



## Pilgrimage of Presence: Endledleni Diaconia in Marginalised Communities

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### Abstract:

This article explores the concept of Pilgrimage of Presence as an expression of diaconia in marginalised communities in Cape Town, South Africa. Traditionally, the diaconal chain is from church to community or from Institution/ Organisation to the recipients of care. This article proposes that diaconia happens in the encounter between the church and the community – the encounter between the organisation and the recipient of care. The author is a pastor of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and find that the diaconal approach of many congregations is that of short term projects (charity projects). There needs to be a shift in social and diaconal work organisations where appropriate, away from being a “supporter” and “provider” towards being a “facilitator” and “enabler”. Hence the concept of Pilgrimage of Presence and *endledleni* diaconia “on the road diaconia” where widows and unemployed young adults are placed at the center and recognised as new co-service providers.

Keywords: Pilgrimage of Presence, Ukuzimaza Approach, Endledleni diaconia, Apartheid.

### Abstrak:

Artikel ini hendak menggali konsep Ziarah Kehadiran sebagai ekspresi diakonia pada komunitas marginal di kota Cape Town, Afrika Selatan. Secara tradisional, rantai diakonal adalah dari gereja ke komunitas atau dari Lembaga/Organisasi ke penerima layanan. Artikel ini mengusulkan bahwa diakonia terjadi dalam pertemuan antara gereja dan komunitas – pertemuan antara organisasi dan penerima layanan. Penulis adalah seorang pendeta di Uniting Reformed Church di Afrika Selatan dan menemukan bahwa pendekatan diakonal di banyak jemaat adalah proyek jangka pendek (proyek amal). Perlu ada perubahan dalam organisasi kerja sosial dan diakonal, jika diperlukan, lebih dari sekedar menjadi “pendukung” dan “penyedia” adalah menjadi “fasilitator” dan “yang memungkinkan”. Oleh karena itu muncullah konsep Ziarah Kehadiran dan diakonia *endledleni* “diakonia dalam perjalanan bersama” di mana para janda dan pemuda pengangguran ditempatkan sebagai pusat dan diakui sebagai penyedia layanan bersama yang baru.

Kata kunci: Ziarah Kehadiran, Pendekatan Ukuzimaza, Diakonia Endledleni, Apartheid.

### Introduction

This article would like to explore the concept of Pilgrimage of Presence as an expression of diaconia in marginalised communities in Cape Town, South Africa. The idea,



purpose and significance of pilgrimage are broadened and the author proposes the concept of Pilgrimage of Presence as a diaconia expression. The article reflects on two Pilgrimage of Presence journeys (projects). Firstly, the Intercultural Widow Care Pilgrimage of Presence: January – December 2022 in Langa and Bishop Lavis<sup>1</sup> community and secondly the Renarrativizing our history Pilgrimage of Presence, which was happening from 17- 23 September 2023 in the Bishop Lavis community. Widows and Unemployed young adults were placed at the centre of these reflections and recognised as new co-service providers.

The author has been working as pastor in these two mentioned communities: In Bishop Lavis from 2006 to 2022 and in Langa from 2017 to 2022. The community of Bishop Lavis was established and developed by the Citizen's Housing League in 1951 under the apartheid system as a residential area for coloured people. It was merely a cheap method of solving a non-white housing problem and applying the horrendous policy of apartheid.<sup>2</sup> The community of Langa was established in the 1920's and is Cape Town's oldest black African township named after the Chief of the Amahlubi tribe, Langalibalele, who led a rebellion in 1873 and was banished to Robben Island. The segregation of these two communities was to literally and symbolically maintain Cape Town City as a white space bereft of signs of otherness and thereby erasing the contradictions of colonialism intent on preserving tribalism and cemented apartheid as a political, economic and in this instance a socially constructed and engineered practice which shows Cape Town's cracked face still to this day. Whilst working in these two communities the author's common pastoral responsibilities were concentrated with young adults and with widows. The young adults were battling with drug dealing, unemployment and being stuck in a prison parolee system while the widows were being housebound and lonely most of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Lavis and Langa are two of the Cape Flats communities collectively refers to Black and "Coloured" townships on the low – lying areas to the south – east of Cape Town's CBD established under the apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Population Registration Act (1950). See Nicholas Coetzer, "Langa Township in the 1920s - an (Extra) Ordinary Garden Suburb," *South African Journal of Art History* 24, no. 1 (2009): 1–19.



