

# *Ukuthwasa* and the Practice of Being a Traditional Healer

A conversation within the Methodist church of southern Africa



A Discussion Paper for Districts, Circuits, Organisations and Formations

Prepared by DEWCOM

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## INTRODUCTORY GUIDELINES

This discussion document on *ukuthwasa* within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is a product of a journey that has been informed by experiences of members of the MCSA and ministers. While the practice of *ukuthwasa* and being a traditional healer has existed from precolonial days in Africa, the church has not effectively expressed its mind on how to deal with members who have an ancestral calling. After several roundtable discussions in the last two years, the conference of 2022 formally mandated DEWCOM to produce a discussion document for Methodist people to openly discuss the phenomenon of *ukuthwasa* and its impact for the church.

The goal of the discussion is to allow Methodist people to share their stories, experiences and insights on the subject for the church to:

- i. clarify its theological position on *ukuthwasa*, ancestors and traditional healing practice,
- ii. develop pastoral responses for members, families and congregations who are trying to support and journey with people with an ancestral calling,
- iii. deepen our understanding of African spirituality and African cultural practices.

DEWCOM appreciates that this is a conversation that evokes divergent opinions and emotions. Furthermore, it has potential to challenge many dearly held beliefs among members of the MCSA. Thus, members and leaders across the different levels of the MCSA are invited to allow space for open, respectful and compassionate listening and engagement in their dialogue. Whoever is mandated to facilitate the conversation should always ensure that clear ground rules for respectful dialogue are put in place.

### Group Discussion guide

The following guidelines can be adapted to suit context:

- *Listen with respect. Good listening requires concentration and attention. (Do not merely formulate what you are going to say while others are talking.)*
- *Seek first to understand, then to be understood.*
- *Each person gets a chance to talk. Try not to speak again until one or two other persons have added to the conversation.*
- *One person talks at a time. Don't cut people off.*
- *Do not put another person on the spot by calling on her/him directly for the answer to a question (both leaders and group members should respect this rule). Remember, not all persons are comfortable sharing in front of a large group.*
- *Speak for yourself, not as the representative of any group or any other person.*
- *If you are offended or uncomfortable, say so and say why.*
- *It is OK to disagree, but personal attacks are not allowed. No name-calling or stereotyping.*
- *Personal stories stay in the group, unless we all agree that we can share them.*
- *We share responsibility for making the discussion constructive. Help the facilitator keep things on track.*

It is also advisable to invite people who have experienced an ancestral calling or are practising traditional healers to share their experiences as part of the discussion.

In each instance, the minister, leader or facilitator should guide the process and clarify what the expected outcomes of the discussion are. In formal gatherings, leaders are to ensure that feedback is properly documented and submitted to the relevant structures. May God bless you as you begin the journey.

DEWCOM also respectfully submits its covenant to the Methodist people for consideration as a guiding tool for respectful dialogue. This could be easily adapted to any context where the goal is to hold a respectful dialogue.

**We, the members of DEWCOM covenant to:**

- 1. Respect one another's integrity. We believe that each person in the committee is seeking to be faithful to Christ in our expression of theology and living.**
- 2. Celebrate our diversity – our diversity in tradition, identity, race, culture, gender, sexuality, age, spirituality and theology as a gift to each other.**
- 3. To debate in order to grow and will abstain from arguing in order to win.**
- 4. To give ourselves to the process – of thought, engagement and consensus building.**
- 5. To speak and act from a place love embracing generosity of thought.**
- 6. Not to approach debates and disagreements in theology as personal debates and disagreements. Amen.**

## **RESOLUTION TAKEN BY CONFERENCE 2022**

The recent Doctrine Ethics Worship Committee roundtable discussion on *Ukuthwasa* (initiation into an ancestral calling) and the practice of being a traditional healer in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa unearthed a few critical theological and practical polity issues that requires an honest reflection by the church. Amongst other issues the discussion brought to the fore the following:

- 1. Experiences of ministers and lay members.** The few accounts of Ministers who are initiated *Sangomas* or traditional healers reveal that they have experienced a substantial amount of judgement, suspicion and sometimes forced to choose between their Ministerial calling and Ancestral calling. The perceptions of a 'double calling' – ministerial and ancestral – are at large. Methodist societies and leadership do not have enough understanding of how to deal with such ministers as agents of the gospel.
- 2. No theological position on the existence of Ancestors and the practice of initiation into Ancestral calling.** The MCSA as an institution does not have an expressed theological position on the existence of Ancestors and by extension how people relate to their ancestors. As such and depending on one's cultural heritage and theological persuasion, divergent views spanning between separatist and integrationist approaches exist across the MCSA. A further collective of themes that need to be explored have emerged and these include:
  - African Christian spirituality and ancestral calling
  - Decolonisation of Christian spirituality and African traditional healing practices.
    - Is responding to an ancestral call different from a call into the ministry of word and sacrament? Can they co-exist as part of a response to the same God? Is this a form of Syncretism?
- 3. The Practice of Ministry.** The question of actively living out a ministerial call alongside an ancestral calling carry practical polity and ethical ramifications. There is a need for the MCSA to clarify its understanding of Christian vocation in relation to African traditional healing practice. From this comes a few related questions the church needs to answer, for example:
  - What are the practical realities of being a Christian and a traditional healer in a Circuit?
  - How should leaders at a Circuit, District and Connexional level respond to ministers and leaders who are initiated Sangomas or traditional healers?
  - What are the ethical issues involved in practising both as a minister and a traditional healer?

Conference notes and commends the preliminary work done by DEWCOM on *Ukuthwasa* and the practice of being a traditional healer within the MCSA. However, Conference notes that this work requires theological reflection on the key themes and practical polity issues this work evokes. Conference further notes with concern the painful experiences of Ministers and members with an ancestral calling.

Therefore, Conference requests DEWCOM to develop a Discussion Document on *Ukuthwasa* and the practice of being a *Sangoma* or traditional healer in the MCSA for discussion at the April Circuit Quarterly Meeting and for report to the ensuing Conference through District Synods.

Conference further encourages Districts, Organisations, and formations to facilitate reflective sessions on the subject to deepen awareness and listening to the experiences of Methodist members who may have an ancestral calling.

## DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

<b><i>Abalozi.</i></b>	Possessed and trained through the whistles. This type of healing is very rare, and it takes a longer time than ordinary training. Normally it is ancestors who do the whole training themselves through dreams, and in dreams.
<b><i>Amafufunyana/inkhathazo/bolwetsi ba badimo.</i></b>	The symptoms that manifest as a form of illness indicating the presence of an ancestral gift.
<b><i>Amakhosi/abalozi/amandawe.</i></b>	Nguni ancestors associated with ventriloquism – the way an ancestor can speak through a healer during a trance. <i>Amandawe</i> are popularly known as water ancestors.
<b><i>Amasiko.</i></b>	Cultural rituals. Sometimes specific rituals performed on an individual or young children to introduce them to their paternal and maternal ancestors.
<b><i>Amathongo and Izithunzi.</i></b>	The sleeping ones, shadows or shades of the departed. Ancestral spirits that come through dreams from ancestors with specific messages and instructions.
<b><i>Ibhayi/ihya.</i></b>	The item of clothing used as a physical representation of an ancestral calling and clan. The colour schemes of these items of clothing indicate the stage of initiation and perhaps the clan. Sometimes it may have the symbol of the animal used as part of the clan totems.
<b><i>Idlozi/ Amadlozi/ Badimo.</i></b>	Ancestor/ ancestors – the departed members of the family or the ‘living dead.’
<b><i>Impepho.</i></b>	A sage plant which, when dried, is used to communicate with the ancestors.
<b><i>Indumba.</i></b>	The spiritual house used for divination and healing or where initiates reside throughout their training.
<b><i>Ingoma.</i></b>	The singing and chanting used to invite the ancestors.
<b><i>Igqira/ngaka.</i></b>	This could refer to a medical doctor or an African traditional doctor.
<b><i>Isangoma.</i></b>	Diviner/traditional healer. These can take various forms of specialisation depending on the gifts given by the ancestors. They are usually trained through dancing and music ( <i>ingoma</i> ). Their work encompasses the skills of the diviner, herbalist, psychotherapist and community counsellor, not to mention artist, detective, mediator and sensor <sup>1</sup> .
<b><i>Isanusi.</i></b>	This is the highest hierarchy in African Healing. <i>Isanusi</i> is a seer, foreteller, and a prophet who can tell people what will happen and when. This is the development of <i>abalozi</i> .
<b><i>Isithunywa.</i></b>	The ancestor who determines the type of spiritual gift that a person must inherit. Mostly diagnosed through a prophecy or divination.
<b><i>Isithunywa.</i></b>	This refers to the manifestation of a spiritual gifts in a person that may be bequeathed on them by an ancestor who could have been a prayer worrier or traditional healer.
<b><i>Ithwasa/ amathwasa.</i></b>	The initiate/s who are undergoing <i>ukuthwasa</i> .
<b><i>Iziwasho.</i></b>	The water prayed for by prophets during the divination process and for the purposes of healing.
<b><i>Lefehlo/iphehlo/mpande/indumba.</i></b>	The school where training occurs.
<b><i>Mkhulu.</i></b>	A term used to refer to an elder/ <i>gobela</i> . It can also mean the type of ancestors who have called the person as in being inhabited by elders ( <i>ungenwe ngabadala/ngomkhulu</i> ).

