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The ministry of Nicholas Bhengu in South Africa: A missiological assessment

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Background: African prophets have been historically undermined by white churches, which is rooted in colonialism and a power struggle over the authority of indigenous spiritual practices. Western missionaries often dismissed African Christian formations as inferior and without being self-resilient and self-assertive. African prophets' missiological contributions remain eclipsed under the colonial cloud.

Objective: This article proposes to critique white-infused superiority in Christian matters while highlighting rich theologically ministry birthed by the word in African expressions and identity.

Method: Employing desktop qualitative research, the study concludes by presenting Nicholas Bhengu's ministry as occupying centre stage of true Christian enterprise.

Results: The study further found that Nicholas Bhengu's ministry remains one of balanced African spirituality that brought about enormous life-transforming God's presence in the lives of many Africans.

Conclusion: The research contributes to the legacy of one of the outstanding missiological or evangelical figures whose work is not fully recorded in theological archives.

Contribution: Although he had no high academic achievements, his missiological insights were par excellence.

Keywords: Pentecostals; evangelism; church; mission-stations; self-transcendence; ministry.

Introduction

The 2025 Nicolus Bhengu Lecture, hosted by the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, coincides with the anniversary of his death in 1985. This research explores Bhengu's missiological contribution to African Christianity in contrast with white missiology on the continent. His evangelisation of African people and methods reflect the influence of South Africa's social and political context on the church. Bhengu's evangelical influence went far beyond the confines of the movement he had founded. His spiritually empowered preaching impacted the people on the margins and transformed them into self-reliant Christians. Bhengu left a legacy of the ministry that emboldens with courage, determination and sacrifice.

To fully relate the legacy of Nicholas Bhengu and his contribution to missiology in South Africa, the researcher briefly confines his discussion to the following six interrelated propositions: (1) Bhengu's ministry approach vis-á-vis missionary methods, (2) the missiology of self-transcendence, (3) the ministry of females in mission, (4) Bhengu's rejection of the 'Slaves of Definitions' categorisation, (5) true evangelism is consciousness-making and (6) the spiritual boundaries within which he operated.

Research methods and design

The study follows the secondary research or complementary research method based on the desk research method that involves gathering information and data from existing sources, such as books, journals, articles, websites, reports and other published materials. The researcher analyses and synthesises information from already available information to present an African approach to evangelism. The choice of the method is based on its cost-effective nature, rather than on primary research, because it requires less time and fewer sources. The method is appropriate in the present research because of the scarcity of original sermons, letters and circulars written by Bhengu himself. The collections of articles and theses written by Bhengu's students and friends, which include masters dissertations and doctors theses written in his

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honour, are invaluable in the absence of primary sources. These include, in particular, dissertations written by Lephoko (2025:18), Resane (2018:1–219), Balcomb (2005a: 338–348), and Dubb (1976:1–17) and books by Dubb (1976)s, Watt (1991), and others.

Nicholas Bhengu: A great evangelist of the 20th century

Nicholas Bhengu is one of Africa's prominent evangelists of the 20th century (Lephoko 2018:217) who worked tirelessly to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the breadth and width of South Africa without seeking recognition or fame. The impact of his ministry continues to vibrate through the dusty townships of South Africa. The researcher came to know his work during his student days, when he was a member of the Student Christian Movement (SCM), which later merged with the Students' Christian Association (SCA) in 1997. The profound revival influence of the SCM swept through many high schools in the early 1970s, bringing many students to salvation in Jesus Christ (Nel 2015:1–18).

Like Epaphras and Barnabas of the New Testament, Nicholas Bhengu dedicated himself to sharing the Gospel of the Kingdom, earning the status of a black evangelist in church planting. Nicholas Bhengu was indeed a prominent South African evangelist known for his 'Back to God' crusade, which planted over 2000 churches across South Africa and neighbouring countries (Lephoko 2018:1–219). Emphasis on self-sustainability – a key tenet of his teaching – was the cornerstone of self-sustaining communities. He encouraged material independence through hard work and taught his church members the value of self-reliance, combining evangelism with development – a critical message for black communities under the repressive apartheid regime. He was a passionate teacher who emphasised holiness and the fear of God. His goal was 'national redemption' (Lephoko 2025:1–11).

