



# A study on the lived experience of *Koinōnia* in a post-apartheid, post-Armstrong congregation: A transition from power-imbalance to *Koinōnia*<sup>1</sup>

Dr Candida Millar  
South African Theological Seminary  
Email: [candida@sats.ac.za](mailto:candida@sats.ac.za)

Prof Dr Godfrey Harold  
South African Theological Seminary  
Research Associate: Stellenbosch University  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6609-9651>  
Email: [godfrey@sats.ac.za](mailto:godfrey@sats.ac.za)

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.218>

## Abstract

The triune God reaches from within his perichoretic unity (Eugenio, 2014:156), into his creation, inviting all of humanity to participate in the Triune community of “shared participation—a participation together—in the perichoretic community of Trinitarian persons” (Grenz, 2003:268). Within this community, humanity finds it is made-in-God’s-image value and can live in the freedom of God’s communion (Knight, 2007:1). This article considers the experience of *koinōnia* in a church where membership lived through transitions of both apartheid and legalistic religion simultaneously, based on the research question, “What is the lived experience of *koinōnia* in the post-apartheid, post-Armstrong Grace Communion International Johannesburg Congregation”. Where genuine, evangelical, Trinitarian *koinōnia* exists, there appear to be blockages in the progressively deepening life in community. With significant input from the work of Lincoln (Lincoln, 2009) *Koinōnia* is explored through five considerations: identity, common life of believers, virtuous life, ubuntu, and practical sharing. *Koinōnia* in the lived experience of people who have traversed the ills of apartheid and the transitions of legalistic religion are encountered, exposing the beauty of diversity, the need for common values, and the commitment of time together in Scripture. Responding to meaningful moments (Frankl, 2006) towards Christlikeness by the power of the Spirit, not the flesh (Galatians 5:13–22), appears to significantly draw believers into the unity that Jesus prays in John 17. A more faithful practice is envisioned where believers build trust in the Spirit’s unifying power and presence and, from within the identity of Christ, are encouraged to explore various responses to meaningful moments towards Christlikeness. As the article and antecedent research suggests, widening and deepening individuals’ awareness of common life may build the connectivity of the visible vessel fulfilling its mandate to reflect God to the world. The Church is like a diverse tapestry attending to the calling of mending what was broken by harmful religious and political practices.

**Keywords:** Legalistic religion, Armstrongism, community, fellowship, *Imago Dei*, Trinitarian *koinōnia*

---

<sup>1</sup> This article comes out of a PhD submitted to The South African Theological Seminary entitled “A study on the lived experience of *Koinōnia* in a post-apartheid, post-Armstrong congregation: A transition from power-imbalance to *Koinōnia*” by Candida Millar, supervised by Godfrey Harold.



## Introduction

The Worldwide Church of God (WCG) practicing Armstrongism since its inception on radio (1937) by Herbert W. Armstrong (1892–1986), considered its exclusivity on earth as a preparation for its future kingdom calling. While the denomination would much later change its doctrine and name to Grace Communion International (GCI), it started as an American-based, Adventist-related, religious organization (Mazur, 2014:1085). British-Israelism, Holy Day observance, dietary laws and seventh day Sabbath observance were firm practices that distinguished the church from other Christian denominations.

According to Armstrong, God's chosen people were those of Britain and British colonies, including the United States, as they were seen to be descendants of ancient Israel (Jenkins & Thomas, 2009:113–14) fueling racial biases in Armstrong's denomination. Armstrong's conviction in Deuteronomy 32:8, that when "the most High divided to the nations their inheritance (speaking of land or geographical boundaries), when he separated [notice – he *separated*] the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people ..." (Armstrong, 1985:149 parenthesis and emphasis his), perpetuated a Gentile-subordinative stereotyping blending the identity of non-Anglo members with a misinterpretation of the dogs mentioned in Matthew 15:27.

WCG offered members identity, community and relationships that bound them in a unique "otherness" (Jenkins & Thomas, 2009:126), with a "profound sense of belonging" (2009:126) in stark contrast to the political action in South Africa at the time, influencing the lived experience of *Koinōnia*. The calling to be unstained by the world by obedience to legalistic laws projected a high standard of living that morphed into a WCG identity. For many people of colour this offered a lifeline, in one sense, as apartheid began stripping racial groups of their cultural identity, and in another, a noose, as many simultaneously embraced Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal paradigms of thinking. Fisher (2011:6) reminds that sacred texts interpreted by white Christianity during this era can produce "negative, oppressive and regressive realities" for non-white people. Such realities cannot be ignored in post-legalistic, post-apartheid *Koinōnia*. Entire denominations became "victims of their own prejudices and captives of the apartheid system that ruled South Africa until 1994" (Resane, 2017:169) blending misinterpreted Scripture into political agenda, a "law unto themselves" (2017:122).

Engaging perceptions and paradigms of thinking through the understanding of Bourdieuan fields, practice, and capital (Grenfell, 2014; Burawoy & von Holdt, 2012) offers a rich description of existing and emerging *Koinōnia* both during the WCG-era and the subsequent Grace Communion International (GCI) post-name-change era. The article (and research) suggests that lived experience of *Koinōnia* speaks to the authentic, heart-invested practices of both eras, while simultaneously pointing to the concern that a more full-bodied experience of a progressive revelation and internalization of *Koinōnia* may be thinned and/or decelerated, by legalistic practices and oppressive regimes. Scott discusses the veiled ideological resistance that is "disguised, muted, and veiled for safety's sake" (1990:137). Disguising and surviving as alternative ways of being intercept the progressive reality of *Koinōnia*. Resane (2017) posits that "the educationally and theologically elite devise and entrench a system that polarised and to a certain degree, destroyed the essence of the communion of the saints" (2017:113). The considerations of identity in Christ, common life of believers, values of a virtuous life, ubuntu, and practical sharing, are evidence that *Koinōnia* exists in the lived experience of GCI membership. Though often confused about the steps required to engage more deeply, the authentic desire to face a common future in unity, embracing the freedom and responsibility to choose (Frankl, 1988) and taking steps to initiate change is evident. Herein lies humanity functioning in its unique design as the *Imago Dei*.



