

# MISSIO AFRICANUS

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN MISSIOLOGY

VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 1  
APRIL 2015



ISSN 2059-173X



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**MISSIO DEI:  
AN AFRICAN APPROPRIATION**

**EDITOR: HARVEY C. KWIYANI**

# *Missio Dei: An African Appropriation*

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## **Abstract**

The ‘discovery’ of the concept of *missio Dei* at the 1952 International Missionary Council at Willingen in Germany started a paradigm shift in missiological and theological conversations around the world. It has certainly reinvigorated mission in the West even though most of this missionary work looks very different from that of the twentieth century. Once we begin to understand mission as *missio Dei*, the implications are quite extensive. It is very likely that not even western theology has come to understand it fully. In this essay an attempt is made to situate *missio Dei* in Africa using the Malawian concept of *umunthu*, which means ‘personhood’, but also connotes ‘humanity’. It is argued here that in *umunthu* God is reaching out to humanise the dying world in a way that Africans would understand easily – which potentially makes *umunthu* an African hermeneutical tool for interpreting *missio Dei*.

**Keywords:** African missiology, *missio Dei*, humanisation, *umunthu*.

## **Taking Missio Dei to Africa**

**M**issionally speaking, the world today is living in a very exciting age. This is the season of mission, no matter which part of the globe one is in. Indeed, mission is on the verge of finally becoming a truly six-continent affair. Christians have embraced God’s calling for them to participate in God’s mission in the world, both within their own continents and in other continents as well. The word ‘mission’ itself has become so extremely popular among Christians worldwide that it is in danger of becoming just another Christian buzzword that means everything and nothing at the same time. However, sixty years after the Willingen 1952 IMC conference where it was first thrust into the world missionary scene, *missio Dei* is still a term that is foreign to many non-western Christians. Few have heard the term ‘*missio Dei*’ while even fewer know its meaning. For those who do know the meaning of *missio Dei*, many wonder about its implications for their lives and ministries. This essay attempts to engage with many questions that have been posed by numerous African pastors: What is *missio Dei*? What does it mean for our ecclesiology?

Missiology? Theology? How do we make sense of it in our African context?

In attempting to explore what *missio Dei* means for Africa, this essay concerns itself with three tasks. The first one is to provide some brief background information on the historical development and the theological significance of 'missio Dei' in world Christianity. In this regard, the essay will engage some of the key voices that have appropriated *missio Dei* in the West from 1952 to the present. The second task is to explore the theological implications and limitations of *missio Dei* for African theology. It appears to this writer that to faithfully contextualise *missio Dei* in Africa there is a need to find a starting point that is African; and consequently, that starting point will be different from that of the Willingen 1952 conference. Finally, the third task is to propose a new interpretation of *missio Dei* based on the foundations of the Malawian concept of *umunthu*.

## Missio Dei at Sixty

The resurgence of mission in *world Christianity*, especially within the last fifty years when Majority World Christians have joined the missionary movements of the world, has serious implications for all things Christian. In all parts of the world the academic disciplines of Christian mission, intercultural studies, missiology, and many others related to mission, are, once again, popular in many colleges and seminaries. Mission schools have appeared, almost overnight, in many countries around the globe. Short-term missions are at an all-time high, while the long-term migration of Christians is on the rise. *Mission* has come back. Even in the West where Christianity is in decline, conversations around the mission of the church (e.g. the emerging church and the missional church) have created new energy on how to convert the West. Indeed, according to Alan Roxburgh of the Missional Network, the word 'missional,' which was made popular by the 'Gospel and Our Culture Network 1998' publication, *Missional Church*,<sup>1</sup> seems to have travelled the remarkable path of going from obscurity to banality in only one decade.<sup>2</sup>

In the eyes of the rest of the world, *missio Dei* has, however, taken an inconspicuous route. Even though it has existed in western theology for sixty years, it is still mysterious and ambiguous to most of the world's Christians. Even at the Willingen conference itself, *missio Dei* did not render itself easy to interpretation – there were already different schools of thought on how to interpret *missio Dei*.<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Richebacher, a German theologian, once

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Tormod Engelsen, "Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003).

