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A Church in the Margins: Reimagining God's Missional Agenda for South African Cities

Thinandavha Derrick Mashau

College of Human Sciences Deanery, University of South Africa, Pretoria 0003, South Africa; mashatd@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

South African cities are marked by deepening social and spatial inequalities that produce exclusion, vulnerability, and contested forms of belonging. In this article, these inequalities are understood as the result of historically entrenched processes of colonialism, apartheid spatial planning, and contemporary economic exclusion that continue to shape urban life. These realities not only shape the socio-historical context of Christian mission but also expose the inadequacy of specific ecclesial forms—such as racially and linguistically differentiated synodical structures, centralised theological training institutions, and the historical distinction between "*kerk*" (church) and "*sending*" (mission), including mission paradigms characterised by a movement from institutional centers to marginalised communities under paternalistic control. This article argues that faithful participation in the *missio Dei*, understood here as the Triune God's redemptive and transformative activity in the world, into which the church is called to participate rather than initiate, requires a reimagined missional ecclesiology shaped in, with, and from the margins. Framed by a broader transforming missiological paradigm and drawing on qualitative literature, this article critically engages key streams within African urban theology, missional ecclesiology, and discourses of power and marginalisation, patriarchy, and ecclesial control to interrogate how churches often reproduce dependency, paternalism, and unequal agency in urban spaces. Using the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSAs) as an illustrative case, this article demonstrates how inherited missionary structures have constrained the theological and missional agency of so-called mission churches—that is, churches established among Black and Coloured communities under conditions of financial, administrative, and theological dependence on historically white "mother churches".

Keywords: missional ecclesiology; church in the margins; *missio Dei*; South African cities; transformation

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1. Introduction

Urbanisation has become one of the most defining realities shaping missiological reflection and ecclesial praxis in Africa (De Beer 2022, p. 213; De Beer 2023, p. 85), particularly in South Africa, where cities continue to bear layered effects of colonialism, apartheid spatial planning, economic exclusion, and social fragmentation (Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024, p. 2). In these urban contexts, poverty, unemployment, migration, homelessness, structural and epistemic violence, gender-based violence, and fractured forms of access and belonging to the city are not peripheral concerns, but realities that shape lived experiences of city dwellers. For the Christian church, these realities raise a pressing missiological question: what kind of ecclesial presence is required if the church is to participate faithfully in the *missio Dei*, understood not as a program of the church, but as God's own mission

of restoration and justice in the world, within South African cities marked by structural marginalisation?

This question is particularly urgent because the church in South Africa has historically occupied an ambiguous position (Vorster 2019, p. 1). On the one hand, sections of the church participated in, or remained complicit with, colonial and apartheid projects by providing theological justification for racial segregation, land dispossession, and unequal social relations. The theological defense of apartheid by sectors within the Dutch Reformed Church tradition, alongside missionary approaches that often reflected paternalistic assumptions regarding race, culture, and civilization, contributed to the legitimization of systems of exclusion and oppression (Amponsah 2013, p. 431; Pillay 2018, p. 1). On the other hand, churches also emerged as sites of resistance and liberation. Ecclesial bodies such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the adoption of the Kairos Document (1985), and the drafting of the Belhar Confession (1986) provided powerful theological critiques of apartheid and mobilised Christian communities toward justice and reconciliation. Furthermore, church leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Beyers Naudé, and Frank Chikane embodied a prophetic Christian witness by challenging state oppression and standing in solidarity with marginalised communities. These contrasting trajectories reveal the contested nature of the church's public presence in South Africa and highlight the need for continual missiological reflection on how the church participates in the *missio Dei* within contexts of inequality, exclusion, or marginality (Mudimeli 2017, p. 1). Recent urban realities suggest that the church's public and prophetic agency, that is, its capacity to discern, speak, and act meaningfully within its socio-political context, is often muted due to structural dependency, institutional centralization, and the limited recognition of contextual and local voices precisely where social and structural transformation is most urgently needed (Mangayi 2022, p. III; Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024, p. 2). The issue, therefore, is not simply whether the church should engage the city, but whether inherited missionary paradigms are adequate for such engagement.

