

Rethinking the identity and economic sustainability of the Church: Case of AOG BTG in Zimbabwe

**Authors:**

Kimion Tagwirei¹ 
Maaake Masango¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Research Project Registration:

Project Number: 21790532

Corresponding author:

Kimion Tagwirei,
kimion22tc@gmail.com

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With burgeoning economic challenges that have been hard-pressing Zimbabwe for more than a decade, most Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal churches who do not strategically multiply their revenue in reciprocal correspondence with God-given resources have been disabled and forced to narrow their missionary focus towards proclamation of the gospel and neglected other dimensions of mission, such as *diakonia*. The partial focus on the gospel in word without corresponding deeds portrayed an exclusively Salvationist and less integral image, and defaced ecclesiastic identification when Zimbabwe is anxiously in dire need of a wholesome Church that values and attends to all areas of their lives. While extensive attention has been paid to the conceptualisation of ecclesial identity in general, and manipulative economics of some charismatic churches in Zimbabwe and Africa, research about the identity and economic sustainability of the Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal Church is sparse. Thus, this study filled the gap, taking Assemblies of God, Back to God (hereinafter referred to as AOG BTG) as a case study. Applying *theonomic* reciprocity theory, complemented by the concept of sustainability and engaging purposively sampled in-depth interviews, this article interfaced missionary identity with economic sustainability and recommended the adoption of contextually feasible strategies to capacitate the Church to meet the rising operating and missionary costs in the volatile Zimbabwean context.

Contribution: This study reviewed the ecclesial identity, interconnected Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal ecclesiology with current economics and observed circumstantially applicable strategies to restore a blurred identity.

Keywords: church; identity; classical Pentecostal Church; economics; faith; strategies; sustainability.

Introduction

With the painful series of economic hardships that have been hard-hitting Zimbabwe for more than a decade (Bond 2007:149–150; Chagonda 2016:131; Manjokoto & Ranga 2017:26–27; Nyakanyanga 2022:n.p.; Pinto 2022:n.p.; *The Economist* 2020:n.d.), most Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal churches who do not tactically multiply their revenue in reciprocal correspondence with God-given resources have been incapacitated and forced to narrow their missionary focus towards the proclamation of the gospel and neglected other dimensions of mission, such as *diakonia*. Such partial focus on the gospel in word without corresponding deeds portrayed an exclusively Salvationist and less integral image, and defaced their identity when citizens are anxiously in dire need of a wholesome Church that is heedful to all pastoral areas of human life. Extensive attention has been paid to the conceptualisation of the universal ecclesiological identity (Chan 2016:23–24; Durbin II 2005:3; Hanson 1985:345–355; Migliore 2004:254; Verster 2022:4–5) and exploitative economics of charismatic churches in Zimbabwe and Africa (Bishau 2013:5–7; Chibango 2016:58–59; Chitando 2013:96; Magezi & Manzanga 2016:2–3). However, scholarship on the costly identity and needful tenability of the Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal Church is exiguous. Observing the blurred identity and incapacitation of the local Church, this study reviewed general ecclesial and particular Assemblies of God, Back to God (AOG BTG) identity and economics. Through a denominational case study, applying *theonomic* reciprocity theory, complemented by the concept of sustainability and engaging purposively sampled in-depth interviews, this study uncovered that the church should interface ecclesiology with economics and adopt contextually feasible strategies with checks and balances to avoid exploitation, advance contextually necessary sustainability and manage operating and missionary liabilities. Structurally, it begins with a historical overview of the AOG BTG in Zimbabwe, reviews her identity and

economic sustainability in view of the universal Church. Thereafter, it reviews the biblical, contextual applicability of, and suggests strategies that the AOG BTG (and other churches in similarly volatile contexts within and outside Zimbabwe) can adopt towards rebuilding economic capacity for self-sustenance and regaining the defaced missionary identity in reciprocity to God's provisions.

Historicising the Assemblies of God, Back to God in Zimbabwe

Scholarly studies by Lephoko (2010:165, 2018:62) and Motshetshane (2015:166) trace the history of the church from the tremendous Azusa street revival, California, Los Angeles, United States of America (US) in 1904. As Kgatla (2016: 323–325) observes, the Azusa Street Revival was a Pentecostal revival, which was steered by an African American, William Seymour, characterised by baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in other tongues, experiencing miracles and other spiritual gifts and works. The revival lasted about 8 years from 1906 up to 1914. It attracted innumerable people within and outside the US. It impacted multitudes and resultantly led to the foundation of abounding denominations across the world.