observed that “Christian missions [after 1952] found [*missio Dei*] not just new and liberating, but also more and more confusing.”<sup>4</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile observed two strains in the interpretation of *missio Dei* that developed out of the deliberations at Willingen; one is creation focused while the other is redemption focused.<sup>5</sup> Richebacher also mentioned two ways of interpreting *missio Dei*: one prioritising mission as a “sign of the life of a church which is sure of its source in the Spirit of God” and the second one describing mission as a “work of God that is common to all religions.”<sup>6</sup> Richebacher further observed that “*missio Dei* can be used to justify the Christocentric definition of all the mission of the church or to propound a deity that bears witness to itself in other religions and thereby counter the absolute claims of Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> These different ways of understanding *missio Dei* still exist in the West today.

Thus, sixty years after Willingen 1952, *missio Dei* still remains a concept in need of explanation – not only among Africans. Over the past decades, *missio Dei* has connoted many things to many people. Some have embraced it as one model of mission among many. David Bosch, for example, located *missio Dei* among the thirteen ‘elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm.’<sup>8</sup> Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder mentioned *missio Dei* as one of the four models of a relevant mission for the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, other scholars have taken it to be the central identity of mission that provides the foundation for any model of mission. For instance, the works of Lesslie Newbigin,<sup>10</sup> Darell Guder,<sup>11</sup> Craig Van Gelder,<sup>12</sup> and many others place *missio Dei* as the foundational cornerstone of any understanding of *all* mission. For these missiologists, *missio Dei* is not one among many models of mission. It is an all-encompassing concept that informs and shapes all aspects of mission. They embody the theological conviction that the church is missionary by nature and therefore church and mission are not separate entities. All true mission is *missio Dei*. Even though Bosch did not bridge the gap between mission and the church, he helpfully summarised *missio Dei* in this way:

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<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Richebacher, “Willingen 1952 - Willingen 2002: The Origin and Contents of This Edition of IRM,” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003): 465.

<sup>5</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Richebacher, “Missio Dei: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003): 588.

<sup>7</sup> Richebacher, “Willingen 1952 - Willingen 2002, 465.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 368, 389-93.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 286-304.

<sup>10</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is not that the church has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church. Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is the fountain of sending love.<sup>13</sup>

Wolfgang Gunther concluded that:

[*Missio Dei*] offers an umbrella, as it were, under which all the different biblical motives for mission and the corresponding different directions in our churches have their rightful place but are at the same time relativized. God's mission is so all encompassing that all who take part in it can only ever take up one small part of it.<sup>14</sup>

## Missio Dei: A Brief Historical Background

The concept of *missio Dei* has been in existence for much longer than the sixty years that inform this essay. Some scholars have pointed out that the idea of the mission of God (not the terminology) appears significantly in Martin Luther's writing.<sup>15</sup> Tormod Engelsen noted that the idea of *missio Dei* goes as far back as Augustine.<sup>16</sup> However, the term *missio Dei* as it is currently used first appeared in western theology and missiology at the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council. The term '*missio Dei*' was coined in 1934 by a German theologian, Karl Hartenstein<sup>17</sup> in response to Karl Barth's 1932 presentation at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference, where Barth envisioned mission as an activity of God – *actio Dei*.<sup>18</sup> Hartenstein agreed with the idea in his 1933 publication, *Die Mission als Theologisches Problem*.<sup>19</sup> However, in 1934 he moved beyond identifying mission as the action of God to understanding it as the mission of God.<sup>20</sup>

At the Willingen conference, where Hartenstein was secretary, mission was discussed in terms similar to *missio Dei*. The term *missio Dei* was never used at the conference at all. It was

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<sup>13</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Gunther, "The History and Significance of World Mission Conferences in the 20th Century," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003): 530.

<sup>15</sup> See James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Engelsen, "Missio Dei," 482.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Hartenstein, (1894-1952) was the mission director for Basel Mission from 1926 to 1939. He died in 1952 and never lived to see the fruits that would come out of the term that he coined. See John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 125-33.