The 23 November 1959 issue of *Time* magazine featured an article titled *Religion: The Black Billy Graham* focusing on South African Pentecostal leader Nicholas Bhengu. The piece highlighted his successful 'Back to God Crusade', his impact on reducing crime among young gangsters and his evangelistic message during the apartheid era. Today, when one speaks of the Assemblies of God in South Africa, nations recall the impact of Nicholas Bhengu on the African continent (Resane & Lephoko 2025:1–7). His ministry operated within spiritual boundaries, which I will detail shortly. Setting boundaries is crucial for godly figures because these boundaries define who they are and who they live for and establish confessional lines (Gotquestions.org n.d). Nicholas Bhengu's spiritual boundaries, according to Resane and Lephoko (2026:1–7), were:

- **Selflessness:** Prioritising God's work over personal recognition.
- **Perseverance:** Serving even when facing challenges or discouragement.
- **Humility:** Seeking to elevate God without seeking one's own glory and valuing the prosperity and the wellness of humanity as Jesus has loved them.
- **Honesty:** Seeking truthfulness, integrity and high moral and ethical principles.
- **Faithfulness:** Remaining committed to his calling, consistently and dependably fulfilling God's calling in one's life, demonstrating love, loyalty and steadfastness in all aspects of God's service.

Nicholas Bhengu reminded the church to set spiritual boundaries, which entail spiritual discernment. As expressed in Psalm 101:3, 'I will not look with approval on anything that is vile. I hate what faithless people do; I have no part in it'. Bhengu possessed the foresight to discern where a particular path might lead and to choose the appropriate path of ultimate meaning – salvation (Balcomb 2005:337). He exemplified bold humility, service and dedication to the growth of the church until his death. Bhengu refused to be used by white missionaries as a 'helper', insisting on being recognised as a full-fledged minister with independence of mind, a sense of dignity and self-confidence (Watt 1991:28). Because of his theological insight and balanced mind (Singh 2018:178), the Assemblies of God did not become a segregated church like some of the other Pentecostal churches, especially in the movement founded by him in 1950. Back to God Ministry (launched in 1950) was a profoundly influential, largely Pentecostal movement in South Africa that transformed Black communities through mass evangelism, planting over 2000 self-governing churches. Known as the 'Billy Graham of Africa', Bhengu's crusades significantly reduced crime and fostered dignity, self-reliance and moral stability among Black South African (Watt 1991:15).

Bhengu's ministry approach vis-á-vis missionary methods

Nicholas Bhengu was not an armchair theologian preoccupied with philosophical criticisms and vague speculative theology. He adopted a comprehensive and effective approach to sound theology and evangelisation (Bosch n.d). Bhengu was an autodidact (self-taught in the matters of faith and spirituality) who gained his knowledge about faith and other spiritual aspects primarily on his own rather than through formal academic training (Giyani Assemblies of God Constitution n.d.). His approach to self-education was guided by his Christian beliefs and values and involved independent study of Scripture and theology and the application of Christian principles to his learning journey (Dubb 1976). He demonstrated resilience in the face of challenges and a willingness to seek and use various resources to achieve his learning goals.

Bhengu saw his calling as one of serving God and His people by proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom (Lephoko 2025:1). Unlike Western missionaries, who employed the mission-station approach of extracting converts from their communities and settling them in mission-stations outside of their natural environments (Kgatla 1988:63), Nicholas Bhengu worked in the communities. In this time, the growth of missionary ministries followed a typical pattern:

A missionary stationed at a central location would make evangelistic forays to surrounding areas to establish 'outposts' of the congregation and recruit and appoint indigenous workers to meet the spiritual needs of the new seekers and converts (Mushayavanhu 2014:12).

