

Simon, D X  
Dept Practical Theology and Missiology  
University of Stellenbosch

## Witnesses as strangers responding to “Bodily Imperatives”<sup>1</sup> of the poor

### ABSTRACT

The bodies and embodiment of the poor challenge the churches’ missional ethos, which entails the modes of relating and responding to the plight of the poor. It suggests that churches should deal with the “human face” of poverty at both its material and cultural dimensions, with the levels of human dignity and human identity respectively. This requires a continuous transformation of the modes of witnesses that shift between being “for” (partial inclusion of) and “with” (embracing of) the poor. “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor should mainly inform and shape this process of transforming the modes and persons whenever witnesses and the poor encounter each other on the “frontier” of poverty and class. “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor echoes a call for both missional *and* moral responses in the process.

### INTRODUCTION

The paper is set within broader discussions on the outcome and impact of societal imbalances on the poor, on poverty, and, particularly, on the encounters between Christians in South Africa today. It departs from the fact that the poor are estranged by the imbalances. At the same time, statistics generally indicate that the poor, a community of faith, still remain and increasingly become religious insiders of Christianity in (South) Africa. Despite being socio-religious strangers, the poor have cultural *and* religious resources<sup>2</sup> that are as important as the material resources in the

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1 As will be further developed, the concept of “Bodily imperatives” (Weis 1999) refers to the missional-moral demands that the (physical, biological, gendered, cultural-ethnic, etc) bodies and embodiment (“being-in-the-world”) of poor as marginal persons make on the witnesses and churches’ responses.

2 The intention is not to discuss the resources in detail but to introduce historical and contextual issues and problems that have prevented meaningful encounters between witnesses as strangers and the poor as social-strangers with their own resources. See the following on resources within communities or resources being used in encounters between the poor and “others”: Stenger 2002 who links human dignity and human identity to material poverty; Ngwenya 2001, on how “We are all Believers” become a theme by which the poor identify themselves in contexts of HIV/AIDS, of death, and other crises; See particularly Fenyves *et al* (1998) - an empirical research on “how urban and rural people cope with poverty in the light of religion”.

“African Independent Churches (AICs): Spiritual Support for Secular Empowerment” (G C Oosthuizen 2002), an excellent article based on empirical work, offers some hints on discovering, giving recognition of, and appropriating the material and socio-cultural resources of the poor. The idea of the poor as religious insiders and agents, as used in this paper, is partly based on Oosthuizen’s assertion that the AICs are “becoming the true mainstream of South African Christianity.” They are “... the largest and fastest growing form of civil mobilisation bridging the gap between the employed and unemployed,

“fight” against poverty. More specifically, in marginal Christian communities these resources are embodied within the poor. *The extent to which relative affluent witnesses<sup>3</sup> and middle-class congregations can create space for the poor as agents and appropriate the resources impacts on the transforming outcome of the encounters with the poor and on addressing poverty. Indeed, class as a differential is one of the major hurdles in crossing and transforming both witnesses and the poor on the “frontier”<sup>4</sup> of poverty.* After describing the concepts and introducing the problems and challenges in terms of culture and embodiment, the paper proposes some hints for further reflection on the encounter with the poor and missional-moral responses of witnesses as strangers, the “others,”<sup>5</sup> on the frontier of poverty and class.

### DUALISM DISEMBODIES

The socio-culturally estrangement of the poor remains a reality. On the subject of “past and present estrangement” du Toit states, “South Africa may no longer be a nation of enemies, but it remains a nation of strangers, socially alienated from one another.” People have some “contact” and “knowledge” of each other, but the “relations “are very hierarchical and plagued by power imbalances” defined along economic, class, racial, and cultural lines (2003:52). One often hears clichés like “cultural poverty”<sup>6</sup>, “poverty as a sub-culture”<sup>7</sup>, and the “culture of the poor”<sup>8</sup> that exacerbate the estrangement. *These undermine the intrinsic and dynamic relation among the triad of poverty, culture, and religion; consequently, they, similarly as an exclusive emphasis on material poverty, objectify and disembody the poor as agents. To counteract this, the agency of the poor should be construed as axis within the triad to deal with the various forms of dualism that inform reflections on poverty and encounters with the poor.*

As point of departure one should, however, be cautious when material poverty and cultural-religious resources are mentioned and discussed within the same context. For Boff warns of the potential danger when dealing with concepts like “the economically poor” and “evangelical poverty”<sup>9</sup> and, by implication, with these resources. He asserts,