<sup>18</sup> See Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Und Die Mission in Der Gegenwart*, *Theologische Fragen Und Antworten* (Zollikon: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1957), 100-84.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Hartenstein, *Die Mission Als Theologisches Problem: Beiträge Zum Grundsätzlichen Verständnis Der Mission* (Berlin: Furche-verlag, 1933).

<sup>20</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants*, 290.

when he compiled the conference report that Hartenstein used *missio Dei* – the term he had coined almost twenty years earlier. He described mission as “participation in the sending of the Son, in the *missio Dei*, with an inclusive aim of establishing the lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation.”<sup>21</sup> In the years that followed the Willingen conference the concept of *missio Dei* became a popular theological framework for understanding mission in various Christian traditions, especially in West. Several German theologians such as Georg Vicedom,<sup>22</sup> Johannes Blauw,<sup>23</sup> and Hans Kung,<sup>24</sup> published books that sought to interpret *missio Dei*. For example, in his 1958 book entitled *Missio Dei* (translated into English in 1965 under the title *The Mission of God*), Georg Vicedom provided a report of his reflections on the undertakings of the Willingen conference. He suggested, “The mission, and with it the church, is God’s very own work ... Mission as the business of God implies that He (*sic*) lays claim to make use of all God’s believers exactly as God wishes in order to impart God’s love to all men (*sic*) through God’s believers.”<sup>25</sup> More recent publications on *missio Dei* include Christopher Wright’s *The Mission of God*<sup>26</sup> and John Flett’s *The Witness of God*.<sup>27</sup>

In Britain, Lesslie Newbigin’s theology attempted to appropriate *missio Dei*. In the 1980s Newbigin led a program around the Gospel and Culture in Britain and Ireland. Out of this program, the Gospel and Culture Network (GOCN) was born in North America.<sup>28</sup> While there have been several ways to interpret and apply *missio Dei* to theologies of mission, the gap between the church and mission, or between ecclesiology and mission, continued to exist. It was not until the 1990s when this gap would be bridged to begin what has been called *missional ecclesiology* by the works of the GOCN. In 1998 Darell Guder and several GOCN missiologists published the seminal book, *Missional Church*.<sup>29</sup> Here, Guder and his colleagues tried to articulate a missional ecclesiology that stays grounded in *missio Dei* in order to faithfully embody the conviction that the church is missionary by nature. This book is the first major attempt at engaging the implications of *missio Dei* in ecclesiology without the church-mission dichotomy. Thus, it took nearly half a century for *missio Dei* to be

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Rodger C. Bassham, *Mission Theology, 1948-1975: Years of Worldwide Creative Tension - Ecumenical, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 67. Also see Walter Freytag, *Mission Zwischen Gestern Und Morgen: Vom Gestaltwandel Der Weltmission Der Christenheit Im Licht Der Konferenz Des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen* (Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 1952), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965).

<sup>23</sup> Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Flett, *The Witness of God*.

<sup>28</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*.

interpreted in ways that actually begin to challenge the self-understanding of congregations and western Christians.<sup>30</sup>

## Situating the Development of *Missio Dei*

In order to understand what *missio Dei* would entail in an African context, it is important to take a look at the missionary world of the 1950s. Like any other theology in the world, the early theology of *missio Dei* as articulated in western theology was shaped by the contextual circumstances of the mid-twentieth century. To their credit, in their *Missional Church*, Guder and colleagues were intentional about theologising *missio Dei* for North America, even though their missional theology can be contextualised for other parts of the world. For African Christians to make good use of the *missio Dei* concept, they must also understand their own contexts as well. Trying to use it without contextualising it may only lead to further confusion and frustration. Let us now look at the challenges that faced the missionary endeavours of the first half of the twentieth century and which led to the missional paradigm shift of Willingen.

### 1. Mission Theology

When *missio Dei* came to prominence in mission theology in 1952 there was a major crisis in western Christianity and its missionary work in the world. First, there was a subtle discontent among some mission and theology scholars about the conflicting strands of western theology that had been gradually gaining ground since the late 1800s. On the one hand, there was fundamentalism; on the other, there was the social gospel movement.<sup>31</sup> Both these theological schools led to anthropocentrism and voluntarism in the missionary movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under these circumstances mission was not regarded as God's very own work but as a purely human endeavour. As such, a very anthropocentric theology emerged, which intentionally severed the strong link between mission and the doctrine of the Trinity. Bosch commented that until the Willingen conference, mission had been conceived in soteriological, ecclesiological, or cultural terms.<sup>32</sup> As such, *missio Dei* was articulated at the Willingen conference in response to these theological issues, to dislocate mission from overdependence on human effort and locate it with God.