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<sup>1</sup> (Wreford 2005)

<b><i>Muthi/muti.</i></b>	The medicinal herbs used to heal but also can be used for conventional medical forms of medicine.
<b><i>Thwasa.</i></b>	A verb for <i>ukuthwasa</i> or <i>intwaso</i> .
<b><i>Ubizo.</i></b>	The general word referring to anyone who has a form of vocational calling. In African traditional belief, this is a person who is showing signs of a call from ancestors.
<b><i>Ugobela.</i></b>	The teacher/trainer/senior traditional healer responsible for training initiates.
<b><i>Ukufemba.</i></b>	This is a doing word, describing the extraction of spiritual maladies from the sick person's body. An advanced healing technology performed by experienced healers who go into a trance and identify ailments that are in the client's body. The healer goes into a state of trance to perform this.
<b><i>Ukugida.</i></b>	The rhythmic dancing and stomping of feet during a ritual.
<b><i>Ukuphahla.</i></b>	A ritual of communicating with the ancestors through the usage of different elements such as <i>impepho</i> , slathering and water.
<b><i>Ukuthwasa/ Intwaso.</i></b>	The process of initiation undergone by someone who has received a call from their ancestors to become a traditional healer. The training process undertaken by those who have spiritual gifts from ancestors/ to emerge as a healer/ new moon/ rebirth.
<b><i>Umbilini.</i></b>	Possessing the spiritual gift of intuition.
<b><i>Umgidi.</i></b>	A ritual ceremony.
<b><i>Umhlahli.</i></b>	This is a person who can tell you the name of the person who bewitched you. They are very few these days.
<b><i>Umdiki.</i></b>	An ancestral spirit that requires a person to undergo <i>ukuthwasa</i> .
<b><i>Umprofeti.</i></b>	One with the gift of divination or prophecy.
<b><i>Umthandazi.</i></b>	This is an individual who heals through prayer and symbols such as water, candles and salt.

# 1 BACKGROUND TO THE DISCUSSION

Mandated by Conference 2022, DEWCOM has produced this discussion paper which explores the concept of *ukuthwasa* and the practice of being a traditional healer among members of the MCSA. This phenomenon has implications upon the theology, polity and practice of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). Cultural practices, such as *ukuthwasa*, need to be understood within the historical timeline of African Christianity. It is also critical to recognise that African Christianity has been historically shaped by the dominant imperialistic mindset of the missionary enterprise. The missionary mindset (with exceptions) has been characterised by cynicism and alienation of African cultural practices, while seeking to universalise Western Christian expressions and value systems. The underlying view is that, for one to be authentically Christian, they must relinquish their cultural identity, abandon their cultural practices and consequently setting the gospel and Christ against culture<sup>2</sup>.

The failure to properly integrate African cultural practices and values into African Christian witness has led to erosion if not erasure of African spiritual practices from the Christian lexicon. To faithfully appropriate African practices and rites of passage within the Christian lexicon, the church needs to wean itself from the historical myths and misconceptions that underpin the dominant narrative. Put simply, there is need to re-engage with African spirituality and practice in a way that is free from the historical cynicism and judgement of Western Christianity. Among others, *ukuthwasa* is one African practice that needs a closer look.

This historical struggle to appropriately enculturate is evident across most of the missionary instituted churches in southern Africa<sup>3</sup>. A case in point, the MCSA with its over two-centuries footprint in southern Africa, still has no theological position on the existence of Ancestors and how societies should pastorally deal with members who have an ancestral calling. With no theological position, Methodists across the Connexion have either judged and excluded people with ancestral calling or timidly leaned towards their personal cultural heritage and theological persuasion. The divergent views held across the Connexion can be slotted along the separatist and integrationist approaches. The lack of a theological position and pastoral guidance has subjected ministers and lay people with an ancestral calling to a substantial amount of judgement, suspicion and exclusion. In some instances, they have been forced to *convert* or choose between their *Christian discipleship*, *ministerial calling* and *ancestral calling*.

Along with forcing people to choose, there is also a growing perception of a '*double calling*'. A double calling means that while someone may have a call to the ordained ministry or being active Christian, they may also experience a call from their ancestors to become a traditional healer. The MCSA has not addressed this perception. In most instances, and depending on context, ministers and members who have expressed both calls have either been forced to convert or leave the ministry or church or practice covertly. At best, District and Connexional leaders have offered pastoral care or turned a blind eye. It can be concluded that across the different levels of the MCSA, leaders and members do not have adequate knowledge and tools for supporting and guiding members who are disciples of Christ and agents of the gospel who are also called to be traditional healers.

The issues discussed above led to the 2022 Conference of the MCSA to mandate a discussion on *Ukuthwasa* and the practice of traditional healing among members of the church. Any discussion on the subject should consider Methodist theology, practice and polity. This paper seeks to explore African practices of *ukuthwasa* and *ubungoma* in relation to African spirituality, the nature of God, Christian vocation and ancestral call, and the experiences of ministers, members and leaders across all levels of the church.

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<sup>2</sup> (Oduor 2021)

<sup>3</sup> (Forster 2019)



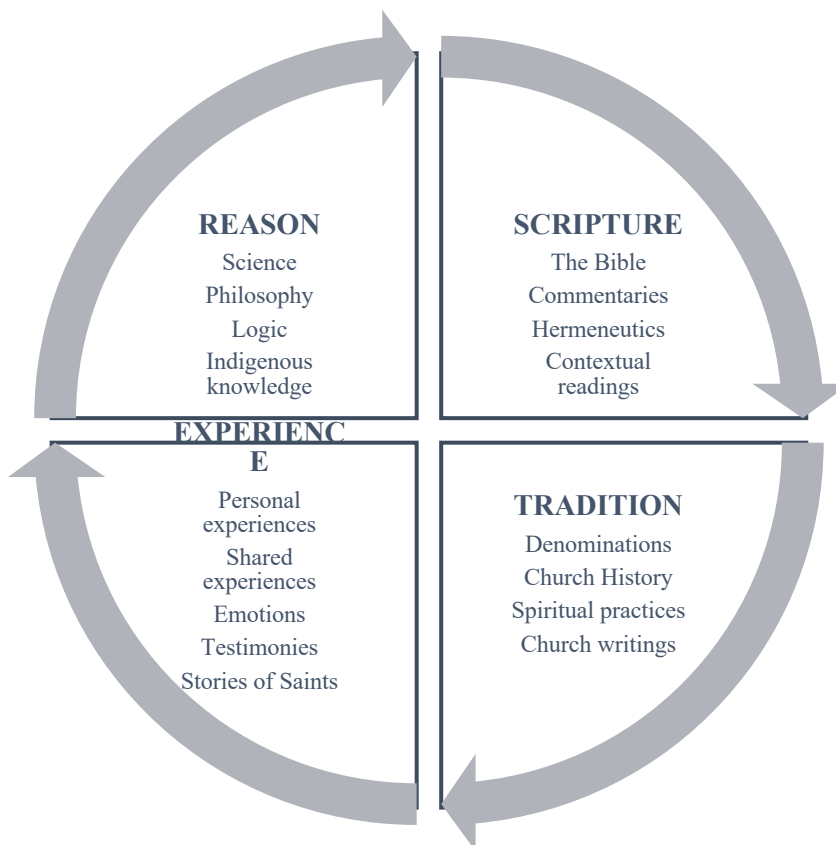
## 2 METHODOLOGY FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A methodology is a set of beliefs and principles that guide the process of thinking, research, discussing and making conclusions or decisions about a specific subject. It involves deciding on the basis and assumptions that will inform the process of engagement. Across every area of life and in formal academic disciplines, there are a variety of tools and methods used to discuss any subject. In the church, there are accepted doctrines and practices that are used as a ‘measuring rod’ for policy and practice. These are often guided by the history of the denomination, context, accepted theological positions and polity. For instance, based on a theological lens, the Methodist church may hold a distinctive position on the role of ancestors which is different from the Catholic and Lutheran churches.