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- the urban and the rural ...”. Also, they “facilitate urban migration”, “mobilising scarce resources for developmental aim.” Lastly, they “... operate from an ethos in which Christian values of spirituality are blended with the traditional value of *ubuntu* i e service to the community” (4-6).
  - 3 Witness connotes a person(s) who communicates (in word and deed) the contents of the gospel through “...proclamation (*kerygma*), community (*koinonia*), service (*diakonia*), ...” (Guder 2000:53) and worship (*leitourgia*) (Kritzinger *et al* 1994:36-39). When embodiment is viewed holistically as discussed in this paper, the witnesses already embody dimensions of these approaches, which should be accentuated and brought into dialogue with the gospel as specific contexts demand. In other words, witnesses and a Christian community in its particular context already embody some ingredients for holistic witnessing.
  - 4 “Frontier” is a loaded concept in mission. In this paper it expresses the physical, missional, and moral distance to be crossed as witnesses from relatively affluent/middle-class congregations encounter the poor.
  - 5 “Others” refers to witnesses from relatively affluent/middle-class congregations who become strangers as they find themselves on the frontier of poverty and class.
  - 6 Comparing a cultural aspect(s) of, for example, two communities’ and then concluding that the one is “poorer” than the other – lacking some depth . It is assumed that one is still underdeveloped.
  - 7 Accepting assumptions that people are victims of poverty and that it dominates their whole outlook on life.<sup>8</sup> Holding persistently onto perceptions that the “poor” have a dominant and unique way of thinking and acting culturally and religiously.
  - 9 The tension between “the economical poor” and “evangelical poverty” parallels that in discussion on whether the “poor in Spirit” in Matthew 5:3 means “material poverty” or “spiritual poverty.”

There is the risk of diluting the reality of the true poor, the economically poor, in the name of a broader concept of evangelical poverty, which includes other dimensions than the economic. Evangelical poverty is certainly a polyvalent concept, but its conceptual richness must not be bought at the price of forgetting of the scandalous material poverty that directly affects biological subsistence (1991:56).

Being cautious of such risks, embodiment as a lense into culture, as outlined below, guides the reconstruction of the poor as agents within the triad. It supports the argument that amidst poverty the poor embodies cultural-religious resources that are often neglected or downplayed in reflections and programmes. Resources structure the sense- and meaning-making from within a cultural-religious meaning system (CRMS) – the “dominant meanings” of a community. As deduced from Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion and culture, a CRMS suggests that a missional-moral encounter with the poor should occur at the fundamental symbolic levels of the triad. Contrasting it with a worldview, which often seems to be too general for informing the correlation of cultural-religious themes and experiences in contexts, he states,

A meaning system refers to the dominant meanings in a culture that are associated with particular symbol or set of symbols. Its distinguishing feature is an identifiable *set of symbols with which interpretations, feelings, and activities* can be associated.... [It] pertains to one set of symbols, even though these symbols may be used in a number of different contexts, settings (1987:45, italics mine).

Symbolic resources embedded within the socio-cultural and religious interactions, events, and rituals constitute the “dominant meanings” of the poor. With the resources the poor (in)directly challenge the imaginative and concrete modes through which witnesses as strangers encounter them in the name of the gospel on the frontier.

When one hears or thinks of the “good news” to the poor the immediate connections made are often on a materialistic level. However, witnesses, as Boff (1991:26) insists, “... must produce, where it encounters cultures, that which its name proclaim: the good news. What is the good news? For who is the good news good? There is no deciding before hand what is good news without reference to specific cultures, and to the ways these cultures deal with the basic expectancy of human existence.” If decisions are made in advance, then an “either-or” approach to material poverty or “evangelical poverty” tends to end in objectifying and disembodiment of the poor. Are the churches seeking or creating further spaces to prevent or overcome the dualism that disembodies the poor? If not, is it possible to respond and address the missional-moral consequences and implications of the “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor significantly? This question presupposes a particular approach to culture that focuses on bodies and embodiment as a way of integrating the material and socio-cultural dimensions of the triad. Most importantly, an approach should endeavor to take the poor as the axis of integration.

Such an approach, as discussed in the next section, aims to overcome the dualism through the integration. Thereby it will deal with a tension that often informs how witnesses and others perceive and respond to the bodies and embodiment of the poor.