## **Research problem**

The research problem can be postulated in the following manner: that the practice of *Koinōnia* in GCI Johannesburg Congregation may be a hybrid of Armstrongism, amplified by an apartheid induced thinking paradigm that may impact negatively on the practice of the biblical understanding of the theology of *Koinōnia*.

## **Research question**

What is the lived experience of *Koinōnia* in the post-apartheid, post-Armstrong Grace Communion International Johannesburg Congregation?

### **Subsidiary questions**

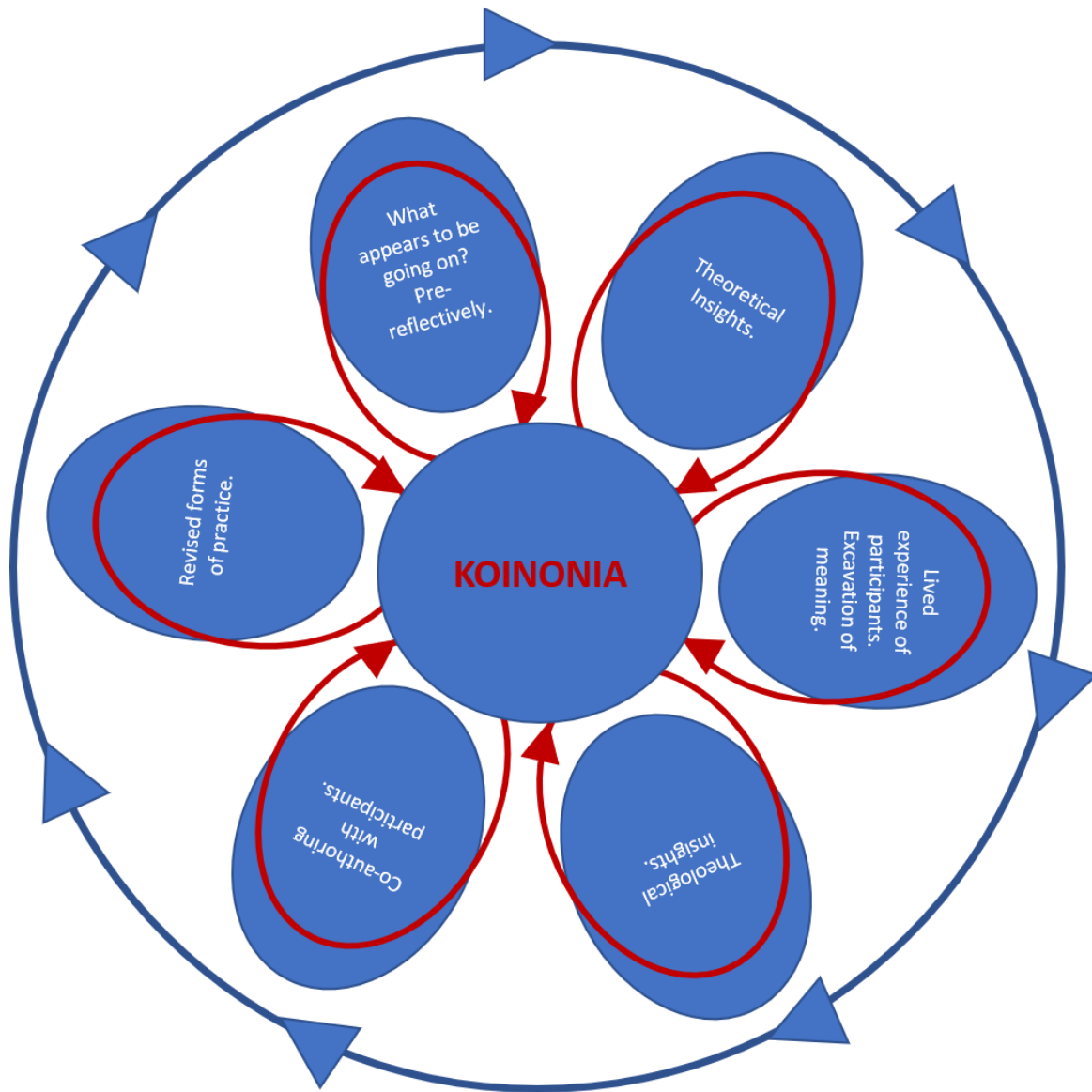
- What does *Koinōnia* appear to look like in GCI Johannesburg: an evangelical, Trinitarian congregation of humanity, seen as both spiritual and physical within the context of South Africa? The pre-reflective stage of phenomenological inquiry of the research supporting this article is observation and consideration of the socio-anthropological context within which it is practiced (Swinton & Mowat 2016). Critical race theory, power and capital realities and present global sensitivities are invited into the conversation that attempts to respond to this pre-reflective question, while the reality that "... the truth of the gospel reaches across barriers of age, race, and class" (Chester & Timmis, 2008:202).
- What is the actual lived experience of *Koinōnia* in the GCI Johannesburg Congregation? This question explores the responses of humanity in their lived experience of *Koinōnia*. Hoping for an authentic description of *Koinōnia* in GCI Johannesburg, the research begins with human experience (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:11).
- How is one to theologically understand *Koinōnia* from an evangelical, Trinitarian perspective? This question engages the relationship of the divine Persons (Volf, 1998:loc. 5568) and his relationship with humanity through Christ. A reflection of *Koinōnia* through five considerations offers an opportunity to explore the Triune God's fullness.
- In what way might GCI Johannesburg respond towards an authentic, faithful practice of *Koinōnia*? This question not only engages responses to previous sections, but invites, and even propels the church towards repentance, action, and a more faithful practice based on God's creative, expansive and transitive love (Harper & Metzger, 2012:22). The "next steps" of unity in diversity are explored.

## **Research aims and objectives**

The research aimed to offer practical theology insights into the lived experience of *Koinōnia* in the post-apartheid, post-Armstrong era within the context of GCI Johannesburg, and potentially into the wider denomination. It is hoped that the practical theological relevance may be assessed and applied to existing knowledge, enabling further faithful practices.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theory guiding the understanding of *Koinōnia* incorporates Torrance (Tyler, 2019; Eugenio, 2014), Grenz (1996; 2000; 2005) and Harper and Metzger (2012) in co-authoring conversation with the voice of the participants of the research in question.