Lephoko (2010:165–167) establishes that the Assemblies of God church was planted through the missionary work that was done in South Africa by missionaries who were stimulated by the unusual Azusa Street revival in the US. Accordingly, the first Pentecostal missionaries landed in South Africa at the beginning of 1908 and planted the Apostolic Faith Mission in Johannesburg, which was led by Mr Lake who worked with certain unnamed white people. According to Resane (2018:37–38), later in 1908, Canadian missionary named Charles Chawner, Henry Turney, his wife Anna from America and Hannah James from England arrived. They formed and instituted a team to minister to black people in and around Pretoria.

Resane (2018:37) narrates that Turney later died in 1921, and several other missionaries flocked to South Africa and collectively developed the Assemblies of God as an autonomous church.

Lephoko (2010:166) explains that one of the missionaries known as James Mullan brought Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu in and supported him to establish an indigenous Assemblies of God movement for black people. The work was code-named Back to God because it sought to call and reconcile black Africans back to God.

According to Lephoko (2010:50–51, 11–12) and Motshetshane (2015:150), Nicholas Bhengu was born on 05 September 1909 at Entumeni, a Norwegian Lutheran Mission Station near Eshowe, the former capital of Zululand (now KwaZulu-Natal) Lephoko (2010):

His father, Josiah Khanda, was an evangelist of the Lutheran Church. His mother, Yele complemented his father in ministry.

Nicholas Bhengu was always proud of, and highly influenced by his missionary upbringing and work by the Lutheran missionaries. He married Mylet, who died in 1971, and remarried Nokwethemba Mthethwa three years later, in 1974 (Lephoko 2010: p.12).

Nicholas Hepworth Bhekinkosi Bhengu envisioned, institutionalised and operationalised evangelisation and planting of churches in and beyond South Africa, which led to the formation of the AOG BTG in Zimbabwe in the 1950s (Chibango 2021:73). Mpoko (2019:15–17), Togarasei (2018:38) and Lephoko (2018:165) recount that the AOG BTG church was, however, already in Zimbabwe, planted and directed by some missionaries. Through one of the leading missionaries called John Bond, they invited and submitted to Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu who then officially opened the AOG BTG church in Highfields, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1959 and is thus acknowledged as her founder in Zimbabwe (Chibango 2021:74). Mpoko (2019:16) outlines that a number of local gospel ministers such as Reverend F. Murwisi, Reverend Kenneth Mawire, Reverend Daniel Gara, and Reverend Wilfred Mutasa joined Apostle Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu and established the black missionary work into the AOG BTG. The AOG BTG eventually raised various pastors and deployed them to shepherd different assemblies around Zimbabwe. Applying a mixture of episcopal and Presbyterian governance, Nicholas Bhengu provided overall leadership from South Africa and regularly visited for executive meetings and crusades. He later died on 07 October 1985 at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa (Chibango 2021:74). He institutionalised the Zimbabwe work in a way that he had structured the church in South Africa – with the national conference, national executive (NE), district or regional councils, that is, Midlands, Manicaland, Matabeleland and Harare. Identifying themselves as historically and essentially missionary, the AOG BTG regions used to evangelise, grow and set up sub-regions before succumbing to economic instability. Some of the sub-regions that they established include Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Chitungwiza, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Masvingo and a number of others. After 2008 when the national economy deteriorated, the church became economically destabilised. Since then, some urban congregations have been struggling to afford outdoor evangelism, subscribe and attend to ecumenical fellowships as well as giving to the needy. While partially doing missionary work (such as one-on-one evangelism), worst poverty-stricken peri-urban and rural branches have been failing to afford most operating costs, eventually neglecting *diakonia* and *koinonia* as the majority of congregants struggle for survival.

Institutionally, the AOG BTG church in Zimbabwe runs under a nine-membered NE that is elected by the National Conference at the national assembly after every 2 years. The NE oversees the policing and operation of all regions of the church in Zimbabwe. The NE is assisted by seven-membered regional District Council Committees (DCCs) that administrate regions and local congregational committees that manage assemblies under their pastors and

elders with the backing of a nationally recognised arm of organisers for the ministries of mothers, youths and girls.