The MCSA believes in the accepted credal positions of the universal Christian church as they are expressed in the ethos of the Methodist and Wesleyan theological heritage. Among other things, Methodist theology and practice is informed by our emphasis on the Order of Salvation, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the Methodist Rule of Life and the two sacraments Methodist people observe<sup>4</sup>. *Ukuthwasa* is both a religious and a cultural phenomenon. To understand the phenomenon, thus requires engagement with Methodist theology and African cultural perspectives.

### 2.1 The Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a conversation tool

It is hard to have tough conversations without emotions shutting down the discussion. To transform conversations into a deeper pursuit for the will of God, Methodists have increasingly used a tool that is popularly known as the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*.



*Figure 2-1 Adaptation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral*

As illustrated in *Figure 2 – 1*, each of these elements represents a different source of authority or basis of knowledge. While some have attributed the quadrilateral to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, it is was

<sup>4</sup> (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, 11–13)

coined by a Methodist scholar, Albert Outler. This reflection tool is made up of four complementary sources or standpoints: *scripture, tradition, reason, and experience*. At the most basic level, the quadrilateral helps us to understand any subject or form of Christian knowledge within its biblical context, historical and contemporary knowledge sources, and peoples lived experiences.

The goal of any conversation in the church is not to give people right answers to the complex questions of faith. Instead, it helps us to do what we call '*holy conferencing*' in a manner that deepens our thinking, discernment and Christian fellowship. Using all available sources, we train our minds and hearts in the habits of critical thinking and making informed Christian choices. Let us now briefly discuss the four legs of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

- i. **Scripture.** Scripture entails the word of God as recorded in the biblical canons and how it is read and interpreted across history and within church traditions and communities. One helpful view of the word of God is Karl Barth's threefold doctrine of the word of God: (i) *the written word of God* – the canons as used by different church traditions, (ii) *the preached word of God* – hermeneutics within context and (iii) *the revealed word of God* – Christian revelation including Jesus<sup>5</sup>. For Wesley, scripture was the first premise for engaging any subject. Moving from the foundation of scripture, then he would find sources from tradition, reason and experience.
- ii. **Reason.** Reason is the space where we look at the influence of science and rational thought. The skills of logical reasoning and the results of sound scientific data are evaluated. Not all information put forth as scientific fact is in fact, true. Scientists are sinners, just like everyone else. Sometimes the results of scientific endeavour are biased and influenced by what we want the outcome to be for personal, economic, or philosophical reasons. In the context of this discussion, it is important to recognise that many forms of indigenous African knowledge are not scientific. Therefore, reason should include African cultural sources of knowledge, especially those that have been previously alienated and demonised.
- iii. **Tradition.** Tradition is a powerful influence on our worldview and behaviour. Tradition includes teachings of the Church – from the earliest traditions of the Church, general world history and community practices and beliefs that have stood the test of time. We listen to tradition to hear and learn from the wisdom of those that have gone before us. We learn from the good they have done and their bad decisions and actions. When embracing tradition, we should always be careful not to hold onto traditions that are no longer life giving.
- iv. **Experience.** The truth of scripture always finds expression in personal and communal experience. John Wesley's May 24, 1738, personal revival experience profoundly impacted his life and ministry. As such, the discussion of theology and its application is not just a head decision but one that is also a matter of the heart. While personal experience cannot be elevated to the same level of scripture, it is important to recognise that people's experiences of faith within a particular cultural context can inform how they grow in Christian discipleship.

## 2.2 The Gospel and Culture

Alongside the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, it is important to briefly highlight the long-standing debate between the gospel and culture. Church history displays many ways in which Christians have interacted with culture. These narratives range between Christians who separate themselves from cultural practices and those that want to integrate their faith with their cultural rituals and values. In his classic 1951 book *Christ and*

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<sup>5</sup> (The PostBarthian 2018)

*Culture*, Richard H. Niebuhr identified five approaches that Christians have taken towards culture. While Niebuhr's model is not a perfect system, it gives insights into the ways in which Christians live out their faith in any culture. Let us take a quick overview of these approaches.

- i. **Christ Against Culture.** This group of Christians believe the culture and world outside the church are corrupted beyond repair. Christians should avoid, reject, and separate from any world culture to create a pure Christian culture. These Christians tend to be critical, withdrawn and keep safe moral distance from the world and cultural practices around them. In the African cultural context, these Christians do not participate in cultural practices and family rituals. In some cases, they are judgemental of family members and other Christians who participate in cultural rituals.
- ii. **Christ of Culture.** This group of Christians see culture as inherently good and not in conflict with Christianity. They would seek to respect Christian truths and cultural wisdom equally. These Christians would generally take an integrationist approach to bring together all the good from Christianity and culture. Those who criticise this approach would argue around issues of Christian Gnosticism and syncretism.
- iii. **Christ Above Culture.** This model views culture as basically good. However, Christian revelation is required to explain and perfect cultural expressions. This view is largely responsible for the inculturation and institutionalisation of Christianity through specific Christian rituals and materialistic expressions such as the inclusion of Easter and Christmas into public calendars.
- iv. **Christ and Culture in Paradox.** This model is characterised by a perceived ever-present tension between Christianity and culture. Christians are expected to live between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of Heaven simultaneously by accepting some aspects of culture and rejecting others. While this model exhibits a creative way in which Christians experience the world, the strong moral and ethical underpinnings may tend to lean towards a more conservative engagement with culture.
- v. **Christ the Transformer of Culture.** In this final model, the Christian is seen as a conversionist, a person who seeks to transform the values and objectives of culture to the service and glory of God. Christ came to redeem all of creation, and as Christians, we are to participate in this redemptive work now, while awaiting his coming Kingdom. This is the view traditionally held by Christians in the Reformed tradition.

### 2.3 Christianising culture and Africanising Christianity

Broadly speaking, there are often four concepts that are used to describe the different ways people engage with culture. These are assimilation, decolonisation, inculturation and enculturation.

- i. **Assimilation.** This is the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. The process of assimilating involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society. Different forms of forced assimilation of indigenous peoples was particularly common in the colonial era in Africa and across the world. Religious assimilation refers to the adoption of a majority or dominant religious practices and beliefs by a minority or subordinate culture. A great deal of missionary instituted churches subjected most local cultures to forms of assimilation in the pretext of adopting right teaching and rituals.
- ii. **Decolonisation.** This is a political and ideological process that seeks to reverse and remedy the effects of colonisation. At the least, colonisation is a historical and ongoing global project where settlers

continue to occupy land, dictate social, political, and economic systems, and exploit Indigenous people and their resources. Colonisation is more than physical; it is also cultural, religious and psychological in that it determines whose knowledge is privileged. Decolonisation is a process of challenging the dominance of western knowledge, culture and values as the standard. Decolonization is about cultural, psychological, and economic freedom for Indigenous people with the goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty — the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political and economic systems.

- iii. **Decolonisation of the church.** Decolonizing the church means recovering practices and traditions of the of indigenous people that have been changed, altered, and sometimes thrown away for hundreds of years. In African context, this means recognising the influence of western theology, practice and culture on the church. While the stories of how Christianity arrived in Africa differ, it is important to note that the confessional language, liturgies, vestments, worship, governance, rituals and culture of missionary instituted churches were (and still are) shaped by the theology and practice of their mother bodies. Sometimes, due to poor engagement and lack of understanding, Christianity is in part responsible for the erosion of African spiritual and cultural practices and ways of life. In this regard, decolonisation means allowing the African church to delink with some of the colonial patterns of power and ways of being church and rediscover African ways of doing and being church.

### 2.3.1 *Inculturation and enculturation*

In his highly perceptive book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o makes a critical point about the colonial project. ‘Its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world’<sup>6</sup>. While Ngũgĩ’s observation is critical for every dimension of life, it is pertinent for our discussion on the history of the Christian faith on the African soil. The processes of contextualising knowledge and re-appropriating culture stands to benefit from both decolonisation and indigenisation. Decolonization restores indigenous worldviews, culture and traditional ways of being by replacing western interpretations of history with indigenous perspectives of history. Indigenization recognizes the validity of indigenous worldviews, knowledge and perspectives. It also identifies opportunities for indigeneity to be expressed by incorporating indigenous ways of knowing and doing into public spaces.