**Figure 1.** Hermeneutical Phenomenological Circle (Millar, 2023)

The Hermeneutical Circle (Gadamer, 2003, 2004; Bultmann, 1955; Ricoeur, 1969, 1988) is employed as the theoretical framework within which *Koinōnia* is central and the search for meaning moves from “whole to part and back to the whole” (Gadamer cited in Swinton and Mowat, 2016:111).

The hermeneutical circle is an ongoing movement of and towards responsibility, power-balancing, vulnerability, and creativity. The authority of the meaning is shared, co-authored, and prioritized in a dynamic, evolving community incorporating participants, academia, the researcher’s insight, and biblical authority.

### **Research design**

As the research is qualitative using hermeneutical phenomenology to engage lived experiences (Van Manen, 2014) “... to give life experiences meaning ...” (Burns, Grove, & Gray, 2015:20), it invites Frankl (2019) and Swinton and Mowat (2016) into dialogue to more thoroughly investigate meaning and its created, given and/or ensuing properties. A clean, raw



description of *Koinōnia* through human experience is expected such that a deeper understanding of meaning is plausible (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:101). Assuming that phenomena are already meaningful, hermeneutic phenomenology is a suitable approach for providing a voice to understand or explain it (Van Manen, 2014). The phenomena of *Koinōnia* are observed considering meanings, metaphors, symbols, descriptions, etc. as is characteristic of qualitative research (Lune & Berg, 2017) within its current post-apartheid, post-Armstrong context. The participants interpret their unique experiences as the starting point and encounter the meaning brought into authentic co-labouring conversation towards broader generalizations and theories, understanding and deepening meaning through critical thinking (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:108–12).

Based on the work of Swinton and Mowat (2016), the research investigated the empirical, descriptive, critical and constructive dimensions within practical theology through the following 4 questions:

- a. What appears to be going on? (Pre-reflective stage)
- b. What is going on? (Cultural/contextual analysis)
- c. How are we to understand the problem? (Critical, theological faithfulness)
- d. How might revised forms practice be formulated? (Faithful and authentic)

### **Research methodology**

The research methodology considers population sample, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

#### **Population sample**

Homogeneous purposive sampling is utilized to explore *Koinōnia* in the lives of those who have lived through the transitions of both apartheid (April, 1994) and Armstrongism (December, 1994). Minor scale stratified random sampling and random sampling in an attempt to enhance validity and efficiency of the selection process. The end result was a group of participants of varying age, affluence, gender that represented black, white, and colored cultural groups who lived through the transitions as mentioned above and who consider themselves congregants of GCI Johannesburg congregation.

#### **Data collection**

Significant attention is brought to power-imbalances within the research processes. While all participants are competent with English as it was the research language, the limitations of language in expressing oneself in sensitive spaces as one engages sensitive themes was considered. Entering an already meaningful narrative, a triangulation empirical evidence approach was employed as a process of empirical theory building. Three data-gathering techniques were carefully selected to authentically and respectfully capture the lived experience of *Koinōnia*, namely, hermeneutical phenomenological interviews, a focus group and observations.

#### **Hermeneutical Phenomenological Interviews**

Firstly, data was gathered through semi-structured hermeneutical phenomenological interviewing related to the participants lived experience of *Koinōnia*. Identity in Christ, common life of believers, living a virtuous life of values, ubuntu and practical sharing framed these interviews. The interviews were transcribed and the themes that emerged through narrative analysis were brought to the group for verification, namely exclusivity, fear, brotherhood and loneliness, race, and identity. This forms data-set-A.



### **Observations**

Participants were invited to explore the collective themes amidst a herd of horses. This outdoor experience engages all five senses to subconsciously stimulate deeper, more vibrant knowledge of lived experiences. The effectiveness of the observations is in the subconscious self-sharing with the conscious mind that which may have been forgotten, blocked, or buried. Facilitators observe the movement of the horses and people through specific activities based on extrapolated themes, and when sharing these observations with the participants, invite collaborative exploration of meaning. The symbols of identity and common life were introduced as the framework for the other themes. This data forms data-set-B.

### **Focus Group**

Multi-method exploration adds value to the research process because the dynamic of the lived experience is altered when drawn into focus (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:47). The focus group brings individual narratives and interpreted observations into a new context and scrutinizes their validity in group interactions. This also authenticates existing data and offers another opportunity to respond to the meaning in the moment of the conversation, adding to existing knowledge. Data-set-A is compared with data-set-B from the observations within the herd of horses and is brought to the focus group for interrogation, thus informing, thickening and authenticating the emerging narrative.

### **Data analysis**

Collaborative conversation, reflections, and spontaneous iterative data alongside data-sets A and B were examined through Swinton and Mowat's six stages of analyzing data (2016:269–74), narrative analysis (Barusch, 2015) and the hermeneutical circle (Heidegger, 1927; Gadamer, 1990). Each step was utilized to direct and structure the research as the picture of *Koinōnia* in GCI Johannesburg emerged.

### **Six Stages of Data Analysis (6 C's)**

While certain of the C's are repeated due to the circular process of data analysis, the general order is complexification/simplification, categorization, critical thinking, creation of coherence, casting and constructive criticism (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:269).