Bhengu was an evangelist *par excellence* [embodying outstanding excellence in his ministry], a teacher of the Word and a pastor with a unique approach to ministry (Lephoko 2015:1). He introduced the 'tent-ministry' and 'open-air' approaches, which were characterised by highly organised publicity with trained personnel to evangelise thousands of people who got converted in multitudes (Dubb 1976:18). From 1952, Bhengu decided to concentrate on the congregation in East London.

On Sunday, 27 October 1957, a major Assemblies of God church was opened in Duncan Village, East London, South Africa (Dictionary of African Christian Biography 1991:n.p.). By 1959, there were 50 assemblies that had been started through the ministry of Bhengu (Balcomb 2005:338). Bhengu towered above many of his contemporaries through his ministry based on the teaching of holiness, honesty and humility (Resane & Lephoko 2026:4–7).

Open-air ministry involved sharing the Gospel in public spaces through preaching, music and personal testimonies from converts of encounters with Jesus Christ. Open-air proclamations took place at crossroads and open spaces, while tent ministry was used mainly at night or during rainy periods. These ministries reached many people who might not have attended traditional in-house church services, offering opportunities for salvation, healing and counselling. Nicholas Bhengu encouraged his converts to *remain* in their original churches while welcoming those who wished to join his new movement to stay with him (Lephoko 2018:1–130). This non-denominational strategy allowed him to reach a wider audience without pressuring converts to abandon their existing congregations. His vision was to build a powerful, self-propagating movement that would support the evangelisation of Africa (Resane & Lephoko 2018:1–11).

Tent ministries offered significant advantages. They enabled access to restricted communities, fostered financial sustainability by reducing reliance on donations and promoted deeper cultural immersions and relationships through close social interaction. People who could not attend Western churches, which appeared unwelcoming of the poor, could attend his services without being expected to pay anything or give anything in return. They would come to his services in tatters and dirty because they were not afraid of being rejected (Balcomb 2005:338).

On the other hand, the missionary mission-station approach faced numerous challenges. These included resistance from indigenous populations who were unwilling to abandon their communities, as well as conflicts between chiefs and colonial authorities who competed for control over the converts (Dubb 1976:19). Some community members who fled to mission-stations were accused of witchcraft and were never welcomed back into their communities (Kgatla 2000:77). The mission-station model also undermined local chiefs' authority over and disciplines of their subjects. Ultimately, it encouraged a perpetual dependency.

Although the missionary mission-station approach in Africa had some advantages, including the introduction of education and health services, the development of written languages and the creation of new economic opportunities, it also had disadvantages. These included the physical and social separation of converts from their communities, the hindrance of local cultural integration, the devaluation of local people by treating them as 'projects' rather than equals and the disruption of traditional social structures. Although Nicholas Bhengu did not have the resources to establish schools, hospitals or other socio-economic infrastructures, he made a significant contribution to the spiritual well-being of Africans. His ministry was widely accepted by local communities as well as by government authorities (Balcomb 2005:338).

The disadvantages of the missionary mission-station approach included cultural disruption and the erosion of local traditions, the imposition of foreign values, the creation of dependency and paternalism and various challenges related to isolation, health and language barriers for the missionaries themselves. These stations also sometimes served colonial interests, leading to negative perceptions and resentment among local communities.

Bhengu longed for the day when the multitudes moving through the great cities of the earth would hear the clear call of God, accompanied by an outpouring of His Spirit. The Assemblies of God are among the Christian movements that have taken Christ's injunction very literally – to go out into the highways and byways and invite people to come into the kingdom (Balcomb 2005:339).