This article argues that specific inherited mission paradigms, especially those structured around a centre-to-margin logic in which a mission is initiated, controlled, and evaluated by institutional centres, have proven inadequate for contemporary urban engagement. These paradigms often manifest in paternalistic oversight by "mother churches," structural dependency of local congregations, and the marginalisation of contextual voices in theological and missional discernment. When this happens, those in the margins remain objects of a mission rather than agents of the *missio Dei*.

2. Methodology

The proposed transformed ecclesiology of a church in the margins is grounded in a broader framework of transforming missiology (Bosch 1991; Mashau 2024). Methodologically, the study draws on contemporary scholarship in African urban theology, missional ecclesiology, public theology, and critical theories of power and marginalisation to interrogate how inherited ecclesial structures and mission paradigms continue to shape the church's participation in the *missio Dei* within South African cities. Rather than separating theological reflection from lived realities, the study adopts an integrative approach that views urban marginalisation as both a socio-historical reality and a theological locus for ecclesial discernment and action. The need for theological reflection in the rapidly urbanizing contexts characterised by poverty, migration, exclusion, and inequality is not optional (De Beer 2022; Mangayi 2022). And therefore, particular attention is given to contemporary discussions on contextual theologising, contextual discernment, and participatory approaches to theological reflection and mission practice within African contexts (Nagy 2022; De Beer 2022).

Within this broader literature-based design, the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) is used as a historically grounded illustrative case through which to examine the intersections of mission, power, ecclesial authority, dependency, theological formation, and urban marginalisation. The RCSA's historical development reflects persisting tensions between church and mission (*kerk* and *sending*), centrelised and de-centrelised (localized) forms of theological authority, and the continuing struggle toward ecclesial unity and self-determination in post-apartheid South Africa. The purpose is not to be exhaustive, but to provide an interpretive lens through which broader questions of missional transformation and ecclesial agency are examined.

In addition to this literature-based analysis, the article includes New Life City Church (NLCC), Sunnyside, in the City of Tshwane as a practice-based illustration derived from the researcher's participatory observation. This does not constitute a fully fledged empirical case based on formal ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or survey data. Rather, it is a demonstration of how local churches may participate contextually in the *missio Dei* through practices that seek transformation, justice, and human development in the city (De Beer 2023; Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024). And therefore, the inclusion of NLCC is not based on its social programs alone, but as an illustration of how a local church can integrate worship, discipleship, social engagement, economic empowerment, and community participation within a missional framework.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this article is organised around five analytically distinct but interrelated categories that function as interpretive lenses, i.e., marginalisation, a church in the margins, the missional, church agency, and transforming missiology.

3.1. Marginalisation

Marginalisation refers to processes within urban spaces through which individuals and communities are excluded from full participation in the life of the city (Le Roux et al. 2018, p. 3). In this article, "margins" specifically refer to urban contexts characterised by socioeconomic exclusion, spatial injustice, and vulnerability, such as informal settlements, inner-city migrant communities, and historically marginalised townships, rather than rural or purely geographical peripheries. Such exclusion is visible in lived experiences of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, migration, gender-based violence, racism, cultural and linguistic femicides, disability, and limited access to the city and its resources, and displaced and trafficked women and children, among others (Mangoedi and Moroka 2014, p. 89).

Maginalisation in South African cities is not only spatial, economic, racial, or gendered, but also linguistic. Language functions as a powerful marker of identity, belonging, social participation, and access to power. It can either facilitate inclusion or reinforce exclusion in multilingual urban contexts like the City of Tshwane. Linguistic marginalisation occurs when individuals or communities are denied meaningful participation in ecclesial life, theological discourse, leadership structures, or worship practices because their languages are rendered secondary, invisible, or undesirable. And therefore, the recognition of linguistic identities and voices of those in the margins should form part of legitimate sources of the recovery of agency of these communities and their participation in the *missio Dei*.