## **1. Pilgrimage of Presence**

The author offers the Pilgrimage of Presence as a diaconia expression as he draws from the spiritual wisdom of his ancestors, the Khoi – Khoi who calls God Tsui//Guab: *God is the God with the wounded knee*. God “limping beside” his wounded children standing between them and destruction. The author have participated in two Pilgrimage of Trust of the Taize Community<sup>3</sup> (Stuttgard and Cape Town) and has been a facilitator of the Robben Island Pilgrimage for several groups. It is the experiences of these two pilgrimages that gave birth to the current Pilgrimage of Presence as the author became aware of the sacredness of every space and that all spaces are pregnant with presence. The Ukuzimasa<sup>4</sup> approach of being in the space, rather than doing and knowing in that space informs and confirmed the naming of the pilgrimage: A Pilgrimage that articulates and embodies God’s presence. In the words of Pope Francis of the Catholic Church: “This presence must not be contrived, but found, uncovered”.<sup>5</sup>

The author is a pastor of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the diaconal approach of many congregations is that of short term projects (charity projects). There needs to be a shift in social and diaconal work organisations where appropriate, away from being a “supporter” and “provider” towards being a “facilitator” and “enabler.” Every pilgrimage implies a voyage of self- discovery and a search for something greater and beyond oneself.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This worldwide pilgrimage includes “stations” in different countries. Taize is the name of a tiny village hidden away in the hills of Burgundy in the eastern part of France not far from the town of Cluny. Since 1940 it is also the home of an ecumenical community of brothers whose prayer three times a day is at the centre of their life.

<sup>4</sup> *Ukuzimasa* is a Xhosa word meaning “to just be present”

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, of the Holy Father Francis, to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (Vatican Press, 2013), 59.

<sup>6</sup> David Baldwin, *Santiago de Compostela - The Pilgrim Way of St James* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2001), 3.



### **1.1 Post Covid- 19 congregations and communities**

The current state of our congregations in South Africa due to the corona virus pandemic attest to the following among others: our core ministries for children, women and compassion has come to a standstill. Our ministry of prayer and caring has become privatised. Our ministries of offerings and tithes has been compromised due to unemployment. Our ministries of community being and building and serving justice is no more. If we think of functionality of the congregation, then we all have to confess that it has grinded to a halt and the amazing improvisations cannot replace the functionality of the church that in its very essence have become part of the cultural embodiment of our communities and as these have eroded so being with buildings and Sunday gatherings and services have also collapsed.

The Covid 19 pandemic has destroyed the cultural meaning we have attached to the life of the church and in fact carved out of this the shallowness of our practices on the one hand and the depth of rediscovering faith both as mystery and substantive otherness. The church has run dry. The youth are not enticed. The house altar could not replace the Sabbath altar and did not provide the substantive anchor – because we did not drop the anchor in time. It has, where and when it still meets, become the place of the elderly. And being a meeting place for elders have also in a sense dislodged the church from the very communities it is located in and has to render a service to and for. The Covid 19 pandemic has illustrated and laid bare the structural and institutional inequalities in societies across the world in relation to have's and have not's. These conditions include a range of factors – poverty, marginalisation, social exclusion. This highlights an aspect of the current capital market system where those that are marginalised face the risk precisely due to the nature and consequences of their exclusion. Farm workers, factory workers, lowly skilled and unskilled workers, retail workers toil with minimum protection, including access to health care and education.



## 1.2 Endledleni Diaconia

Hence the need for endledleni diaconia.<sup>7</sup> In isiXhosa<sup>8</sup> endledleni means “*we are on the road together*”. With all the disruptions due to the Covid 19 pandemic as well as with revived racism, reinvented colonialism, re-embraced tribalism, re-invented ethnic nationalism in society and in our church<sup>9</sup> endledleni diaconia stubbornly navigates planning, discovering, doing and celebrating together. Endledleni diaconia wants to recover a habit of very specific story exchange, shared memory and joint action if we are to have robust liberation.<sup>10</sup>

