



Friendships and Fellowship: Living *koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia* in the Corinthian Church of South Africa – from the perspective of social capital

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In this article, I argued that the rituals of baptism, After-burial ritual cleansing ceremonies, and the burning of the heifer [*isitshisa*], performed by members of the Corinthians Church of South Africa based in Durban and Phepheni, near Kokstad, generate friendships and fellowship [*koinonia*], and that these in turn promote witness [*martyria*] and service [*diakonia*] to the community.

Introduction

Methodology

In this article I explore the function that religious rituals play in the context of poverty amongst the members of the Corinthian Church of South Africa based in Durban, South Africa. I seek to address three questions: what generates friendship, what enhances fellowship, and more importantly what fosters service in the Corinthian Church of South Africa in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal and the worshippers at Phepheni (near Kokstad), from the perspective of social capital?

To respond to these questions, I propose to undertake the following, namely to define three Greek terms: *koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*, then explore how these concepts reflect the life of the Corinthians, in the context of their performance of religious rituals and symbolism at the annual sacrifice of a heifer, *isitshisa* at Mlazi in Durban and their worship at Phepheni, in the Eastern Cape near Kokstad in KwaZulu-Natal.

In my definition of the term social capital, that follows later, I will seek to explore what values of social capital are engendered through the performance of rituals and use of symbols by the Corinthians in the context of worship (*koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*). Differently put, to what extent do the rituals generate values of common ownership, collective participation, collaboration and, therefore, enhance service to the communities? Consequently, implied in this study, is the issue of how rituals contribute to social cohesion amongst the Corinthians and other groups. Or inversely, the issue of how rituals help to undermine poverty and subsequently contribute to social development.

The terms social development and poverty however, need to be defined. The aforementioned terms are relative opposites or antitheses of each other. Briefly defined, poverty denotes the very absence or lack of 'progressive' material conditions for social development. On the other hand, (social) development entails the existence of material conditions that enhance social welfare.

The present study is part of the wider project sponsored by the National Research Foundation on ritual, poverty and social development¹. In this study, I will draw from my observation of the ritual of the *isitshisa*, performed at Mlazi on 31 October 2009, and at Phepheni, on 04 April and 31 October 2010 and on 08 and 10 April 2011 and I will refer to the interviews I conducted on both of these and other occasions. This study falls within the arena of liturgical and ritual studies informed by theological insights.

I argue that the degree of worship, the role of rituals and structures in the Corinthian Church, generate values of social capital in the forms of friendship and fellowship. These in turn cause practical pastoral implications for the life of the Corinthians and the neighbouring communities.

Defining the concepts

Koinonia, *martyria*, *diakonia*, poverty, social development and social capital

What is *koinonia*?

According to G.W. Bromiley, the Greek term *koinonia* denotes 'to share in', rendered as *koinoneo* and 'to participate in' (1988:447). He notes that for the Greeks friendship, fellowship,

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companionship, (*koinonos*), generosity, (*koinonikos*) and participation are grouped together. In this respect, so Bromiley asserts, 'sharing in divine power through common meals' is an expression of *koinonia* (p. 447). On the other hand, *koinonia*, so Bromiley explains, denotes 'common (*koinos* ownership in the sense of what concerns all, such as monies, societies, resolves' (p. 447). From this perspective, in this article I seek to explore how *koinonia* is engendered amongst the Corinthians, and how the rituals they perform and the symbols they use enhance a spirit of collaboration and participation. This article will also question the aspects of the rituals and symbols of the Corinthians that promote values of friendship or companionship, fellowship and participation.

What is *martyria*?

On the other hand, Bromiley (1988:568–569) asserts that *martyria* denotes 'bearing witness with others', and that *martyrion* denotes a confession of faith that culminates into death. It is also a teaching or Gospel message as a teaching that is affirmed. Associated with these, the question arises, to what extent do the performance of rituals and symbols act as a Christian witness to the Corinthians and the other groups? In other words, what role do the Corinthian rituals play in enhancing Christian values?