### **Narrative Analysis**

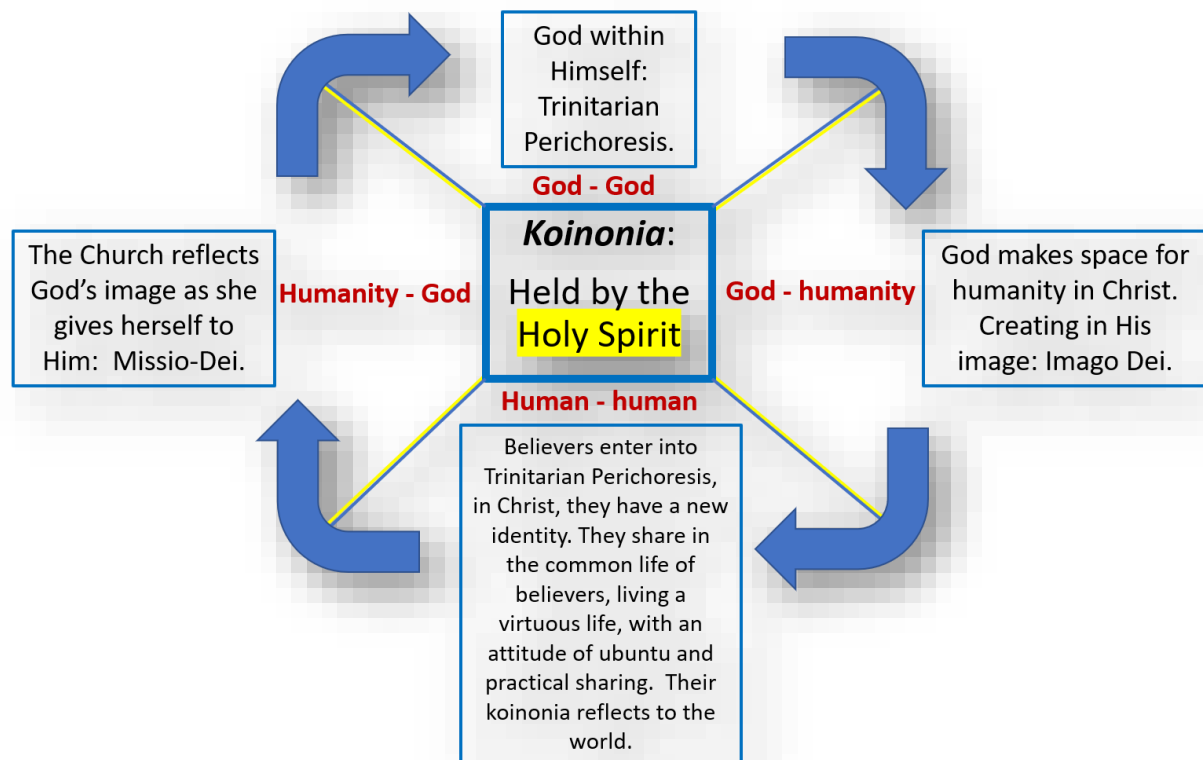
Drawing the interpreted responses to meaningful moments within the narratives of individual participants into a multi-voiced, co-authored collective expression of both words and images was important to the research aims. While narrative analysis is complimentary and perhaps replicatory, this resource brought the unique perspectives of discrepancies, commonality, dominant narratives and counter-narratives (White & Epston, 2019), bringing to light values, beliefs, doubts, and what is personally meaningful (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015).

### **Hermeneutical Circle**

Gadamer's hermeneutical circle (Heidegger, 1927; Gadamer, 1990) is employed as a way to orchestrate words, observations, academia, biblical insights, participant revelation, and researcher interpretation to a coherent, authentic expression of the lived experience of *Koinōnia* in GCI Johannesburg.

### **Literature Review**

The research situates *Koinōnia* within Trinitarian *perichoresis*, expressed through a Spirit-held, circulatory model illuminating relationships of God with himself, God with humanity, humanity with humanity and humanity with God.



**Figure 2** Koinōnia held by the Holy Spirit (Millar, 2023).

While the mystery of God may not be fully comprehensible, our “growth is in coming to know what the mystery of God is” (Weinandy, 2000:22) through human inadequacies that invoke meekness, repentance, curiosity, hunger and motivation. The Trinity progressively reveals himself to humanity in love offering a situatedness to view *Koinōnia*. Torrance (Torrance, 1984:265) encourages believers “to discover the relations of things and events at different levels of complexity, and to develop our understanding and expression of them in such a way that their real nature becomes progressively disclosed to us.” Chester and Timmis (2008:43–44) emphasize the priestly role of making God known to the nations, because they are in him, and he is in them, and there is community within each other. The Church is the fullest reflection of the *imago Dei*, the *missio Dei* complete, but not yet,

Being an icon of the Holy Trinity, the Church is called to reflect in her spatiotemporal reality, in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the dynamic relationships existing eternally between the divine persons, as described by the concept of trinitarian perichoresis (Manastireanu, 2005:116).

The study of *Koinōnia* is organized around key constructs of God as a social trinity and *Koinōnia* as a creative, expansive, transitive expression of himself, the God who is love (Harper & Metzger, 2012). The revealing of himself through creation (including *missio Dei*) Scripture and incarnation offers a more clearly understood *Koinōnia* when viewed within various cultural contexts, as God overflows as an extension of himself. Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007) as a significant voice in the transformational theological journey of GCI and Stanley J. Grenz (1950–2005) offer perspectives influencing the research outcome. Harper and Metzger (2012) and Chester and Timmis (2008) are also influential voices in literature review.



The social Trinity, “the divine community of love” (Sexton, 2013:87–114) affords humanity a view of community as first from above, then from below (Harper & Metzger, 2012) because humanity receives what is given through God’s self-revealing knowledge (Torrance, 1998:116–18). Torrance contends that one is included in his communion as a participant through obedience to God’s self-revelation, and in this participation their knowledge of him increases (Torrance, 1996b:97). Grenz adds that divine fellowship and community, from whence all culture and diversity emanates, define human fellowship in community (Sexton, 2013), trusting that the sincere reality of who God is, is being genuinely revealed. The research contends that a fuller pictural of God will be found in a relational community that includes diverse cultural and contextual experiences.

A deeper understanding of God’s love through his self-revelation of creation, Scripture and incarnation lays a foundation for considering identity in Christ and common life of believers where *Koinōnia* is born and bears fruit in virtuous living (values), ubuntu, and practical sharing, among others. *Koinōnia* of the Triune God, reflected to the world through the Church is as Grenz (cited in Sexton, 2013:155) posits “the divine image only in community.” Literary works from Chester and Timmis (2008), Grenz (1997; 2004), Harper and Metzger (2012), Torrance (1980; 1981; 1989; 1994; 1995; 1996a; 1996c; 2003; 2008; 2009) and Yarnell (2016) as the primary voices that bring evidence to God as a social trinity in the research are engaged within the themes of creation, Scripture and the example of Jesus, which overflows as an extension of himself, *Koinōnia*, God’s creative, expansive and transitive expression of love.