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

The missiology of self-transcendence (moving beyond horizon to the spiritual realm)

Before his miraculous conversion, Nicholas Bhengu was fully immersed in the political struggle for the liberation of black people from apartheid in South Africa. According to Lephoko (2018:217), Balcomb (2005:338) and Resane (2018:1), Bhengu was a member of the Communist Party from 1929 until his conversion in 1931 to free South Africa of apartheid. After he converted to Christianity, Bhengu considered the whole agenda of Christ in the liberation of

humankind. In his new-found faith, embraced the promotion of self-confidence and socio-economic development for Africans, championing the slogans 'Jesus for Africa' and 'Cape to Cairo' to inspire continental unity and liberation from all forms of oppression, including colonialism, capitalism, and sin (Lephoto 2025:17). He strongly advocated for African leadership in evangelisation and challenged dependence on foreign aid, viewing spiritual liberation as the foundation for political, social and economic freedom (Motshetshane 2015:270–275). Bhengu chose to suffer for Christ in the service of salvation, balancing this by adopting what he termed *the missiology of self-transcendence*. He believed that true liberation would come only through total salvation and redemption from God that fully involved God and human endeavours (Lephoto 2025:9). Caution should, however, be exercised here, lest we categorise Nicholas Bhengu as a Pan-Africanist, Nationalist, Socialist or any other ideological type. His actions were inspired by his calling and experience in his encounter with Jesus Christ. If he exhibited any inclination towards those ideologies, it was his response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is against this backdrop, and through the lens of self-transcendence, that we look at his ministry.

The concept of self-transcendence is borrowed from Lonergan's understanding of religious conversion and is employed here to articulate a new orientation towards understanding and directing the type of realistic conversion Bhengu pursued. In his framework on self-transcendence, Lonergan (in Doran 2011:2) explains his understanding of religious conversion by introducing three concepts: Authenticity, self-transcendence and conversion. According to Lonergan (in Doran 2011:31), the three terms are interrelated: 'Authenticity is achieved in self-transcendence, and consistent self-transcendence is reached only by conversion'.

The white churches and state theologies sought to produce black conformists to the existing system; liberation theologies resisted this conformity mentality and fought for an egalitarian and free society, promoting equality for all (Kgatla 1992:345). The transition to democracy in 1994, for example, has fostered a 'self-interest theology' and a sense of having 'arrived', self-entitlement, which has led the church to forget its critical calling. Prophetic theology has been swallowed by the secular government it helped come to power. The church has become silent, weak or co-opted by power, rather than speaking truth to power (Kgatla 2022:5).

Both movements – the imposition of white domination through the Christianisation of black people for self-interest and the black agenda of liberation – failed to embrace a transcendental methodology that would go beyond secular binaries and bring about the transformational and empowering spirituality of Jesus Christ. It is my contention that Bhengu perceived the Western understanding of mission as largely compromised by racial prejudice, greed, economic interest, deliberate inequality, political ambition and interest and dominance for the promotion of white people's survival (Magwira & Kgatla 2015:473). On the other hand, black Africans fought the system with paraphernalia manufactured for human self-preservation and self-interest (Kgatla 2025:4). As a result of the lack of a self-transcendence during the political transition of 1994, the country faces significant issues today, such as high unemployment, poverty, inequality, unprecedented corruption and crime; South Africa remains a 'melting pot' today.

By self-transcendence, Lonergan meant going beyond the self (Doran 2011:4), breaking human-made boundaries and reaching beyond familiar horizons. Within Lonergan's framework, humans possess a dynamism that keeps them searching beyond for something authentic and real (Doran 2011:3). Human beings consciously and unconsciously search for God until they 'fall in love' with Him. When this occurs, the Holy Spirit floods their hearts, enabling them to experience a new relationship with the transcendent reality (Doran 2011:5). We should extrapolate the concept of self-transcendence and Nicholas Bhengu's calling to ministry.