What is *diakonia*?

Similarly, Bromiley (1988:154–155) states that the Greek term *diakonia* is rendered in four senses, namely, 'waiting at table', 'providing sustenance', whilst the wider meaning of the term denotes 'the discharge of a long service or obligations' relating to ministries such as evangelists, apostles. Finally, *diakonia* also entails 'collection' (Rom 15:31; 2 Cor 8: 1ff), as a true act of Christian love, services and responsibilities involving personal commitment (pp. 154–155). In other words, *diakonia*, as service rendered, relates to ministry as an obligation driven by personal commitment. For the purpose of this study all renderings of the term are relevant. Hence in this study, I seek to address the question: how does the Corinthians performance of rituals and use of symbols contribute to service 'as an obligation to one another' and others in the community? Associated with this, an additional question is: what roles do their teachings and structures play in promoting the spirit of *diakonia* as ministries to sustain communities?

What is poverty?

Poverty is defined as:

A state of one who lacks a certain amount of material possessions or money [...] being unable to afford basic human needs, which commonly includes fresh water, nutrition, health care, education, clothing and shelter. (Wikipedia n.d.)

Fundamentally it is:

a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society ... insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. (Wikipedia n.d.)

This Western definition of poverty however, solely perceived almost exclusively from the materialistic point of view, does not do justice to the African view; which also views poverty as a lack of spiritual resources. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, these two perspectives are important. The Corinthians are 'poor' in the sense that the majority of them live in the rural areas of South Africa and are not in 'gainful employment.' For instance Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani has no formal employment whilst his wife sells fruit in the streets of Kokstad (interview with Mrs Bestina Mthopi Richmond, Jean Richmond and Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani).

What is social development?

'Social development is rendered as 'an alteration in the social order of a society ... it may refer to social progress or social cultural evolution' (Education.com n.d.), that is, a change in the nature, social institutions, social behaviours or social relations of a society. In addition, the term entails 'patterns or process of change exhibited by individuals, resulting from their interaction with other individuals, social institutions or social customs' (Wikipedia n.d.) In light of this definition, the question that must be addressed is: how does the Corinthian performance of rituals alter the social structure of social groups in their communities? Or, how does the performance of their rituals influence human behaviour?

What is social capital?

Though the term denotes different meanings to various scholars, fundamentally it entails the manner and the extent to which the individuals or groups collaborate to achieve certain social benefits (John Field 2003:1–2). Essentially, the core of such activities rests on a network of relationships, on one hand sustained by trust and tolerance, and on the other by mutuality or reciprocity and independence (pp. 1–2). Hence social networks are considered valuable assets for generating social capital.

Robert Putnam (1995:200) popularised the concept of social capital as a tool applicable for social research. Similar to other scholars, he stresses the central role that networks play in the sustainability of communities. On the other hand, James Coleman (1998) concentrates on the role that social structures play in enhancing social capital. This study is concerned with social and religious structures, firstly in the role of the secretaries, *oonobhala*, in co-ordinating food parcels for the blind. Secondly, it involves the role of the secretary, the minister's wife and female parents at the baptism in Phepheni. Further it seeks to address the issue: how do the structures in the Corinthian Church foster the spirit of *diakonia*?

Social capital is understood to operate on three levels. Firstly, bonding capital is characterised by strong bonds and as those that prevail amongst family members or an ethnic group. Then, there is bridging capital that entails weaker or less firm ties in which business associates, acquaintances, or friends



from different ethnic groups are involved. Finally, linking capital denotes connections at different levels of power.

At the centre of social capital stand three aspects: bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Bonding social capital is characterised by strong bonds like those between family members or members of an ethnic group. Bridging social capital designates weaker, less dense but more cross-cutting ties like those between business associates, acquaintances and friends from different ethnic groups. Linking social capital refers to connections between people at different levels of power or social status.

I argue that the degree of worship, and the role of rituals and structures in the Corinthian Church generate two critical values of social capital, these are: participation and collaboration, and that these are nurtured by the spirit of friendship and fellowship fostered through performance of rituals and symbols.