Overviewing ecclesiological identity

The concept of identity traditionally connotes the being and values of believers as well as their relationship with God and the world (Kok 2011:2). Amid a pluralised, globalised and dynamic modern world, as Linden and Nel (2016:1) observe, identity does not have a firm, fixed and unchanging actuality. Just as it was historically a puzzle for Israel as she repeatedly succumbed to an identity crisis when she kept drifting away from God and their core mission (Linden & Nel 2016:1), ecclesiological identification has been perennially changing, challenging because of socio-economic and political factors. Consequently, it is still a pressing cause for contemporary concern. In the same way, the identity of the Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal Church has been marred by a plethora of social, economic and political problems that disable denominational and ecumenical efficiency and effectiveness. However, traditional metaphorical portrayals remain well expressive about ecclesial distinctiveness as predominantly missionary. So, the following section gives a general delineation of ecclesial identity and integrates with a reflection on the AOG BTG church's blurry identity and how she can regain it. According to the Faith and Order Paper 198 (2005:4–8) of the World Council of churches, universal ecclesiological identity can be generally portrayed as the making of God, metaphorically as the people of God, the body of Jesus Christ, bride of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit, Communion, witness of God and fundamentally missionary.

The Church as a creation of God

Under this depiction, Bunning (2020:11) avers that the Church is broadly envisaged as a gift of God, created through Jesus Christ by his teachings and guidance of the Holy Spirit to propel the Trinitarian love, grace and care for humankind. As John 3:16 denotes the redeeming sacrificial love of the creator, her formation and existence are purposed and sustained by God. Thus, the Faith and Order paper 198 (2005:4) affirms that ecclesia belongs to God and is of his service through ministering his word on earth.

Accordingly, Hanson (1985:345–356) concurs that she exists to serve the missionary purposes of God. In the same vein, Simon Chan expresses that she owes her existence to the Godhead (Chan 2016:23–24). That is why House (2013:2) declares that she originated from God. To my concurrence, Chan (2016:23–24) argues that the Church did not create herself. More so, her foundation from God is also mirrored from her centralisation and grounding in his word. That is why Olson (n.d.:1) thinks that orthodox faith, doctrines and practice are supremely drawn from the God-given scripture. Consenting, scholars such as Köstenberger (2013:34–59), Lints (2020:1) and Cody (1973:15) agree that she is formed, guided and fostered by the incarnated, crucified, risen, omnipotent, omnipresent and everlasting Jesus Christ.

Similarly, the AOG BTG denomination principally identifies herself as a missionary establishment of God. However, she only affords minimum attention on proclaiming the gospel in word, indoors, sometimes through open crusades and fails to demonstrate the gospel in deed. She does not afford to give to the poor, widows and orphans as well as to advocate for peace in times of turbulence, that is, political turbulence that is escalating as national elections near in Zimbabwe (Nyathi 2022:n.p.; Phiri 2022:n.p.). Therefore, this article awakens the church to review her identity and rebuild her economy to sustain her proclamation and demonstration of the gospel in all areas of life.

The people of God

From the Old to the New Testament, the universal Church is also identifiable as the people of God. This is widely conveyed in scriptures such as Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 37:27, 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Hebrews 8:10. The Bible also echoes the divine ecclesiastical formation and missionary mandate in Isaiah 49:1–6.

Durbin II (2005:4) engages 1 Peter 2:9–10, which states that believers' status changes and becomes Godly the very time that one submits their lives to him. To my agreement, Durbin II (2005:4) argues that the Church is recognisable as the chosen priestly, prophetic and kingly people of God. Concurring, House (2013:1) lists a number of depictions in Bible verses, that is, God's friends (Ex 33:11; Is 41:8), God's priests (Ex 19:1–6; Is 61:6), God's assembly (Nm 16:3; Dt 23:2–4; Neh 13:1), God's people (Ex 6:7; 8:23; Dt 7:6; Ps 53:6; 81:11; 100:3; Hs 1:10) and God's flock (Ps 77:20; 78:52; 100:3). In agreement with Verster (2022:4–5; Bosch 1991:370–372; Wright 2006:398–400) and Flemming (2014:62), the Church is largely the *missional* fellowship that delivers the embrace mission of God in the entire world. Relatively, the AOG BTG church takes herself that way, unfortunately while partially attending to *kerygmatic* work through doing some evangelism as and when she affords, and failing to attend diaconal and ecumenical dimensions of mission. In the context of economic instability, nationwide poverty and political violence, she cannot come to terms with the prices of helping the needy and advocating for national peace and reconciliation. Such failures deface her identity, hence the need for economic sustainability.

The body of Christ

In view of Pauline understanding, the Church is distinguishable as the body of Christ, which is differently membered and gifted to complement each other (i.e. 1 Cor 12–14; Rm 12:3–8; Eph 4:7–16; 1 Pt 4:10–12). The same observation is also propounded by Jenssen (2018:6) and Hewitt (2017:1) who further elaborate it as the visibility, concreteness, tangibility and unity in diversity.