#### “TEXTUALITY” IN TENSION WITH “EMBODIMENT” AS RESPONSE

Interdisciplinary studies<sup>10</sup> have recently focused on bodies, body images, and embodiment to deal critically and constructively with the sense-and meaning-making and other aspects of the triad.

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10 See how embodiment, experience, culture, and nature become the main concepts in the titles of the following interdisciplinary studies: Thomas J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and experience: the*

The shifts in these studies connect directly with concerns in this paper as poverty has a “human face”, namely, the human dignity and identity of the poor are at stake (Stenger 2002:72). Bodies and embodiment become “lenses” for understanding the bodies of the poor and other bodies as a gateway into “our” cultures, approaches to poverty, and experiences with the poor. The “lenses” assist this paper in directing the attention to the decisive existential grounds of sense-and meaning-making and responses: the poor continue with this *despite poverty*; the witnesses mostly *due to the* (in)direct impact of poverty. Thus, this section argues that *the tension between focusing on the mere bodies of the poor against the embodiment of the poor shape and characterise how some witnesses respond to poverty and encounter the poor in Africa.*

When cultural analysis approaches the body as “a cultural phenomenon” and a “biological entity”, it turns to “a critical methodological opportunity to reformulate theories of culture, self, and experience, with the body at the centre of analysis” (Scordas 2000:4). It takes the agency of individuals seriously for they interact “with their bodies and through their bodies with the world around them” (Davis 1997:15). The fact that culture is not viewed primarily as something out there in the world should impact on *how the relation among culture, person, and world is perceived in the contexts of poverty.* One of the major problems concerns the objectification of “bodies as things devoid of intentionality and intersubjectivity”, devoid of a “self and person”. The objectification occurs explicitly and subtly when, as Scordas (1994:5-6) argues, the “body and its transformations” are studied “while still taking *embodiment* for granted” (italics in text).<sup>11</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the tension between body and embodiment parallels the tension between “reading” the body of the poor as mere “text” and as experience. One approach turns to the body of the poor like turning to “text” in abstraction. It asks what the body represents – “the body as representation”. On the other hand, the other approach centres on embodiment of the poor – the poor “being-in-the-world”. It foregrounds the “existence” and “lived experiences” of the poor amidst poverty and, therefore, also the socio-cultural resources embodied in the poor.

The critical question is whether and how “textuality” or “embodiment” shapes our everyday and ecclesiastical praxes and modes of encountering the poor? It seems that the (secular and Christian) media, focusing on statistics and visual images, has molded us to “textualise” and thus objectify the poor as mere victims of their circumstances. In its totality the body of the poor becomes “a mere sign, a metaphor” for material poverty and of almost everything that has gone wrong in Africa. The challenge is that the media should take the embodiment of resources within the poor as point of departure. It would involve the conscientising and shaping of the churches and witnesses to recognise and respond critically to the “being-in-the-world” of the poor. In short,

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*existential ground of culture and self* (2000); Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber (eds.), *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersection of Nature and Culture* (1999). Csordas, Thomas J. *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology* (1990). The two volumes and the article resemble the direction the research has developed since the 1960s to 2000s. In “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology” Csordas (in Weiss and Haber, 1999) summarises some of the approaches and then describes what the “paradigm of embodiment” is: “If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience, the studies under the rubric of embodiment are not ‘about’ the body per se. Instead, they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the world. They require what I would call a *cultural phenomenology* concerned with synthesizing the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always inevitable immersed” (Csordas 1999:143; cf. 147, italics in text).

11 The first group of approaches turn to “perception, practice, parts, processes or products” (the “analytical body”). Others focus on the “body in relation to specific domains of cultural activity” (the “topical body”) for example, the body and gender/politics/religion. Other approaches make “the number of bodies dependent on how many of its aspects one cares to recognize” (the “multiple body”), for instance, its individual, medical, physical, social, religious, and political aspects (Scordas 1994:5-6).

witnesses and congregations need to deal with an unresolved tension: on the one hand, “textuality” discourages significant missional-moral responses to the “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor; “embodiment” encourages significant responses on the other hand. They cannot neglect this tension, taking for granted that their own sense of humanity and “intersubjectivity” are adequate grounds for responding to the poor and dealing with poverty.