Transcendence and self-transcendence

Transcendence points to what lies beyond – beyond that which cannot be subjected to human manipulation or control. Schwartz (2004:xi) defines transcendence as the ground of humility, something humans cannot boast about. It is an epistemological break that cannot be reduced to human whims and manipulation (Schwartz 2004:xi). Transcendence is an experience that exceeds human conceptualisation, stretching out beyond absoluteness and immanence. It entails going back to the source of all goodness and reimagining a world where God is not only present, but where He also rules.

Solutions to societal problems that are based on non-belief, no matter how intellectual they may appear, are not authentic if they are found outside of the Trinitarian mandate (Doran 2011:4). Closely related to transcendence is self-transcendence, which emphasises understanding that humans are inherently incomplete and are thrusting themselves into an incomplete future (Doran 2011:2). Self-transcendence presupposes that knowledge of God can never be separated from a dynamic relationship with Him (Taylor 2004:5). A true spiritual experience – the kind Bhengu encountered – is one where God and humans meet; only then is transformative spirituality between God and humans is possible (Lephoko 2018:218). This phenomenon explains why some former liberation activists in South Africa are caught up in their own self-interest and susceptible to corruption, having forgotten about the people they once purported to be fighting for (Kgatla 2022:3).

Viktor Frankl (in Wong 2016:131) helps us to understand the theoretical framework of self-transcendence. In defining self-transcendence, Frankl refers to a fundamental human capacity and a core aspect of authentic spirituality, representing the expansion of consciousness beyond the self

towards something higher, such as a divine or spiritual realm. This universal process of expanding consciousness beyond the personal self towards a greater connection with Christ enables us to function free from habitual, self-limiting beliefs, leading to a more self-directed and true self where spirituality serves as a driving force towards authentic identity with God (Du Toit 2012:4).

The ministry of females in mission

In celebrating the legacy of Nicholas Bhengu, one should also mention his legacy in the 'female ministry' of fundraising. Very early in his evangelist work, Bhengu recognised the tenacity, commitment and resilience of females in supporting church ministry through fundraising. His female fundraising ministry demonstrated that females are impactful givers, and their dedication to social change is *non parella* [unparalleled] by that of males. Females can redefine philanthropy by prioritising meaningful engagement, collaboration and long-suffering, rather than focusing solely on transactional relationships (Lephoko 2025:9). Bhengu saw this unique gift, rooted in values and driven by a desire to create positive change and employed it to reshape the landscape of fundraising within his ministry.

Recognising their skills, thoroughness and patience, Bhengu discovered female resilience in God's work. In many African societies, females are renowned for their tenacity in beadwork. Tedious work such as beadwork in traditional African cultures is associated with patience, thoroughness and skill. Dlamini (2024), in *Meet the females behind Ntozinhle lifestyle*, tells the story of creativity, empowerment, inspiration and resilience in Ndebele communities. Bhengu recognised the same indelible attention to detail in everything females undertook and entrusted them with the crucial responsibility of fundraising for Assemblies of God ministries. With each passing annual conference, the tapestry of female fundraising grew larger as more females joined the fold, each contributing her unique skills and meticulous attention to detail. The creation of a single purse became a symbol of dedication and the success of female ministry (Lephoko 2018:3).

Bhengu's rejection of the 'slaves of definitions' categorisation

Historically, North America and Europe appropriated to themselves the right to first define who people of the colour were, what their needs were and how they could be developed to meet European standards (Kgatla 2021:4). In this respect, Tempels (1959:9) asserted that the Bantu people of Africa were incapable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with the necessary vocabulary, without Western assistance. Western sciences and philosophical frameworks were conceptualised and constituted as determining and destining Africans to become 'better–developed' people (Van Rimsum 2001:2). These assumptions were based on the notion that the West was able to research and understand the 'Other' and guide the 'Other' towards knowing who they were according to Western standards (Sanneh 1992:10). This process resulted in the marginalisation of Africans, who were pushed to the ghettos of knowledge. Power defined how people related to one another and understood their roles within their interactions. Expressed through physical force, material wealth, language, status or gender inequality, technological advancement and psychological manipulations, power remained largely undetected in the neoliberal, globalised world. Based on these aspects, power defined both the identities and roles of those involved (Kgatla 2021:8). The power involved here referred to material resources that called Africans 'ignoramus' or underdeveloped unbelievers to realign to Western 'imperialism' for Western interests (Van Rimsum 2001:3).