As Ephesians 2:13–14 says, Jesus Christ united people from different tribal, racial and cultural backgrounds into one inclusive fellowship under his gracious leadership.

The Church is therefore identifiable as one body whose head is Jesus Christ. Sarot (2010:38) discerns the rebuking of Saul (in Ac 9:4; 22:7; 26:14) as a remarkable demonstration that believers are indispensably part of Jesus Christ. The story infers that Saul troubled the Lord when he was persecuting his followers. It suggests that ecclesiastical members are an indivisible body of Jesus Christ. Several scholars like Conzelmann (1975:n.p.), Mare (1976:n.p.), Hanson (1985:346–347), Verster (2022:5), Migliore (2004:254) and Van Aarde (2015:54) concur that the Church is observable as one communion that is embodied and purposed to transform humanity with the gospel.

Additionally, in agreement with Moses (2018:474), Groppe (2019:25) and Fee (1993:583), the ecclesiological representation of the body of Christ speaks much about togetherness, unity, purposefulness, diverseness and complementation. The AOG BTG in Zimbabwe identifies herself denominationally as united in the diversity of her members across the nation and ecumenically as part of the universal Church. However, her economic insecurity deforms her identity as she cannot afford to accompany her members in times of sickness, funeral, weddings and related functions. More so, she struggles to fund pastors, regional and national leaders to attend ecumenical events. Generally, the absence of pastors from congregants' events and leaders [or representatives] from ecumenical programmes clouds her identity as the body [or part of the body] of Christ. So, the AOG BTG church must rethink her identity and work out strategies to rebuild her economic sustainability.

The bride of Christ

Contemporary evangelicalism recognises the Church as the glorious bride of Christ (Shealy 2012:2). Verster (2022:6) explains that she lives with him in the world. Hence, ecclesiastic gloriousness flows with the magnificence of *Parousia*. As a bride lovingly longs and prepares for the coming of her bridegroom, the Church has been waiting, preparing and she keeps expectant and prayerfully working towards the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Scripturally, the book of Revelation 19:7 calls for celebration for the readiness and wedding of the lamb and the coming of the bride. Such biblical references support the bridal illustration of the Church.

Furthermore, Van Zyl and Nortjé-Meyer (2018:6) elucidate that ecclesiological identity is the collective earthly personification of the love and grace of God. Various submissions (i.e. Aune 1998:n.p.; DeSilva 2004:910; Mounce 1990:340; Shealy 2012:4) corroboratively share the bridal depiction of the Church as about serving God through ministering the gospel with humanity while waiting for *Parousia*. As indicated before, AOG BTG's economic incapacity disrupts her attention to ministry and depicts her as a failed bride. It obscures her identity and costs contextual ecclesiological and economic reviews towards the desired restoration.

The witness of God

Drawing from the spiritual enlightenment, transformation and inspiration, the Church is also identifiable in publicly witnessing the gospel of salvation from her personal experiences (Maponya 2018:3–4; Migliore 2004:254). This is further clarified by Guder (2005:430) who observes the conservative witnessing nature of the early Church.

Relatively, Anderson (2015:n.p.) avows that advancing the gospel is the heart of ecclesiology. This is well scripturally upheld by different scriptures such as Acts 1:8 and 5:32, which indicate that God gives the faithful his spirit to empower them to witness about him across the world.

As such, the Church is recognised as a typically missionary. As the witness of God, the Church lives to win souls and serve lives for God in any context (Armstrong 2015:24; Garstecki 2019:376; Manyaka-Boshielo 2018:n.p.; Migliore 2004:253; Robinson 2019:141). She is not only a witness in *kerygma* but in *diaconal* and *koinonia* dimensions (Guder 2015:143; Pillay 2015:6). Now the AOG BTG talks much about witnessing while depending on unreliable donations and unfortunately manages to do little because of a lack of economic sustainability. Therefore, she is in dire need of rebuilding her economy in order to sustain her witnessing.

Temple symbolism

This speaks to ecclesial conformation to God against worldly standards (Verster 2022:6). In accordance with that, she is detectable as a community that adorns the gospel in word and deed (Van Engen 1991:n.p.). Correspondingly, Van Niekerk and Niemandt (2019:8) say that she is noticeable by incarnating the *Trinitarian* God for humanity to encounter his goodness and righteousness through her talks and walks.