This seems to be the case when arguments follow Aku’s thought as he connects “corporeality of subjectivity” (“intersubjectivity”) and embodiment (2000:159). That is, the body of the witness becomes the axis for understanding the “corporeality of our subjectivity” where “being-in-the world” with the poor becomes a “follow-up to our corporeality.” From the locus and perspectives of witnesses of the church, the arguments conclude that due to “our” humanness – being “embodied as human persons” – the various and “different experiences” (Gittins 1999:xv) become a base for responses. The humanness and experiences set, as Aku puts it,

... the ground for moral demands on us. It creates the possibility of being a neighbour, and of exercising the spirit of neighbourliness to one another. Thanks to my corporeality I can be physically near to the other and have a feel of his and her plight. It is by virtue of this knowledge (or feeling) that I can make myself ready to help. That is the moral demand that my body as ground for presence and neighbourliness exposes me to (2000:159).

Despite the fact that embodiment is a common denominator describing the “being-in-the world” of witnesses and the poor, two distinct “Bodily Imperatives” lead to distinct missional-moral responses. For “*gender, race, ethnicity, and class are embodied*” in moral agents and thus shape the “interactions” and “obligations” resulting from the interactions (Weis 1999:140, emphasis mine). Therefore, the witnesses’ bodies “as ground for presence” and their awareness of corporeality do not necessarily guarantee any significant missional-moral response to the “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor.

To take the *poor as socio-cultural strangers* versus *the relative affluent and middle-class* witnesses as an example, the differentials have decisively shape the tension between the “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor and those of intercultural witnesses in mission history. In the words of Gittins, an anthropologist-missionologist who approaches culture as a “human reality ... embodied in people,” [t]he implications are enormous, both for those who cross cultural boundaries in search of other embodied people, and because Christianity is *par excellence* a religion of incarnation, of embodiment” (Gittins 1999:75, italics in text). Some of the implications are set out in Bonk’s *Mi\$\$ion\$ and Money* (1994). Only three are briefly referred to here as an indication of the strangerhood of missionaries as witnesses and the need for both moral responses and missional responses. They suggest that the bodies and embodiment of witnesses as strangers on the frontier of poverty and class must continually encounter and be encountered by the “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor as part of a bigger process of transformation in and through Christian communities.

The relative “affluence” and middle-class status of witnesses, “missionary *insulation*”, “missionary *isolation*”, and the “*unbridgeable social gulf*”<sup>13</sup> (Bonk 1994:46-49) impact negatively on the missional-moral responses *from* the “Bodily Imperatives” of missionaries and *from* the

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12 Bonk refers specifically to missionaries from the North, particularly, from North America. Nevertheless, his argument applies as well to other witnesses. Some migrant workers from the South who define themselves as missionaries in the North might be the exception. It would be interesting to investigate what the “bodily imperatives” and agency of the poor in the North (the African Diaspora) would imply from their perspectives. See Gerloff (2002) on the African cultural and religious (dis)continuity through the African Diaspora in Europe.

13 He also mentions “illusions of superiority”, “relationships of mistrust”, and “hostile relationships.”

“Bodily Imperatives” of the poor. According to Bonk, missionaries “inhabit an island in a sea of poverty.” They are “protected from the ‘heat’ and ‘sound’ of poverty” in which the majority of the globe’s inhabitants live and move and have their being” (Bonk 1994:46). Secondly, the “inevitable price of affluence” is “missionary isolation.” The costs pertain to three areas, namely, “... when personal possessions and privileges *prevent, distort, or destroy* missionary *relationships with the poor*” (emphasis mine). Thirdly, a direct outcome of these is “an unbridgeable social gulf” that “makes fraternal friendship so awkward as to be virtually impossible ...”(48). Nevertheless, driven by an urgency of mission as evangelisation (verbal proclamation) and mission as development (diaconia), missionaries and other witnesses continue to encounter the poor and engage poverty despite the social insulation, isolation, and unbridgeable social gulf. Simultaneously, throughout the modes of encounters the “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor still urge for a missional-moral response since

It is difficult to deny that the economic disparity, and not simply cultural difference, poses a great obstacle to fraternal social reciprocity. Consequently, many ... missionaries – more instinctively than deliberately – associate with the poor only in the context of their missionary work. In other contexts, attempts by the poor to participate in the social life of missionaries can only be a mutually embarrassing intrusion (:49).