The process of contextualising the church is also captured in the tension between the concepts of inculturation and enculturation. Inculturation is the adaptation of Christian teachings into different indigenous cultures across the world. In Africa, this adaptation often took a forceful slant by missionaries as they tried to evangelise and christianise Africa. As the case was in Africa, inculturation often meant the rejection and erosion of African practices and rituals. On the contrary, enculturation is the process through which an individual or institution adapts to the norms and values of a culture in which they are immersed. Examples of these include the translation of liturgies, missionaries and ministers learning the language of the people and accepting clothing styles and cultural rituals of the culture. Related to these concepts is the concept of *acculturation* which means a cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture. In this instance, the individual fully merges into a culture and its values to the level that their culture of origin is no longer recognisable.

In the African context, the *inculturation - enculturation* journey involved two patterns/movements – the Christianisation of culture and the Africanisation of Christianity. Inculturation as Christianising culture from faith to culture involves at least four interconnected practices<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> (wa Thiong’o 1986)

<sup>7</sup> (The Southern Cross 2010)

- i. **Challenging Culture.** This means that in every context the gospel and culture enter a rigorous dialogue marked by contradictions, connections and opposing factors. In this instance we need to allow the gospel to challenge aspects of ancestor beliefs.
- ii. **Purifying Culture.** Based on the belief that every culture has good and bad practices; it is therefore important to separate what is acceptable in terms of Christian values from what is unacceptable.
- iii. **Enlivening the Culture.** This involves enriching neutral or positive customs of the culture with the Christian leaven, such as integrating Christian elements into liturgies and African practices and customs of initiation, cultural weddings and other rites of passage.
- iv. **Unearthing the Riches of the Culture.** This involves the theological work of cooking theology in African pots. Allowing the mysterious presence of the Eternal Logos to emerge in the substance of culture and structures of life. In this case the questions of ancestral calling and be placed alongside issues of Christian vocation and seek to discover the Christ in heart of God's creative purposes in each practice.

Correspondingly, the process of enculturating Christianity from culture to faith includes,

*Identifying key components of the local culture and religion, and comparing them to Gospel values, where there is a clear correspondence between them, and where necessary, making the appropriate change. There may be a change of both (faith and culture), producing a new way of expressing Christianity, one which better resonates with the African experience<sup>8</sup>.*

In practice, churches Africanise themselves through adapting their theologies and liturgies to local languages, finding local symbols for their vestments, adapting cultural rituals and practices, allowing each aspect to amplify the other. Many mainline denominations, including the MCSA, continue to Africanise the church as a way of evolving their inherited theological and polity arrangements. To move in this direction, the MCSA has over the last few decades taken several resolutions that encourage contextualisation.

## 2.4 How can we have the conversation?

For the purpose of this discussion, the above movements of Christianising culture and Africanising culture can be infused with the Methodist theological tools such as the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral* and the *Order of Salvation*. These two features of Methodist theology provide sources and framework of entering into discourses as challenging as the phenomenon of *ukuthwasa*. Practically, this means making the oscillating movement between culture and Christianity using the lenses of scripture, tradition (including African traditions), reason and experience which will provide a path towards honest conversation. This approach promises to give space to multiple voices and perspectives as well as yield a deeper and richer outcome. These conversational practices are inherent in our Methodist heritage of holy conferencing and African philosophy and culture. Such a process promises to surface African world views and ways of finding meaning, community building and understanding vocation.

Mbiti observes that:

Even though attempts are made to give Christianity an African character, its Western form is in many ways foreign to African peoples. This foreignness is a drawback because it means that Christianity is kept on the surface and is not free to deepen its influence in all areas of African life and problems<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> (The Southern Cross 2010)

<sup>9</sup> (Mbiti 2015)

Thus, what would an attempt of giving Christianity an African character look like in this discourse? Is the Africanisation of the church through an authentic embrace of African spirituality and cultural heritage what the phenomenon of *ukuthwasa* among Methodists calls for? Is the phenomenon of *ukuthwasa* perhaps a call for re-engagement?

### Reflection Questions

- What criteria do we use to compare different ideas and determine which one we will believe?
- How do we look at a problem or challenge and decide which understanding to have or which path to take from all the opinions out there?
- Spend some time discussing your understanding of the concepts of decolonisation, assimilation, acculturation and the processes of inculturation and enculturation.

## 3 UKUTHWASA AND THE PRACTICE OF TRADITIONAL HEALING

*As we walk upon the Earth, our feet press against the bones of the Ancestors on whose shoulders we stand<sup>10</sup>.*

Before discussing the practice of *ukuthwasa*, this section provides a brief overview of an African world view as well as the presence and role of ancestors. These are important in locating the practice of initiation in the wider cultural context.

### 3.1 Ancestors in the African context

In the African belief system, the family is made up of both the living members and deceased members of the family. The deceased members are commonly referred to as ancestors. Ancestors could be any person from whom one is descended including forebears, living or dead. They are the ‘living dead’ who continue to communicate and offer support and bestow spiritual gifts to the living. In the African worldview, there is a hierarchy of affiliations between God/Supreme Being - the creator, lesser deities, ancestors or the living-dead and living members of the family and community.

Ancestors exist in the spiritual realm in a higher state of ontological existence to watch over their descendants and provide guidance on family affairs, traditions, customs, ethics and morality, health and fertility<sup>11</sup>. They also fulfil the function of being the intermediaries between humans and God. They are closer to God and related to the people who are their children. In John Mbiti’s understanding, ‘the living dead are bilingual: they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until recently; and they speak the language of spirits and of God, to whom they are drawing nearer ontologically.’<sup>12</sup>

As powerful part of the clan, ancestors maintain a close link between the world and the spirit world. Apart from protecting the living, they act as a moral guide and can discipline any erring member of the clan. They can punish behaviours such as incest, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness and other moral vices. As elders of the family, they are reincarnated into the family. Johannes Triebel<sup>13</sup> summarises the importance of ancestors in the African worldview as follows:

It is the responsibility of everyone to further and strengthen the life of one's own community. One must take care that the stream of life will not be interrupted or ebbed. To fulfil this basic commandment of African ethics, one must know about the origin of life, that is, the ancestors. They are the spring of the

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<sup>10</sup> (Teish 2021)

<sup>11</sup> (Edwards et al. 2009)

<sup>12</sup> (Mbiti 2015)

<sup>13</sup> (Triebel 2002)

stream of life; they are the source of life. Only the ancestors can guarantee that life will continue, that the stream of life will not be interrupted. Therefore, the relationship to the ancestors is important. Without the ancestors there is no life. Without the ancestors I would not exist; I would be a nothing. Therefore, the dead are part of the family. Indeed, they are the foundation, the reason for our being. Only in relation to them will I be able to understand the present time. The relationship to the ancestors therefore influences the thinking, the life, and the behaviour of the living. This view finds its corresponding expression in ancestor veneration. Everyone who neglects the relationship to his or her ancestors endangers his or her life, indeed the life of the whole community. The wrath of the ancestors can cause misfortune, illness, hunger, and death. It is therefore necessary to ensure their favour and benevolence towards the living and thus to preserve the stream of life.

Some scholars hold the view that God and ancestors work together. Ancestors do God's work. They are mediators between God and people. In some rituals some people will connect to the ancestors and pray to God.

### **3.2 Belief in presence of ancestors**

The beliefs about the presence, role and function of ancestors is at once personal and cultural matter. What an individual believes about the deceased or departed members of their family is often an integration of their experience, family, cultural and Christian beliefs. While the essence of those beliefs may be personal, there is a general belief in the nearness and presence of the departed. In common language it is often said that they are closer to God or in heaven with God. This belief is often supported by a belief in their continued living and priority, with an ability to protect and intercede for the living.

In an excerpt from the book, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, John O'Donoghue (2005) captures this belief as follows:

The dead are not distant or absent. They are alongside us. When we lose someone to death, we lose their physical image and presence, they slip out of visible form into invisible presence. This alteration of form is the reason we cannot see the dead. But because we cannot see them does not mean that they are not there. Transfigured into eternal form, the dead cannot reverse the journey and even for one second re-enter their old form to linger with us a while. Though they cannot reappear, they continue to be near us and part of the healing of grief is the refinement of our hearts whereby we come to sense their loving nearness. When we ourselves enter the eternal world and come to see our lives on earth in full view, we may be surprised at the immense assistance and support with which our departed loved ones have accompanied every moment of our lives. In their new, transfigured presence their compassion, understanding and love take on a divine depth, enabling them to become secret angels guiding and sheltering the unfolding of our destiny.