From what I have just outlined, it is clear that a close nexus exists between the Greek concepts of *koinonia*, *martyria*, and *diakonia* on one hand, and social capital on the other, in the sense that to a degree both concepts entail collective activity and participation. I now spell out how the life of the Corinthians characterise and express ideas behind these concepts and the pastoral imperatives derived thereof.

Worship: The experience in celebration and *koinonia*

'Religious' life in the Corinthian Church of South Africa centres on three interconnected activities:

- worship
- the performance of rituals and use of symbols
- the regular sharing of meals on those occasions or 'table-fellowship' (festivities).

These three define and express their communal life and the lives of others. I therefore analyse them in the sections that follow.

Corporeal nature of worship

By character, worship in the Corinthian Church is all-encompassing involving dancing and singing, reading of Scripture, sermons and teachings. Music forms the central aspect of worship, where all are involved.² The character of worship is rhythmic and dramatic, in which all congregation members are engaged in dancing, for hours on end, and music is a significant characteristic of this worship. In describing the impact of music, Thulani Zondi stated that 'this music connects the Corinthians to each other, an experience in spiritual and emotional unity which only the one who experience it can properly describe' (interview with Thulani Zondi, Kokstad, 09 Feb. 2011). He went to assert that 'without music, fellowship is almost impossible – it knits our

²See Mbaya, H., 2011, 'The socio-practical dimension of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] in the Corinthian Church of South Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(2), Art. #930, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.930>

spirits and souls – it is an African rhythm.' In other words, for Thulani Zondi, music exudes power, the power which Johan Cilliers has described as a *force vitale*, knits the worshippers closely together.

On the other hand, Veliswa Dhlamini stated that 'music and dance (worship) enhances the spirit of oneness amongst themselves that makes it possible for them to communicate with the spiritual world – it is the key to our worship and fellowship with the spirit' (interview with Veliswa Dhlamini, Kokstad, 15 Feb. 2011).

Through drumming, the blowing of *imibhobho*, the sprinkling of holy water, the burning of incense-emitting objects, coupled with rhythmic music and dancing, a highly charged atmosphere is generated. The worshippers become immersed in an experience of heightened engagement. As Cilliers noted (2008):

There is a natural tendency for penetration and interplay, creating a concert or orchestration in which the ear hears, the eye sees, and where one both smells and tastes color, wherein all the senses, unmuted engage in every experience. (p. 276)

Nokuphila Khumalo stated that it was:

In this context that the Corinthians experience each other's presence as a spiritual blessing where they are not only in tune with each other but also with the Spirit and the Spirit of the Founder. It is a celebration of oneness, a gift that one enjoys in the Corinthian Church. (Interview with Nokuphila Khumalo, Phepheni, 03 Oct. 2010)

A stronger sense of belonging and fellowship becomes a reality because of the intense nature of worship and music, in which ritual takes a central place. It is not mere fellowship, but communion on a deeper level. Worship and performance of ritual becomes a celebration of life in which they see each other's life as a web in which they are interconnected. Revd Dingani asserted that:

It gives us power and interest, that you feel inside with joy so that you feel you must come back to Mlazi. The feeling is that you don't want to see it come to an end. (Interview with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Phepheni, 19 May 2011)

Thus, worship creates space for close personal interaction, where intensive fellowship on a personal level (bonding) is engendered, thus, *koinonia* becomes a real experience where each member feels closely connected to the other. In this atmosphere, social distinctions tend to blur as one sees the other as a brother or a sister. It is as Cilliers (2008:74) stated, 'I participate, therefore I am ... in participation lies identity ... I dance (with you), therefore I am.'

Here religious identity is fostered, and this opens up an opportunity for social engagement. Fellowship becomes a reality as the members participate to a greater degree in worship that appeals to them sensually, visually, intellectually and emotionally. Thus people are deeply engaged in social and spiritual communion, *koinonia*, where they communicate with one another and the Spirit(s) (and of the Founder) on a spiritual and emotional level. According to Gerrie ter Haar (2009:2), for the African Initiated Churches such as



the Corinthians, spiritual fellowship is transformative, as it empowers them for social development.