The differentials (for example, economic disparity, race, ethnicity, class, and gender) within the “Bodily Imperatives” and moral agency of the poor should remain a dominant matrix in the critique of how witnesses may assume that “our” mere intersubjectivity, corporeality, and neighbourliness can be the primary and even ultimate grounds for missional-moral responses.

The dominant matrix within the critique should be subjected to but also serve a broader purpose. It includes, amongst others, the re-orientation of modes of responses and an ethos (a way of life) within a missional framework. The process involves “the continuing conversion of the church” (Guder 2000) and of witnesses as strangers foremost *on* and *from* the frontiers. Being located *on* the frontier of poverty and class offers an opportunities for witnesses to be transformed from *without* and *within* their own Christian communities as they move *to* and *fro*.

It implies that witnesses move from “textuality” to “embodiment” as a “lense” for perceiving and engaging the poor. The assumption is that embodiment would result in witnesses as stranger being more open to the critique and missional-moral (trans)formation on and from the frontier. However, both the costs associated with the differentials with regard to poverty and key missional aspects from “cross-cultural” witnessing (traditional “missions”) continue to filter and inform responses. How witnesses view the poor within the various dimensions of witnessing (see footnote 1) can perpetuate some of the costs and therefore hinder some critical outcomes of embodiment. It can prevent and even derail an existing spirit of openness, and a mode of embracing the poor for the sake of re-orientating both witnesses and the poor.

#### SEEING THE POOR AS RELIGIOUS INSIDERS VERSUS RELIGIOUS OUTSIDERS (STRANGERS)

As indicated in the introduction, strangerhood partly describes witnesses from middle-class and affluent congregations on the frontier of poverty and class. For it is suggested that, as Bonk also argued, they often wrestle to engage the poor and adopt appropriate modes of “being” and “doing” within *on* and *from* the frontier. The metaphor of witnesses as strangers partly describes a reality and a challenge. Past actions and modes of interacting with indigenous peoples in “cross-cultural” witnesses support the fact that witnesses have not usually viewed themselves persistently as social-

cultural strangers. Witnesses have rarely even embrace an image of being religious outsiders as the numbers of indigenous Christians has increased and exploded. Against this historical background and the current re-emergence of interest in mission by congregations, *witnesses are often on a tight rope which impacts on how they respond missionally-morally to the “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor. They grapple with this in so far as they ignore or fail to differentiate between the poor as socio-cultural strangers due to material poverty and as Christian communities who have moved from being religious outsiders to religious insiders with particular resources.* The next section briefly develops this proposal as background to the last section. The latter offers some hints for a communal quest between witnesses and the poor that revolves around missional-moral responses from the “Bodily Imperatives” and the agency of the poor.

The duality expressed in “evangelisation of the poor” includes a method, spirituality, and critique of construing intercultural witness in the context of poverty.<sup>14</sup> In its objective sense, it relates to a tradition that has reduced the poor, often unknowingly, to receivers (“objects”) of “evangelisation” understood narrowly as the “saving of souls.” Despite the fact that the poor are often religious insiders who express unique forms of Christianity in (South) Africa,<sup>15</sup> subtle and overt forms of objectifying the poor as religious outsiders (strangers) still exist. The poor as socio-cultural strangers and as religious outsiders are often lumped together by a form of “evangelical” outreach - mission *to* the poor. This tends to reduce the poor to mere receivers of congregational ministries and mission. Informed by a particular evangelical sense of biblical strangerhood, in the eyes of some witnesses the poor are *the* religious outsiders (strangers). It usually occurs as witnesses fail to distinguish between the poor and the “nations” when texts like Matthew 28:16-18 are used as motivation for intercultural witness. With the emphasis on verbal proclamation, “Go into world and make disciples” almost equals “Go into the world” and “disciple” (evangelise, convert) the poor as “the nations” – the “others”. Or in its more recent manifestations, “go and make disciples of all nations” is turned into “go and disciple (teach) the poor as the nations.” This discipleship of the poor is directed only at the other poor perceived as religious strangers.<sup>16</sup> The ultimate goal is to encourage and equip the poor to “evangelise” *their own* and other poor *people* as the “nations” – applied to the poor indiscriminately as religious insiders, religious outsiders, or socio-cultural strangers.