This is further clarified by Beange (2003:14–65) who explains that the temple symbolisation reflects the indwelling of the spirit of God in and among believers instead of a structural identification. Additionally, symbolising the Church as the temple of God speaks volumes about her need for holiness, indispensability of the bond, togetherness and fellowship between the faithful and creator, as well as lifelong loyalty to her maker.

Agreeing with Brouwer (2018:98–99), expressing the Church as the temple of God emphatically regards central characteristics of purity, love, togetherness, deliberate and consistent separation from worldliness as distinctive ecclesiastic attributes. Considering this general illustration, the Church is anticipated to exhibit redemption from evil and likeness to Jesus Christ as her role model (DeSilva 2004:586; Martin 1998:n.p.; Page 2020:9; Pinnock 2016:47). Challengingly, the AOG BTG mainly preaches holiness and fails to live other practical teachings of love and togetherness because of lacking financial and material resources for pastoral care. The church will only be able to showcase her being the temple of God fully when economically capacitated; thus, attention to economic sustainability matters.

The Church as *koinonia*/communion

As Kärkkäinen (2007:1–5) beholds, the ecclesiology of *koinonia* primarily denotes an important relational aspect of Christian demonstration of love through life in sharing, impartation, participation, community and communion in all areas of life – spiritual, social, economic and political fronts.

Complementarily, Kariatlis (2012:60) affirms that the Church is centrally and markedly designed to be and stay in communion with God and each other, in individualism, denominationalism and ecumenism. The foundational and prevailing loving and harmonious communality under ubiquitous supernatural inspiration and guidance characterise real groupings of the faithful.

By this delineation, the Church is also perceived like a vessel of fellowship, in being instrumental for human communion with God and all other creatures (Mayer 2012:114). In concurrence with the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Paper 198 (2005:8–9), Peacore (2010:1) mentions that divine, human and natural communion is a fundamental theme of Scripture. Agreeably, so, the whole of creation generally keeps longing for close *koinonia* with God and each other. With that well discernible in his submission, Durbin II (2005:5) relays that such communion integrates individual, congregational, denominational and ecumenical partnerships with God for the effectuation of his mission.

The AOG BTG congregations and pastors have been failing to attend local, regional and national fellowships because of the same financial reasons. Pastorally, the AOG BTG national leadership organises pastors' winter school, summer school and pastors' retreat programmes every year, to enable fellowship, teachings and related agendas. Regional and local leaders of the church also complementarily organise similar events for the same cause. The purpose of the schools and retreats is to edify and refresh the clergy towards ministerial effectiveness and personal development. It is in the schools and retreats that AOG BTG pastors share their experiences, challenges and testimonies and encourage each other in order to manage their pastoral work and welfare progressively. The church has, however, been experiencing very low attendance at all such national, regional and local meetings mostly because of financial constraints. A number of apologies submitted by most pastors suggest that they were struggling to attend their local ministerial, family needs and could not afford national *koinonia*. The same applies to regional and local fellowships. As the Zimbabwean economy deteriorated from 2008 up to today, all fellowships (i.e. pastoral, leadership, couples, men's, mothers, youth and girls) have been lowly attended to. Some regions of the church have shunned fellowships as they actually struggle to meet basic bills such as water, electricity and pastoral support. The majority of local branches accrued debts (e.g. on water and electricity) while smaller and poorest assemblies failed to support their pastors financially. In such contexts, it has been difficult and sometimes impossible to afford any fellowships. Ecumenically, the AOG BTG church subscribes

and attends to the national Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe. Pastors are also encouraged to join and attend their local clerical fellowships such as Pastors Fraternal and others. This has been helpful in enabling pastors to fellowship, learn and develop with fellow gospel ministers from other denominations in their resident areas.

The Church as centrally missionary

Overall, the Church is largely distinguished as essential missionary (Van Aarde 2017:2). The Church does not exist purposelessly but purposefully to execute *missio Dei* (Kok 2011:3; Mayer 2012:100–101).