Rituals and symbols as lens to *diakonia*

Baptism: An opportunity for witness – civic capital and empowerment of women leadership

At Phepheni baptism is conducted three times in a year. It is elaborate and full of symbolism and ritual. Unlike baptism conducted in the missionary-initiated churches and other denominations, in this case women take a prominent role. The secretary, Phindiwe Qwayede calls out names of parents and their children from a book, and spells out their obligations. Then the wife of the minister examines the parent(s) (almost always women) knowledge of the portion of Scripture chosen to be read to his or her child, even though it is doubtful whether or not the child understands the Scripture readings. On this occasion each parent must recite, before the congregation, a portion of Scripture that she has been reading to the child, and state the relevance of the Scripture reading to the baptismal rite.

When asked why parents were charged to take this role, the minister, Revd Dingani stated that it was carried out with the objective of nurturing the child in the Scriptures, but also as a public lesson to the rest of the congregation (interview with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Kokstad, 4 and 10 Apr. 2010). The ritual of reading Scripture is significant, as it establishes a bond of emotional and spiritual attachment between the parent and child. In light of Bromiley's rendering of *martyria* however, in this case, the parent's reading and exposition of Scripture takes the form of *martyria*, a 'confession' of faith, and a public witness of faith to the rest of the congregation. Scripture reading by women is precisely for the edification of the whole congregation. The public exposition of the Scriptures is meant to be of benefit to all those present.

Through public readings however, people attain reading and public speaking skills. Thus, the parents acquire skills in what is called 'civic capital.' Such skills empower women in leadership skills, such as public speaking.

After-burial cleansing ceremony: For social cohesion and *martyria*

The goal of worship and ritual in particular, in the Corinthian Church is to enhance cohesion on three levels, spiritual, emotional and social. To achieve this, a ritual is performed to counter factors that foster social disintegration, most notably sickness and death (interview with Mrs Mthopi Bestina Richmond, Jean Richmond and Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Durban, 31 Oct. 2010). In other words, a ritual is performed that foster spiritual and social cohesion. One of the prominent rituals is the rite of cleansing after burial.

Following the Founder's instructions, the Corinthians refrain from sharing a meal after a burial service. According to the

wife of the Founder, Mrs Richmond and Revd Dingani, the founder instructed the Corinthians to refrain from funeral festivities as these would 'weaken' their soul or spirit, which would then make them vulnerable to death (interview with Mrs Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Durban, 31 Oct. 2010). When some people have eaten, or return from the funeral, a cleansing ritual is observed (interview with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Kokstad, 08 Apr. 2011).³ The objective of the ritual is to re-integrate those who have attended the funeral (and ate) once again into the fellowship of the congregation and the spirit (interview with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Phepheni, 08 and 10 Apr. 2011).

There is another dimension to this ritual. According to Mrs Richmond and Revd Dingani, abstaining from funeral meals also discourages the Corinthians, and the poor, from spending too much on funeral expenses (interview with Mrs Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Durban, 31 Oct. 2010). In doing this, the Corinthians encourage a simple life-style amongst the people (interview with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Kokstad, 31 Oct. 2010). In other words, this ritual attempts to 'reintegrate' some Corinthians with the rest of the congregation, where disintegration had occurred as a result of their defilement, from death. Thus, the ritual tries to restore cohesion amongst the Corinthians. In other words, the ritual tries to give meaning to their life.

On the other hand, abstention from funeral festivities is a public witness, and it is critical of the practices that continue to encourage exploitation of the poor, especially in the rural communities of South Africa. In this sense it has ethical implications. The Corinthians live ethically, but at the same time, their ritual serves as a tool for 'witnessing' (*martyria*) in the community, serving as an example to others about ethical living. In other words, here is an ethical principle that seeks to foster some moral value in the community.