There is perhaps a need to reconcile the Christian and African world views to the role and function of the departed. Biblical tradition, Christian creeds and liturgy all recognise the value of ancestors. Can the saints and ancestors we perceive to be close to God speak to us and call us to respond in any way? If yes, are they sent by God?

With these questions in mind let us now explore the concept of *ukuthwasa*.

### **3.3 Ukuthwasa – the Initiation Journey**

A quick scan of the cultures that make up the MCSA will reveal different understandings, paths and rituals involved in the process and practice of *ukuthwasa*. While there are conceptual similarities, people who undergo the process of initiation are also gifted with different gifts by their ancestors. It is also important to recognise the limitation of language in conceptualising the nuances of *ukuthwasa*. In several Nguni cultures, the whole practice of traditional healing is centred on the power given by the Supreme Being/God

(*Umvelinqangi* – the one who appeared before everything), ancestors, nature, and the individual's connection to all these spiritual forces<sup>14</sup>.

### 3.3.1 Definition

*Ukuthwasa* or *intwaso* is a process of initiation undergone by someone who has *ubizo* (a call) from their ancestors to become a traditional healer. In the Zulu cultural milieu, *ukuthwasa* is an action verb that means 'to emerge', like the emerging of a new moon, or 'becoming a new person'. In other words, it is a process of learning to listen, hearing and accepting to live with the active voice and call from your ancestors as well as placing yourself at their service. The process is also understood as an awakening of one's spiritual eyes, faculties and intuition – one learns to see, feel and hear with one's spiritual eyes. Initiation is also a process of healing, personal integration, reconnecting with self, one's family tree and with one's ancestors.

### 3.3.2 Beginning the journey

When someone has been identified to have an ancestral calling, they undergo a rigorous process of initiation. The first signs of *ubizo* can take the form of dreams and or visions in which they may have an encounter with elements of nature or animals. The calling is understood to come from the ancestors, someone in one's blood line, who might have the gift or had been a healer themselves. Accepting the ancestral call implies the death of an old life and being reborn into a new person. Accepting the call often involves forms of abstinence and change of diet to achieve an unpolluted sacred status of a traditional healer<sup>15</sup>. The process of *ukuthwasa* depends on a clear directive from the ancestors and the guidance of *ugobela*, who will help interpret and guide the messages one receives and the required rituals. Throughout the initiation process, *ithwasa* develops habits of listening to and communicating with ancestors. In each of these steps the trainer becomes the guide and mentor. They help the initiate to learn how to listen and how to connect with ancestors on behalf of people who need healing. There is no timeline on the process of *ukuthwasa*. It largely depends on the ancestors and when *ugobela* feels they have successfully completed the journey.

### 3.3.3 Signs and symptoms of *ukuthwasa*

The signs and symptoms of *ukuthwasa* manifest themselves in different ways for different people. These symptoms may include a variety of emotional and physical symptoms, perceptual experiences, hallucinations, aggression, distress, restlessness and spiritual dissonance. In extreme circumstances, these may take a form of illness and ecstatic symptoms, sometimes misunderstood as 'possession' or 'evil' spirits<sup>16</sup>. Social scientists have often quickly diagnosed and dismissed psychological and emotional disturbance symptoms of an ancestral call. The first manifestations of a calling to become a *sangoma* is known across much of Southern Africa as 'the sickness of calling'<sup>17</sup>.

The issue of possession by evil spirits is said to happen when a frustrated alien spirit from outside a person's lineage seeks to inhabit a person as their home<sup>18</sup>. Some scholars believe that the hardships and symptoms people with an ancestral calling experience are not symptoms of disease in the medical sense but crises of evolution of consciousness. Traditional practitioners would argue that sometimes a call manifests in the spaces where a person feels the emptiness and dissonance in several of their life dimensions. The persistence of the emotional and psychological struggles is sometimes understood as the 'brooding of the ancestors'<sup>19</sup>. In such an

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<sup>14</sup> (Kubeka 2016)

<sup>15</sup> (Kubeka 2016)

<sup>16</sup> (Booi 2004)

<sup>17</sup> (Wreford 2005)

<sup>18</sup> (van der Zeijst et al. 2021)

<sup>19</sup> (Wreford 2005)



instance, *ukuthwasa* becomes a process of decluttering the soul and creating space for order and connection with one true self and their ancestor's call.

When a person has experienced all the signs of a calling, they often need to go or are guided by the ancestors to go to a senior *sangoma*, who will diagnosis the person and guide them through the steps of responding to the call. When the diagnosis has been done, the person is guided on how the journey will unfold. The process of initiation leads one through a path of spiritual awakening and self-discovery that opens them up to take up their ancestral gifts and serve the community – you are healed to become a healer.

Unlike the mainstream approach to a career choice, where anyone who has a desire to become a doctor can pursue medical studies and graduate, *ukuthwasa* is not just for anyone. Rather, those who undergo the process are believed to have been gifted by their ancestors, and they need to embrace the call and the healing powers that come with it. The 'living dead' or ancestors who call, are often referred to as *amadlozi*, *badimo*, *labaphansi*, *amathongo* or *izitunzi* (the sleeping ones, shadows or shades of the departed). Ancestors are believed to have special intuitive spirits through which they bestow divination and healing powers to men or women during the process of *ukuthwasa*.

### 3.3.4 *Completing the process*

On completion of the process of *ukuthwasa*, the trainee has access to the world of ancestors. They possess the skills for divination and healing, and they can receive direct communication from them. Traditional healers can specialise in several ways in line with the spiritual gifts bestowed upon them by their ancestors. These streams include *izangoma*, *ababhuli*, *abalози*, *izanusu*, *liNgaka*, *amaGqira* and *aBathandazi* among others. There are some for whom the process of initiation is sufficient, they never proceed to practice. They are satisfied with healing their suffering spirits and connecting with their ancestors who act as guides along life's journey.

## 4 USING METHODIST TOOLS FOR REFLECTION

When one considers the phenomenon of *ukuthwasa* and African healing practices the fear of religious plurality and syncretism suddenly surfaces. These arguments often invoke the author of scripture and how we interpret it within particular a context. Contextual reading of scripture and theologising should always go hand in hand. In its very nature, the bible is a contextual document that needs to be understood within its social and literary context. Transporting it into Africa requires a sensitivity to the African ways of thinking about God and salvation.

Similarly, the issue of worship is a very nuanced subject. When African people address their ancestors or address God through their ancestors are they worshipping or venerating their ancestors? This question needs to be placed alongside the idea of the unity of God and the command to have no other gods. Are ancestors other gods or mediums like or less than Jesus? These questions are at the heart of how Africans understand the nature of God, the cosmology of faith and the journey of salvation and healing. Properly speaking, they are the fundamental questions of the theology of God, Christology and soteriology. These theological themes lie at the centre of the inculturation debate. How much does African theology, spirituality and culture shape the conversation about God? In the following subsections these are briefly introduced.

### 4.1 Scripture

the invitation in the following subsections is to read the bible in the three ways we are often invited to exegete or interpret a bible passage, namely.

- i. **What is *behind* the text?** Understanding the world, author, the historical moment – political, social, religious and cultural context in which the text was written.
- ii. **What is *within* the text?** The literary context of the text – where it is in the book and broader bible canon, the text and textual features, characters and setting, literary influences and grammar, as well as ideas, phrases or concepts.
- iii. **What is in the world *in front* of the text?** This includes at least two types of readers: you as an individual who encounters the text in our contemporary world, a context so different from the world that produced the text. The second type of reader/interpreter is the believing Church over many centuries, a living tradition. We read as individuals within a believing context.

It is also important to further consider the contextual factors raised in the methodology about the African cultural context. We are reading these texts with critical eyes that seek to hear and see beyond what is given. This form of reading also brings into conversation Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

#### 4.1.1 *The Bible and Ancestors*

The word an'-ses-ters (*ri'shonim*, "first ones") appears once in the English Bible, only once (Lev. 26:45). The Hebrew word, the ordinary adjective "first," occurs more than 200 times, and in a few places might fairly be rendered ancestors (e.g., Deut. 19:14; Jer. 11:10). While the word ancestor appears once, the number of genealogies tracing family lines in the Old and New Testament indicates that ancestors were significant to the Israelites. In speaking of ancestors, the Old Testament ordinarily uses the word for Israel's forefathers. In the bible, ancestors are those from whom a person is descended and were honoured. Leaders and prophets implored the Israelites to remember their heritage and the God of their ancestors<sup>20</sup>. The bible account of Israel's ancestors does idealise them but portrays them as fallible mortals. In the New Testament, Paul was encouraged by remembering the faith of Timothy's grandmother and mother (2 Timothy 1:5). In Hebrews, the preacher encouraged the Jewish converts to remember the faithful believers who have gone before them (Hebrews 11:1 ff).