Yet, marginalisation is not understood as the site of deprivation but as spaces of critical praxis (Radford 2017, p. 18). The lived experiences of those in the margins, 'crowded and complicated' (Nadar 2007, p. 294), are engaged as knowledge generators that seek to redefine the positionality of the church as one that emerges in the margins and redefine its praxis as a transforming agent of the *missio Dei*. Therefore, the margins are not only contested spaces where issues of power, inequality, and the vulnerability of African com-

munities can be exposed and contested (Klaasen 2018, p. 1), but also a representation of contested presence, resistance, and the demand for justice.

3.2. A Church in the Margins

The concept 'a church in the margins' refers not only to proximity to the poor, but to an ecclesial identity formed within contexts of exclusion, a mode of discernment rooted in the lived realities of marginalised, and a shift from being an object of mission to becoming a subject and agent of God's mission. It is asserted, '[T]he church is called to be in the margins to articulate the mind of God on these issues and to offer a counter-narrative to the dominant culture that birthed these margins' (Christian 2019, p. 53).

3.3. Missional

In this article, "missional" refers to a mode of being church in which the church's identity, structure, and practice are determined by its participation in God's ongoing work in the world. Rather than extending its institutional reach, the church discerns and joins what God is already doing within specific contexts (Bosch 1991; Verster 2022).

3.4. Church Agency

Church agency refers to the recognized and enacted capacity of local congregations and their members to initiate, shape, and sustain theological reflection and missional practice within their own contexts, without dependence on external control structures. Consequently, the incarnational nature of the *missio Dei* becomes more visible in and through the church as a transformative agent of change (Pillay 2017, p. 1; Baron and Maponya 2020, p. 3). The inclusion of NLCC is significant because it provides a practical illustration of how such an agency can be embodied within the City of Tshwane's urban setting.

3.5. Transforming Missiology

Reimagining God's missional agenda in marginalised South African cities requires a transformative missional ecclesiology that shifts the church from centre-driven toward embodied participation in the *missio Dei* from within the margins. A transformative mission recovers church agency among those historically treated as objects of mission by affirming the priesthood of all believers as active participants of God's redemptive and justice-oriented work (Baron and Maponya 2020). This agency is incarnational and prophetic, standing where God stands in solidarity with the poor and marginalised while confronting structures that sustain inequality, dependency, and exclusion (Pillay 2017). Transformation, in this instance, is thus both ecclesial and social, calling the church itself to continual reform as it is shaped by the realities it seeks to serve '*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*' (Koffeman 2015, p. 3). Within this framework, mission in African cities becomes holistic, addressing spiritual, economic, gendered, spatial, and ecological injustices as inseparable dimensions of God's redemptive activity (De Beer 2023; Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024). Consequently, a church in the margins emerges not as a recipient of mission but as a credible, contextual, and transformative agent of the *missio Dei* within the city.

4. South African Urban Context and Structural Marginalisation

Being and doing church in the margins must be situated within the rapidly urbanising and deeply unequal reality of South African cities. In 2024, more than 63% of South Africans were living in urban areas, a figure expected to rise steadily as cities continue to absorb migrants from the margins and elsewhere from the global communities (Statista 2026; De Beer 2022).

However, it should be noted that South African cities present a profound theological challenge for the church in the aftermath of colonialism and apartheid; hence this study.

Rapid urbanisation has not translated into spatial justice or democratic belonging, but has instead intensified what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2020) describes as the enduring structures of coloniality, where race, power, and space continue to determine who may flourish and who is rendered marginal or disposable. Within this reality, cities function as postcolonial contact zones in which poverty, homelessness, migration, gendered violence, ecological crisis, and informal labour are normalised features of urban life rather than exceptional failures. Mbembe's (2021) notion of necropolitics offers a disturbing lens through which to view these urban realities, revealing cities as sites where power governs through abandonment and exclusion.