We follow the literal way which Jesus used: travelling together while teaching and learning. Continuously transforming closed spaces and fixed identities. Australian New Testament scholar John Collins contends that the understanding of diakonia as humble service was very much based on the narrow interpretation of diakonia which shaped the diaconal movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus Collins’ biblical semantic research is helpful in dismantling a historically far too narrow interpretation of the meaning of the New Testament *diak-* words, which turns out to be insufficient as a tool for defining today’s understanding and interpretation of diaconal theory and practice. He proposes diaconia to reside in the ministering community and to be understood as the go-between functions requires the ability to be an advocate and mediator, to listen at the margins and report back to the center about the toil and burdens of the marginalised.<sup>11</sup>

Those who first spoke of diakonia were not the linguists or theologians of our day but Lutheran Churchmen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. They were seeking to establish a

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<sup>7</sup> See Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni, “An Exploration of the Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Congregational and Community Life,” in *Covid-19 In Congregations and Communities* (Johannesburg: Nelidi, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> *IsiXhosa* is one of South Africa twelve official languages.

<sup>9</sup> Alan A Boesak. Uniting Reformed Church General Synod Address: “Jesus is Lord, past, present and future”. Stellenbosch, October 7, 2022

<sup>10</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (New York: Convergent, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



form of Christian ministry among the displaced and all those adversely affected in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and by the onset of industrialisation.<sup>12</sup>

In Endledleni diaconia as expressed in the Pilgrimage of Presence journey (project) the value of thoughtfulness is at the center where institutions and churches are encouraged to receive unemployed young adults and widows as providers of values and moral orientation in terms of our social priorities. This Pilgrimage of Presence envisions transformative experience where new goals, shifts in epistemologies and new praxis are guiding signposts.<sup>13</sup>

### **1.3 A New Agenda/Goals**

The theological concept of lament can show us where unemployed young people and widows are positioned to offer new agendas for institutions and churches in marginalised communities. In lament our task is never to convince someone of the brokenness of this world: it is to convince them of the world's worth in the first place. True lament is not born from that trite sentiment that the world is bad, but rather from a deep conviction that it is.<sup>14</sup>

The Intercultural Widow Care and the Renarrativizing our History Pilgrimages serves as examples of the new agendas/new goals for diaconia practitioners in marginalised communities in South Africa. We will illustrate below how this three-fold interventions of new agenda/new goals, new epistemology and new praxis were applied to the two pilgrimages.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>13</sup> See the work of Ignacio Martin – Baro and also Mwansa C. Kimpinde and Yolanda Dreyer, "Pastoral Care with Young People Suffering from Depression in the Context of Soweto," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (November 10, 2020), <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/6225>.

<sup>14</sup> Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*, 101.



#### **1.4 Intercultural Widow Care Pilgrimage of Presence**

The Intercultural Widow Care Pilgrimage was developed in 2019 as a diaconia – pastoral model for congregations in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. For a period of one year we jointly embarked on a five-fold care model for widows in two separate cultural communities. This pilgrimage combined the rich experiences from the Xhosa Christian and the Camissa-Xhoi-Afrikaans Christian Women Ministries. Both of these ministries have been in operation and have been caring for women, especially widows for over 50 years. During this time the author experienced a transformational attitude of “*nothing about us, without us*”

#### **2. Renarrativizing our History Pilgrimage of Presence**

This pilgrimage was a journey of thirty unemployed<sup>15</sup> young adults who visited seven institutions/sites for one week and reflected with its leaders on the history, vision, significance and our their challenges. The pilgrims also reflected on their own histories, challenges and resilient agency. The four hour encounters everyday ended with a common meal and common resolutions towards the total liberation of the community. The first encounter was with the St Joseph the Worker Anglican Church because this church was consecrated by Bishop Warren Sydney Lavis<sup>16</sup> in 1957. This Bishop was known for fighting for the betterment of slum conditions in the 1900’s and our encounter with the members of this church was how to rekindle the spirituality of hope for the community. The second encounter was with the leadership of the local Police services. The deliberations were focussed on how partnership policing would look like amidst high levels of gender based and gun violence.

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<sup>15</sup> South Africa is currently recognised as one of the most unequal nations in the world and has the added burden of high rates of unemployment and poverty. Although education increases prospects of employment, nearly two thirds of people aged between 18 and 35 years are unemployed with women being the worst affected.