Although there is a slight nuance from viewing the poor as receivers to the poor as agents, these two interpretations remain problematic in the context of Indigenous Christianity and poverty in South Africa. Lamin Sanneh is quoted at length as he concisely describes the historical background to the problems and questions on the agency of the poor and of missionaries as witnesses:

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14 In its subjective sense “Evangelisation of the poor” as used in Catholic circles aims at the internal transformation of structures and ministries. Its motivation and driving force is “an experiment in ecclesiology: the people themselves, the poor and professing, are carrying forward the gospel project”(Boff 1991:58). Similarly, “Mission in Reverse”, as used by both Catholics and Protestants, expresses the idea of an encounter of the churches “of the poor”, mostly from the South, with the people and churches in the North. According to Gittins (1993:58), “in the 1970s Claudia – Maria Barbour “... gave this formal title to a way of living out the Christian mission in the existential situations.” He himself defines ethos “the way of life” to express the original intention of “mission in reverse”, “referring to both a spirituality and a method of approach to mission and ministry.”

15 See footnote 2.

16 The poor as agents of “evangelisation” should not be applied only to one’s *own* people. The poor should encounter the “other poor” as socio-cultural strangers/religious strangers but also witnesses and “the whole church” as religious insider who are often estranged by modern social systems and structures (See Boff 1991: 117).

A striking paradox confronts us about missionary agency in that as “insiders” or custodians of the religion they brought, missionaries viewed their foreign status in Africa as a serious limitation, yet as they learned the vernacular, and in other ways succeeded in entering the culture, they became peripheral to the indigenous claims on Christianity and forced gradually to relinquish control into local hands. In the numerous instances of cultural breakthrough, either of missionaries themselves or, no less momentarily, of Africans with regard to missionary intentions and ambitions, and still more remarkable, in examples of mutual discovery, there is active interchange between “outsiders” and “insiders”, two otherwise stable categories now framed by fluid, dynamic boundaries” (Sanneh 1993:153).

The two interpretations pertaining to the agency of the poor underemphasise or neglect a fundamental historical and contextual question, namely: What would the implications be for our ministries *and* for us as witnesses when we grapple with and respond to the fact that the poor we encounter have been religious insiders? Witnesses should also address the implications of such questions when they focus on diaconia and the poor as socio-cultural strangers, estranged by material poverty. That is, what are the implications when we encounter the poor as both social-cultural strangers and religious insiders with their own forms of dialogue? Would a discovery of the continuing internal dialogue among the poor and their appropriation of resources from the Gospel and cultures be a priority for witnesses as they encounter the poor?

All these questions have implications for witnesses who are motivated by both the verbal proclamation and diaconia in the context of Indigenous Christianity. The biblical-missiological conjuring of the socio-cultural strangers and religious strangers forms the background for the questions and statements. *When texts on proclamation and diaconia are discussed in the same contexts without considering the historical and contextual factors behind the unresolved tension between the two distinct forms of being strangers, encounters with the poor might encourage and sustain perceptions of the poor as mere receivers or agents for the sake of their own people.* Critical questions should be asked even if a consensus exists on the importance of both proclamation and holistic healing of the marginal (Mt 28 and 10, Mt 28 and 25, or Mt 28 and Mt 24, etc.) For example questions should inform discussions when Bosch concludes, “[a]long with Matthew 28, Matthew 10 would be ‘the charter for missiological praxis and reflection’” (Bosch 1995:61). With regard to diaconia as service *for* and *with* the poor as social-cultural strangers, what associations are made to religious strangers/insiders when witnesses and congregations hear the following words of Jesus: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”? (Mt 25:25-26).<sup>17</sup> The extent to which traditional interpretations of Matthew 28:16-20 filters congregational receptions and responses to calls for proclamation, diaconia, and healing with regard to the poor as religious strangers (outsiders) *and* socio-cultural stranger should not be underestimated.

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17 Although this paper does not intent to develop a systematic missional-moral reflection on the “bodily imperative” and agency of the poor from Scriptures, this text would be a key text. Such a reflection would correlate the “Bodily imperatives of Jesus (as he responds missionally-morally to marginal persons in his ministry and mission) and the “Bodily imperatives” of the poor.