It is in this context that theological interlocution remains not only critical (Boesak 2015), but also assists in unmasking how inherited ecclesial mission paradigms continue to undermine the agency of those in the margins by reproducing dependency, inferiority, and silence among those whose lives are shaped from the margins (Biko 1978). In his critique, Vuyani Vellem names the South African urban Christianity as having been captured by the empire. Women theologians have added another layer to it by unmasking the gender dynamics of patriarchy that continuously perpetuate violence and marginalisation against women. Masenya's (2012) Bosadi theology and LenkaBula's (2018) ethics of responsibility reveal how dominant theological frameworks often spiritualise pain while ignoring the embodied realities of Black women navigating violence, economic exclusion, and invisible labour in urban spaces. It is within these contexts of marginality in the city where the credibility of the church's missional witness is most visibly tested (Ballard 2016; Klaasen 2018).

5. A Changing Missionary Paradigm

The Christian missionary enterprise has always been framed within the context of the missionary church's efforts to engage people from and in the margins. It is opined that this engagement has always been characterised by a movement from 'the centre to the periphery, from the privileged to the marginalised' (Hewitt 2017, p. 104). Historically, the Christian mission in southern Africa has been characterised by movement from 'the centre' to 'margins,' and such a centre was defined institutionally, geographically, racially, financially, and theologically. However, what is disturbing and remains a focal point in terms of the current discourse is that those in the margins remain(ed) objects of the missionary enterprise of the so-called mother church. Writing in the context of the Calvinistic brand of the Reformed faith and identity, Hewitt (2017, p. 109) identified this as a 'missio-authoritarian approach.' He asserts that '[t]he poor were not seen so much as active participants/partners in God's mission in Christ, but passive objects/recipients in need of his teachings on God's favour' (2017, p. 109).

The foregoing represents the old missionary paradigm, and its inadequacies or deficiencies can be seen in at least the following four interrelated distortions:

First, the marriage between the empire and Christian mission (Amponsah 2013). This, according to Kim (2019, p. 304), 'brought into the 'mission field' the 'baggage' of Western military conquest and economic and (assumed) cultural and intellectual superiority.' This became a breeding ground for racial hierarchies, paternalistic habits, and dependency. The centre became more of the bearer of theological maturity and a model to be replicated by margins in areas of doctrine, institutional form, leadership patterns, and cultural assumptions. In such a framework, the voice of the margins was not trusted and included in missionary conversations.

Second, homogenous and segregated ecclesial forms of ministry in terms of race, culture, language, and gender, with patriarchy rearing its ugly head in terms of the marginalisation, domination, and relegation of women to the kitchen and childbearing, while excluding them from church leadership (Mashau 2020, p. 51). This has led the church, both from the

centre and the margins, to shy from actively and effectively participating in resolving social ills of our times, including those in the city (Mkhize 2024, p. 1).

Third, institutionalisation, professionalisation, and clericalisation of church ministry and mission to the exclusion of the body of Christ in terms of their royal, priestly, and prophetic calling (Mashau 2024, p. 1). The participatory agency of the priesthood of all believers was ignored in favour of institutional control through mission commissions and ordained missionaries (Franklin 2025, p. 4).

Fourth, dependency syndrome became an entrenched culture among churches in the margins. It is important to distinguish between dependency and Christian solidarity. While sharing of resources within the body of Christ is a vital expression of koinonia, dependency refers here to structurally entrenched conditions in which local churches are unable to exercise theological, financial, and missional self-determination. Writing in the context of reformed churches in South African cities and townships, Mutavhatsindi and Meiring (2014, p. 2) assert: '[m]ost of their resources came from outside, from the missionaries, and the members of the new churches relied on the missionaries for virtually everything: for the ministers' salaries, for church maintenance, as well as for material support (food and clothes) for congregants.' Consequently, their voices were either swallowed, muted, or silenced, while their identity remained a replica of the missionary church. It is for this reason that there are still churches in South African cities that still mimic the colonial, imperial, or apartheid church.

The foregoing issues have always led to creative tension between imperial and indigenous churches, between churches in the centre and those in the margins, and between privileged and less privileged churches. They have also exacerbated the ongoing power struggle, but there is a need for a changing paradigm within churches from the margins.