### **Value of the Research**

The research questions how the church might fulfil its purpose to be the “primary conduit of God’s self-revelation” (Tyler, 2019:loc. 948), to reflect the triune God’s unity and love in his kingdom on earth, so that through the glory that God gave Jesus which he gives the church, it may be one as the Trinity is one, such that “the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22–23). The dynamic of an ever changing, growing in knowledge and understanding community is brought into focus as *Koinōnia* is researched within the GCI Johannesburg congregation. Within *Koinōnia* a collective response in and to God includes all tribes and people in Christ, where there is no distinction between them (Galatians 3:28). However, their individual made-in-God’s image uniqueness remains intact, invited, and interdependent (Barth, 1962:353). By the blood of Christ, all people are drawn into one body, establishing them in *Koinōnia*, bearing the fruit of *ubuntu* and reconciliation. The research proports that communion ecclesiology is the dialogue, not merely a “path to dialogue” (Doyle, 2016) as God expressed himself to the world through those made in his likeness, individually unique, and complete within one another, all in a transformational journey towards Christlikeness. As there has, to date, been no research conducted in the GCI Johannesburg congregational on the topic of *Koinōnia* in a post-apartheid, post-Armstrong community of believing participants, this research hopes to offer insights to the local church, national leadership, as well as the international denomination, as it relates to Trinitarian *Koinōnia*. In addition, the research hopes to invest into evangelicalism in South Africa and practical theology as it explores the theory of Trinitarian theology in praxis.

It is hoped that the research offers a valuable contribution towards practices that assist the church in responding to post-apartheid, post-Armstrong paradigms taking both culture and context into consideration.

### **Truth of the Gospel, or Convincing Performance?**

The research explored *Koinōnia* in the GCI Johannesburg congregation, within critical race theory, power and capital considerations, and globally charged sensitivities within the South





African context. In the chapter that engages what *Koinōnia* looks like, the research considers the pre-reflective stage of phenomenological inquiry where the socio-anthropological context invites attention (Swinton & Mowat, 2016). While Chester and Timmis (2008:loc. 1040–1047) contend that “Evangelicalism has become a largely middle-class, professional phenomenon”, that churches they observe tend to have a common social-economic status, and thus would invite similar “classes” to church, enlarging a singular demographic, the research concludes that this may not be accurate when considering the GCI Johannesburg congregation. It is, at least in appearance, a congregation of diversity, from the outside, reflecting the image of God.

Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory (Grenfell, 2014:2) is drawn in to assist in understanding the experiences of *Koinōnia* while holding reflexivity in hand, considering those who may be vulnerable to “implicit or explicit exploitation” (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:60). Social suffering, symbolic violence, and probable hysteresis limit the capital with which people traverse different fields, such as WCG and apartheid, to present-day GCI and democracy. People make sense of their present experiences through their habitus. The exploration of what appears to be going on in GCI Johannesburg, the renamed WCG, is observed while considering racial, cultural and philosophical climates in both pre-and post-transition eras.

The research queries whether it is performed through false consciousness and forced compliance (Scott, 1990:60), or the work of the truth of the gospel, where each person brings their acquired capital into a relationship with the Holy Spirit, taking up the space uniquely designed for each individual, in relationship with others, within the identity of Christ? Is there a deep love for Jesus where love for one another offers unity, shared experiences, equality, *Koinōnia*? Or, as the research queries, is there a concentration camp of the mind defined by dominant and dominated fields, sin and flesh that is reducing the experience of *Koinōnia*? What is inscribed in the hidden transcript of congregants, protected by fear and/or discomfort in conflict? Is there a process of deconstructing inequalities, racial complexities, and binary thinking taking place?

With Delgado and Stefancic’s (2017:47) affirmation of immense challenges in “bridging the gap in thinking between persons of good will whose experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds are radically different” the research queries fear of punishment, divergent interests, and lack of time investment in the progressive experiential potential of *Koinōnia* towards a common life, mission and eternity. There is plausibility that people attending GCI Johannesburg may be “tactically” surviving while “strategically sustaining quite other orientations, beliefs, desires, needs.” Is a gathering of diverse cultures, with varying life experiences, influences and capital “inhibited hidden discourse[s] offstage” (Scott, 1990, 136), or might the “convincing performance onstage” be John 17 unity, within Jesus Christ, namely, *Koinōnia*?

### **In the Field**

The research considered the lived experience of the participants in three spaces, two of which were literally in the field, amidst a herd of horses. For the researcher, considering what makes one human was foundational in considering engaging lived experiences. Havanga-Coetzer (2003:8–10) believes that the spiritual, freedom, and responsibility to reach above oneself to others and God is uniquely human. Humanity is “conscious of his responsibility” (Frankl, 2011:67) and has both unconscious instinct and unconscious spirituality from which to draw in life. For believers, the Triune God is the source of life, knowledge and meaning. As the Trinity’s *Koinōnia* overflows into humanity as God’s redemption action, humanity is invited to respond (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:11) and engage the progressive reality of Trinitarian *Koinōnia*, as a free-will response, spirit with Spirit. Life thus offers endless meaningful moments in that every moment is full of the meaning that God ascribes to it by his intentional redemption purposes (Philippians 2:13; Romans 8:28).



To effectively observe lived experiences is to view life narratives unfolding, in the moment, as humanity responds through their creativity/work, receiving an experience and/or through their chosen attitude toward life's "unavoidable suffering" (Frankl, 2019). The researcher considered the above responses as an opportunity to capture the authentic *Koinōnia* narrative, whether between God and God, God and man, man and man, and/or man and God. Meaning is viewed through the chosen responses to life's circumstances as shared by the participants through triangulation empirical evidence collection. The considerations of *Koinōnia*, namely identity, common life, virtuous living, ubuntu, and practical sharing, framed the process. As the research recognizes the potential power imbalances present within the process, themes from the semi-structured, one-on-one, hermeneutical phenomenological interviews were explored as a group within a herd of horses. Outdoor experiences stimulate deeper, more detailed content as the five senses engage the environment (Eagala, 2019; Norcross, Krebs & Prochaska, 2011) and the subconscious self is revealed to the conscious mind through triggers, or responses to meaning, "... paving the way for ever-deepening exploration" (Mandrell, 2006). Focus group conversations are utilized to bring observations of the horse and people to the participants' attention such that opportunities for co-authoring shared meaning might be plausible.