While there is an important place for ancestors in the bible, there is probably one incident of ancestor worship in Ezekiel 43:7-9 which may suggest that the bodies of Israel's dead kings were being worshiped. There may also be instances of deification of ancestors among ancient Israel's neighbours. Speculative evidence suggests the possibility that Israel's religion could have evolved from ancestor worship. Considering the absence of specific incidents of ancestral worship, how do we interpret the texts (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:32, 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:10-11; 1 Samuel 28:3; Jeremiah 27:9-10) that forbid diviners, sorcerers and contacting the dead? Yet again, there is the story of Saul consulting a medium to bring up the spirit of the dead Samuel which resulted in his death "*because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance*" (1 Samuel 28:1-25; 1 Chronicles 10:13-14).

How do we read these texts? Do we read literary? Do we allow them to speak to the broader canon of scripture? Do we read them in the context of the ancient near eastern struggle with a variety of forms of worship and deities? Are the Jewish scriptures a form of protest in a time and culture where worshipping and making sacrifices to different gods was the norm? Is Israel trying to purify herself and learn to worship the one true God who revealed Godself to their ancestors? There is a fair argument for either side of the coin. As African Christians, how do we hold the biblical command to have no other gods against the need to embrace cultural spiritual practices? Perhaps the methodological clue is to allow scripture to be in a dynamic conversation with tradition, experience and reason.

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<sup>20</sup> (Bruce 1991)

#### **4.1.2 Mediators and mediums between God and people**

There are different types of mediators and mediums between God and individuals and communities in the bible. A mediator is a person or form of agency that comes between two parties to promote relations between them. On the other hand, a medium is an intermediary, someone who stands in the gap between the living and the dead to communicate messages seen, felt, or heard regarding the past, the present, or the future. In the Old Testament the patriarchs, Moses, the judges, prophets, kings and the Levitical priests acted as mediators between God and Israel. Apart from the people who acted as mediators in scripture, those who study angelology suggest that angels also play the role of mediators in scripture.

In scripture, God spoke to individuals through dreams, visions and other means. For example, God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. Given the African cosmology discussed above, it can be argued that ancestors are part of the above list of mediators. The struggle for many Christians is to separate what could be labelled as occult practices and superstition such as necromancy, magic, and fortune-telling, which the bible seems to condemn. Should communicating with ancestors be regarded as one of these occult practices?

Two patterns of mediation can be discerned in scripture: Prophetic - God towards human beings and Priestly - human beings toward God. Prophetic mediation is when an appointed agent, like Moses and the angel that announced the birth of Jesus, reveals and proclaims a message or instruction from God and interprets God's will to people. The priestly (God-ward) mediation is the way God is approached, reconciled with, and sought on people behalf by an appointed representative. It is important to note that ministers and worship leaders perform both functions in the act of worship. When they preach, they prophetically speak to God's people on behalf of God, and they perform a high priestly function when interceding or presiding over sacraments/rites of passage on behalf of the people to God.

Before moving from this theme, it is important to ask the question about Christ being the one true mediator between people and God. In the opening of John's gospel, the bible speaks of Christ's pre-incarnate mediation. Furthermore, in Hebrews, scripture emphasizes his eternal election as the eternal mediator. This is also pointed out in Paul's words to Timothy, '*For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human...*' (1 Timothy 2:5, NIV). Is trying to locate an ancestral calling within a Christian story a contextual sensitivity and reading or a wresting of the African worldview into the bible? A reading of these texts with the African worldview is important in understanding what it means to worship God and have Jesus as mediator. As a general principle, African theologians accept the idea of Christ as the mediator between God and people. The question is often about where ancestors stand in relation to the Trinity. The contextual interpretation of the ministry and role of Jesus in relation to how Africans relate to ancestors promises a deeper and richer conversation.

If scripture testifies to the presence of a cloud of witnesses, as the writer of Hebrews suggests, we need to ask how this cloud relates to God and people. Is it too improbable to assume that God along with Jesus and the Holy Spirit can still use angels, dreams and ancestors to communicate with us? Similarly, African communities are replete with well-respected people who are agents of healing such as prophets, *izangoma*, *abathandazi* and diviners. Are these people messengers and mediators between God and people?

#### **4.1.3 Christian calling and Ancestral calling**

One of the key questions in this discussion is how does the practice of *ukuthwasa* relate to our understanding of Christian vocation? In Latin, 'vocation' refers to a call or summons. It is an occupation for which a person is qualified, trained or suited. In the Christian context, 'vocation' almost always means the call by God. This could be a call to the ordained ministry or another form of Christian service. Across the church, there is a

strong association between vocation and the divine call to service of humanity and the church. Vocation is not stagnant and determinative, rather a dynamic and progressive process of responding to God<sup>21</sup>.

Biblical witness and Christian theology also stress that every human being, by virtue of their creation, has a vocation. God has a creative purpose that each person must fulfil. Life in one way, is an act of listening and attending to that purpose. If the first call is to be fully human, through our baptism we are ushered into the family of God, in which we take our place in God's mission in the world. Put differently, everyone has a vocation and in Christ our human purpose finds fulfilment and in worship and service we fulfil God's call. In this way, vocation is a movement of living *in* the glory of God and *for* the glory of God<sup>22</sup>.

A further point can be made. Biblical witness suggests that God gives a variety of gifts to individuals and communities. For instance, those called into the ordained ministry are at the least expected to be endowed with several gifts and graces for leading public worship, pastoral care, counselling, oversight and governance, and leadership. From a dynamic perspective of vocation, God can still call someone further and bestow more gifts. Some gifts such as wisdom and compassion can be discovered in community. A classic example is Mother Teresa who became a beacon of compassion and care and built a community around the disciples of care. There are spiritual gifts that are cultivated and nurtured by context, communities and cultures. As such, a vocation is discerned in community, not alone. The process of discernment may happen in fellowship groups, worship and through the ministry of spiritual guides and mentors.

A few summative points can be extrapolated from here:

- Human vocation is an abiding in God and having God abide in us. Christian vocation is the Christian life one is called to live. Christian vocation is for the Church and world, and with others.
- Christian vocation is commensurate with one's talents and interests, but also one's backgrounds and identities. It is personal and communal, and it can be nurtured by a culture or community of faith.
- We are equally called to be persons – creatures growing every faculty of being into holistic flourishing, and we are called to use the gifts God has given in our family life, profession, church or community for the sake of others. In this way we participate in the work of redirecting our fallen world to its redemptive purpose.

We must pause here and ask the question again, are there similarities between Christian calling and ancestral calling? The description of the process of *ukuthwasa* and Christian vocation suggest several similarities. Both vocations are: (i) personal and communal, (ii) involve a process of initiation and discernment, (iii) they are meant for the wellbeing of the individual and community, (iv) an individual can possess several spiritual gifts, and (v) they are both initiated by a spiritual encounter. What is still not clear is whether both vocations come from God or other spiritual forces?

## 4.2 Tradition

The notion of tradition as a source of knowledge has largely referred to church tradition. It is important that Christian tradition is a product of wider historical currents.

### 4.2.1 *Ukuthwasa and the church in Africa*

The practice of veneration of ancestors in the African church is a long-standing tradition. Christians, across the denominational spectrum have openly or covertly said prayers and performed rituals in honour of their departed. Depending on denomination, context and culture, some African rituals have been adapted and incorporated into liturgical rites of passage such as funerals, weddings, birthdays, thanksgiving services, etc.

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<sup>21</sup> (Peacore 2010)

<sup>22</sup> (Peacore 2010)

Failure to engage and validate these rituals has perpetuated a duality, with members practising their Christian rites in church and their traditional rites away from the vicinity of other Christians.

While the practice of *ukuthwasa* has existed for centuries in Africa, it has been viewed historically as pagan and heathen. As church history suggests, when missionaries and colonial powers failed to understand African spiritual practices, they tried to abolish them. A case in point is when the apartheid government in South Africa legally banned *ukuthwasa* in Natal because it associated it with sorcery, *ukuthwala* (gaining powers for wealth), *ubugqwirha* (witchcraft) and other superstitions. Among the key reasons for the dismissal of African cultural practices was the failure for missionaries to find or identify their own conceptions of God in their engagement with local African cultures. A case in point, was that of the missionary John Edwards, who, when writing about Sotho/Tswana-speaking interlocutors assumed that the Mantatees<sup>23</sup> ‘*have no distinct notion of a Supreme Being*’.