It even filters receptions and responses when witnesses and congregations broaden their biblical base and scope (for example connecting Mt 28:16-20, Lk 1:8, and Mt 24) as motivation for the proclamation of the gospel to the “nations” - the evangelization (discipling as converting and teaching) of the poor locally and globally. Questions should also be asked when Sundermeier proposes on the basis of strangerhood, which defines the nature and character of mission and of a missiology in Africa, that

There is simply no church without the stranger, without the religious and social strangers, both being strangers in the same sense. Matthew 28 and Matthew 24 both relate to the mission of the church. Without the other there is no church. The ‘other,’ the stranger, is crucial not only to the very being of the individual; the individual’s existence is also determined by the ‘other’. This is the sense underlying the statement that the church *is essentially mission*” (italics in text) (1990: 266).

In sum, traditional orientations of the poor as religious strangers (outsiders) and social-strangers are in tension with the poor as religious insiders and social-strangers. These orientations filter and impact on how witnesses and congregations respond missionally-morally to the “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor. In encountering the poor witnesses might be physically proximate and yet remain missionally-morally distant due to the objectification of the poor and the lumping together of the poor as social-strangers and religious outsiders. Consequently, the “Bodily Imperatives,” as a particular catalyst in transforming individual and congregations, continually challenges ethos and modes of responses.

When clarified and contextualised by the challenges and questions posed above, in its subjective dimension the “evangelisation of the poor” as religious insiders encourages witnesses and their congregations to embrace the possibility of being “evangelised” and be re-orientated on the frontier of poverty and class. On the question of “who is to evangelize the church - especially its governing body, the hierarchy” Boff (1991:44) states, it is the “heirs of the first beatitude” since “[a]mid their wretchedness, they have not lost sight of the basic values of Jesus’ utopia: solidarity, sharing, fellowship, historical patience, faith in providence, and hope against hope.” For witnesses “to be converted” to the poor “means to be turned to the world” (Boff: 81) and be missional agents who lead and model encounters on the margins (see Roxburgh 1997:62-63). Witnesses as missional agents should be aware that they need to move from doing “a great deal *for* the people and *for* the poor” to being and doing “*with* the people and together *with* the poor, from the viewpoint of the poor.” If they neglect the appropriate modes, the relations between witnesses and the poor will affect the intentions and outcomes of agency of the poor negatively. That is, the encounters will “... end by eternalizing relations of dependency, and preventing the impoverished from becoming the subjects, the agents, of their own history” (Boff 1991:80). However, such a “strategy of power” would only partially disembody the poor as social agents.

As socio-cultural strangers and religious insiders the poor have their own resources and legitimate internal dialogue to encounter outside forces that disembody. Turning the poor as religious insiders into religious outsiders does not render the poor utterly helpless. Nevertheless, it affects the desired reciprocity between witnesses and the poor negatively. A lack of reciprocity prevents the re-orientation of an ethos and modes as responses to “Bodily imperatives” on the frontier of poverty and class.

### Hints for reflecting on and responding to “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor

In view of past mission encounters and the current re-emergence of mission consciousness, the tension between the poor as social-cultural strangers and religious insiders (often turned into religious outsiders) can act as a matrix for the missional-diaconate (proclamation and diaconia) of congregations of the DRC family. In short, “Witnesses as strangers responding to ‘Bodily Imperatives’ of the poor” can inform further reflections on directions, programmes, and encounters on a multi-dimensional frontier of poverty and class. The implications could be enormous since the (proposed) encounters on the frontier between and within churches and congregations can inform other encounters between Christians, the poor, and others in South Africa. Responses to the “Bodily Imperatives” could set basic parameters for and internal missional transformation and for transcending ecclesiastical and congregational boundaries *on* and *from* the frontier.

The remarks of Schoeman *et al* (2002) in “Wit Kerk en Swart Nood”<sup>18</sup> set the background and allude to the need for such praxis within the DRC family. Some of the frontier issues discussed so far are implied when they state, “*the needs of the Black community (especially in terms of HIV/AIDS)*” are far removed from the “life-world” of the traditional white church (: 469, my translation; emphasis in text). Due to the make-up of the church, the poor as “the target group affected mostly by HIV/AIDS is not represented in the church”. Moreover, the church is “currently middle-class, mostly an elderly, white community” and the “leadership is mainly male.” With these defining features the question is asked whether there is still salt left for the church to be the “salt of the earth” amidst HIV/AIDS and relative to extreme forms of poverty. The authors propose “a paradigm shift” for the church at the levels of “*self-definition, destination and calling*” (: 471, emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> It would include recognition of the “deafness to the voice of black human need” in “a process of listening within, from Above, and listening sideways.” The authors propose that “*interracial koinonia*” and, by extension, *koinonia* across the frontier of poverty and class, are the starting point and the envisaged outcome of the encounters. They hope that the church will rediscover that God is in essence a “caring-God” and that “a listening church” is “a humble church.” As outlined in this paper, the theme of the “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor can be a test for and expansion of the overall proposal and arguments. What is and ought to be the outcome and process a church or a congregation’s missional-diaconate *with* and *for* the poor?