<sup>16</sup> The community of Bishop was named after this Anglican Bishop



The third encounter was with the leader and members of the Masjiedul-Izzah, local Mosque to cement the spirituality of giving amidst the high poverty levels in the community. The fourth encounter was with the Huis Alleyne Yeld Senior Citizen's home, a place that need redefining as it is still owned by a large company whose profit before people policies and attitudes endorses the undignified treatment of people in their last phase of their lives. The fifth encounter was with the leaders of the Community Health Center to craft a memorandum for a healthy community. The sixth encounter was with the Principal of the Bergville Primary School, one of thirteen primary schools in the Bishop Lavis community.

The author had a prior meeting with all the school principals in October 2022 where the agenda was *“to search for possible ways in which the religious leaders can theologically play a role in addressing the challenges of teacher dissatisfaction (with the disruptive behaviour of children at school) as well as giving some guidelines on how this challenge can be eliminated by implementing an Action Plan”*. We reflected on the large number of students dropping out early from school since it is one of the major contributing factors to the growing incidence of poverty and we departed with refrain in our ears: *“while some may sell dope we will continue to sell hope”*. The eight and final encounter was with a community leader of the “Agste Laan” informal settlement.

Agste Laan is a community of shacks of corrugated iron, wooden planks, hardboard and even plastics have mushroomed wherever people have been able to find land. The informal settlement are marked by a general lack of services – health, schooling, water, electricity, refuse removal, sanitation.<sup>17</sup> We concluded our pilgrimage in this informal settlement as we want to embrace this community and prophesy that this will become a place where the power of the exclusion system has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other. We concluded our pilgrimage thus with prophetic witness, prophetic truthfulness, prophetic faithfulness and

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<sup>17</sup> Pieter Verster, “The Gospel in the Squatter Camp: A Missiological Approach,” *Mission Bulletin* XIV, no. 3 (1994): 3–5.



prophetic boldness. This new agenda' goals orientation can aid us in renarrativizing our history, not as passive victims of white colonialism but as active, joyful, religious actors in the face of dispossession and despondency.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.1 A New Epistemology

Knowledge production and knowledge sharing is critical in the Pilgrimage of Presence praxis. The critical questions of *Who has the power to define what is of value in our societies and what or who is regarded as worthless* will be examined as diaconal work is less about getting things done or meeting targets and more about being present and staying faithful, unconditionally.<sup>19</sup> Leonardo Boff suggests that theology should be built from the perspectives of the victims in the context of a system that generates social and human problems and the poor should be the epistemological place, the place from which the concept of God is thought.<sup>20</sup> In the Intercultural Widow Care Pilgrimage the five-fold care envisioned in the Widow Care model are: Communicare, Hybrid-Care, Mental Health Care, Spiritual Care and Feeding Care. In this five-fold care model a shift in knowledge production and knowledge sharing is envisioned.

Communicare: This is a shift from caring for individual members, for example, one on one house visits to a caring model we call Communicare. Previously widows had to reach out for care and it all depended on the availability of carers. Now the visits are coordinated, planned and done in groups. The visatee (widow) are also afforded an opportunity (when their health allows) to leave their house and residences and engage with their peers in a dignified manner. At these visits we celebrate birthdays or family events, bereavement care as well as health care.

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<sup>18</sup> See Johnathan Jodamus, "The 'Pinkster Kerk' as a Site of Indigenous Religious Expression within Black Pentecostal Theology," *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (October 25, 2022): 600–616, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/erev.12722>.

<sup>19</sup> See Erica Meijers and Heather Roy, "Reformulating Diaconia in Western Europe: New Approaches and Theological Challenges," in *International Handbook of Ecumenical Diakonia Chapter* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 260.

<sup>20</sup> Rodolfo Gaede Neto, "Didactics of Inclusion: Diakonia as a Round Table," in *International Handbook of Ecumenical Diakonia Chapter* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 659.



Hybrid Care: We are attending to the needs of widows as multi-cultural agents of transformation. Mental Health Care. This is a shift in the caring of the widows mental health which was done on an individual and call out basis. Now we want to engage with widows so that their resilience can be shared and appreciated. Spiritual Care. This shift is from an individual sermon based Bible study care model to Intercultural Contextual Bible Reading Groups. Feeding Care. This shift is from an individual feeding schemes to elderly and widows to a Serving Justice Feeding Care Model where widows will be agents of preparing and serving food.