Commenting on the struggle of missionaries, Tim Attwell<sup>24</sup> concedes:

Their mistake was to draw the inaccurate conclusion that their interlocutors had no conception or notion of divinity. Consequently, they proceeded to describe ‘God’ in their own terms – a Western dualistic construction of transcendent divinity expressed in anthropomorphic symbols which was at odds with the immanent, numinous, non-anthropomorphic sense of divinity that was deeply embedded in the *African* world view. Erroneously assuming that the minds of the children of the Mantatees were a *tabula rasa* where a sense of divinity was absent... they intended to inculcate in the minds of the children to whom he would address himself his own transcendent, dualistic conception of divinity (God) by teaching them the first part of the Conference Catechism. These...missionaries simply did not examine and interrogate carefully enough their own presuppositions and the symbolism in which they were expressed before jumping to inaccurate conclusions about the presuppositions of *African people*.

The failure of missionaries to engage, learn and embrace African ways of life led to intrusive forms of inculturation if not religious colonisation. The erosion and demonisation of African spiritual practices have created layers of psychological, social and cultural dislocation, a mindset which has a strong hold on the church still<sup>25</sup>. As such *ukuthwasa* and African practices of healing have carried a stigma that has often led the educated Africans or Christians to shy away from publicly associating with traditional healing practices or admit that they may have an ancestral calling.

#### **4.2.2 Learning from African traditional religions**

While mainstream Christianity has struggled to integrate elements of African cultural practices of healing, African traditional religions and churches have become the place where people have found solace or place to express their spiritual gifts. African traditional religions span from general ways in which African people related with each other as a way of life, to organised practices of worship and ancestral veneration to religions that came to being as protest missionary instituted churches. In these religions and churches, the distinctions between Christianity and culture do not exist. A person can be a priest or prophet and *isangoma* in the same tradition. Missionary initiated churches can benefit from learning how this integration happens in those communities. The duality and judgement that exists in Christian churches does not exist in African traditional churches. According to Gottlieb and Mbiti (1996):

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<sup>23</sup> Mantatees, a group within the Tlokwa, were people who migrated under the leadership of chieftainess Mmantatise during the Mfecane.

<sup>24</sup> Rev Tim Attwell made these comments in a brief reflection on the 10 February as part of DEWCOM discussion on Inculturation and the subject of *Ukuthwasa* in Southern Africa.

<sup>25</sup> (Ogana and Ojong 2015)

The environment and nature are infused in every aspect of traditional African religions and culture. This is largely because cosmology and beliefs are intricately intertwined with the natural phenomena and environment. All aspects of weather, thunder, lightning, rain, day, moon, sun, stars, and so on may become amenable to control through the cosmology of African people. Natural phenomena are responsible for providing people with their daily needs.

The holistic view of life that exists in the African worldview is something worth invoking in the conversation about African cultural practices. As early sentiments suggest, the conversation is not about how the church can clean up traditional practices for Christian sensibility; rather it about a mutual listening and finding a place that honours both traditions and the people involved.

#### **4.2.3 *The Communion of Saints and Ancestors***

Building on the concept of mediators, the presence of a Supreme Being in African reality is also linked with distance. God is holy and relatively removed from the actions and lives of the living. This God has no role in judging, or rewarding good or bad behaviour, and is too big to be concerned with the daily affairs of human beings<sup>26</sup>. This transcendent God needs intermediaries and mediators. Ancestors who are with God and Christ in the spiritual realm, are believed to possess God-like qualities. They implicitly communicate with God. They are also essentially human-like because of their origin; therefore, they are also able to communicate with humans. It is because of this status as well as their moral superiority that in most African societies ancestors serve as intermediaries and intercessors to the Supreme Being<sup>27</sup>.

Congruently, the role of ancestors is in part the same belief in the existence of the Communion of Saints. In the Apostle's Creed, the church affirms the community of saints, and we liturgically intercede for them every Sunday. While the recognition and honour of the departed has been part of the Christian tradition, the MCSA Conference resolution moves beyond the belief of the presence of ancestors to explore their active role and agency in shaping our understanding of vocation and ministry. Beyond asking to be '*strengthened by their fellowship*' and seeking to '*follow their example*'<sup>28</sup>, can the community of the departed speak, guide, call and bestow gifts on the living? Is a two-way stream of communication possible? Can they open our eyes to a spiritual realm beyond the material world? Is their voice the voice of God?

By extension, the church believes in the communion of saints who are with God and intercede for the living. The bible is also replete with genealogies of people of faith. Faith is a gift transmitted through generations and communities of faith. The faith we hold is a deposit from our ancestors in the faith. If God can use a variety of means to communicate with us, the following questions are important for us to answer:

- Are the gifts of faith and the Spirit only possible through the Christian church?
- Can God use ancestors to share truth and spiritual gifts with us?
- Is there a place for ancestors to be included as mediators of the same God who uses angels and other mediums?
- Do ancestors have special powers? If so, where do they get their power from?

#### **4.2.4 *The Christian God and Ancestors***

Methodist ethos and broad Christian theological premise that shapes our practice centres around the Christian revelation and the Chalcedonian belief in the Trinity, who is the God of love. This God is both immanent and transcendent and nothing exists outside their realm. God is also in Christ redeeming the world to the fullness of salvation and Christian perfection. Through the Holy Spirit that '*...comes from the Father, through the Son...*' (Nicene Creed), the world is charged with the power and the presence of God, and the people of God

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<sup>26</sup> (Mbiti 2015)

<sup>27</sup> (Bae 2008)

<sup>28</sup> (Methodist Publishing House 1992, B27)

are formed, equipped and given gifts and graces. The church also believes in the fellowship and example of the communion of saints.

It is also important to observe that these tenets of faith are also central of African Christianity. Most African scholars believe in the presence of God/Supreme being who is the Life Force, Vital Force that animates the whole of life<sup>29</sup>. A critical question is, are ancestors (Christian or not) also charged and animated by the power of God? Answering this question will assist us in addressing the issue of whose spirit is a person with an ancestral call responding to? Do ancestors possess a different spirit from God? Can a person who has received an ancestral call claim that the spirit calling them to be *isangoma* is the one that came through the Father and the Son or do ancestors have a different source?

Both in the Old and New Testaments there are instances where evil spirits are driven out of people. Jesus healed and drove evil spirits of people and animals. The question of ‘spirits’ and their sources calls for a deeper engagement. Are there good and bad spirits?

#### **4.2.5 Ancestral worship or veneration?**

The practice of veneration or worship of ancestors is found in many cultures across the world. Prayers and offerings are said to and for the spirits of dead relatives. These individuals are believed to embody the space of the living and their spirits are also thought to act as mediators between the living and the Creator. Death was not the sole criterion for being worshiped as an ancestor. The person must have lived a moral life with great social distinction to attain that status. Ancestors are believed to influence the lives of later generations by blessing or cursing them, in essence acting as gods. Praying to them, presenting them with gifts, and making offerings are done to appease them and gain their favour.

The debate about the limits of what is worship and what is veneration is inconclusive. The word ‘worship’ is defined as the act of showing great reverence, honour, respect, etc., especially to God. In theological terms, it is the acknowledgement, adoration, reverence, and submission of God’s place as the source of all life. Veneration on the other hand is not given the same status. Veneration is a form of great respect for elders and ancestors. This form of respect for Africans is not equated to the worship of the Supreme Being – God.

With regards to *ukuthwasa*, the important distinction that needs to be made is whether responding to an ancestral call displaces the worship of God. Is responding to the call part of weaving one’s path towards God and allowing God to use you in a different way?

#### **4.2.6 Discerning the ‘Spirit’ or spirits**

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

1 Peter 2:9

The above citation from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter is important scriptural reference in dealing with the issue of *ukuthwasa*. While we can safely say, both Christian vocation and *ukuthwasa* are spiritual matters, the source of the guiding spirit is often a bone of contention. The Christian church believes in the agency of the Holy Spirit in guiding, forming, conferring spiritual gifts, and directing the mind and actions of Christians. Similarly, when a person receives an ancestral calling, they are guided by the spirit of their ancestors through mediums such as, for example, dreams. The critical questions that follow are:

- Is the spirit of ancestors the same as the Spirit of God? How do we tell the difference?

