘virtual’ members become real only when the televangelist holds church service close by. Jesus’ virtuality became real when the Centurion sends the ‘healing word’ to his home to ‘touch’ the ailing servant (Luke 7:1-10). Not only that, but Jesus’ virtuality during his earthly ministry was something difficult to contain by the disciples, because sometimes he was to them like a ghost (Matt. 14:26). This was even so with the post-resurrection Jesus (John 20:19, 27; Luke 24:40-43). Televangelists make Jesus more real and active in the life of the believers than perhaps some pastors in the mainline churches²⁹.

²⁸ My daughter and son-in-law are members and attend at this Sinoville branch.

²⁹ Cf. The debate of Geisler and Howe (1992) on the logic, possibilities or impossibilities of Jesus’ ‘supernatural’ body.

The Drifting Church

This ‘church construct’ happens when viewers of Christian TV broadcasts continuously move between worship meetings of various televangelists without making them their home. This nomadic behaviour is prompted by a ‘seeking spirit’ whose needs are fulfilled at any of them. Often it is occasioned by the claims of testimonies of those who claim healing or attainment of their needs at the one or other televangelist. Jesus’ ministry was a ‘drifting church’; hence his response to an aspiring follower, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Matt. 18:19f, NIV). It is a church with no address, shape, size or reliable description. Pastors dealing with this phenomenon are always in bewilderment like a person viewing a hologram or phantom. It is before your eyes, but is neither tangible, nor does it disappear someday like a mist (John 6:66, NIV). The benefits of such a church are often temporal and seasonal; seasonal, because they remain attracted to televangelists for as long as they benefit from their ministries. That is why televangelists are forever devising means and strategies to keep these ‘members’ hooked to them³⁰. This often baffles other churches, because they are confronted with members who are intermittently present and not fully committed and functional.

The Lava Church

This phenomenon is a product of a process of fluidity and solidification. As viewers of the Christian channels are attracted to advertised evangelistic meetings, they get attracted to specific televangelistic ministries and follow these wherever they go and attend its meetings, wherever possible. This simulates hot lava that flows while still hot and naturally solidifies when it cools down. Then it finally sets into a permanent feature of its geographical destination. Many viewers who were enticed to televangelistic events have finally settled with then as new congregations or churches. For example, when Pastor Chris Oyakhilome started his Christ Embassy church in South Africa, many were attracted to his ‘Night of Bliss’ (Ngwenya 2011) meetings that started at the FNB Stadium in January 2011, and subsequent meetings at the

³⁰ Bishop Makamu of ‘Rea Tsotella’ fame stated in his ‘I AM Bishop Makamu’ advertisement that today church growth is about the business strategy you employ (2019).

Johannesburg Stadium. The stadiums were filled to capacity and many people were turned away. The precursor to these meetings were the amazing but controversial³¹ ‘miracles’, which were televised on Christian channels. After these meetings, several Christ Embassy congregations were established in major cities of Gauteng. The lava effect has been evident with several televangelists who used their TV programmes as an effective ‘church-planting’ method. Biblically, when the Jewish temple authorities beset the newly-born church it was scattered far and wide. These refugees, once they arrived at places of safety, continued to exercise their faith forming new churches in diaspora (Acts 11:19ff, NIV). The ‘lava syndrome’ continues to deal a deadly blow to the existence of mainline churches as they bleed profusely to members who resettle in churches of televangelists.

‘The Church is dead, long live the Church’³²

Since the advent of Christian TV broadcasting there has been sustained outcries from the mainline churches because of their loss of members. Many churches have had to rationalise their services and church buildings, as services that were initially well attended became woefully reduced. This has become a death blow both to the life of the churches and their resources, which depended on affluent and numerically strong membership. Furthermore, young people who found the neo-Charismatic worship style of the churches run by televangelists very appealing, despite all controversies raised by their parents and critics, left their ‘parental churches’ to join the new-styled churches in

³¹ ‘Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa ruled that local television channel e.TV must withdraw all Christ Embassy Church advertisements claiming that Oyakhilome can faith-heal HIV. This was followed by the Treatment Action Campaign successfully lodging a complaint with Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) against Oyakhilome after a member whom he claimed had been healed by Oyakhilome died of HIV/Aids-related illness (Vena 2011).

³² Borrowed from the ‘the king is dead, long live the king’: The old has gone, replaced by the new. The phrase originated on the death of Charles VI (Le Roi est mort. Vive le Roi!, 1422) and was repeated for a number of French kings, most dramatically at the death of Louis XIV. In English it dates only from the mid-1800s but was soon transferred to other events (Farlex, Inc. 2022).

droves³³. Hence Vaters (2016) reprimands, ‘Jesus told us to show the world we’re his disciples. Not by putting on a better Sunday morning show, or by making higher quality movies. And certainly not by sticking with the old, stale Sunday morning show, either’. This explains why mainline churches have decried televangelism as killing the ‘true’ Church. If Jesus Christ’s declaration that even the ‘gates of hell shall not prevail over it’ (Matt. 16:18), it stands to question how televangelists would then ‘kill’ the Church.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Rounding off the Hypotheses