Data from interviews, observations and focus group conversation were authenticated, reflected on and then analyzed through narrative analysis (Barusch, 2015), the hermeneutical circle (Heidegger, 1927; Gadamer, 1990) and the six stages of analyzing data of Swinton and Mowat (2016:269–74). The findings were rich, vibrant, thickened narratives from which complexities could be held up to theological understanding, towards more faithful practices.

### **Theological Understanding of *Koinōnia***

From the Tower of Babel, it was evident that the 'unity' humanity might fathom of its own accord would bear the fruit of independence from God, forgetting its need for God (Genesis 11). According to McNeil (2020:loc. 323) humanity's inability to "fill the earth with the *imago Dei*" is due to human "mastery and imagination" in homogenetic-unity separate from God, until Pentecost where God brought the same diversity he created at Babel into one space where "diverse languages served to bring people together ... One new humanity ..." (2020:loc. 352). Through the five considerations mentioned in the research (identity, common life of believers, virtuous living, ubuntu and practical sharing), reflecting on *Koinōnia* offers an exploration of the Triune Subjects, the relationship of the divine Persons (Volf, 1998:loc. 5568). From within Triune *Koinōnia* the Church is born, and reflects him to the world (Volf, 1998:loc. 5603). This is he who is "unquestionably a God of justice and compassion" (Harold, 2018:21).

The research suggests that it is in Christ, within the unity of God, that believers find their completion, and experience *Koinōnia*, as an extension of God through the sacrifice of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, "an event which has happened once and for all time" (Barth, 2003:5) offering humanity an identity, a future, and a family. As a communion of believers there is shared common life that the Holy Spirit holds in balance (see figure 2), based on who Christ is, and not reliant upon what people do or are. It exists because Christ exists, as a spiritual common life, the Bride of Christ, already but not yet (Finger, 1989:247–69). The research claims that within the common life of believers John 17 unity is visible.

Ubuntu is an African philosophy from which the research borrows to consider an attitude of submission to others, an awareness of salvic-love that actively chooses to challenge the behaviours and views of others. By the Spirit of God, this is illuminated and change is made possible, "since through him the Gospel bears fruit in every creature under heaven" (Basil, 1980:104). The fruit of a virtuous life, living by values assigned by one's new identity in Christ, humility, hope and joy, "not only transforms persons but rearranges relationships and structures" (Clemmons cited in Yong, 2012:loc. 1592). *Koinōnia* challenges prejudices and



selfish motives, as the Spirit flows from the good of one believer to others, and then into the world beyond (Galatians 6:10–11).

*Koinōnia* made visible to others and the world is through practical sharing, as “all members complete the body of Christ in the unity of the Spirit, each member assisting the others with aid provided by the unique gifts it has received” (Basil, 1980:94). This sharing goes beyond the world’s sharing, as it is an extension of the love of God through the Church, empowered by the Spirit, rebuilding what was broken and restoring what was ruined.

Culture and context is considered when examining the *Koinōnia* word group from a Pauline perspective, specifically in his writing to the Philippians and Romans as the meaning found within *Koinōnia* is from the essence of the Triune communion (Harper & Metzger, 2012; Torrance, 2009:370). The Spirit connects believers as communion through faith and baptism (Harper & Metzger, 2012:50; Hellerman, 2001:221; Lincoln, 2009), the Spirit connects believers as communion. The research attempts to remain within the participatory, lived experience of the *Koinōnia* word group, as it is supported by the research methodology (Swinton & Mowat, 2016) and confirmed by Paul’s dividing of the hearers and doers in Romans 2. Paul’s letters illuminate his concern regarding communion (Lincoln, 2009) and are thus emphasized in the research alongside his focus on the Spirit’s connecting work.

The Church is mobilized “beyond the shelter of their own people” (McNeil, 2020:loc. 352), by the Holy Spirit, as a reflection of God that is “... multicultural, multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multinational ...” (2020:loc. 2276). Resane (2017:32) succinctly summates that when people are in communion with the Triune God, they are in communion with each other to which Yong (2012:loc. 3306) adds that it should thus bear evidence of the character and essence of the Triune God: love, gratitude, service, speaking up against injustice, living by kingdom values, etc.

### **Authentic, faithful practice of *koinōnia***

The research hopes to be one of many catalysts that might encourage the self-transcendence of believers towards each other and the world in more faithful practice through authentic new knowledge, presented through the five considerations, within the Trinity’s creative, expansive, and transitive love (Harper & Metzger, 2012:22). While Resane’s (2017) concerns that post-apartheid South Africa is polarized on Sunday mornings did not prove to be the case for GCI Johannesburg congregation, there appears to be a block in penetrating the next step in deepening *Koinōnia*. While Fisher’s (2011) concerns present in lingering negative effects of legalistic Christian religion, the research contends that there appears to be more positive effects when observing *Koinōnia* in those who have journeyed through the WCG-GCI transition. All participants experienced the complexity of spiritual transformation during the transition from WCG-GCI, and while their commitment to Christ was challenged, it was a commitment that existed prior to the WCG doctrinal changes of 1994. Not one participant claimed to have found Christ in the transition, as they had accepted Christ within the WCG regime, but rather that their depth of commitment was challenged. Though the fear of the “lake of fire” (Tkach, 1997) was no longer a motivating force, and doctrinal changes shook their very identity, all, without exception chose prayer and humility before God, waited on him for clarity, and chose to remain in GCI, no longer (if ever) attempting to avoid a worse spiritual fate (Fisher, 2011; Nell, 2019; Resane, 2017).