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<sup>29</sup> (Masoga 2017)

- Are we able to faithfully discern the nature and substance of the spirit(s) invoked when responding to a Christian call or ancestral call?

There is even a greater challenge. Is receiving and attending the ancestral calling a movement towards *light* or *darkness*? These questions are not easy to answer, particularly because historically, ancestral worship, veneration and by extension receiving an ancestral call have been associated with darkness. If the motif of *darkness* only exists in relation to cultural practices, a lot can be said about the dark history of the church. The crusades, slavery, colonisation, apartheid, racism, sexism, patriarchy and many others, are deeply intertwined with Christian history and ideology. Perhaps the challenge is to engage with church history and culture in a manner that is mutually purifying and enlivening. What is suggested here is that there is no practice that is dark by virtue of being a cultural ritual; rather, every practice may contain elements of light and darkness.

The task for the church is to enter the darkness and draw everything into the light of God's love, truth and justice. Not everything about *ukuthwasa* or *ubunyanga* is pure. The process of engagement should clarify what can be embraced and what is inconsistent with the faith we profess. The church has the task of discernment. The MCSA must discern and engage in reflection about the nature of ancestral spirits and their relationship to the Holy Spirit. The church cannot have a voice about an aspect that it does not understand and has not studied.

#### 4.2.7 *Christian world view and the role of Christ*

Locating ancestors within the Christian worldview and Christology requires a conversation about Jesus being God's definitive revelation to humanity. In theology, this invokes the different branches of Christology. Jesus' incarnation and ministry is often interpreted from several stances including trinitarian, historical, existential, anthropological, political, humanistic and liberation stances<sup>30</sup>. Each of these stances reveal an aspect of who God in Jesus is. In the African theological landscape, there are two dominant Christologies - liberation Christology and inculturation Christology. The liberation metaphor hosts the different liberation theological trajectories, and the enculturation approach focuses on the place and agency of Christ within the cultural milieu of African existence. The existence or non-existence of ancestors belongs to this area of theological engagement. Emerging themes in African research include Christ as reconstructor and healer, brother and senior ancestor.

The tensions between the traditional view of Christ as the only mediator with God calls for an inquiry into the differences between the traditional Christian cosmology and African cosmology. Bearing in mind that Christological formulations are also formulations across church tradition, it is worth questioning whether the insertion of ancestors as mediators between human beings and God changes our understanding of the identity of Christ. Does it change or enhance our relationship with God?

### 4.3 Reason

The polymorphism of the process of *ukuthwasa* demands the use of a multidisciplinary approach. The methodological frame suggested above provides enough space for doing such reflective work. A substantial amount of research in psychology and psychiatry has failed to fully diagnose the symptoms of a person presenting with signs of an ancestral calling. This failure is largely because western psychology only perceives illness in physical and psychological terms. People with *ukuthwasa* are often diagnosed with psychosomatic disorder, affective, anxiety or psychotic disorders. In extreme cases people who present symptoms of *ukuthwasa* are often diagnosed with different forms of schizophrenia. When the symptoms escape the scope of limits of what can be diagnosed western psychology can be found wanting. The fundamental challenge is that western medicine diagnoses are based on an individualistic view of a person, to

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<sup>30</sup> (Gathogo 2008)



the exclusion of spiritual and religious beliefs<sup>31</sup>. As such, western professionals will have difficulty in communicating with Africans who hold a traditional perspective.

It is notable that the prevailing perspective in western thought is a compartmentalisation of life. This categorization often leads to a limited view of the presenting illness or symptoms. Some scholars have suggested that practitioners who employ a transpersonal psychology perspective are better equipped to have a holistic view of the person. The journey of *ukuthwasa* and the practice of healing in Africa has several psychosocial themes. Scholars suggest that the process of initiation is about unlocking awareness, deepening self-consciousness, connecting to one's roots and rediscovering a sense of belonging and purpose<sup>32</sup>. Studies on *ukuthwasa* that have used Jungian psychoanalysis would go as far as to say that the initiation process moves the person from the state of unconsciousness and leads them on a personal development and maturation<sup>33</sup>.

While there may still be aspects of scientific research and diagnosis that fail to capture the holistic aspects of people experiencing an ancestral calling, integrative approaches prove better suited to deepen understanding and assist in finding solutions. This growing emphasis is closer to African approaches to initiation and healing.

#### 4.4 Experience

This paper came out of the lived and real experiences of Methodist people, ministers and lay, who are going through the existential reality of trying to align their Christian belief with their ancestral call to be traditional healers. Each of these members told their stories of how they have struggled with the call and the failure of the church to understand what they were experiencing. In most instances they felt judged, stigmatized and rejected and were not granted any form of pastoral care.

As the preceding sections suggest, the experiences of these members are not new. For a long time, the Christian church in Africa has failed to embrace African spirituality and cultural practices. While the MCSA has done well in adapting several aspects of governance and expressions, contextual styles of worship, translation and development of liturgies in African languages, the growth of organisations and how they express cultural elements in worship, it remains necessary to explore this matter. While commendable developments have been noted in the MCSA, there seems to be an ongoing struggle when it comes with engaging courageously with African cultural practices in a manner that is life-giving. There is need to discover ways that could edify culture and enhance our theology and practice.

The pastoral and leadership issues that lurk behind the discussion on *ukuthwasa* are very important. With no standard to hold onto, people with ancestral calling have often fallen victim theological persuasions of circuit ministers and leaders. Very little pastoral care and attention has been given to the people who are going through a personal crisis in their own spirituality. There is need to address the elements of fear that propel the judgement of people with an ancestral calling or those who are practising as traditional healers. In the process of writing this paper, we discovered that there are Methodists who, when they experience an ancestral calling, often leave the MCSA to join African traditional churches who seem more receptive. Once these members have left, some of their friends follow them to privately consult. It also emerged that there are some members who take a "sabbatical" (or time away from church) to go and fulfil the requirements of their ancestral calling. When they return, some of them are often subjected to judgment and discrimination publicly, yet they are privately consulted by the very people who mete judgment against them.

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<sup>31</sup> (Booi 2004)

<sup>32</sup> (Mlisa 2009)

<sup>33</sup> (Mlisa 2009)

## Reflection questions

- Are there people in your family or society who are practising as traditional healers?
- How has your own society dealt with people with an ancestral calling or are known to be traditional healers?
- What beliefs have informed the way you or your society has responded to people who are traditional healers?

## 5 Conclusion

Doing theology in Africa today requires a recognition of the interwoven manifestations and persistence of the political and religious colonization of Africa. Theologians and biblical scholars today, have the task of confronting and deconstructing long accepted stances that denigrate African ways of life and culture in order to allow voices from the margins to find their way into the centre. At the heart of this confrontation, is the need to deconstruct the way early missionaries rejected and demonized African culture and practices in favour of western theologies, rituals, liturgies and hymns.

Making a case for the decolonisation of the church, Masoga<sup>34</sup> points out that some African missionary instituted churches are still stuck with inherited theological traditions and ecclesiastical arrangements. He continues to question why the African church is always respectful of other theological and cultural traditions but fails to give the same respect to its own. This discussion on *ukuthwasa* highlights the continuing struggle for the church to embrace African cultural wisdom and spiritual practices.

While above tendencies persist, we must acknowledge the growing awareness of the multi-cultural and polyvocal nature of Christian theology and spirituality<sup>35</sup>. A Polyvocal approach in theology allows for a rethinking and questioning of inherited ways of knowing, giving way to the contextual embodiment of narratives and values<sup>36</sup>. This growing awareness is characterised by a respectful approach towards cultural expressions of humanity who are met by the gospel. In part, decolonising the church and theology in Africa means fostering an attentiveness to contextual voices and expressions of being church. It also means finding ways of telling the Christian story through the lens of African spirituality and culture.

Furthermore, experience suggests that when the church fails to authentically engage with the cultural beliefs of its members it often results in diluted forms of Christian witness, a dual system of beliefs and loss of membership into more enculturated churches. Some people would attend church to worship and fellowship with other believers and thereafter go to traditional healers and diviners to consult and seek healing. While the fragmentation of people's faith can be caused by a variety of factors, the lack of authentic engagement has caused people to seek other mediums to address their fears and curiosity about their ancestors and the spiritual realm and presence of evil spirits. To map out a way forward, it is important for the church to engage and reflect to authentically Christianise culture and Africanise Christianity.

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<sup>34</sup> (Masoga 2017)

<sup>35</sup> (Lloyd 2023)

<sup>36</sup> (Weidinger 2020)

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