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<sup>30</sup> It is my suspicion that even though Guder's *Missional Church* makes a great contribution to understanding *missio Dei*, there are still many gaps that are yet to be filled in order for world Christianity to fully come to terms with what *missio Dei* means. I have argued elsewhere that the missional ecclesiology that shapes *Missional Church* is lacking in pneumatology. See Harvey C. Kwiyani, "Pneumatology, Mission, and African Christians in Multicultural Congregations in North America" (Ph.D. diss, Luther Seminary, 2012). Even though *Missional Church* was written for North America, the missional theology that is articulated in it is relevant for mission in all continents. *Missio Dei* is *missio Dei*, no matter what part of the world it engages.

<sup>31</sup> See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, ch. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

## 2. World Politics

Second, the western missionary enterprise of the twentieth century was badly disrupted by the first and second World Wars. To begin with, the missionary zeal that characterised the 1910 World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh crashed only four years after the conference, when the First World War erupted. During the World Wars western missionaries generally sided with their governments. This forced them to distrust missionaries from enemy states. Missionaries who had previously worked together on the mission field were forced to intern other missionaries from opposing countries.<sup>33</sup> This was very disorienting for both the missionaries and their converts. It became apparent to the rest of the world that the Christianity of western civilisation could not prevent engagement in a destructive war against fellow (Christian) Europeans.

Also, in Germany, in the 1930s when *missio Dei* was coined, the Nazi Government ideology was beginning to forcefully demand the church to partner with it in its campaign for nationalism. At the same time, the build-up to the Second World War was in progress. The German church and its leaders were in danger—a danger of compromise in order to maintain a peaceful co-existence with the government by endorsing or turning a blind eye to the hateful nationalistic political rhetoric of the day. Christians who did not support the government were persecuted. Most of them left Germany. Many of the courageous ministers who stayed in Germany, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were killed. The world missionary sphere, and that of Christianity, looked rather discouraging. There was a need for a new framework—a solid foundation for mission and mission theology.<sup>34</sup>

## 3. Decolonisation and expulsion of missionaries

The third crisis in the western missiology of the time was the collapse of political colonialism. In the sight of most of the colonised people, mission had become suspect as the bait that was used to pacify them before the colonisers took over their land. The colonial empires crumbled when the colonies, starting with India in 1947, gained independence. When the colonial agents returned to their western countries, missionaries followed along. By 1952 the western church did not think that the ‘younger churches’ of the mission fields could survive without them. The fight against colonialism left most western missionaries feeling rejected by the indigenous Christians whom they had educated at their mission schools. As such, there was great concern around the future of the “younger churches” in

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<sup>33</sup> The internment of German missionaries by British missionaries in Tanzania, for instance, would have major implications for the understanding of mission. See Frieder Ludwig, *Church and State in Tanzania: Aspects of a Changing Relationship, 1961-1994* (Boston: Brill, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> It is possible that the city of Willingen in Germany was chosen for the 1952 conference to restore and encourage the German Christians after the devastating wars.

the postcolonial world starting in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. As seen in the case of China, the rise of communism brought many more challenges to mission as it was understood then. When China expelled western missionaries in 1951-52 it signalled potential trouble for missionary enterprise all around the world.

Consequently, western understanding of *missio Dei* was shaped by these three factors. In between fundamentalism and liberalism in theology, anthropocentrism in mission, the turmoil of the World Wars, and the collapse of colonialism with the missionary work attached to it, there was a great need for a new theological framework that would keep missionary work going. Mission had to be established on a solid base and *missio Dei* proved to be just that. No matter what the world was going through, mission belongs to God. Mission is in the very nature of God. It is also in the very nature of the church to be missionary. In this sense, the end of *missions* had come, and it was time for the age of *mission* to begin.<sup>35</sup> Anthropocentrism (which was coupled with ecclesiocentrism) was replaced by theocentrism. The challenges faced had led to the truth that mission belongs to God, wherever it is carried out, be it in Europe, America, or Africa.