As fieldwork unveiled the commitment to Christ of WCG membership during legalistic religiosity, it simultaneously revealed three observations from this era. Firstly, identity may have been significantly linked to WCG, and the void WCG left may have affected participants’ confidence in living out their present-day freedom in Christ through interracial relationships. Secondly, leading up to the time of the research, while equality is spoken of, the evidence of interracial responses to meaningful moments appear limited to white-saviour-to-black, misuse



of *ubuntu* between black people, and poverty mentality beyond materialism to spiritual gifts presenting. Lastly, *Koinōnia* is more apparent within homogenous groups. Uncomfortable topics are avoided (racism, genderism, Armstrongism, apartheid, etc.) and at the time of the research, members would wait on the elders for the next steps, and if they weren't presented, the congregants revert to that which is most comfortable and safe, setting up church and waiting.

A theology of dignity (Harold, 2022) is considered as participants engaged one another sharing their calling to remain in GCI, though uncomfortable with some experiences of loneliness. Humanity's value at creation (Mason, 2021:33–34) may be the framework for the catalysts of change (McNeil, 2020), and recommendations of the final chapters of the research. Considering the research outcomes, it may be that GCI Johannesburg is living in *Koinōnia* and reflecting an image of God without a full awareness of its profound impact on the individual and collective. Exploring culture through Scripture (Sexton, 2013), social justice, deconstruction of racism, remorse and repentance, lamenting in solidarity are but a few of the responses to meaning-full moments the Church is invited to, even expected to engage in. When the Church is gathered, it exists, and it is called together by the God of the universe in worship, through the Spirit (Harper & Metzger, 2012:100–102).

### **The emerging tapestry**

As a multi-racial congregation, GCI Johannesburg represents socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. While *koinōnia* exists, it is not experienced in the abundance that is possible when authentic, integrated relationships are developed through time and commonalities. Catalysts of change towards ultimate meaning (Frankl, 2011), as per participants' recommendation is in motion. Trust and safe spaces for change (McNeil, 2020) are materializing, where meta-identity infuses sub-identity, inviting the brilliance of unity in diversity into the emerging tapestry of the "perichoretic community of Trinitarian persons" (Grenz, 2003:268), past, present, and future.

The responses of individuals towards the life of Christ offers a decolonization of the mind, that does not redefine identity, but rather realigns one with one's original identity, on route to the wedding supper of the Lamb (Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, Luke 14). The bride of Christ is known and sustained by God's love (Bird, 2020), her desire only for her husband, as he rebuilds what was destroyed and replants what was desolate (Ezekiel 36).

### **Further investigation**

Though individualism causes division, uniqueness has a purpose. While this research discussed identity in Christ as the origin of *koinōnia*, it failed to draw on the value-at-creation of the individual brought into the community to fulfil a meaningful purpose/function in the body. Further investigation into drawing the value of the created being into the redemption story is needed. Might it be that the value-at-creation of the individual, brought into community, that completes the tapestry of *koinōnia* and what might be asked of a more complete *koinōnia* in its mandate to reflect God to the world (John 17)?

### **Conclusion**

This research confirms that *Koinōnia* is not thwarted by social injustice but affords humanity a space to find community, bring their made-in-God's-image uniqueness, and participate in the diverse brilliance of the tapestry of the Church, confronting social injustice with one voice. Though there is a block in GCI Johannesburg's full experience and expression of unity in diversity, the opportunity to enter into the tension between who the church is today, and who it is becoming is engaged. A discovery of raw, ethnic beauty is being discovered through catalysts of change (McNeil, 2020). From the starting point of identity in Christ, reaching back



into the value-at-creation, and forward into bold, explorative, Godly activism, the Church is called to reflect Triune *Koinōnia* to the world (John 17). When choosing to respond to meaningful moments by the Spirit, not the flesh, it achieves this mandate and participates in the Spirit's ongoing transformative presence in community (Sagovsky, 2000:127). Will the Church have the courage to embrace its identity in Christ fully, restored to its truest created value (Mason, 2021), embodying its ultimate meaning and purpose as that which reflects God to the world, complete, whole, visible and audible, as it continues in its Father's business? As the research concludes, so too does the article, "The words from Isaiah whisper across the wilderness, 'Whom shall I send?'... are we not chosen for a time such as this?" (Esther 4:4 adaptation).

## References

- Armstrong, H. (1985). *Mystery of the Ages*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.
- Barth, K. (1962). *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. Vol. IV part 3, Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Barth, K. (2003). *God Here and Now*. Routledge Classics. London & New York: Routledge.
- Barusch, A. (2015). "Step-by-Step Approach to Narrative Analysis." Online resource. <http://amandabarushc.com>.
- Basil, St. the Great. (1980). *On the Holy Spirit*. USA: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Bird, M. (2020). *Evangelical Theology. A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic.
- Bultmann, R. (1955). The Problem of Hermeneutics, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*. 5th ed. Vol. 2 of. London: SCM Press, 234–61
- Burawoy, M. & von Holdt, K. (2012). *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment*. Johannesburg, SA: Wits University Press.
- Burns, N., Grove, S.K. & Gray, J. (2015). *Understanding Nursing Research: Building an Evidence-Based Practice*. 6th edition. St. Louis, Missouri: Elsevier.
- Chester, T. & Timmis, S. (2008). *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community*. Kindle Edition. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books.
- Corrigan, P. & MacDonald, H.M. (1991). Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, by James C. Scott, *Social Science Quarterly*, 72, 624–25.
- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. Third edition. New York: New York University Press.
- Doyle, D.M. (2016). "Communion Ecclesiology." *Pathways for Ecclesial Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century: Revisiting Ecumenical Method*. Edited by Mark D. Chapman and Miriam Haar. Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US. 21–27
- Eagala. (2019). Fundamentals of the Eagala Model. Becoming an Eagala Certified Professional, Training Manual, 9th Edition.



Eugenio, D.O. (2014). *Communion with the Triune God: The Trinitarian Soteriology of T. F. Torrance*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications.

Figgou, L. & Pavlopoulos, V. (2015). *Social Psychology, in International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. 2nd ed. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/narrative-analysis>.