Isitshisa – as *koinonia* and *martyria* for *diakonia*

Since 1994, twice a year, in June and October, coming from all parts of the country, the Corinthians gather at Mlazi, south of Durban, for two days, on Friday and Saturday. They come for worship, and in particular to offer the sacrifice of the burning of the heifer, which is accompanied by thanksgiving and prayers of blessing.⁴ Following the instructions and ministry of the Founder, the Corinthians give donations of food parcels and money to the blind and other poor people who are present, and subsequently share a meal with them. The donations to the blind, and other needy people, are coordinated through the network of the congregations by the *oonobhala*, or secretaries.

3. For a more detailed description of this ritual see H. Mbaya, 2011, 'Creativity, imagination, symbolism and identity formation in the Corinthian Church of South Africa', a paper presented at the Practical Theology seminar, University of Pretoria, 24 January 2011.

4. For more analysis on this issue see H. Mbaya, 2011, 'The socio-practical dimension of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] in the Corinthian Church of South Africa', *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 67(2), Art. # 930, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.930>



Asked what made the ritual and tradition special, Revd Dingani, Bishop Zibuthe, Jean Richmond, Mrs Richmond and Nokuthula Sikhakhane stated that it was because '[they] received it from *ubaba* (the founder, Johannes Richmond) as a gift, which [they] value and through this [they] are blessed' (interview and discussion with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Bishop Mzwandile Zibuthe, Jean Richmond, Mrs Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Nokuthula Sikhakhane, Durban, 10 Jan. 2010). This ritual has been a legacy which they cherish, it unites the Corinthians. On the other hand, motivation for observation and participation of the ritual derives from their sense of ownership. Bromiley (1988:447) noted that 'common ownership' and 'common participation' constitute core elements of *koinonia*. In fact, these elements serve as a foundation of a deeper fellowship amongst the Corinthians. It is this feeling that fosters bonds of affinity amongst the Corinthians. Bonding is an important dimension of social capital.

Veliswa Dhlamini responding to the question: how does the *isitshisa* affect them? She states:

We meet to share as brothers and sisters in worship, rituals and all God's gifts even with others such as the blind and the other needy – and when we leave we go home and then come back the following year – knowing each other even better – so it is like we are one family of Revd Richmond, our Founder'. (Interview with Veliswa Dhlamini, Phepheni, 22 Jan. 2010)

Here friendship and participation is enhanced by the bonds of worship generated every year. It is the key to a deeper fellowship and participation (same interview). For years this tradition has become part of their life in which they participate regularly and feel a strong sense of ownership. Collective and regular participation generates fellowship that enhances *koinonia*.

According to Bishop Zibuthe however, to be at *isitshisa* was 'to be part of the blessed team or group with others – as we receive spiritual blessings of power and healing' (*koinonia*) (interview with Bishop Mzwandile Zibuthe, Durban, 31 Oct. 2010). In other words, according to Bishop Zibuthe being part of something implies a sense of belonging, which in turn implies being in company, where unity and a sense of belonging is asserted and celebrated one amongst the other (social capital). Thus the *isitshisa* makes it possible for *koinonia* to be expressed in a deeper fellowship, within which a group, characterised by bonding, is expressed in common participation.

In other words, the nature of worship creates some space for bonding amongst the Corinthians, which is an aspect of social capital. Similarly B.A. Muller and C.J. Wepener (2011:15) noted a deeper sense of fellowship engendered by this ritual. They stated that 'there is a strong emphasis on *koinonia* as the total experience of active love, sharing the needs of the afflicted'. The congregation is perceived as a communion – with organic unity. *Koinonia* is centred on close fellowship and communion amongst the members of the congregation.