The argument in this paper is that “Bodily Imperatives” should inform and shape the missional-moral responses in terms of “being” and “doing” *with* the poor, which would eventually culminate in a re-orientation of, first and foremost, the witnesses as strangers on the frontier of poverty and class. Here follows some hints for further systematic reflections<sup>20</sup> on missional-moral responses, engagements, and the outcomes endeavored:

1. The metaphor of witness as stranger situates witnesses physically on the frontier of poverty and class that demands missional-moral responses in and through encounters

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18 This article is based on Schoeman’s research for a doctoral dissertation (Promoters – P. Verster and J. J. Kritzingner).

19 Schoeman *et al*, p. 471.

20 It is possible to develop these reflections into bible studies or a congregational praxis around worship and witness as spaces for encounters between witnesses as strangers and the poor as social-cultural strangers and religious insiders. For the starting point and ultimate outcome of the subjective dimension of “the evangelisation of the poor” and “Bodily Imperatives” of the poor is, according to Boff (1991:77,88-89), celebration.

with the poor. The physical location is in itself estranging for relative affluent witnesses. Witnesses might simultaneously become strangers who disembody and estrange the poor when forms of dualism associated with the material and cultural dimensions of poverty inform the encounters. The dualism, resulting from and further sustaining an overemphasis on the *otherness* of the poor, affects modes of relating to the poor.

2. On the one hand, physical proximity may be desired as motivated by a concern not only to alleviate poverty but also to be *for* the poor. On the other hand, witnesses may remain morally distant, which negates concerns to alleviate poverty and embrace a mode of being *with* and *for* the poor. Physical proximity without a missional-moral proximity prevent witnesses to move meaningfully from a mode of “textuality” (objectifying the poor) to “embodiment” (critically accepting the social-cultural resources and agency) of the poor.
3. Consequently, the “evangelisation of the poor” or “mission in reverse” from the locus of the poor as religious insiders can hardly be a catalyst for re-orientation through conversion. “Mission in reverse” would imply a missional transformation of an ethos as defined by being and doing *with* and *for* the poor from the loci of the poor.
4. With a more positive inclination to the metaphor of strangerhood witness as stranger can become receptive to “mission in reverse” from the poor as significant religious insiders in South Africa. It would imply embracing an “attitude of being a guest” (witnesses as strangers-guests) – the willingness to receive from the poor as religious insiders-guests. This is how witnesses can submit and be exposed to the “hospitality and friendship of the poor”(Bevans 1991:51).
5. To be *with* the poor and wrestle with poverty makes the witnesses vulnerable. It “requires a recognition of” the witnesses’ own vulnerability as strangers-guests of the poor (Ogletree 1985:2). Such recognition can be a catalyst for missional transformation of witnesses from the perspective of the gospel: a “hierarchy-in-reverse”, a “displacement of the centre” (Koyama 1993:284.).
6. “Mission in reverse”, however, is intrinsically dialogical as it includes dialogical encounters, mutuality and reciprocity. Witnesses as strangers should constantly be alerted to the reversal of roles and status in the process of encounters with the poor and as demanded by the specific contexts of material poverty and the socio-cultural resources embodied by the poor. It implies amongst others that at certain times and moments witnesses can and should become strangers-friends or hosts of the poor as their guests. Indeed, the witnesses as strangers can still “practice hospitality” by embodying/”embracing hospitality” (Brueggemann 1991).
7. The insulation, isolation, and the unbridgeable social gulf on the frontier of poverty and class continue to be the ultimate challenge to mutuality and reciprocity as witnesses and the poor wrestle with each other in overcoming material poverty and appropriating socio-cultural resources in the process.

The “Bodily Imperatives” and agency of the poor should remain the axis around which witnesses and the poor as socio-cultural strangers and religious insiders reflect and wrestle with these hints.

“Bodily Imperatives” can assist witnesses and congregations to gauge their own missional-moral modes that range between (total or partial) exclusion and (partial or full) embrace of the poor on the frontier of poverty and class.

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