## Missio Dei in African Contexts

Any attempt to articulate *missio Dei* in Africa must attend to at least two issues. First, *missio Dei* in Africa will have to connect with African theology in ways that make it truly African. God's missionary faithfulness to the African context can only be seen in God's identifying God-self with the African. As such, the mission of God – *missio Dei* – in Africa must look African. Colonial theology will not do the continent any good. Second, in order to do this, *missio Dei* in Africa will have to start from a different set of premises from those that shaped the Willigen definition of *missio Dei*. Indeed, this is very necessary since *missio Dei* is not reacting to anthropocentrism or a crumbling imperialism in Africa. Nor is it facing any of the challenges that faced the missionary movement in the mid-twentieth century.

Naturally, *missio Dei* in Africa has to start from the premise that mission is God's mission – and not the church's. In the African context, it is not sufficient to simply say *missio Dei* means that mission belongs to God, as most westerners do. In this day and age most Africans do not imagine mission in anthropocentric terms, since, in African cosmology, God (through the spirits) is active in the world. To say mission belongs to God will state the obvious since African Christianity is not anthropocentric. If mission belongs to God who is already at work in Africa, then the missionaries and Christians will have to discern and join in God's

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<sup>35</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

already ongoing mission. Certainly, God’s missionary presence in Africa precedes that of the church and the missionaries. The church is God’s primary agent for mission, but it is not the only agent. As such, to understand what *missio Dei* will look like in Africa, missionaries and Christian leaders ought to ask, “What is God up to here?” The answer to this question will vary according to the context in which it is asked. For instance, *missio Dei* in Africa will look for God’s presence and work in the context of poverty, diseases, bad governance, corruption, ethnic conflicts, etc. By asking “What is God doing here?” missionaries and Christians may be able to discern what *missio Dei* will look like in their respective contexts. To situate *missio Dei* properly in Africa, there is a need to locate God’s Spirit at work already in the African context. For instance, in the Malawian concept of *umunthu*,<sup>36</sup> this writer sees points of contact where *missio Dei* might actually guide the African church to a missiology that is authentically African but also properly grounded in the Scriptures. *Umunthu*, which means ‘personhood’, is an expansive philosophical, theological, and spiritual concept that actually puts human beings in a bonded community of life that includes God, spirits, society, and nature.<sup>37</sup> It describes a well-rounded philosophy of life in which to be a person – to have *umunthu* – is to be at peace with oneself, the community around, God, the spirits, and nature. For this reason, when Malawians say ‘*wakuti ali ndi umunthu/mzimu*’ (someone has personhood/is a person/is a human being), they mean that the person is kind, sociable, caring, self-giving, generous, communal, and hospitable, spiritual, understanding, etc. To have *umunthu* is to be someone who *humanises* others through acts of hospitality, inclusivity, and generosity, listening, etc. To humanise another is to share a person’s *umunthu* with others – something that may lead to the recipient’s spiritual awakening – or regeneration. To dehumanise is to exclude, oppress, and to lack *umunthu* which is equivalent to being a beast – *chirombo*. (This is said of those who terrorise their communities, such as thugs, murderers, etc).<sup>38</sup>

In essence, *missio Dei* is also about humanising. The Triune God, the Great *Munthu*,<sup>39</sup> came to earth in the Person of the Son, Jesus Christ, to restore human beings to their full

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<sup>36</sup> In Chichewa (Malawi’s national vernacular), not unlike many other Malawian languages, *munthu* means person. Adding the prefix *U-* to make it *umunthu* transforms it to mean ‘personhood.’ The Malawian concept of *umunthu* is the same concept that is known as *ubuntu* in South Africa, meaning ‘personhood’ in South Africa too. *Umunthu* is quite foundational in African life and very significant for understanding African theology. It is known as *utu* in Swahili, *obonto* in Kiisi, *nunhu* in Shona, *bunhu* in Tsonga, *numunhu* in Shangaan, *botho* in Sotho, etc. *Umunthu* is not a Christian concept; *umunthu* is not equivalent to Christianity or *missio Dei*. However, in my opinion, it may serve well as a preparation for the coming of the Gospel (and that of Christianity).