I wish to affirm, *firstly*, my first hypothesis that televangelism can be directly attributed to Jesus’ prophecy to the apostles. ‘Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father’ (John 14:12). The impact of the Christian TV broadcasting in all spheres of the society cannot be denied. The advent of the Holy Spirit in the Apostolic era was one major source of power and explosion towards the mission of the Church in spreading the Gospel. The advent of television and its use in spreading the Gospel is another important landmark in the epochs of Jesus Christ’s walk with the church throughout the ages (Matt. 28:20). It has achieved what Christ could not have achieved within the limitations of his bodily sojourn on earth. Christ certainly foresaw this electronic age and its benefits to the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, regarding the second hypothesis, it can be attested that over the years the harvest of Christian TV has been immense. The ‘wheat’ of the harvest has led to the spread of the Good News of God’s Kingdom and the growth of the Church. It is equally true that the ‘tares’ are intertwined with the ‘wheat’ and continue to harm the credibility and the authenticity of the biblical message of salvation. Some televangelists undoubtedly harm the course of the Gospel; hence the CRL Commission’s bid to curb the abuse and rot that has crept into televangelism. There are fears that the South African government may apply restrictions on the Church as in Rwanda (Woods 2008). Should that happen, it is well documented (cf. Workman 2009) that once the State suppresses or persecutes the Church, it often results in a backlash or then the

³³ Traditional outlook pastors criticize the neo-charismatic outlook of the church as just ‘shows’ or ‘show-offs’ (cf. Vaters 2016).

Church is pushed to operate underground, effectively evoking the ‘subversive memory of Christ’ (Arias 1984:67).

Thirdly, I have proposed above that one of the ways of addressing the glaring contradictions posed by televangelism is by ‘Deconstructing and Decolonising church praxis, Retheologising and Reconstructing the Church’. The philosopher, Jacques Derrida (*Britannica* 2019), the originator of the ‘Deconstruction’ theory posits, ‘deconstruction ... consisted of conducting readings of texts looking for things that run counter to the intended meaning or structural unity of a particular text’. We certainly need to analyse what is happening in televangelistic ‘church’ and in the ‘traditional’ church, juxtaposition our findings, in a process akin to decoloniality and get rid of the ‘impurities’³⁴ (Tingini 2017). In fact, Niemandt (2017), in discussing the historical roots of theology of ‘Prosperity Gospel’, concludes that it is ‘a spiritualisation of materiality and celebration of classic symbols of surplus/excess and consumerism’. If we agree with this definition, then many unsuspecting viewers and attendees of televangelists fall victim to this ‘prey Gospel’. Viewers and members, I recommend, must be empowered to ‘self-theologise’³⁵; ‘self’, not as an exclusive privilege of the ‘preacher’, but as prerogative of the ‘ordinary member’ or ‘viewer’ in the sense applied by Gerald West (2015)³⁶ using necessary methods such as used in inculturation and contextualisation³⁷ (Biko, in Maluleke 2007). However, I caution that West’s approach as a ‘grassroots’ activity functions ideally from a ‘group-based’ forum. However, television viewers under emotional enchantment of what they ‘see’ on the screen, might,

³⁴ Christianity flared up under Roman imperialism and it has always been riddled with imperfections, many of which differ from the teachings of Jesus Christ and thus raise the need to decolonize Christianity (cf. Tingini 2017).

³⁵ In addition to the ‘Three-Selves principles of mission, namely, ‘self-governance, self-support and self-propagation’ first articulated by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, David Bosch (1991), among others, proposes that the (African) church need to do ‘self-theologising’.

³⁶ West espouses ‘Contextual Bible Study’ (CBS) where the participant, preferentially, ‘the ‘poor, working-class, and marginalised’ or the viewer (in the case of televangelism) through ‘embodied theology’ applies a ‘see – **judge** [own emphasis] – act’ response.

³⁷ Wendland (2002) states, ‘Theologizing’ speaks of an interplay of the need to ‘de-theologize’, ‘re-contextualize’ and ‘re-theologize’.

on the spur of the moment, lack the instant ‘judgement’ (discernment) required to ‘act’ appropriately especially as regards a well-crafted deception. It is incumbent upon the ‘Church’ to provide ongoing empowerment of believers, especially from those of aggrieved mainline churches³⁸, through guided ‘self-theologising’ seminars³⁹.

Televangelism as a Wake-up call to Mainline Churches

Notwithstanding, mainline churches have done themselves a disservice by not discerning the times in which God is taking the Church into a new season (Luke 12:54ff). They ‘should’ long have discerned the move of the Holy Spirit, ‘to stand where God stands’, as Kritzinger (2014) and Mashau (2018) suggest, not on matters of justice only, but also to be actively involved in the universe through ‘signs and wonders’ in the laying of hands, healing and deliverance of God’s people, breaking the power of Satan and demonic activities and witchcraft, stronghold of poverty and servitude to drugs. Therefore, the Church must open its ‘ears’ and ‘eyes’ to the workings of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2 & 3) in the era of the Fourth Wave of the move of the Holy Spirit (cf. Pawson in Bond I.A.H and Bond J.C. n.d.). Those who regard themselves as well versed or trained in theology, should transcend the rigid walls of their institutions and churches and join Jesus Christ’s salvific and transformative activism among the marginalized and downtrodden, as well as encounter territorial powers and principalities operating in politics, economy, education, religion and many other oppressed spheres of the society, through the same Spirit.

The Way Forward

This research has exposed numerous gaps and untapped areas of research. Possible future areas include how South African televangelism has affected missions locally and abroad. While we have discussed its effect on the Church

³⁸ In fact, Steve Biko, in his challenge to religion, raises ten points which African Christianity has to consider to redress the harm the ‘religion of the White man has done’.

³⁹ For example, the homeless people of the City of Tshwane, with the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at Unisa, have collaborated to publish two volumes using CBS (Mashau & Kritzinger 2014).

broadly, we have not touched on the type of believers or members it has produced. We certainly also need to check the quality of this evangelism in terms of the depth and breadth of its outreach. Lastly, we need to inquire further into the theology that feeds into the practices of televangelists, for instance, the source of their training and praxis methodologies they apply in dealing with the ‘virtual’ church and their ‘tangible’ church.

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