To that effect, Dodds (2012:394) explicates the missionary being of the Church. He reiterates that ecclesiological identification is in total obedience and submission to the salvific plan and work of God for humankind. His proposals concur with Pinnock (2016:54), who says that mission is biblically inherent in Christianity. Thus, the Church is universally *missional*, not because she has undertaken a world mission, but because of the innate universality of the gospel. Agreeably, ecclesial identity is in her mindfulness to integral mission in the sense of going beyond proclaiming, to demonstrating the gospel in all areas of life (Althouse 2016:102–103). Similarly, the AOG BTG church in Zimbabwe identifies herself commonly in the lenses of the above-mentioned portrayals. Understanding mission as the essence of the Church, her leadership clarified that she is a missionary, *missional* and communal denomination, which prioritises missionary work and community involvement. In agreement with Verster (2022:2), the majority of AOG BTG interviewees explained that the church is supernaturally inspired and empowered to transform the world with the gospel. Further together with MacIrvine III (2010:91), they elaborated that the AOG BTG denomination is a *missional* church that is driven to advance God's missionary work. In a way that Snyder (n.d.:6) takes ecclesiological identity as principal, the AOG BTG has been making frantic efforts to live in missionary terms by conducting local assembly revivals and open soul-winning crusades in some rural areas that have not been reached by most urban-based churches. Consequently, the AOG BTG identifies herself as substantially *missional*. Her leadership holds that she does not exist for her sake but for God who formed and sent her into the world to fulfil the reconciliation and salvation of all creation.

The entire AOG BTG church leadership fully takes herself as a genetically missionary. Interviewed leaders revealed that the denomination is part of the body of Christ that complements his will for humankind. In addition to that, the AOG BTG church operates with reference to deliberate involvement in raising, nurturing, sending and supporting missionaries across the world. The church's *missional* ideology is also well confirmed by her historical thrust in preaching to call humanity back to God [hence her name – AOG BTG]. The Back to God (BTG) part of her name was taken from her missionary tent-crusade movement that was established by her founder, Nicholas Bhengu for the

evangelisation of black people with a vision to cover Cape to Cairo. The crusade method was traditionally viewed as her massive approach through which she won multiple souls from place to place. Unfortunately, the AOG BTG church has been attempting to broaden her missionary work in vain mostly because of worsening economic incapability. The AOG BTG church talks of helping (needy, 60 years and above) widows who are believers and orphans who are members of the church with inspiration from 1 Timothy 5:11–16. However, the church has not been attending them regularly because of her economic instability. ‘We actually struggle to meet our monthly expenditure and we rarely attend to widows and the needy’ said one of the church leaders.

This has compromised her identity because ministering with mere words to increasing numbers of economically hard-pressed poor and oppressed Zimbabweans who are in dire need of help and accompaniment attracts mixed perceptions. While the early Church sustained herself mainly through communal economics as believers worked and shared their resources (Cho 2020:47), the AOG BTG church in Zimbabwe has been failing to meet her operating and missionary liabilities chiefly because of a crippling economic quagmire that incapacitates members to contribute anything sustainable while they struggle to survive. As Chitiyo et al. (2019:25) and Chingono (2021:n.p) observe, the Zimbabwean state of economic affairs has been upsetting households, businesses and the social fabric of the country, and increasing numbers of citizens have been subjected to horrible suffering (Chingono 2021:n.p.). In such a context, communal economics got shaken as members congruently became economically distressed. Thus, the Church became weakened to live up to her missionary identity.

All in all, the church appreciates and commendably tries to pay heed to inclusive mission but fails to do much because of economic constraints. While she is created and owned by God like the Old Testament Church (Israel) (Mathison 2012:17–22), that God only gave Israelites manna in the wilderness and stopped when he gave them land in Canaan reflects that the Church must work with God-given resources to grow her economy and sustain herself (Cho 2020:42–43). This agrees with the New Testament model of the early Church that worked, grew her economy and sustained holistic mission through selfless sharing. Additionally, Paul models tent-making that mirrors the value of employment and/or business towards economically sustaining missionary work (Tagwirei 2022:6–10). More so, we strongly agree with Butzke’s (n.d.:9–10) theory of *theonomic* reciprocity that the Church must utilise God-given resources in total submission to his guidance and blessing towards sustaining his mission. Thus, waiting for *manna* when God gave land – doing nothing to generate economic sustainability, especially in the poor Zimbabwean context – is irresponsible and incapacitating. Thus, this article calls the AOG BTG church to rethink about her missionary identity, diversify her income sources and sustain herself.

Having this in mind, the following section proposes some strategies that she can consider and apply to restore her economic tenability and missionary capabilities.

Does the Church need to have strategies?

Considering that, globally, the Church is ordinarily unwaveringly expected to live by faith, and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Kraemer and Abrecht (1951:392–393) argue that the term strategy is not a good word to use in ecclesiology. They contend that God was, is still and will remain the only strategist that everyone must depend on. Such a viewpoint is widely shared across local ecclesial boards. It suggests that the Church should not worry about self-sustaining strategies.