In conclusion, Muller and Wepener (2011) observed that:

The Church is regarded as the family of God ... a people of God ... who is a community of love and fellowship. Love and fellowship is the 'most important thing in life', based on 'God's love'... The God, who receives them as children, stimulates a sense of belonging to God and to one another. He makes them into a community of support, accepting one another, and sharing their needs. (pp. 9–10)

This community is about belonging together, enhanced by a common heritage of a ritual tradition that goes back to the Founder in 1952. The Corinthian Church operates as a closely-knit network of congregations, bound by the legacy of the traditions of the Founder, Johannes Richmond (interview with Jean Richmond, Mrs Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Durban, 31 Oct. 2010). These aspects of belonging and working together are an important component of social capital.

In other words, for Mrs Richmond, it is a sense of obligation and a sense of loyalty to the tradition of the Founder who devoted himself to caring for the blind. Hence there is a sense of ownership of the ritual, and an attachment to it which is an expression of *koinonia*.

There is another more important reason, which is to enter into fellowship not only with the Spirit of the Founder, which blesses, but also with one another. This was more articulately expressed when Revd Dingani stated, 'We cannot do anything without the angel or messenger into whose fellowship we also "find each other"' (interview with Revd Wellington Phungula Dingani, Phepheni, 04 Apr. 2010). Gerrie ter Haar (2009:2) stressed the critical dimension, of the Spirit, in African Initiated Churches. She asserted that 'through communication with the spirit world African believers have traditionally had access to a form of power – *spiritual power* – that could transform their lives'. Thus, she concluded, noting that 'it is for Africans' self-empowerment in the process of development, through spiritual empowerment as a means of transformation'.

Pastoral implications of 'table fellowship'

What generates friendship and fellowship? According to Revd Dingani:

Worship as fellowship is incomplete without sharing a meal together. Eating together just as worshipping together – keeps us together. When we eat we express our union which we experience in worship. Eating completes what we started in worship, our spiritual sharing (Interview with Revd. Wellington Phungula Dingani, Phepheni, 03 Apr. 2011)

For Revd Dingani then, worship provides fellowship which is consummated by the communal sharing of a meal. Worship is incomplete without 'table fellowship' for worship engenders one level of fellowship whilst communal sharing of a meal amongst the Corinthians raises fellowship to a higher level. Thus, a meal has a sacramental dimension, at which partakers sit around a fire place and corporately share together the meal which they believe is God's gift to them.



In sharing a meal the Corinthians also believe that they 'enter into each other's life' as Nokuthula Sikhakhane remarked:

When we eat together, we 'find' each other as brothers and sisters. Through discussions we know more and about each other as we discuss the issues of survival and other challenges. Thus we enter into each other's life. (Interview with Nokuthula Sikhakhane, Durban, 15 Mar. 2011)

Certainly 'table-fellowship' engenders 'deeper communion,' 'deeper fellowship', and *koinonia*, which binds the Corinthians together spiritually and socially. This fellowship is sacramental in dimension as it touches the lives of all, including the blind and the poor, as, spiritually they 'find each other' around the common table. The less fortunate have the opportunity to share with the relatively fortunate. In this respect, social differences blur.

Thus, meals create an opportunity for witnessing which is fostered by messages of hope in the sermons,⁵ whereby the less privileged see themselves on the same level as the more privileged, and vice versa. Effectively, fellowship transforms the lives of the worshippers as they gather as brothers and sisters. In other words, there is a *diaconal* principle implied here whereby the worshippers are inspired to engage in social action, by serving others who are needy.

Conclusion

At the start of this article, I posed three questions: what generates friendship, what enhances fellowship, and more importantly, what fosters service in the Corinthian Church of South Africa in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal and the worshipers at Phepheni, near Kokstad? By analysing rituals, in the form of 'table fellowship,' ritual cleansing, *isitshisa* and baptism, in light of the concepts: *koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*, I have established that ritual enhances friendships and fellowship, and that this happens precisely because of the social

5. To a greater degree the sermons centre on the theme of 'Carrying one another's burdens'.

networks and co-operation that the ritual fosters. In other words, participation and fellowship (*koinonia*), and with this, co-operation, leads to service (in the form of *martyria* and *diakonia*). These are the values that derive essentially from friendship and fellowship engendered by ritual.

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