It is within this understanding that the notion of 'a church in the margins' is reimagined. While the missiological discourse around the missio-authoritarian approach as discussed above will always be subsumed by the colonial power matrix and be guided by the evolution of mission to the margins to embrace other dynamics as 'the church on the margins,' 'the church at the margins,' 'the church in the margins,' and 'the church from the margins' among others. The choice and use of the notion 'a church in the margins' is guided by the need to move beyond the definition of church as homogeneous ministry with the ability to monopolise the so-called mission fields, objects of mission, and their indigenous churches. A church in the margins postulates not only the struggle to shrug off the imperial, colonial, and apartheid past in South Africa, but also the need to define churches from the margins as having the same missional status as those that planted and established them. In essence, these churches should also be seen as centre churches in their respective localities.

6. A Case for the Reformed Churches in South Africa

6.1. Historical Mission Paradigm and Ecclesial Self-Understanding

To concretise the foregoing missiological discourse on the intersection of mission, power, and marginalisation, the RCSA serves as an illustrative ecclesiological case to critique these phenomena in the South African urban spaces. However, it does not constitute a universal prescription. The RCSA were established in 1859 in Rustenburg, and they emerged largely from settler communities of Dutch, Huguenot, and German descent (Kim 2019, p. 306; Zgambo 2022, p. 5).

Historically, the RCSA has always been conscious of its missionary calling and mandate from its inception (Kim 2019, p. 306). Influenced and shaped by the colonial and apartheid power matrices, it embraced a missionary praxis which embodied a missio-authoritarian paradigm—a movement from the ecclesial centre to the margins. While it

consistently affirmed the theological centrality of the mission approach, its practical outworking reflected a structural differentiation between *kerk* (church) and *sending* (mission). The latter was primarily directed at black and coloured people on the margins of urban spaces where they lived.

The foregoing demonstrates that the RCSA's historical development and ecclesial self-understanding were deeply entangled with colonial and apartheid power matrices, which shaped their theological imagination, missional posture, and spatial location within South African society. Hence, in their traditional conceptualisation of mission, distinction was made between evangelism and mission. Evangelism was considered to be work done among white Afrikaans who had backslidden. In contrast, mission was understood as work among black and coloured communities, often located in homelands, townships, and peri-urban spaces of South African cities. This approach led to the establishment of so-called mission churches based on language, culture, race, and geographical location; as a result, four synods were formed in line with these defined binaries, i.e., Synod Potchefstroom for the White Afrikaans, Synod Suidland/Southland for the coloured/mixed race, Synod Middellande/Mindlands for the IsiZulu and SeTshwana Speaking people, and Synod Soutpansberg for the Tshivenda and XiTsonga Speaking people (Ramantswana 2015, p. 1).

6.2. Dependency, Agency, and Missional Authority

Although the RCSA formally embraced and affirmed mission principles of self-sufficiency (financial independence), self-governing (constitution of a church as an independent entity with its own elders and deacons), and self-propagating (the right to do mission and plant new churches), in practice, so-called mission churches remained financially and administratively dependent on established churches and their mission partners (Kim 2019, p. 309). Intentionally or otherwise, this resulted in the paternalistic missionary approach and structural dependency. This affected the agency and missional authority of the founded churches, as demonstrated in the following areas, namely:

- Paternalistic missionary language with the established churches known as mother-churches, while the newly established churches were known as younger churches.
- The infrastructure in the established mission stations was sponsored by the established churches, including church buildings, schools, hospitals, and community gardens. This included the salaries of missionaries and evangelists.
- Theological training for black and coloured communities was done in a separate space, as one intended for white Afrikaans-speaking churches in Potchefstroom, and cannot remain detached from questions of language and agency. The Hammanskraal Theological School was established to train black pastors but remained in the control of white churches; hence the notion '*ons skool vir julle*' (our school for you) (Ramantswana 2015, p. 6). This affected the issue of self-theologising among black churches in particular. The critique offered here should not be interpreted as a rejection of formal theological training or theological seminaries, a traditional practice deeply entrenched in Reformed history. The concern is rather that, within certain missionary paradigms, theological education became concentrated in structures that unintentionally reinforced patterns of dependency and limited contextual theological agency. This concern has surfaced repeatedly within debates in Reformed Churches in South Africa regarding self-theologising, ecclesial autonomy, and the enduring legacy of missionary paternalism (Ramantswana 2015; Kim 2019; Zgambo 2022).