World-renowned evangelists such as Bhengu were often defined by their colour or identity. As Ezekia Mphahlele observes: 'They were defined as "not something" before they could be "something"'. They were called 'non-white evangelists', 'non-European ministers' or 'native evangelists' (E. Mphahlele [Discussion with Ezekia Mphahlele on the philosophy of apartheid in South Africa] pers. comm., 1994). By imposing these labels, the intention was to modify them to be inauthentic and to undermine their roles in their ministry and keep control over them.

Bhengu refused to be 'defined' or 'modified' by others, regardless of their relative power (Balcomb 2005:339). He rejected the 'Dark Continent' Narrative, the labels of 'African Native Churches' or 'African Initiated Churches' and, in fact, the Western notion of supremacy in God's mission. Africans were true servants of God *par excellence* [embodying outstanding excellence in his ministry] (Lephoko 2025:3). Bhengu championed African leadership within the church, calling Africans to take full ownership of their ministries. He advocated for the importance of self-respect, self-reliance and economic independence (Lephoko 2025:3).

In October 1950, Bhengu launched the 'Back to God Crusade' with the aim of reaching the whole of Africa with the Gospel of the Kingdom. The movement brought tens of thousands to Christianity, empowered the Black church and significantly reduced crime in areas where the 'crusades' were held. The ministry achieved this through large-scale evangelistic campaigns, the establishment of self-governing churches, social upliftment programmes for youth and females and by fostering a sense of dignity and confidence within the black community during the apartheid era. Its core impacts included the following:

- **Mass conversions:** The 'Back to God Crusade' consisted of a series of evangelistic campaigns that led to thousands of conversions to Christianity.
- **Social transformation:** In areas where the crusades were held, crime rates decreased significantly, as criminals returned stolen goods and weapons; and
- **Empowerment of black churches:** Bhengu advocated for a self-sustaining national church, empowering black congregations to be independent rather than reliant on foreign missionary agencies (Balcomb 2005:341; Lephoko 2025:5).

True evangelism is consciousness-making

Bhengu preached the Word of God with simplicity and honesty, exhibiting a commitment to clearly understanding Scripture and conveying its meaning using simple language, short sentences and relatable illustrations, all while maintaining a pure heart and a motive to please God rather than humans (Balcomb 2005:344). He was a deeply honest person who avoided distortion and ensured that the truth was presented without human opinion or cleverness, with the ultimate aim of illuminating God's message so that listeners could understand and apply it in their lives. He created a conscious environment in which listeners could experience cognitive dissonance and come to a critical level of understanding of the nature of their situation before God. This often led them to seek new paths for change in their lives and to seize opportunities of self-empowerment through radical repentance. Lephoko describes the atmosphere of Bhengu's preaching as follows: 'It appeared as if the paint on the inside walls was peeling' (in conversation between the researcher and Lephoko on the ministry of Bhengu in 2009). Often, the problem of their sin was named explicitly, and the complacency of listeners – in their assumptions, roles and lack of critical awareness – was made clearer.