<sup>37</sup> Harvey J. Sindima, “Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective,” in *Liberating Life*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990). Also see John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> For further reading on *umunthu*, see Harvey J. Sindima, “Bondedness, Moyo and *Umunthu* as the Elements of Achewa Spirituality: Organizing Logic and Principle of Life,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 14, no. 1 (1991). Also, Gerard Chigona, *Umunthu Theology: Path of Integral Human Liberation Rooted in Jesus of Nazareth* (Balaka: Montfort, 2002). Also see Augustine C. Musopole, *Being Human in Africa: Toward an African Christian Anthropology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> See James H. O. Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics and the African Intellectual Culture* (Boston: Brill, 2007).

humanity – personhood, *umunthu* – and give them life in abundance. The Pauline corpus suggests that the culmination of this humanising begins with regeneration whereby the Spirit (breath, *ruach*,) of God brings the human spirit to life.<sup>40</sup> The apostle Paul testified to this when he said, “we were once dead in our sins ... but God made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:1-7, my paraphrase). Peter added that “you were once not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:10, NIV). Thus, the real *umunthu* begins with salvation; the secular *umunthu* is only a shadow of the *umunthu* that is made possible by Christ. When everyday acts of *umunthu* are undergirded by prayers and faith, they become anointed avenues through which God’s Spirit draws people to God’s humanising love. This is what *missio Dei* is about. This humanising principle of *missio Dei* rightly extends the concept of salvation in Africa to include many ways in which life and personhood is shared. Many scholars have shown how salvation in Africa is more than the saving of the soul.<sup>41</sup> Salvation, even in its Greek translation, *sozo*, includes healing, deliverance, blessing, empowerment, liberation, feeding, clothing, etc.<sup>42</sup> All these are humanising acts through which people can have the abundant life that Christ gave to humankind. In all these acts, plus many others, Christian witness is made and the gospel is shared, even sometimes without proclamation.

The implications of this interpretation of *missio Dei* are many and huge. For instance, by suggesting the possibility – or likelihood – of God’s mission manifesting itself in *umunthu*, mission easily becomes theocentric, while placing an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Every Christian is a missionary whom God can use anywhere, not just in church. In the daily grind of *umunthu*, God can surprise the church by drawing people to the cross of Christ. In addition, in *umunthu*, mission becomes holistic. It pays attention to the whole human being, not just the person’s soul. *Missio Dei* becomes rooted in healthy loving and humanising relationships between Christians and the community in which they live. In this sense, *missio Dei* also leads to a Christian identification with the poor and the marginalised. Christian ministers leading by *umunthu* will be generous people who are there for their flock (and not only the tithing members of their churches). Extortion for the sake of personal enrichment is thievery – *patse patse nkulanda* – a sign of lacking *umunthu*. Finally, *missio Dei* understood through *umunthu* encourages good stewardship of God’s creation, for to have *umunthu* is to be in harmony with God, the spirits, the community, and nature. The desertification of the land and the exploitation of the lake are contrary to *umunthu*, and therefore also contrary to *missio Dei*.

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<sup>40</sup> Gen. 2:7. Among some Malawians, the word *spirit* is also used interchangeably with *umunthu*.

<sup>41</sup> See J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Boston: Brill, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the subject of salvation among African Christians, see *ibid.* For further reading, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Holy Spirit and Salvation: The Sources of Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 399-416.

## Conclusion

*Missio Dei* is a rather complex concept. In its basic sense, it says mission belongs to God and not to the church. This is not sufficient to help Christians to understand how to carry mission out, especially in contexts where there is no doubt that mission belongs to God. To contextualise it in Africa, there is a need to discern aspects of African life where God is already at work. One such point of contact is the Malawian concept of *umunthu*. Through the Spirit of God Christians have inherited God's personhood and therefore have the real *umunthu*. Through this, they ought to serve God and share it with the world to glorify God's Son. This is *missio Dei*.

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