The foregoing not only points to a missionary deficiency regarding the identified issues but also reflects deeper ecclesiological assumptions about agency, authority, and the theological identity and maturity of founded churches (Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024).

6.3. Ecclesial Segregation and Urban Marginality

The institutional differentiation of synodical structures along racial, linguistic, cultural, and spatial lines points to a deeper and more complex ecclesial unity within the RCSA. This, in the main, affects the missional identity of local churches and perpetuates creative missional tensions and ecclesial praxes that are difficult to reconcile with the transformative agenda of the *missio Dei*, namely:

- Synod Suidland faced natural extinction in the democratic dispensation, having last met for its twenty-third time in 1989.
- Synod Soutpansberg rejected the proposal for structural unity and continued to operate as an independent entity within the RCSA. They continuously establish and grow new churches within the very same urban spaces where the General Synod of the RCSA operates (Mutavhatsindi and Meiring 2014, p. 1).
- Synod Potchefstroom and Synod Midlands opted for structural unity, which was realised in 2009 but remains homogeneous in outlook and ecclesial praxis, with congregations still gathering along racial, cultural, and linguistic binaries (Baloyi 2018, p. 3).

The historical organisation of the RCSA along linguistic lines illustrates how language has functioned as both a unifying and dividing force within ecclesial life. While language-based structures often emerged from practical concerns regarding communication and cultural identity, they simultaneously reinforced patterns of separation that reflected broader colonial and apartheid social arrangements. Consequently, language became one of the dimensions through which ecclesial marginality was experienced and reproduced, leading to creative barriers to mutual participation, shared theological discourse, and structural unity within this denomination.

However, as a result of rapid urbanisation in South African cities, accompanied by demographic shifts driven by urban migrant patterns, we are witnessing the emergence of multiethnic and, in some instances, multicultural congregations within the RCSA. While it is noted with great appreciation that some Afrikaans-speaking congregations within the RCSA opened their facilities for these ministry opportunities, they came with their own challenges, including questions about ownership, belonging, and ecclesial authority within the denomination (Zgambo 2022). Recent theological studies argue that these arrangements entrenched unequal access to power, voice, and theological recognition, particularly within urban congregations occupying historically white ecclesial spaces (Baloyi 2018, p. 1). Issues of perpetual paternalism, dependency, and limited or muted autonomy continue to manifest.

6.4. Emerging Urban Congregations and Missional Reorientation

Against the backdrop of the historically centre-driven missionary paradigm of the RCSA, some emerging urban congregations signal a gradual yet significant reorientation in missional ecclesiology and practice. These congregations illustrate a shift from mission to the margins toward mission from within the margins, thereby disrupting patterns of dependency, paternalism, and limited ecclesial agency (De Beer 2023).

NLCC is not presented as an ideal or unique congregation, nor are its social ministries assumed to be exceptional within the broader Reformed tradition. Reformed churches have long engaged in diaconal ministry, social responsibility, and community development. Rather, NLCC serves as a limited illustrative example of how a local church may negotiate a transition from historically inherited patterns of dependency toward greater contextual missional agency. While formally connected to the RCSA through classis structures, NLCC demonstrates increasing local autonomy in shaping its missional praxis. This is evident in its integrated ministries, including early childhood development, student food relief, small-business support initiatives, and ministries to the homeless, among others.

However, its significance lies in the theological integration of worship, discipleship, community participation, and local leadership within its understanding of participation in the *missio Dei*.