Usually, people engaged in self-introspection and self-education as their consciousness was raised and awakened. They began dismantling stereotypes, ignorance and feelings of superiority or inferiority, gradually starting to delimit themselves. *Time* magazine (23 November 1959) writes:

> One of the strongest Christian influences in Africa is a 50-year-old Zulu … who has a knack of persuading criminals to turn in their weapons – and often themselves. He says, 'Crime does not pay, surrender your arms and yourselves to God' … He continues and a pile begins to grow at his feet – knives, blackjacks, brass knuckles and quantities of stolen goods. At one meeting, police carted away three vanloads, and it was not unusual for Bhengu to walk down to the police station hand in hand with someone on the wanted list. (Balcomb 2005:342)

Discussion

The spiritual boundaries within which he operated

Bhengu was an evangelist, a teacher of the Word and a pastor (Lephoko 2025:8). Through his ministry, he built large congregations in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and the rest of South Africa, as well as in neighbouring countries. Bhengu emphasised holiness and the fear of God, among other principles, and set spiritual boundaries within which he served God and His mission to the world. I briefly juxtapose the following axioms that characterised his ministry: (1) collectivity, (2) transformation, (3) integrity, (3) simplicity, (4) listening and (5) reflexivity.

Collectivity

In the workplace, collectivity denotes totality, oneness, unity of purpose and a sense of commonality. In any leadership collective, decision-making is crucial for achieving desired goals. Key sources emphasise the importance of communal discernment, shared burdens and the interdependent nature of the church, viewing the Trinity as the ultimate model of giving, receiving and mutual glorification (Wright 2012:47). In this respect, Wright (2012) defines God's mission as:

> Fundamentally, our mission means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. (p. 49)

When followers support the process as their own, true collectivity is achieved and space is created for meaningful involvement of stakeholders. Communal decisions arising from such an environment energise those involved.

Collectivity in 'Back to God Movement' was demonstrated by Christian solidarity, which could be defined as a strong sense of community, mutual aid and shared spiritual experience, often rooted in the movement's history among the poor and marginalised. It was characterised by a 'prophetic' response to social issues – advocating for the dignity of the working class, addressing economic hardships and providing a support network where the state fails (Lephoko 2025:1–6).

Transformation

Transformation is a radical vision that involves the complete dismantling of old, inhuman structures and their replacement with a life-giving order (Johnson-Hill 1998:1). In God's mission, transformation is a profound internal change from the inside out, where individuals become more like Christ to participate in God's work of redeeming people and creation (Bonhoeffer 1937:56). Transformation is anti-elitism and challenges social and economic inequality. It guards against hypocrisy, where some people – black people or white people – condemn corruption, greed and inequality while benefiting from the very systems they critique (Kgatla 2025:5). Micah 6:8 shows the way:

> He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

This internal change empowers believers to demonstrate compassion, advocate for justice and share their faith with the world (Franklin in Wong 2016:149). Bhengu propagated a 'religion of the marginalised', offering hope and agency in a context of high inequality and unemployment, though its impact is often complex, combining personal empowerment with controversial, sometimes exploitative practice (Lephoko 2025:6).

Integrity

Merriam Webster's Learner's Dictionary (2025) defines integrity as 'the quality or state of being of sound moral principle'. Integrity does not suggest that one should be a saint; rather, it means one is down to earth, honest and willing to open one's life to the scrutiny of others.

When confronted with one's mistakes, someone with integrity accepts and corrects them. Integrity is not about making an impression by blowing one's own trumpet. A person of integrity has inherent qualities that are visible only through public actions; such a person does not announce himself or herself to people but is recognised by those who are observant (Lephoko 2025:8).

Bhengu's ministry of integrity was observed in both an admiration for his passion for saving souls and his quest for empowering black people. Although he prioritised evangelism as his highest mission, driven by the belief that the Holy Spirit empowers believers to reach the 'lost' through personal witnessing, large-scale crusades and demonstrations of divine power, his Pentecostal enthusiasm lacked theological insights on social justice. Often, his evangelical zeal obstructed theological fundamentals like feeding the destitutes and the marginalised on the margins. Often, the emotional focus on direct, personal and emotional experiences of the Holy Spirit misses the mark in that rationality on human conditions is overlooked, as some human conditions can only be attended to through scientific ways.