Assertively, Kraemer and Abrecht (1951:392–393) further posit that the early Church lived not by tactics but by believing and yielding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To my concurrence, Ballor (2014:119–123) argues that piety is not a substitute for technique; hence every church needs to appreciate strategies for proficient and fruitful stewardship of time, talents and related treasures.

More so, being strategic is very biblical as depicted through the biblical account of God’s work, economics and human correspondence as co-workers and economists for all-encompassing tenability from the book of Genesis throughout the whole Old Testament (Cho 2020:39–45). Furthermore, the early Church’s generous and communal economics by which believers strategically shared what they had in order to meet their needs (Adelakun 2010:2–3; Arnold 2015:n.p.; Cho 2020:47; Wessels 2017:489) was strategic. In today’s precarious context, the Church should know and keep in mind that modern economics is unavoidably involved in her missionary work; hence her sustenance cannot be accomplished haphazardly.

Therefore, she should come to terms with the fact that attending *missio Ecclesiae* and meeting operating costs in the explosive Zimbabwean context demand situational tactics. Hence, this study argues that the AOG BTG church should realise that realistic strategies are very biblical and contextually important for her to cope with the liabilities of her growing missionary demands. It is thus commendable for her to observe new patterns of economics, development and related secular affairs in order to establish her economic sustainability.

The necessity of strategies is aptly depicted in the *theonomic* reciprocity theory upon which this study is premised. *Theonomic* reciprocity is drawn from Borhen (1986:66–76) who asserts that as preachers fully submit themselves to spiritual guidance and empowerment for effective preparation and delivery of sermons, they reciprocally devise contextually viable methodologies. Similarly, ecclesiological effectiveness can be realised by submitting everything to God in prayer while correspondingly devising and utilising

circumstantially viable strategies. As supported by Meeks (2014:5), Oslington (2014:n.p.) and Ruffner (2004:88–89), while depending on God a church can realise fruitfulness by depending on God and embracing sound economics in managing, developing and utilising available resources for tenability.

Reconciling faith and research

The thesis upon which this article is based observes that the Church should connect her faith with research. As Gannon (1967:3), Johnson (1968:n.p.) and Carroll (2000:545–546) observe, the church should appreciate and engage in research for self-analysis and to find out how churches that seem to be flourishing or doing better are managing themselves. Notably, research is currently not only an instrument for the understanding of the past and current ecclesiological and economic trends, but an all-time mechanism of much circumstantially necessary, desired change and recovery.

The church should therefore review her philosophy of research and interface it with her faith (Kabir 2016:2). Research is essentially transformative and can lead to progressive denominational changes. It can also enhance helpful reflections on related current affairs and assessment of one's efficiency and effectiveness in attending and attaining their mission. More so, research can support theological development through exposure from new knowledge (i.e. Buch-Hansen, Felter & Lorensen 2015:242; Carroll 2000:547:551; Dunaetz 2020:2; Kapur 2018). As such, the value of research also shows up in additional discoveries (Bordens & Abbott 2011:2), which can be applied in any needful development.

Reconciling mission and business

Observations in the studied denomination suggest that she should conceptualise business as an instrumental means of fulfilling *missio Ecclesiae* and *missio Dei*. Various scholars (such as Ballor 2014:125–131; Graafland 2013:110; Khumalo 2012:599–600; Metu 2016; Woolnough & Ma 2010:27) advance a thesis that ecclesiology should be integrated with economics in order to sustain wide-ranging missionary ministry in the marketplace and communities for total societal transformation.

Talking about ecclesiology, discipleship and economics, Crosby (1988:266) stresses the interaction of the divine and earthly, saying that 'with a growing realization of the basic unity of the world, we are beginning to return to a realization of the need for interdependence'. According to Crosby (1988:266), Jesus Christ epitomised and facilitated the development of holistic missionary ministry, covering *kerygma*, *diakonia*, *koinonia* and *leitourgia*. Complementarily, Iannaccone (2010:1–3) encourages the interconnection of *missio Ecclesiae* with economics in order to resolve issues behind other churches' decline when some of them are thriving in the same contexts. Similarly, Self (2012:n.p.) integrates faith, work and economics as a strategy for ecclesiological economic sustainability. He agrees with

Butzke (n.d.:4), Cho (2020:37–39) and Augustine (2016:9:79) that, like the world, ecclesiology is an interdependent system that demands interconnectivity between faith, stewardship and work for tenability to be realised. Bearing in mind that AOG BTG church is economically unstable, establishing some enterprising ventures to grow her resources is a key strategy that can help her up.