Therefore, what differentiates NLCC from traditional mission congregations is not its proximity to the margins, but its missional self-understanding and praxis. With the participatory model of the priesthood of all believers in mission, NLCC is becoming an agent of God's mission in transforming urban spaces like Tshwane and therefore functions as a credible example of a 'church in the margins.' Significantly, NLCC has become a church that has actively participated in efforts to plant new multiethnic churches in Wapadrant, Brooklyn, and Andeon.

NLCC's integrated missional praxis further reflects a holistic understanding of mission as participation in the *missio Dei* by being the hands and feet of Christ in its immediate context and surrounding areas. Alongside its liturgical and discipleship life, the congregation has established social ministries that respond to urban marginalisation. These include early childhood development through New Life Childcare Centre, educational support through the New Life Aftercare Program, a foodbank serving students from surrounding tertiary institutions—although at a limited scale—and a ministry to homeless folks, even helping some reconnect with their families. In its efforts to assist the unemployed affected by job losses resulting from COVID-19, NLCC, in partnership with a member who is a businessman, launched economic empowerment initiatives and supported at least 15 small businesses. Such practices demonstrate an ecclesiology rooted in incarnation and solidarity rather than charity and control.

7. Reimagining God's Missional Agenda

Reimagining God's missional agenda in the context of marginalised and globalised South African cities requires a decisive shift in ecclesiological imagination and praxis. A 'church in the margins' functions not only as an extension of centre-driven mission projects, as reflected in the traditional missionary paradigm of the RCSA, but also as an embodiment of the *missio Dei*. This calls for a radical shift in terms of the church's identity and agency. Recent African missiological scholars are helping us reimagine how best the church can bring and actively work with God in the margins in efforts to discern and participate in what God is already doing there (De Beer 2022; Mangayi 2022). This article seeks to propose the following critical points of such reimagination:

7.1. Missional

Instead of mission to the margins and taking the approach of engaging in a mission project where a missionary from the sending church takes the lead, a church in the margins should be missional in its ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis. According to Mashau (2014, p. 4), 'A missional church seeks to encourage all members of the church (evangelists, educators, counsellors, environmentalists, businesspeople, and advocates for social transformation in urban spaces, among others) to serve in all forms of mission engagement where God has called and placed them in this life.' While elements of this approach resonate with longstanding Christian traditions (e.g., Acts and Pauline ecclesiology), this article argues that their rearticulation within the specific urban, post-apartheid South African context constitutes a necessary contextual intensification rather than an entirely new paradigm. Therefore, missional ecclesiology in contemporary African cities emphasises the whole people of God as agents of mission within their homes, workplaces, streets, and digital spaces (Verster 2022; Ndereba 2023). It is for this reason that incarnational solidarities with the poor in urban spaces are proposed as a model of transformative ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis that can transform urban situations and marginalisation irreversibly (De Beer 2023, p. 95).

7.2. Contextual: Faith Seeking Expression Within Lived Urban Realities

Historically, missionary Christianity in Africa often approached African culture and religiosity through categories shaped by Eurocentric assumptions regarding civilization, rationality, and religious superiority (Simango 2018, p. 3). As a result, many African cultural expressions, including communal rites of passage, extended family structures, indigenous systems of social solidarity, and traditional understandings of community and personhood, were often interpreted as undesirable to Christian faith. While there is always a need to critically evaluate the African culture theologically, the demonisation of African cultural resources contributed to forms of epistemic marginalisation that denied African communities the opportunity to participate fully in the theological task of interpreting the gospel within their own contexts.