Simplicity

Simplicity refers to a state that is free from complexity, intricacy and unnecessary sophistication. It means being easy to understand and free from confusion and having a single, clear meaning (Kgatla 2019:306). In God's ministry, simplicity involves planning and the standardisation of communication channels so that everyone in the organisation can understand without difficulty. It requires removing unnecessary jargon so that everyone can decode the meaning. Simplicity is a process grounded in good intentions and love for those who are meant to benefit from it. It means exhibiting resilience in the face of challenges and a willingness to seek and use various resources to achieve learning goals (Kgatla 2019:306).

One should also caution the 'danger of simplicity' in Bhengu' Pentecostalism that could be associated with theological and practical risks associated with prioritising immediate experience, emotional fervour and simple, literal interpretations of scripture over deep theological reflection, systematic study and mature discernment. While Bhengu's evangelism approach has fuelled rapid growth, it has also introduced risks, including vulnerability to false teaching, authoritarianism and emotional volatility (Oslon 2016:n.d.).

Listening

Purdy (1991:1–20) defines listening as an active process involving both the mind and the body, with verbal and non-verbal elements working together. According to Purdy, informed listening enables people to be receptive to the needs, concerns and information of others, as well as to their surrounding environment. Listening is an invaluable skill that can make a difference to the life of a good listener. Sharma and Singh (2018) emphasise that listening is a skill without which no leader can succeed. It is an active process of paying uninterrupted attention to someone or something to hear and make sense of what is being said, sung, played, displayed or communicated. Effective listening requires both discipline and commitment.

Bhengu ministered to people with diverse social, cultural, linguistic and economic differences, but he could make them find common commitment to Christ under his ministry (Dubb 1976:8). Through his listening skills, he could construct messages that were able to meet their needs in a way that traditional Christian missions could not (Dubb 1976:17).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to a healthy self-awareness and the ability to engage in introspection while constantly striving to transcend limitations (URCSA Manual for Ministerial Formation 2011:1–10). A reflexive leader is fully aware of the limits imposed by personal subjectivity and recognises the importance of objectivity in pursuing leadership goals. Reflexivity enables a leader to develop ways of seeing himself or herself through the eyes of others and to be self-critical. It is opposed to fixated or stereotypical attitudes.

Reflexivity refers to a *praxis-oriented* [practical application of a theory] approach where experience informs theological understanding (a form of 'hermeneutics of experience'), bridging the gap between sacred beliefs and the realities of daily life.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher has attempted to make an exposition of the work and the ministry of Nicholas Bhengu. At the outset, he posed the hypothesis that Nicholas Bhengu was 'unsung hero' in Africa. The common understanding of an 'unsung hero' refers to someone who makes a significant contribution or performs in an exceptional way without receiving public recognition or praise, even when such recognition is not invited by the 'unsung hero'. The researcher tried to explore the fundamentals that have caused his legacy to remain obscured in South Africa. Apartheid's legacy and its vestiges still present black people as neither heroic nor pioneers, particularly when their work may challenge that of their white counterparts.

The contributions of the study lie in the encouragement of ongoing missiological debate on African evangelism while refuting the white notion of supremacy in Christian mission and missiology. Further research should be done to add knowledge on African missiology of self-transcendence where profound social, cultural and economic differences between white people and black people are impediments (One God TV Network 2025:n.p).

The glowing presentation of Nicholas Bhengu should not be seen as suggesting that Bhengu was infallible. He had his weaknesses and shortcomings, but that needs another paper. The purpose of the researcher was to trigger a further debate and research on African missiology or evangelism to counter a white missionary's celebrated account of their mission in Africa (Balcomb 2005:340).

The notion that black Christians require the supervision of white ministers to fulfil a spiritual or human mission is fundamentally flawed and rooted in racist ideology. History shows that Africans, and indeed all human communities, have always possessed their own spiritual traditions, agency and capacity for leadership in God's mission. Moving past such harmful, colonial-era narratives is essential for recognising the equality and autonomy of all Christians (Kim & Mpofu 2023:n.d.).

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CRediT authorship contribution

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