## 2.2 A New Praxis

Praxis is about acting reflectively. Praxis seeks to be transformative. It is thinking and acting for change. It is communal thinking and acting for change, not an individual activity. In our new praxis we engage the promising work of Australian scholar John Collins on his views of diaconia as a ministry of mediation, go-between relationship – and bridge building as well as witness.<sup>21</sup> Widows from Lavis and Langa communities read the Bible together, meeting twice a month from March – May 2022. The Bible became to them a refreshing stimulus to intercultural encounters. A book (text) to be read in community – with others - encounterologically.<sup>22</sup>

They were reading the Gospel of Luke 9-19 stories and wanted to experience the gospel as surprise, as gift and as a new encounter. We believe that in the re- reading of scripture in life affirming ways it becomes easier to uphold the humanity of each other. Recognising that the sharing of the stories of the widows when we are together places women in a position of vulnerability, but also the realisation that their stories also became dialogical texts was liberating. This is the first time that we read the Bible like this (two

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<sup>21</sup> Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*.

<sup>22</sup> T. D. Mashau and J. N. J. Kritzing, eds., *Pavement Encounters for Justice: Doing Transformative Missiology with Homeless People in the City of Tshwane* (Parow: AcadSA Publishing, 2014); Willem Saayman, "Personal Reflections : Klippias Kritzing as I Know Him," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 37, no. 3 (2009): 20.



chapters at a time) and we have decided on the Gospel of Luke for three reasons: Firstly, the travel Narrative of Jesus (Luke 9-19) because we believe the deepening unity process of Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa's congregations is a journey and not a project.

Secondly, Luke mentions this journey is from Galilee to Jerusalem. Taking the model of Jesus himself, one can consider the relevance of his enactment of the kingdom of God in connection with peace and justice work schematically as involving on the one hand, a Galilean component and on the other hand, a Jerusalem component. The Galilean component focuses on acts of serving, ministering reconciliation, empowering, inviting and being in solidarity, while the Jerusalem component includes protesting, resisting, challenging, truth-telling and consequently suffering.<sup>23</sup> Our third reason for using the Gospel of Luke is because of Luke's continuing story in the Acts of the Apostles. In particularly Acts Chapter 6 about the caring for widows. We believe that in re-reading Acts 6, an Intercultural Caring opportunity was missed by the church leaders then in appointing only Greek speaking leaders to care for Greek speaking widows.

### **3. Conclusion**

What form of diakonia could be discovered for marginalised communities like Bishop Lavis and Langa where you constantly juggle the social exclusions of unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments and bad health? What fault lines (the cracks and divisions) that separate us and prevent us from having a healthy, effective community are exposed? What suggestions for a healthy community do we provide?

The author offers the Pilgrimage of Presence as he draws from the spiritual wisdom of his ancestors, the Khoi-Khoi who called God Tsui//Guab: God is the God with the wounded knee. God "limping beside" his wounded children standing between them and

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<sup>23</sup> Gordon Zerbe, "Christian Social Action and Global Citizenship Education," in *International Handbook of Ecumenical Diakonia Chapter2* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 673–681.



destruction.<sup>24</sup> Unemployed young adults, widows and many other marginalised people in South Africa and everywhere needs to be listened to. Their voices need to be heard lest they became more invisible.<sup>25</sup>

The Pilgrimage of Presence diaconia interventions has gifted us so much in our journeys together with widows and unemployed young adults. We received the gift of faith which have enabled us to takes small intercultural risks for the sake of Christ. We received the gift of diversity. We received a vocational gift. We received the gift of partnership. We received the gift of hope. We received the gift of new forms of community.

In the words of Anglican Bishop Graham Cray: “*Will all these gifts prove to be a gift of patience which recognises how long it takes to journey from no initial enquiry to whole hearted discipleship? Will it be a gift of transformation? Will it be a gift towards maturity? Will new forms of church mature without losing their distinctive character and contextual significance? Will it be a gift of continuing innovation? As a gift of the Spirit, by God’s grace, may it prove to be all of these things*”<sup>26</sup> Whilst on this Pilgrimage of Presence our question is not only what is this place to me, but also what has this place been to those before me and those who made me?

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<sup>24</sup> Willa Boezak, *So Glo Ons: Die Khoi-San van Suid-Afrika* (Kaapstad: Bidvest Data, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Graham Gray, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).



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