Therefore, a transformative missional ecclesiology requires moving beyond the binary of uncritical acceptance or outright rejection of African culture and religiosity. The task to reimagine God's missional agenda does not only require a contextual ecclesiology, but also a critical engagement with African urban realities shaped by historical dispossession and marginalisation, spatial injustice, economic disparities, gender-based violence, and digital disruption (Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024; De Beer 2023). Consequently, contextualisation should give rise to and recognition of epistemic justice in mission, advocacy for local knowledge, African spiritualities, and contextual theological reflection as efforts to respond to current missional challenges. Theologising from below and efforts to amplify voices from the margins become more critical in missiology today (Nagy 2022; Mashau 2022). In this sense, a church in the margins becomes a space where biblical faith speaks meaningfully into housing insecurity and homelessness, unemployment, GBV, migration trauma, and urban marginalisation in all areas of life. Consequently, reimagining God's missional agenda in South African cities requires a form of theological education that emerges from the margins, values multilingual and contextual knowledge, cultivates local ecclesial agency, and equips communities to participate as co-discerners, co-creators, and co-workers in the *missio Dei*. This approach will enable local communities to articulate Christian faith in ways that are both authentically African and faithfully Christian.

7.3. Transformative Agency: Participating in God's Justice-Oriented Mission

A church in the margins embodies a transformative agenda by serving as the agent of the *missio Dei*. In this instance, it intentionally aligns itself with God's justice, compassion, and renewal in the here and now. Instead of the church becoming a site of mission and charity of the sending or missionary church, a church in the margins is called to stand where God stands in the efforts to fight for justice and a just society (Mashau 2022, p. 4). Efforts to stand where God stands include, among others, 'standing for God,' 'standing for the truth,' 'standing beyond known borders,' 'standing in solidarity with those in the margins,' and 'standing for justice' (Mashau 2018, p. 138–40). As much as the eschatological dimension is an essential part of being church, '. . . which inaugurates and stimulates critique and transformation of the existing order of things' (Lovett 1972, p. 290), the agenda to change the here and now is even more critical.

The foregoing transformation agenda is both personal and structural, particularly the missional efforts to challenge global institutions and systems that perpetuate exclusion, marginalisation, and inequality. Therefore, mission in African cities should become more holistic and address issues such as social justice, advocacy, economic empowerment, and healing in the urban context where city dwellers continuously face economic, gendered, and political injustices, among others (Kabongo 2022; Prinsloo and Dreyer 2024).

7.4. Ecumenical and Networked: Towards Mutuality and Shared Witness

Finally, reimagining God's missional agenda requires a renewed commitment to ecumenical and networked partnerships. Therefore, churches in the margins cannot afford the silo mentality that misses the missional ecclesial praxis, nor can they afford to remain dependent on so-called mother churches. These churches must aspire to missional partnerships that are not characterised by paternalism but by mutuality, reciprocity, shared vulnerability, and theological humility (Mutavhatsindi and Meiring 2014, p. 2).

In the post-COVID-19 and digital transformation era, there is also a need for hybrid and networked ecclesial expressions that transcend denominational, spatial, and technological frontiers (Ndereba 2023). Therefore, a church in the margins participates in God's mission collaboratively—globally and online, while resisting hierarchies of superiority and inferiority that have historically undermined authentic partnership and shared witness.

8. Conclusions

Framed within the transforming missiology and using a metaphor of 'a church in the margins,' and the RCSA as an illustrative case, this article calls for a transformative ecclesiology. It sought to position a church in the margins as an active participant in the *missio Dei*, not only by affirming its agency but also by asserting its missional presence in addressing the urban realities and challenges of power, inequality, vulnerability, and marginalisation in globalised South African cities today.

Using the RCSA as an illustrative case, this article argued that the traditional missionary paradigm of a mission from the centre to the margins perpetuates dependency and limits the agency of so-called mission churches. The example of NLCC demonstrated that emerging churches from the margins offer alternative and life-giving opportunities by embracing a transformative missional ecclesiology. This article argued that churches in the margins become transformative agents of the *missio Dei* when congregational agency, contextual theologising, theological accountability, and social engagement are held together within a participatory missional ecclesiology. In a more practical way, a church in the margins must address interconnected forms of social, linguistic, economic, gendered, spatial, and theological marginalisation. Such a church requires contextual theological education, meaningful dialogue with African religious worldviews, and forms of ecclesial agency that emerge from local and marginalised communities. Ultimately, the reimagined church in the margins is missional, contextual, transformative, self-theologising, and ecumenically oriented.

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