Finger, T. N. (1989). *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

Fisher, E.J. (2011). The Negative Effects of Abusive/Legalistic Christian Religion: A Call to Prophetic and Covenantal Theology, *Testamentum Imperiam*, 3, 1–18.

Frankl, V.E. (1988). *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*. USA: Penguin Group.

Frankl, V.E. (2006). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Frankl, V.E. (2011). *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. Revised. United Kingdom: Rider, Eburg Publishing.

Frankl, V.E. (2019). *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*. Translated by Clara Winston and Richard Winston. Third, Expanded ed., with A new preface, an Updated bibliography and Added chapter written in English by the author. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

Gadamer, H. (1990). *Truth and Method*. 2nd Revised. New York: Crossroad.

Gadamer, H. (2003). *Truth and Method*. 2., rev. Ed. New York: Continuum.

Gadamer, H. (2004). *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd, rev. ed. Continuum Impacts. London; New York: Continuum.

Grenfell, M.J. (2014). *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*. Vol. 2nd ed of *Key Concepts*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Grenz, S.J. (1996). *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

Grenz, S.J. (1997). *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.

Grenz, S.J. (2000). *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans.

Grenz, S.J. (2003). "Ecclesiology." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*. Edited by Vanhoozer Vanhoozer. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Grenz, S.J. (2004). Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 47, 617–628.

Grenz, S.J. (2005). *Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.



- Harold, G. (2018). Evangelicals and Social Justice: Towards an Alternative Evangelical Community, *Journal of the South African Theological Seminary*, 25, 21–37.
- Harold, G. (2022). “Imago Dei - Developing a Theology of Dignity.” Paper presented at the e-Conference. South African Theological Seminary: unpublished. e-Conference Paper.
- Harper, B. & Metzger, P. (2012). *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*. Electronic Edition. Brazons Press. [www.brazonspress.com](http://www.brazonspress.com).
- Havenga-Coetzer, P. (2003). *Viktor Frankl’s Avenues to Meaning: A Compendium of Concepts, Phrases and Terms in Logotherapy*. Benmore: Patti Havenga-Coetzer.
- Heidegger, M. (1927). *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Hellerman, J.H. (2001). *The Ancient Church as Family*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Jenkins, T. & Thomas, V. (2009). From Radicalism to Mainstream Evangelicalism: Exploring the Effects of Doctrinal Upheaval on Second-Generation Members in the Worldwide Church of God, *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 3, 113–140.
- Knight, D.H., ed. (2007). *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*. Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Lincoln, A.T. (2009). Communion: Some Pauline Foundations, *Ecclesiology*, 5. Stuttgart: 135–160.
- Lune, H. & Berg, B.L. (2017). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Ninth edition, Global edition. Harlow, England Munich: Pearson.
- Manastireanu, D. (2005). A Perichoretic Model of the Church. The Trinitarian Ecclesiology of Dumitru Staniloae, Doctoral Thesis, London School of Theology, Associate Institution of Brunel University.
- Mandrell, P.J. (2006). *Introduction to Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Comprehensive Overview*. USA: Patti J. Mandrell.
- Mason, E. (2021). *Urban Apologetics. Restoring Black Dignity with the Gospel*. Kindle Edition. Zondervan Academic.
- Mazur, E.M. (2014). The Fragmentation of a Sect: Schism in the Worldwide Church of God, *Church History*, 83, 1085–1087.
- Millar, C. (2023). *A study on the lived experience of Koinōnia in a post-apartheid, post-Armstrong congregation: A transition from power-imbalance to Koinōnia*. Unpublished PhD, South African Theological Seminary.
- McNeil, B.S. (2020). *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*. Revised and Expanded edition. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.
- Norcross, J.C., Krebs, P.M. & Prochaska, J.O. (2011). Stages of Change, *Journal of Psychology*, 67, 413–154.



Resane, K.T. (2017). *Communion Ecclesiology in a Racially Polarised South Africa*. SUN MeDIA.

Ricoeur, P. (1969). "Existence and Hermeneutics." Pages 3–24 in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics, Evanston*. Edited by Don Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1988). *Temps et Récit, Paris: Éditions Du Seuil. Translated as Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1–3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sagovsky, N. (2000). *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scott, J.C. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Pr.

Sexton, J.S. (2013). *The Trinitarian Theology of Stanley J. Grenz*. Electronic Edition. New York, NY: T & T Clark.

Swinton, J. & Mowat, H. (2016). *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. 2., rev. Ed. London: SCM.

Tkach, J. (1997). *Transformed by Truth*. Sisters, Or: Multnomah Books.

Torrance, T.F. (1980). *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*. The Richard Lectures for 1978–79, University of Virginia. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Torrance, T.F. ed. (1981). *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.d. 381*. Edinburgh: Handsel Press.

Torrance, T.F. (1984). *Transformation & Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise*. American ed. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans.

Torrance, T.F. (1989). The Doctrine of The Holy Trinity According to St. Athanasius, *Scribd*, 71, 395–405.

Torrance, T.F. (1994). *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans.

Torrance, T.F. (1995). *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Torrance, T.F. (1996a). *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Torrance, T.F. (1996b). *Theological Science*. T & T Clark.

Torrance, T.F. (1996c). *Theology in Reconstruction*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Torrance, T.F. (1998). *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Torrance, T.F. (2001). *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance*. Edited by Elmer M Colyer. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.





- Torrance, T.F. (2003). *Reality and Evangelical Theology: The Realism of Christian Revelation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- Torrance, T.F. (2008). *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*. Edited by Robert T. Walker. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.
- Torrance, T.F. (2009). *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*. Edited by Robert T. Walker. 1. publ. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic.
- Tyler, K. (2019). *The Ecclesiology of Thomas F. Torrance: Koinōnia and the Church*. Kindle Edition. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic.
- Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. Developing Qualitative Inquiry - Volume 13. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.
- Volf, M. (1998). *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Weinandy, T.W. (2000). *Does God Suffer?* 1st edition. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Yarnell, M.B. (2016). *God the Trinity: Biblical Portraits*. Nashville: B&H Academic.
- Yong, A. (2012). *Spirit of Love, A Trinitarian Theology of Grace*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



**This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence**  
*The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.*