Rebuilding stewardship

This study observes that stewardship is one of the pivotal strategies that can help the AOG BTG church to gain economic sustainability in Zimbabwe. It involves being a trustee or guardian of God-given resources such as time, money, talents or other resources.

Traditionally, however, stewardship has been understood *theocentrically*, as conceptualisation of belonging to God, and entrustment of his resources to humans for the sustenance of his mission (Ahiamadu 2007:43; Attfield 2015:n.p.; Churchill 2017:1). This study argues that the conception of stewardship determines giving. Brooks (2005:n.p.) reassuringly avers that giving is motivated by one's faith and maturity in stewardship.

Together with Sergeev (2020:56) and Van Brooks (2018: 853–854), this study upholds that congregants should be taught to give as stewards of God for the sustenance of the church. As Lombart (2018:n.p.), Lovelace (2004:n.p.) and McFate (2010:6–7) assert, it is crucial for the church to develop a foundational theology of stewardship to transform congregational giving. Arguably, that will foster giving towards her economic sustainability for the sustenance of *missio Dei* and *missio Ecclesiae*.

Setting up a business development unit

Further responding to a question about what strategies can help the church to be economically sustainable in Zimbabwe, concurring emphatic views from the majority of the AOG BTG church interviewees suggested that the church needs and should set up a business development unit that focusses on research, innovation, brainstorming, generation, development and operation of business for the church to realise her economic sustainability.

A business unit can come up and run investments that can generate income to enable the ongoing funding of the church's mission. Interviewees agreed that the church should authorise, resource and empower a department that coordinates all aspects of business projects. The AOG BTG church has idle farms in Mashava and Bulawayo – so, instituting a business development unit can yield their utilisation, production and profitability.

The AOG BTG church creditably initiated talks with some external experts towards setting up a business development unit in 2021, which is named the Assemblies of God Development and Relief Agency (hereinafter referred to as AOGDRA). The move is creditable because the church could

benefit from experiences and skills from other denominations. A team of professionals can bring ground-breaking ideas. However, an internally constituted team is arguably preferable. While some of the outside individuals may be good, her own members can be more trusted to serve passionately for their denominational development without ulterior interests. Scholars such as Ahmed (2018:n.p.), Awuku-Gyampoh and Asare (2019:101–102) support the idea of establishing a competent business development unit for institutional development and tenability.

Reviewing volunteerism, employing fulltime workers

Countless volunteers have been helping the AOG BTG church, without burdening her for any pay or other personal gains. Although volunteerism ordinarily begets somewhat free workforce (Chaudhry 2010:6–7; Kodia 2014:10), it is usually spoiled by a variety of problems such as unreliability, absenteeism, poor working habits, corruptibility and instability (Hager & Brudney 2004:3–5; Harris 2010:4–5).

Largely, it is progressive for takers-in to review volunteerism, and incentivise and prepare to eventually employ some of the volunteers in order to earn their best skills towards the integral and mutual sustainability (Graham et al. 2013:33–35; Kabonga 2020:18). If it is integrated in a contextually constructive frame in which mutual expectations are attended to, volunteerism has the potential to profit great impact in and beyond the church for her much needed economic development and realisation of her missionary identity. Hence, if the AOG BTG church revises volunteerism, identifies, addresses gaps and develops policies towards supporting volunteers through any appreciation, support, incentivising, retention, recruitment and employment, large numbers of volunteers can be attracted. Resultantly, she can achieve much productivity, effectiveness and sustainability.

Conclusion

This study reviewed the identity and economics of the AOG BTG church. It explored her various metaphorical portrayals. It revisited her rendition as the construction of God, people of God, body of Jesus Christ, bride of Christ, witness of God, temple of the Holy Spirit, communion and as mainly missionary. It observed that the AOG BTG identifies herself as a missionary establishment that appreciates and tries but fails to fully come to terms with operating liabilities chiefly because of economic incapacitation. In conclusion, similarly, most classical Pentecostal churches which are operating without sustainable revenue have been incapacitated. Resultantly, they have been failing to attend to missionary work holistically. Generally, the majority of economically unstable churches narrow their attention to *kerygma* and minimum *diakonia*. Thus, this study exposed the criticality of interfacing ecclesiology with economics and adopting contextually viable strategies towards rebuilding economic sustainability, capacitation for the work of mission and regaining missionary identity in Zimbabwe.

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Authors' contributions

K.T. is the main author of this article. M.M. supervised the writing of this article and the thesis upon which it is based.

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